



MODERN-DAY SLAVERY?

The scope of trafficking in persons in Africa

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Hundreds of thousands of African men, women and children are being forced into situations of labour and sexual exploitation both on the continent and abroad every year. Internationally, trafficking in persons has been identified as a serious threat to human security and development by governments, pressure groups and the UN. But for many African governments, the problem has only recently been acknowledged. This article, the first in a two part series on the issue, outlines the types and extent of trafficking in Africa, with a focus on West and Central Africa. Contributing factors, in particular the high profit margins and low risk of arrest and conviction, are reviewed as well as the impact on human rights, public health, community and family development and the growth of organised crime. The second article in the series will consider successful strategies and international programmes, with a focus on the lessons learned for Africa from West Africa.

Introduction

Chikezie is a 13-year-old from Nigeria who was in fourth grade when a man from his area promised his family to educate him. Upon arrival in Libreville, Gabon, he was forced to hawk water and nylon bags for his 'master', who beat him when he did not earn as much as expected. His 'master' also burned him with a hot iron. Chikezie escaped to the Nigerian embassy in Gabon, which assisted his repatriation. He is now at home studying to be a chemist. Traffickers duped the parents of another child, Chudi, promising to

train him in a spare parts business. He left from the creeks of the Niger Delta in a rickety ship that capsized in high seas. He was killed and the traffickers told his family that he had made his way to Europe.¹

Slavery and bondage are still African realities.² In fact they are realities around the world. Hundreds of thousands of Africans still suffer in silence in slave-like situations of forced labour and commercial sexual exploitation from which they cannot free themselves.

Trafficking in persons is one of the greatest human rights challenges of our time and is, as the International Labour

Organisation (ILO) points out, the “underside of globalisation.”³

Alarming, human trafficking continues and appears to be on the rise worldwide. Most nations of the world are touched by it in some way, especially impoverished African countries, which serve as destination, transit or origin countries where citizens are transported to distant lands and enslaved through labour or commercial sexual exploitation. Traffickers exploit the aspirations of those living in poverty and seeking better lives. They use dramatic improvements in transport and communications to sell men, women and children into situations of forced labour and sexual slavery with virtually no risk of prosecution.

Modern-day enslavers also exploit lack of political will at the highest levels of African governments to effectively tackle trafficking and its root causes. Weak interagency co-ordination and low funding levels for ministries tasked with prosecuting traffickers, preventing trafficking and protecting victims also enable traffickers to continue their operations. The transnational criminal nature of trafficking also overwhelms many countries’ law enforcement agencies, which are not equipped to fight organised criminal gangs that operate across national boundaries with impunity.

What is trafficking?

For the purposes of this article, the definition of trafficking in the UN Transnational Organised Crime Protocol to Prevent and Suppress Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, is used. The Protocol defines ‘trafficking in persons’ as the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation or the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The Protocol also defines child trafficking as the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child (anyone under 18) for the purpose of exploitation even if this does not involve force, fraud, or coercion. This is a critical point because in Africa, child trafficking often occurs with the consent of the parents and sometimes, of the children themselves.

Types and extent of trafficking in Africa

Trafficking for forced labour

According to the ILO, Africa has the highest percentage of child labourers in the world with 80 million or 41% of African children that work.⁴ These children are between five and 14 years old, with the largest percentage being young girls engaged in domestic work. Many of these children are victims of trafficking for forced labour, put in exploitative situations by intermediaries and powerful agents known to their families. This practice is probably based on the traditional practice of ‘placement’, when a child is placed in the home of a better off relative or acquaintance in which the child performs light housework in exchange for education and training opportunities.

In West Africa, awareness of trafficking is highest, in part due to international attention paid to slave ships carrying child labourers to markets and plantations in the region. In Nigeria, one ILO report found that 40% of the street children and hawkers were trafficking victims.⁵ An ILO/UNICEF report released in March 2002 states that eight million Nigerian children are enduring the worst forms of child labour.⁶ These children serve as domestic servants, beggars, street hawkers, agricultural labourers and prostitutes.

The ILO also estimates 200,000 to 300,000 children are trafficked each year for forced labour and sexual exploitation in

West and Central Africa.⁷ UNICEF estimates between 10,000 to 15,000 West African children work on cocoa plantations in Côte d'Ivoire, sold by middlemen to farm owners for up to \$340 each.⁸ Benin Republic estimated 3,000 Beninese children were trafficked between 1995 and 1999 within the region.⁹ UNICEF estimates 25,000 foreign children are working in markets and farms in Gabon; 7,000 of them are likely trafficking victims.¹⁰ The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) says thousands of Ethiopian girls are trafficked to the Middle East, particularly Lebanon, to work as domestic servants, but the employers seize their documents and the girls are subjected to physical and sexual abuse.¹¹ Approximately 250 Somali teenagers and children, some as young as two to three years old, are found abandoned by traffickers who took money from their parents to 'place' them.¹²

Trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation

African countries are source, transit and destination countries for trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. The trafficking of women to Europe for commercial sexual exploitation also is more prevalent in West Africa than elsewhere. At least 60% of foreign prostitutes in Italy hail from African countries, the majority from Nigeria.¹³ Nigerian and Italian authorities estimate that there are 10,000 to 15,000 Nigerian prostitutes in Italy.¹⁴ Trafficking of foreign women into South Africa for commercial sexual exploitation from other areas of Africa, Europe and Southeast Asia is not only growing but appears to be controlled by organised criminal gangs from Bulgaria, Russia, Thailand, China and Nigeria.¹⁵

Meanwhile, child prostitution is on the rise across Africa, fuelled by the prevailing erroneous belief that sex with a virgin will cure HIV/AIDS or that sex with a child decreases the likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS or another sexually transmitted disease. Molo Songololo, a prominent child rights non-governmental organisation (NGO), estimated that there are at least

28,000 children in commercial sexual exploitation in South Africa's urban centres.¹⁶ An ILO Rapid Assessment indicates there is also a serious child prostitution problem in Tanzania.¹⁷ Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and The Gambia are becoming increasingly known as destinations for sex tourists to exploit local populations, especially children.¹⁸

Trafficking in conflict zones

Civil unrest, internal armed conflict and natural disasters destabilise and displace populations, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, abuse and trafficking. Areas of conflict are easy targets for those interested in plundering a country's resources, including its people. Human Rights Watch estimates over 120,000 children have been used in armed conflicts in Africa that include civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Congo-Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Somalia and the Sudan.¹⁹ In Sierra Leone, children were forced to mine the diamonds that fuelled the civil war and enriched African leaders and foreign traders. Negotiators are pressing both sides of the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire to stop recruiting child soldiers.²⁰

Men, women and children continue to be abducted by all sides in African conflicts to serve as porters for looted goods, arms and ammunition, forced labourers, and sex slaves for military and militia officers. In December 2002, the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflicts specifically criticised Liberia, Burundi, DRC and Somalia for the continued recruitment of children as combatants.²¹ The Lord's Resistance Army has systematically abducted over 10,000 children in northern Uganda.²² All sides in the Sudanese civil war regularly abduct men, women, and children for combat, forced labour and sexual exploitation.²³

Why the growth in trafficking?

The promise of a better life

The transformation of traditional practices of

placing children in wealthier households and long-standing patterns of seasonal labour migration to traffic children for profit is now a bitter African reality. The 'placement of children' is a deeply rooted cultural tradition as a means to giving children a 'better life' and the movement of children from rural to urban areas is very common.

Typically, someone who is known to the family or village, promises to find employment and education for the child. However, powerful agents, who may control an estimated 30–60% of 'placement' situations, are deeply perverting and corrupting the practice.²⁴ Increasingly, parents have no contact with their children nor the intermediary once the child leaves the home. Children slave under backbreaking conditions and long hours that deprive them of education and endanger their health. The children toil under the control of marketers, touts and pimps in the streets and marketplaces of large urban areas, where they are exposed at an early age to a wide range of physical and sexual abuse.

Typically, a number of actors are involved and may include recruiters, intermediaries, transporters, employers of brothel/inn operators and even families. Trafficking occurs if a child or his/her family is misled with false promises, coerced or otherwise forcibly recruited or handed over to transporters. Frequently, a child is told he/she is going to a big city and then moved elsewhere. Alternatively, his/her family might be charged a large fee for 'placement' in a job to ensnare the child into debt bondage. In other instances, a child may be recruited as a waitress or dancer and then forced into prostitution. Poverty-stricken parents also have given children to traffickers to get out of debt.

ILO/IPEC, World Bank and UNICEF research show that most trafficked children come from families with five or more children and that parents are generally ignorant of the risks of sending their children to urban areas.²⁵ It is not always the poorest families in a village that may put their children in a trafficking situation. World Bank surveys in villages in Benin and

Burkina Faso indicate that other factors, such as exposure to the world outside the village through the presence of televisions or soccer clubs, are important 'push' factors.²⁶ Important 'pull' factors include the demand for cheap and malleable labour in Africa's informal economies and the rapidly growing demand for children for commercial sexual exploitation.

According to World Bank studies, often a family's motive in sending a child away is the search for better educational opportunities for their children, not employment.²⁷ Many villages lack vocational opportunities for youth, and educational opportunities are insufficient or inaccessible. Other social factors such as the breakdown of traditional family structures, the death of one or both parents, and greed may contribute to a family's decision to place a child. In general, it is the 'success' stories, displays of wealth, or remittances back to villages by relatives working in urban areas or overseas that provide powerful incentive for parents to consider sending their children out of the home or village for work.

The negative consequences of trafficking on victims do not trickle back to rural areas.²⁸ Trafficking victims, who have not fulfilled the terms of the working arrangements, are often ashamed or afraid to return home. Victims forced into prostitution, many of whom have contracted HIV/AIDS or a sexually transmitted infection, also find reintegration into their home areas difficult, if not impossible. As a result, stories about the negative side of trafficking rarely reach home areas.

A market for commercial sexual exploitation

Another harsh African reality is the movement of young African women and children to Europe and to the Middle East for commercial sexual exploitation.²⁹ Lured by promises of employment as shopkeepers, maids, seamstresses, nannies or hotel service positions in Europe, African women find themselves forced into prostitution upon arrival. For those who may know that they will be engaging in prostitution, they are unaware that their travel documents will be

seized, the enormous debt they will have to repay, or that they will be the subject of brutal beatings if their earning levels are unsatisfactory.

These trafficking networks, dominated by Nigerian organised crime in West Africa, are highly adaptive and have expanded their operations into Benin, Togo, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, and South Africa.³⁰ Increased airport security and scrutiny of documents have forced traffickers to take their human cargo overland.³¹ Typically, the traffickers establish a safe-house network across the region, moving them through the desert to Morocco or by vehicle to other parts of North Africa. They may be moved across the Mediterranean to Spain by fast-boats. The journey is hard, can last up to two weeks, and many die in the desert or crossing the ocean. Italian authorities report that thousands of 'migrants' are rescued each month.³²

A typical trafficking scenario begins when a woman or girl, most between 15 and 24 years of age, is approached by a recruiter to go abroad to work.³³ The recruiters are often known in the area, sometimes friends of the victim, or are family members themselves. Parents are often key accomplices as they pressure their daughters into the trade to repatriate earnings to the family. Work cannot be found, even poorly paid jobs. At the same time, villages have been flooded with images of wealth and prosperity beamed in through television or radio. Lavish displays of wealth by African 'big men' and other elites are an even more powerful message to impoverished villagers and urban dwellers about the benefits of material acquisition. More often than not, an 'ends justifies the means' rationale has taken root to legitimise the source of the wealth, regardless of how acquired.³⁴ This fundamental value change in many societies is enabling the human trade and making it difficult for police to investigate cases due to family pressure in sending their daughters away.

Some families even pay the trafficker to secure overseas employment for their daughters. The women are then subjected to traditional religious rituals to further intimidate them from revealing information

about the network. Once recruited, women who resist are often brutally gang-raped into submission and continually kept under guard. The traffickers threaten to turn the women over to police as undocumented workers or threaten to kill their family members if the entire debt is not repaid. Many women submit to prostitution to repay the debt as quickly as possible. However, traffickers often re-sell victims as they near paying off their contract. Escape is difficult, but increasingly there are embassy officials, NGOs and religious groups coming to the aid of trafficking victims. Nonetheless, victims are often reluctant to return home after 'failing' to fulfill their contracts and fear reprisals from both the traffickers and their families.

High profits, low risk

Modern-day slavery thrives because of its profitability. UN estimates indicate that trafficking in persons generates \$7 to \$10 billion annually for traffickers, the third largest profits for illicit activities behind arms dealing and narcotics trafficking.³⁵ As human trafficking is an underground activity, it is difficult to generate more accurate statistics. However, it is often easier for traffickers to move human cargo through borders and past immigration officials than narcotics or weapons caches, which are often seized when found. Also, the value of trafficked victims is more ongoing than that of drugs or weapons. Trafficking victims, even if caught, can be re-trafficked and traffickers can make additional money off victims by re-selling them to another brothel owner or employer after their often inflated debt is paid.

There can be little doubt that it is the high profits that continue to fuel the trade of human beings in Africa. In a typical child trafficking scenario, the recruiter may earn from \$50 to \$1,000 for a child delivered to the 'employer'.³⁶ Profits vary according to the source countries, destinations and 'use' of the trafficked person. An African child trafficked to the US might net a trafficker \$10,000 to \$20,000, according to the US Immigration and Naturalisation Service.³⁷ A

recruiter and transporter of a woman to Europe for commercial sexual exploitation spends approximately \$2,000 to bribe appropriate officials, procure travel documents and safe-houses, and to transport a victim to a 'madam', who pays approximately \$12,000 for the victim.³⁸ The madam then forces the victim into prostitution to repay a debt of up to \$50,000. Traffickers of women trafficked to Europe for commercial sexual exploitation typically earn \$20,000 to \$50,000 per victim. Some of this money is remitted back to the source country through commercial banks and money wire services. The IOM estimates that traffickers earn about \$800 for each Ethiopian girl trafficked to the Middle East.³⁹ In conflict zones, government militaries and rebel commanders profit from the services of child soldiers, porters and sex slaves, who require little or no remuneration.

Not only high profits, but also low risks make the trafficking business attractive. African traffickers face a low risk of arrest, prosecution, or other negative consequences. Traffickers in Africa have exploited the lack of rule of law, the non-implementation of existing anti-slavery laws, and corruption of judicial systems in several African countries. These institutional lapses allow perpetrators to go unpunished. Cases against traffickers regularly fall apart due to a lack of protection for witnesses and family involvement in sending a child or other family member away. Children are unaware of their rights, are more likely to remain in abusive situations, and are unable to provide enough information against traffickers for successful prosecution. Victims of commercial sexual exploitation are afraid of retaliation from the traffickers, recrimination within their families and villages and the stigma of prostitution. African governments are struggling with addressing the issue of the complicity and incrimination of parents in trafficking while safeguarding the legal rights of the family during the course of investigations. In conflict areas, governments, rebels, and other militias are rarely held responsible at

international war crimes tribunals for the forcible recruitment of thousands of individuals in combat and sexual slavery.

The impact of trafficking

Populations vulnerable to trafficking are growing in Africa, which increases the supply of potential victims for traffickers and the potential deleterious effects on all segments of African society. The victims may be economic migrants, political asylum seekers, those rendered homeless or jobless after natural disasters or civil conflict, or individuals looking for a better way of life. Civil conflict, political instability, famine, HIV/AIDS and economic stagnation mean the number of individuals, particularly women and children, in desperate situations are growing. Civil conflicts and HIV/AIDS are dramatically increasing the number of orphans in Africa. In eastern and southern Africa, the dramatic rise in households headed by children may create fertile ground for traffickers. In Tanzania, 11% of children are orphans; 920,000 have lost at least one parent to HIV/AIDS and 165,000 children have lost both parents. South Africa's Department of Health estimates there were 420,000 HIV/AIDS orphans in 2001; this number could increase to one million by 2005, according to Nelson Mandela's Children's Fund.⁴⁰

Violating human rights

Modern-day slavery violates the fundamental right of all persons to life, liberty and the security of the person, and to be free from slavery in all its forms. It undermines the rights of a child to grow up in the protective environment of a family and to be free from sexual abuse and exploitation.

Trafficking also deprives thousands of Africans of their lives every year. Hundreds of children died on the high seas between West and Central Africa last year alone and over 100 women died crossing the Straits of Gibraltar to Europe.⁴¹ At least 168 foreign prostitutes were killed in Italy last year.⁴² An ILO/IPEC survey in Nigeria found that one

out of every five trafficked children dies from mishaps or disease.⁴³ Many trafficking victims die of heat exhaustion crossing the desert. Thousands of victims are killed in civil conflict for refusing to submit to forced labour or sexual slavery, trying to escape, or from diseases contracted or abuse endured during their enslavement.

Social exclusion and crime

The loss of the family support network makes the trafficking victim more vulnerable to the traffickers' demands and threats. Many victims will not turn to authorities out of fear of being jailed or deported and without effective witness protection victims are unlikely to come forward to assist prosecutors. For families and communities, trafficking also weakens ties of parental affection, undermines extended family relationships, and decreases the family's influence and control over the child. Trafficking interrupts the passage of knowledge and cultural values from parent to child and from generation to generation, weakening a core pillar of most African societies.⁴⁴ Victims who do return to their villages may have a different frame of reference from other community members and may become disruptive and labelled juvenile delinquents. As their ties to society erode, returned victims often have no where to go, and become involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, theft rings and prostitution.

Eroding human capital

Trafficking has a negative impact on the labour market in African countries, according to the ILO.⁴⁵ Forcing children to work at an early age and subjecting them to ten to 20 hours of work per day denies children access to the education necessary to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy that makes conditions ripe for trafficking. It also denies them a healthy childhood development, both socially and physically. Children cannot acquire the skills necessary to compete in their country's labour market, which translates into a labour force at the national level that is not equipped to

compete in the global economy, where success is based on skilled workers. Moreover, use of forced child labour depresses wages for all workers. Departure of children to other countries is an irretrievable loss of human resources because they do not contribute to the development of their own country. Long-term effects of trafficking translate into a lower number of individuals left to care for an increasing number of elderly as well as social imbalances in the proportion of males to females.

Undermining public health

Trafficking exposes men, women and children to HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted and other infectious diseases, violence, dangerous working conditions, poor nutrition, and drug and alcohol addiction. Increasing numbers of victims of commercial sexual exploitation are returning with HIV/AIDS and increasing numbers of child prostitutes and street children are exposed to the disease.⁴⁶ Trafficked children are also less likely to participate in immunisation programmes, defeating government efforts to eradicate early childhood diseases. ILO reports that trafficked children in Africa are at a high risk for sunstroke, increased heart rhythm, poisoning due to chemicals in insecticides, dust inhalation in sawmills and mines, machinery accidents, burns, road accidents, stagnation of growth, and general fatigue that makes them less resistant to malaria and other diseases due to exposure to harsh working conditions.⁴⁷ Severe psychological trauma from separation, coercion, sexual abuse and depression often lead to a life of crime, drug and alcohol addiction, and sexual violence.⁴⁸

Undermining government authority

It is true that many African governments do not exercise control over their territory, but the operation of traffickers thwarts government attempts to exert authority and continues to undermine public safety, particularly the security of vulnerable populations. In 2002, in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, immigration officials attempting to

capture child traffickers were attacked by the well-armed traffickers and forced to retreat.⁴⁹ Governments that are unable to protect women and children who are kidnapped from their homes, schools or refugee camps, are failing in a fundamental responsibility to protect their citizens. Moreover, the bribes traffickers are able to pay also undermine a government's ability to combat corruption among law enforcement, immigration and judicial officials.

Sustaining illicit activities and organised crime

Traffickers are often highly successful because of links with other transnational crimes, such as trafficking in arms, drugs and other contraband, which provide them with safe and tested routes, access to cash and known corrupt officials to bribe. They easily trick their victims into travelling to another country in their search for a better life by creating false travel and employment agencies to give their operations an air of legitimacy. In this way, the profits from human trafficking strengthen criminal groups and thereby fund other illicit activities, while undermining government attempts to establish rule of law. Organised criminal groups, gangs, document forgers, madams, brothel owners and corrupt police or immigration officials funnel trafficking profits into both legitimate and criminal activities. Human traffickers, car theft rings, and drug smugglers are known to use the same methods, routes and corrupt officials to transport humans, drugs and stolen goods to lucrative markets.⁵⁰ It is also entirely possible that some terrorist groups are profiting from human trafficking.

Mobilising against trafficking

Fortunately, recent attention to the long-standing problem of trafficking in persons is mobilising communities, governments, and international NGOs. Action is badly needed, because as ILO/IPEC warns, continued passivity within civil society and ineffective state control could lead to the rapid institutionalisation of modern-day slavery in

Africa. Without serious and sustained political will at the top levels of governments and throughout societies, interventions will remain limited compared to the scope and magnitude of the problem. Traffickers will thus continue to victimise African men, women and children, depriving them of their basic human rights, depriving countries of critical human capital to compete in the global economy, and depriving all governments of the ability to establish law and order within their own borders.

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