

ISSN:2006-2826

LAPAI JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES

Journal of the Department of History and Archaeology
Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lafia, Niger State.

Volume 2 Number 2

September 2008

Trafficking In Women: The Nigeria - Ghana Experience, 1930 -1955

Winifred E. Akoda (PhD)

Department Of History/Int'l Studies

Introduction

The problem of female trafficking and the dogged attempt to prohibit it has assumed a global dimension that has engaged the attention of countries worldwide, especially from the 1990's. Human trafficking for purposes of prostitution is considered the third largest source of profit for organized crime behind drugs and guns. In the African context, it is estimated that over a million people from West and Central Africa have illegally smuggled themselves into Europe in the past decade. (See *Business day Africa*, 27 September, 2004: 10). Arnand Rousselot, the International Office for Migration (I.O.M.) representative for West Africa maintained that countries such as France, Italy and Spain were the most preferred destinations of these illegal migrants. Other foreign countries where the trade is carried out include Germany, Netherlands and Belgium. Within the African continent, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Benin, Gabon, Congo, and Equatorial Guinea host these migrants. In Nigeria, large and industrial cities like Warri, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Sapele, Kano, Kaduna, and recently Bonny, because of the presence of the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Company is fast gaining reputation for trafficking in women. Similarly, states of the Cocoa Belt like Ondo and Oyo have been the destination of internal traffickers who migrate from one Nigerian state to another on the pretext of seeking employment in cocoa plantations.

It is an undisputable fact that females between the ages of 10 to 35 engage in this illegal trafficking. While some of these women participate in it consciously, others are cajoled to partake in the trade with the hope of obtaining profitable jobs. Yet, many are kidnapped for this purpose. The later group constitutes mainly children and young adults. Middle aged women, and widows participate in female trafficking, usually, as brothel owners. Although in Nigeria, the countries deplorable economic condition is the main reason advanced for the proliferation of this trade, suffice it to say that, the human right abuse, which characterizes this ugly phenomenon upon reaching their destination, cannot be over-

emphasized.

A review of existing literature on trafficking in persons reveals that in Nigeria, scholars and media analysts alike have traced this problem to moral decadence in the Nigerian society and political instability occasioned by military rule. Bene Madunagu observes that:

There is moral decadence in the Nigerian society, which has its roots in the economic quagmire arising from political instability and the economic mismanagement of the nation's resources. This moral decadence has reached a stage that has become embarrassing to Nigerians both within and outside. Consequently, there is an urgent need to halt this trend if Nigeria is to be respected in the community of nations. (Madunagu, 2002:16).

Similarly, another scholar traces the scope of women trafficking to the military era when the nation's economy was strangled due to the insensitivity and dishonesty of its leader. (Madunagu, 2002: 16). This resulted in poverty among Nigerian families, hence, the need to seek a profitable means of livelihood abroad.

On the contrary, several researches undertaken by this writer reveal that, in Nigeria, trafficking in women is certainly not a nouveau practice, neither is it a post-colonial phenomenon, nor can it be traced to the military era, as widely acclaimed. Rather, it is a continuation of an organized process that had started between Nigeria and the West African sub-region in the 1930's, which by the 1990's had assumed an international character that engulfed European nations. The Nigeria -Ghana phenomenon is a clear.

The Nigeria-Ghana Experience: A Background

Trafficking in women for prostitution is one of the oldest professions in the world. The Holy Bible makes mention of a woman by name Rahab, who aided the two spies sent to the city of Jericho. Rahab was a harlot/prostitute, meaning that she earned her living through the sale of her God-given sacred bodily parts. Sr. (Prof.) Marie P. Eboh aptly states that, "at face value, women-trafficking is abhorrently seen as females selling their bodies for money" (Eboh, 2002/2003: 16).

During the pre-colonial era, nothing much was known or written about human trafficking and although it occurred, the trade was not organized. Trafficking in persons (with emphasis on the female gender) was largely perceived as kidnap cases. It is unfortunate that

the dearth of documentary records on this era has blurred our knowledge on how it functioned.

In the colonial period and as early as the 1930's archival sources have thrown light on this illicit trade. Mention is made of an organized trafficking in women between Nigeria and Ghana on a large scale between the 1930s and 1950s (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238). This obnoxious trade engaged the attention of the governments of both countries, and some well-meaning associations, like the Nigeria Youth Movement (N. Y. M.). One may be curious to ask why Ghana was the preferred destination of these women. In an explanation to this, this researcher asserts that both countries share a lot in common. Nigeria and Ghana are both Anglophone-speaking countries and have close social ties as manifested through inter-marriages, and among some Nigerian ethnic groups, a common ancestry. Infact, more than any other country in West Africa, there has been quite a number of inter-marriages between Nigerians and Ghanaians. Besides, the origin and migration of some Nigerian groups that trace their ancestry to Ghana have further strengthened the ties between both countries. With regard to this, some Efik families claim to originate from Sekondi in Ghana and names like Essien, Ansa, Ama, Ata, and Arit are common with the two groups (Hart's Report, 1964: 25, 29). Furthermore, the British currency (pounds) was the standard legal tender shared by both countries which facilitated the illegal traffic in women. Ghana was also a choice country for women trafficking because it was known as the Gold Coast and lived up to its reputation, during the colonial era, as a prosperous country where greener pastures could be attained.

Finally, it should be observed that many Nigerians have lived and settled in Ghana and vice versa. With regard to the latter, many of them have remained and worked in Nigerian cities like Calabar, Lagos and Kano. The revered Ghanaian lawyer, Hon. Ata Amono lived and practiced law in Calabar where he took part in active politics, contested election and won in 1928 (Aye, 1967: 159). Today, he has a street named after him in Calabar- Atamunu Street. The Mensah family in Calabar has also sojourned in the city for decades. In Kano, the Solomon (Suleiman) family of the Sabon Gari district has lived in their abode for decades, doing business and competing favourably in the bakery industry. Infact, the number of Ghanaians living and working in Nigeria can only be appreciated when the 1983 repatriation of about 700,000 Ghanaians by the civilian regime of Shehu Shagari is noted. That notwithstanding, both countries have maintained cordial relationship and share a

great deal in common as expatiated above.

The above reasons have, no doubt, influenced the choice of Ghana as the favoured destination of women trafficking. This argument does not in anyway seek to claim that other African countries did not harbour commercial sex workers of Nigerian origin as they are also called. Equatorial Guinea, a Spanish colony received a fair share of these illegal migrants during the colonial years. Its close proximity to Nigeria as well as the much-needed labour for Spanish plantations in the area (Tapela, 1985: 36 - 56), attracted women of easy virtue. Yet, the magnitude of this illicit trade in the small Spanish territory could not be compared to that found in Ghana between 1930 and 1955.

The Nigeria- Ghana Experience: 1930- 1955

From the 1930's, trafficking in women for prostitution became the bane of colonial administrators and associations both in Ghana and Nigeria. On the 28th of June 1939, Prince Eikineh of the Nigeria Youth Movement (N. Y. M) Ghana branch, writing to its parent body in Nigeria, requested it to pressurize the colonial government to stop the emigration of "Nigerian harlots and hooligans forging their way to the colony and thus tarnishing the good name of Nigeria" (Cadist Vol. I, 3/3/238). Apparently, this trade had been in existence for several years and records show that not only were adult females from Nigeria engaged in it, but also underage girls were kidnapped and taken to Ghana by the Calabar and Lagos Sea route for indoctrination. Eikineh had observed that because of the magnitude of the trade, Ghanaian men and women whose knowledge of Nigeria was limited, believed that it was a favourite past time of Nigerian women and a accepted custom in Nigeria (Cadist Vol. I, 3/3/238). An illustration of this point would suffice: archival sources unveil an instance in which an underage girl was brutally beaten up by her foster mother for failing to submit herself to a sailor. This incident was reported to the police in Ghana who only sympathized with the situation. Police Authority admitted hearing of such misdeeds, but claimed to be handicapped since the N. Y. M 'favoured' it. They refused to take any action until it was made a law in the Legislative Council of Nigeria (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238). The attitude of the Police authorities actually illustrated their misconception that trafficking in women was a recognized custom in Nigeria.

Causation is part of a historical process, and the causes advanced for trafficking in persons, particularly women, include lack of employment greed, poverty, poor living conditions, and prospects of

a better and prosperous life amongst others. Most of the women participants of the illegal trafficking ranged between 10 and 35 years. Those from the Southern part of Nigeria were largely from the former Calabar and Ogoja provinces. The former was made up of Abak, Calabar, Eket, Eniong, Ikot Ekpene, Opobo and Uyo (Aye, 1967: 177). Ogoja Province on the other hand consisted of Ikom, Ugep, Obubra, Ogoja and Obudu (Aye, 1967: 177) as the major towns. Yet, from Igbo land came women from Arochukwu and Enugu. Many of these illegal migrants, however, were of Obubra (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238) and Yakurr extraction in the former Ogoja Province. Researches reveal that in some areas of Obubra, there was hardly a family that had no interest in the trade. The elders of the district openly admitted that they received a fee, amounting to some pounds from every woman who practiced the trade (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238). Within these communities, there were societies that were responsible for the organization and management of the business. These societies had representatives in Ghana whose duty was to receive and establish these women on arrival (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238). It is interesting to note that the fees paid by the latter made the societies prosperous to the extent that they built houses and provided legal aid for their clients (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238). On their part, the women became very wealthy from profits obtained from the traffic. Some returned home to flaunt their wealth, starting petty businesses and helping their siblings back home. In a letter dated July 1941 to the Governor of the Gold Coast (Ghana), the Governor of Nigeria, B. H. Bourdillon cited an instance of one Nigerian prostitute who was found with not less than eighty pounds in her possession on returning from Ghana (Cadist Vol. 1, 3/3/238). This, no doubt, attests to the fact that female trafficking between Nigeria and Ghana was a profitable venture, well organized, supported and maintained by the very communities to which the women themselves belong (Cadist Vo1. 1, 3/3/238).

Concerted efforts were made to prohibit illegal human trafficking. The N. Y. M, Ghana branch, was one organization concerned about this ill and at various times, wrote to its parent body and the Nigerian government to be empowered in order to assist in eradicating this illegal trade. The association was totally against "the future mothers of Nigeria" being brought to the Gold Coast (Ghana) " under the disguise of slavery to be made barren" (Cadist Vol:1 3/3/238). The movement suggested some temporary measures to curb trafficking in women and young girls. These were: that an authority be conferred on the body through the Ghanaian

government to take census and all particulars of all Nigerian women in Ghana. Secondly, that letters be written to all shipping agencies in Nigeria not to issue tickets to any Nigerian person travelling to Ghana without sanction of the association. This was in order to ascertain the status of such person.

Because of the gravity of this problem, the District Officer of Calabar had also set up a committee to ascertain ways of nipping this trade in the bud. Accordingly, on the 3rd of January 1940, the Senior Secretary of the Calabar Council, Thomas A. Effiom, made the committee's proposal known to the District Officer in a letter (Cadist Vol. 1, 3/3/238). It suggested that the Nigerian government be persuaded to request the Ghanaian government to institute a thorough inquiry into the matter and repatriate all Nigerian prostitutes in their country. Secondly, that government is requested to investigate all future departures of Nigerian women and girls to Ghana and other parts of the West Coast with a view to ascertaining their purpose of visit and duration. Thirdly, that all Nigerian women leaving Nigeria to other countries, having satisfied the governments or native authorities of their districts, should be given a certificate or permit, authorizing them to travel, and that any woman or girl found at any port outside Nigeria without such certificate or permit should be arrested.

In his own contribution, Mr. Wooleg, a colonial administrator, suggested that the best method to stop the trafficking in women was by education and propaganda in the areas from which these women originated. Governor B.H Bourdillon rejected this approach on the conviction that the trade was organized by their communities and was profitable, hence education and propaganda would not proffer a lasting solution (Cadist Vol.1 3/3/238). In a letter to the Governor of the Gold Coast, Boudillon advocated a refusal of exit permits to women who could not show good reasons for travelling to Ghana. He also proposed a rigorous prosecution for procreation, prostitution, keeping brothels, living on immoral earnings and on any other charges that it may be possible to lay against persons connected with the trade (Cadist Vol. 1 3/3/238). He solicited the co-operation of the Ghanaian administration to repatriate to Nigeria, prostitutes and any other person connected with the profession when they are known to be of Nigerian origin.

The above proposals by well meaning people and associations, as exemplified by the N.Y.M, only demonstrated the magnitude of trade between the two countries; the spirited attempt at quelling this menace and the bad image trafficking in women had rubbed off

on Nigeria.

From the 1940's the colonial government of Nigeria intensified efforts to repatriate female commercial sex workers of Nigerian origin. The Ghanaian government on its part was prepared to deport any Nigerian woman found within 18 months of her stay in Ghana if found to be a prostitute. But the government had requested the Nigerian government to fund their repatriation (Cadist Vol. 1, 3/3/238). Not wanting to bear such huge expenses, the Nigerian government, represented by the Acting Chief Secretary, G. Miles Clifford, suggested that an arrangement should be made for the repatriation of these women to be paid by the Native Administration (NA) funds of the area to which each woman belonged, after which the NA would obtain a refund from the families of these victims. He further alleged that if their families benefited from the trade, then they should be able to provide funds for the repatriation. Such action would also act as a deterrent effect (Cadist Vol. 1, 3/3/238). This proposal was discarded because, according to the secretary, Eastern Province, "no power exists under statute law of Nigeria compelling families to bear costs of repatriation" (Cadist Vol.1 3/3/238).

An attempt to persuade the NA to fund the repatriation met with stiff resistance as it claimed to be financially unstable to embark on such a venture. Besides, it did not trust that the families of the repatriated women would make refunds. Finally, the responsibility had to rest on the Nigerian government which made spirited and successful efforts by repatriating these illegal migrants especially from the 1950's (Cadist Vol. 11, 13/1/939).

Women Trafficking from the 20th to the 21st Century: An Overview.

The repatriation of Nigerian prostitutes in the fifties from Ghana did not curb this illicit trafficking in women. It was only an acceleration of an illegal trade that began in the colonial era. From a regional trade, trafficking in women assumed an international dimension especially from the 1990's. For instance, in 1997, German police arrested thirty - six Nigerian women engaged in this trade in Essen Brothels (Madunagu, 2002: 14). Furthermore in March 2001, sixty-four Nigerians were deported from Italy, forty - seven of them young women suspected to be part of the trade (Madunagu, 2002:13-14). Again, in August 2001, a three-person prostitution syndicate was apprehended by the Nigerian Immigration services near Seme Border in an attempt to smuggle eleven girls out of the country (Madunagu, 2002:15).

The above instances represent a gross underestimation of women trafficking, as many more abound. Unlike in the colonial era however, women and young girls from Edo State dominate the trade. A survey by Women's Health and Action Research Centre in Benin, the Edo state capital, few years back, revealed that one in three young women had received offers to go abroad (www.migrationinformation.org). Some researchers have attributed specific historical and cultural factors as responsible for the concentration of this trade in the Benin axis. Among these reasons are the disadvantaged situation of women, the importance attached to materialism, poverty and the local tradition of slavery (www.migrationinformation.org). Accordingly, these women are attracted to overseas countries with the hope of obtaining profitable jobs to improve their living conditions and that of their families.

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO's) like Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) and Idia Renaissance, under the leadership of Hajia Amina Titi Abubakar and Mrs. Eki Igbinedion respectively, have worked and are still working tirelessly to eradicate the evil menace of female trafficking for prostitution. These organizations have tried to stop the trade by repatriating Nigerian girls from Italy and other foreign countries in order to rehabilitate and engage them in some kind of skills acquisition. Although the effort of these well meaning women have gradually started yielding fruits, they have encountered many challenges: like in the colonial era where the home communities of the participants encouraged the trade, many families in Edo do likewise because of the huge profit accruing from it. In Benin it is not uncommon to hear of parents selling landed property or collecting loans to facilities their daughter's movement to Italy and other foreign countries where the trade is pronounced. The consequences of this is that, at the risk of their health, these women and young girls send huge sums of money home, buy magnificent edifices in their home states and provide their parents with exotic cars.

Undoubtedly, the gross human rights abuses on these persons and the image it has created for Nigeria, makes it imperative to give this embarrassing business a coup de grace. Accordingly, the Nigerian government has signed and ratified the 'United Nations Protocol', to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children. This is referred to as the Palermo protocol (www.migrationinformation.org). However, the country is yet to feel the impact of this document in its entirety.

Section 222A and 225A of the Criminal Code Act CAP 77 of the

law of the Nigerian Federation regards prostitution as an offence. Granted that the use of education and propaganda to curb trafficking in women for prostitution failed in the colonial era and the Palermo protocol has not fully curbed this menace even in the face of the dreaded AIDS pandemic, participants of this trade, whether directly or indirectly should be prosecuted.

It is not enough to rescue the victims of this illicit trade, conduct police investigations, and return them to their families through the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). The case of the twenty - four females caught sandwiched in a trailer truck on the outskirts of Benin in July 2007 followed this trend (Daily Independent Newspaper, July 17, 2007, P A4). Rather, the families of women that encourage this illegal trade should be treated as accomplices, prosecuted in a court of law and severely punished to serve as a deterrent to other families. Similarly, procurers, pimps and those perceived as aiding and abetting in the trafficking of women for prostitution should be treated likewise. Should this step be followed, trafficking in women would be reduced to a bare minimum.

Conclusion

In summary, we have proved that women trafficking for prostitution in Nigeria cannot be traced to the period before the military era. This phenomenon is an ancient profession, and in Nigeria there existed a sub-regional traffic during the colonial era as demonstrated by the Nigeria - Ghana experience. This laid the foundation for modern day trafficking. Hence, the trade was not a post - colonial phenomenon, as some scholars would want us to believe. It was only the continuation and amplification on greater scale, of an organized venture that had its roots in the colonial phase of the Nigerian nation. It is our suggestion; therefore, that the legal prosecution and punishment of those aiding and abetting in the trafficking of women for prostitution may well be a solution to a nagging problem.

Works Cited

- Aye, E. U. (1967), *Old Calabar Through the Centuries*, Calabar. Hope Waddell Press.
- "Big Money to be made in People Trafficking" in *Business Day Africa*, 27, September, 2004.
- Carling, J. (2004), "Trafficking in Women from Nigeria to Europe" (www.migrationinformation.org).
- Eboh, M. P. (2000/2003), "Women Trafficking and Men Traffickers:

- Essay in Gynist Thoery" in *The Sign Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 2.
- "Human Trafficking: Edo Police Rescues 62" in *Daily Independent Newspaper, Lagos* July 17, 2007, p.A4.
- Madunagu, B. (2002), *Trafficking in Girls: Report of as in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria*. Calabar: Clear Lines Publication.
- Report of the Inquiry into the Dispute over the Obongship of Calabar* (Official Document NO. 17 of 1964). " Sole Commissioner A. K. Hart". Government Printer, Enugu
- Tapela, H. (1985), "Nigerian Labour for Fernando – Po (part 1)" in *The Calabar Historical Journal* Vol. 3 No. 1 pp. 36 – 56. Note that Fernando –Po was Renamed Equatorial Guinea.
- Cadist Vol. 1, 3/3/238; "Prostitution", National Archives, Calabar (NA/C).
- Cadist Vol. 11 13/1/939; "Prostitution in Calabar Province, Repatriation of (1955)" National Archives,, Calabar (NA/C)