

## Trafficking in Women in Nigeria: Poverty of Values or Inequality?

Franca Attoh

*Department of Sociology, University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba, Nigeria*  
*E-mail: francaattoh@yahoo.com*

**KEYWORDS** Trafficking. Migration. Exploitation. Madam. Prostitution. Pimps

**ABSTRACT** The existence of transnational trafficking syndicates is indicative that trafficking in women has become a global scourge. It is a violation of all known canons of human rights and dignity. Unfortunately, there exists little awareness of the ramifications of the phenomenon especially in a developing country like Nigeria. The paper examines the ramifications of this illicit trade in women. Using the In-depth interview method, the author examines the erosion of values within the Nigerian society vis-à-vis the material inequality between the industrialized North and a developing country like Nigeria. Anchoring the analysis on Robert Merton's theory of Anomie the paper concludes that trafficking in women is accentuated by the disparity in income between the industrialized North and the poor South.

### INTRODUCTION

The West African sub-region is characterized by a plethora of social problems including cross-border migrations, migration of professionals and displaced persons. Latest on the list of the problems is trafficking in persons of which trafficking in young women/ girls is a subset. Trafficking in young women is the illicit movement of young women across international borders for certain exploitative purposes. This movement is usually from a developing economy to a more developed economy. The sole purpose being exploitation of the persons involved which ranges from sexual exploitation to exploitation of labour. Knowledge of this phenomenon was brought to the fore by the media and non-governmental agencies (NGOs). In Nigeria, this issue came to the fore as a result of media publicity over the mass deportation of young Nigerian women trafficked to Italy for prostitution. The furore generated by this incident made the Edo State Government to enact a law to prohibit traffic in persons as well as the prohibition of prostitution (UNESCO, 2004). This flurry is not unconnected with the fact that majority of those deported are indigenes of Edo State. Sequel to this a number of non-governmental organizations started to put together programmes and initiatives to sensitize the public on the problems of trafficking in young women. Concomitant to these initiatives is the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003, enacted by the National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The law seeks to punish any

one convicted of the offence of trafficking with ten years imprisonment without option of a fine. In addition, an agency known as the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in persons and other related matters (NAPTIP) came into being to arrest offenders and prosecute them and to ensure that victims are rehabilitated and reintegrated into society.

Trafficking in persons is engendered by a myriad of factors. Adepoju (2000) argues that trafficking is due to deepening poverty and a deterioration in the living conditions of persons in Sub-Saharan Africa. For Moore (1994) cited in Adepoju (2005) poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa forces many young persons into work. He cites the examples of young girls who hawk their bodies for money on the streets of Nairobi. Adepoju (2005) sees the declining fortunes of Africa's economies as a strong factor that impels families into encouraging young girls to go into trafficking. This quest for survival is evidenced in the desperation of young persons who risk everything to find their way to rich countries of the North with the assistance of trafficking syndicates. ILO (2003) concludes that "this traumatic development is due to the deterioration of African economies". Literature also cites factors like rural-urban migration, unemployment, peer influence and the collapse of the family institution. Butegwa and De Dios (1997, 1999) argue that trafficking in women in Sub-Saharan Africa is exacerbated by unemployment, poor wages and poor living conditions. Within the Nigerian context, trafficking in women is due to unemployment, low socio-economic status of

women especially in parts of Edo and Delta states where it thrives (Okonofua et al. 2004; Onyeonoru 2004).

In the light of the above, this paper seeks answers to the following posers- Is trafficking in women caused by the collapse of family values? Is trafficking in women due to the existence of economic inequality between the rich North and the poor South? To provide answers to the above questions, we assert that Trafficking in women is *exacerbated by the inequality between the rich North and the poor South*. To provide insight into this phenomenon, in- depth interviews were conducted using a sample of 30 young women deported from various parts of Europe. This paper is divided into five sections. Section one which includes this introduction articulates the issue in discourse. Section two looks at theoretical explanations while section three discusses the methodology. Section four outlines the findings of the study while section five discusses the phenomenon using Robert Merton's theory of Anomie and then our conclusions and recommendations.

### Theoretical Explanations

Due to the complexity of the phenomenon of trafficking in women, we shall draw from Kirk Mann's exposition on The Class Thesis and Robert Merton's exposition on Anomie. Mann (1992) argues that the worsening situation of the underclass is partly a creation of redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich in the 1980s. He avers that there exists transference of wealth from the less well off to the richer sections of society. The thrust of his argument is that the economic policies of the 1980s favoured the rich over the underclass. This is evidenced in the policies of *THARTCHERISM* in England and *REAGANOMICS* in America and infact the *STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT POLICIES* packaged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for developing countries experiencing declining economic growth and balance of payment problem.

Robert Merton contends that the dominant theme of American culture is the undue emphasis on material success but this places strains on individuals who are differentially located within the social structure. He posits that anomie occurs when there is an acute disjuncture between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of the members of a society

to act in accord with them (Merton 1968: 216). Merton posits the existence of typologies open to individuals in their bid to attain success goals. These typologies are 1. Conformity, 2. Innovation, 3. Ritualism, 4. Retreatism, 5. Rebellion. Those favoured to attain success goals using the culturally approved means tend to conform whereas those unable to achieve success goals because of their inferior position within the social structure innovate by using illegitimate means. The result is a deviation from the culturally approved means of attaining success goals. These are the deviants in the society. Within the Benin social milieu, those who have internalized the values of success without the attendant means of attaining such cultural goals in this instance a good education or requisite skills tend to innovate by following traffickers.

### METHODS

In-depth Interview method and Focus Group Discussion were utilized to generate the data for this paper. A total of 30 young women aged (15-25 years) who had been trafficked but deported from various parts of Europe and Africa were interviewed. The sample is disaggregated thus:- 15 years- 10, 16 years- 8, 17 years- 5, 18 years- 4, 19 years- 1, 24 years- 1, 25years- 1. The 30 girls were interviewed using a qualitative instrument that contains open- ended questions. In addition one Focus Group Discussion was held with 10 of the girls who were randomly selected. To gain additional insight into the phenomenon, life histories of four of the girls were gathered through narratives.

### FINDINGS

Using content analysis the following variables were identified and isolated as being responsible for trafficking of young women in Nigeria: education, globalization, unemployment, poverty and family values and size.

**Education:** Illiteracy is an open invitation to poverty. The need to trade off girls' education against immediate survival has resulted in a situation where many girls are denied basic education. Of the thirty (30) young women interviewed only three (3) had completed the senior secondary school. The remaining twenty seven (27) dropped out at various levels of primary and junior secondary school. This reflects

the decision of families to remove girls from schools in order to train the boys. This buttresses the assertion of Osakue and Olateru- Olagbegi (1998) that low level of education amongst women which has limited their participation in the formal sector makes them vulnerable to traffickers. This buttresses the assertion of one of the respondents. According to her:

*How many parents would agree to invest in a girl's education. They would rather ask the girl to learn a trade or get married so that the boys can go to school.*

**Globalization:** This is the integration of World economies through trade, financial flows, the exchange of technology and information. The structure of the world economy has been skewed in such a way that those in the periphery are unable to access the benefits of globalization because they are ridden with debt and unemployment and virtually excluded from world trade. Dembele (1991: 64) argues that Africa is a marginal player in the global market. It accounts for less than 2 percent of the world trade. This is because of the uncompetitive nature of most Africa economies due to their mono- cultural nature. Globalization has reduced the World to a village making it possible for people to access information easily. In addition it has caused the existence of two worlds with those countries in the rich North depending on the raw materials from the poor South to run their industrial base. This has engendered competencies and a better well- being for the economies of the North. The result is better well-being for their citizens. Of significance is the fact that the South is saddled with a weak industrial base and a huge population. The economy of the South continues to suffer declining productivity. This situation is the reason why a large number of young women migrate to Europe to seek better opportunities. Fifteen of those interviewed revealed that their friends and relations living in Europe facilitated their travel while the rest said that the relationships they developed on the internet helped them travel to Europe. Efe is 16 years old; she browses three times a week. She made friends through the net and they encouraged her to come to Europe. They helped her with 50% of the fare. However her documents were not valid so she was deported.

**Unemployment:** The level of unemployment is a barometer to measure a nation's economic well- being as it increases during depression and

declines during economic boom. All regions of the World reflect a higher rate of unemployment among women than men as women are found mainly in the periphery of the economy due to their lack of education and skills. In 20 years women's labor force participation marginally increased by 4 percent (from 36 percent in 1970-40 percent in 1990) (United Nations, 1996:3). All thirty (30) young women interviewed were unemployed as at the time they were trafficked. This buttresses the findings of the International Organization on Migration (IOM, 1996:6) that lack of opportunities, the disparity in wealth between the rich and poor countries and the marginalization of women as some of the factors responsible for trafficking in women. This is especially true for Nigeria where the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) has exacerbated the level of unemployment especially amongst women due to their lack of education, skills and their inability to access credit from the capital market. SAP with its attendant policy of rationalization of jobs, removal of subsidies on social amenities has created a crisis of governance in Nigeria with the result that the state is unable to ameliorate the human condition. This has increased the level of poverty in Nigeria. The respondents argued that there exist few jobs to cater for the army of the unemployed. According to them:

*Where are the jobs? Graduates cannot get good jobs how much less those of us with lower qualifications. With such qualifications one can only get low paying jobs where the employer can wake up and fire you for no reason.*

In essence unemployment is a push factor for trafficking in women.

**Poverty:** poverty has been defined as the deficiency of material items necessary for a minimum level of existence (Jones 1998: 131). Sub-Saharan Africa has suffered a steady decline in economic growth. For instance, between 1978 and 1994, output per head fell by about 0.7 percent. Of the 43 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, about 20 countries are below their per capita incomes of 20 years ago (United Nations development programme, 2003). The report shows that between 1981 and 1989, the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, suffered a 21 percent decline in Gross National Product per capita (GNP). The most severe declines were in Gabon (50 percent), Nigeria (nearly 50 percent), Cote d'Ivoire (42 percent), Mozambique and Niger (more than 30

percent). This translates into absolute poverty for majority of the people living in this region especially women. Of the 30 young women interviewed none had a steady income and all were from families where the combined income of household members was less than ₦10, 000 a month (approximately 72 dollars), just slightly higher than the national minimum wage of ₦7500 a month. *Itohan's case provides a good example of how poverty plays a key role in trafficking. She is 15 years old. With only primary education, her family tricked her into trafficking by telling her that she was going as a maid to a wealthy lady. Her mother is uneducated and unemployed while her father is a subsistence farmer. She was handed to some pimps who took her through a tortuous journey through the Sahara desert to Italy. On getting to Italy after six months on the road, she was sold to a Nigerian madam for 40 American dollars. Thus began her unhappy journey to slavery and bondage. Itohan at 15 years services an average of 15 men a day. All her earnings including tips go to her madam who is anxious to recover her investment. The poverty of her family made them sacrifice her to traffickers with the hope that whatever money she makes will assist the family to achieve a better well-being.* This buttresses the views of some scholars that poverty is major push factor for trafficking in young women.

**Family Values and Size:** The massive rural-urban migration witnessed in the wake of the oil boom in the 1970s resulted in a gradual weakening of the family institution. The close kinship networks associated with the rural areas were non-existent in the urban centres. This nonetheless was not a strong factor amongst the 30 young women interviewed. Rather, the number of children born to their parents played a major role in the decision to be trafficked. Of the 30 young women interviewed only five (5) were from monogamous homes with family size ranging from eight (8) to twelve (12). The remaining twenty five (25) were from polygynous homes where the family size ranged from fifteen (15) to twenty five (25). Speaking in broken English one of them said “*my papa marry four wives. I be the first for my mama side and number 10 for my papa. I no go school and I no learn work wetin make I do? As i no fit thief na him I decide to do ashewo work since I fine to help my family. Wetin com be the wahala inside. You wan make I dey make hungry kill my mama children*”. Meaning that my father married

four wives. I am the 10<sup>th</sup> child and since I am not well educated but physically attractive, I had no choice than to follow a trafficker to assist my mother and siblings. The fact that they come from large families, with no education and skills and not having any means of earning income increased their vulnerability to trafficking. Infact in some situations parents compel their beautiful daughters to go with traffickers,

## DISCUSSION

Evidence from the In-depth interviews show that for Nigeria, the adoption of the market economy, has resulted in mass rationalization of workers thus increasing the army of the unemployed. This is most evident in situations where family heads have lost their means of livelihood. Even those engaged in farming and petty trading do not fare better because they depend on the income of those employed in the formal sector to earn a living. Extrapolating on the strength of the above evidence, we agree with Merton that having internalized success goals as shown on western media and being unable to actualize their desire to be successful they resort to illicit means to acquire success. The crux of the argument is that globalization which has reduced time and distance has introduced the internet and satellite television. Through these media it has become possible for young people in Nigeria to communicate and exchange information with their friends in Europe and America. This has exposed them to the high standard of life prevalent in those societies. Their inability to attain such measure of existence in Nigeria is due to two main reasons (a) their position within the social structure and (b) the position of Nigeria within a globalized economy. The fact that virtually all those trafficked come from the lower class and having no education and skills, it becomes absolutely impossible for them to achieve success through the legitimate means. Their lack of education and skill mean that they cannot access well-paying jobs which could translate into better well-being for them and their families. In addition, the shift from traditional society to industrial society has resulted in individualism and the absence of kinship networks to cushion the frustrations and loneliness of city life. This situation has resulted in value erosion where the individual tends to deviate given the absence of collective conscience which acts as



social control. This laxity in social control leads to deviation.

The situation is further compounded by the fact that government policy helps to accentuate the poverty level. The adoption and implementation of the structural adjustment policy by the Nigerian state engendered a myriad of problems. The most fundamental is the problem of unemployment and underemployment caused by the rationalization of workers by both the government and private enterprises. In addition the devaluation of the national currency which is one of the IMF conditionality meant to promote trade and boost export to other countries has failed to achieve the above objective. Rather it has contributed to the impoverishment of Nigerians by increasing the cost of doing business in Nigeria. The result is high overhead for businesses which is passed to consumers as high cost of goods and services. These result in inflation and then a glut in the supply of goods and services since the citizens cannot afford such products. The companies' inability to recoup their investments sometimes results in total closure or rationalization of staff to reduce overhead. In essence globalization which ought to boost trade and interaction amongst nations has engendered poverty. This is due to Nigeria's position as a peripheral nation and having a monocultural economy with a weak technological base. It lacks the competitive competence to effectively compete in a world that is technology driven. In essence the hegemonic relationship between the rich North and poor South engenders poverty in the south and this tends to exacerbate the incidence of trafficking in young women.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If indeed the world is a village then the rich North must ensure the eradication of poverty in the world especially in Africa, if indeed they are serious about stemming the incidence of trafficking in young women. For as long as this gulf continues to widen the desire to migrate to a place of better social and economic existence will be heightened. The more stringent measures adopted by the rich North, the more the level of desperation by the syndicates and their clients. Instances of boats with desperate young men and women capsizing on the high seas and other desperate acts like entering Spain through Morocco point to this fact. Disillusioned young

people have no respect for migration policies.

The rich North must introduce a marshal plan for Africa to help revitalize the economies of Africa. This will ensure that the young people are kept in their countries. After all in the 1970s when the economies of most African countries were booming trafficking in persons was not in existence. In addition, institutional support should be given to organizations set up by the government to fight this menace.

## REFERENCES

- Adepoju A 2000. Issues and Recent Trends in International Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Social Science Journal*, 165: 385-394.
- Adepoju A 2005. Review of Research and Data on Human Trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Migration*, 43(1/2): 75-98.
- Butege F 1997. *Trafficking in Women in Africa: A Regional Report*. Mimeographed.
- Dembele DM 1998. The Political Economy of Debt Adjustment and Globalization in Africa. In: Y Fall 1999. *Africa: Gender, Globalization and Resistance*. African Association of Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) Book Series.
- DeDios AJ 1999. Rights and Risks: Trafficking, Migration and Reproductive Issues. *Paper read before the Ford Foundation Reproductive Health Affinity Group Meeting*, Le Meridien Bahia, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.
- ILO 2003. *The Trafficking of Women and Children in the Southern African Region*: Presentation of Research Findings, Geneva: ILO.
- IOM 1996. Trafficking in women to Italy, Budapest, Hungary. IOM.
- Jones S 1998. *Criminology*. Butterworth, London.
- Mann K 1992. The Class Thesis. In: W Morrison 1997. *Theoretical Criminology*. London, Sydney: Cavendish Publishing Ltd.
- Merton R 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.
- Okonofua FE, Ogbomwan SM, Alutu AN, Okop K, Aghahowa E 2004. Knowledge, Attitudes and Experiences of sex trafficking by young Women in Benin City South-South, Nigeria. *Social Science and Medicine*, 59(6):1315-1327. Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Benin.
- Onyeonoru PI 2004. Pull Factors in the Political Economy of International Commercial Sex Work in Nigeria. *African Sociological Review*, 8(2): 115-135.
- Osakue G, Olateru- Olagbegi B 1998. *Italios and Sponsors: A Primer of Trafficking in Women* (the Nigerian case). Benin City, Nigeria: International Reproductive Rights Research Group (IRRRAG).
- UNESCO 2004. *Human Trafficking in West Africa: Root Causes and Policy Recommendations*. Lagos, Nigeria: Women Consortium of Nigeria (WOCN).
- United Nations 1996. Poverty Casting Long Shadows. *Bulletin No.6*. Department of Public Information, New York: USA
- UNDP 2003. *Human Development Report: Millennium Development Goals, a Compact among Nations to End Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press.