

The Religio – Cultural Context of Girl-child Trafficking in Nigeria

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Abstract

Trafficking in persons (TIP) is recorded to be the second greatest money-spinner the world over after arms trafficking. Human Trafficking is one of the thriving illegal businesses in Nigeria today. It entails all forms of sexual exploitation, abuse and forced labour. Girl-child trafficking in particular is a common phenomenon in Nigeria. Nigerian girls are being trafficked to Italy, Mali, Libya, Morocco, and other countries in droves, for prostitution. The major factor responsible for this crime in Nigeria is poverty coupled with weak enforcement of the Child Right Act, ignorance, greed, illiteracy, collapse of family values and increase in violence against women. The study attempts to investigate the experiences of some of the victims of Trafficking who have returned to Nigerian and have since been reunited with their families as reported in the various daily newspapers and magazine. It also attempts to look into how the dignity and rights of the girl-child can be established through proper education and re-orientation of both parents and children. There is need to protect the interests of the girl-child and promote their rights through public awareness and proper education.

Keywords: religio-cultural, girl child, trafficking, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Sex Trafficking is increasingly recognized as an important phenomenon with immense implications for global security and societal cohesion (Okonofua, 2004). It essentially involves women from underdeveloped countries being trafficked to neighbouring countries or more developed countries for sex work or domestic assistance. Child trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. “One the average, ten children daily pass through Nigerian borders, especially originating from fostering and extended family systems” (UNICEF, 2007). The children are exploited for labour or commercial sex. The major causes of child trafficking in Nigeria include high level of illiteracy, unemployment and poor living standards. Burdens of poverty and desperation or poor and illiterate parents with large families coupled with ignorance of the impact of child trafficking have led to the removal of children from their family environment to other cities or countries. Parents may be deceived to give their children to trafficker on the basis of the prospects of training and a better life for the children. Perhaps the inability of the majority of Nigerians to meet the minimal levels of health service, housing, food and clothing has created the unpleasant situation that has led some to confront the environment and one of the results is the inhuman act of human trafficking and child labour (Nwaomah, 2006). Girl – Child trafficking is thriving in Nigeria because it involves the exploitation of the parents’ extreme poverty, ignorance and unhealthy quest for material things. The main motive of a woman accepting an offer from a trafficker is better financial opportunities for herself or her family (FGN, 2004). It is seen as an escape route from poverty by the victims. There is little or no knowledge of the fact that child trafficking is a violation of human rights – particularly the right of the child to be protected from any form of economic exploitation, to preserve family relations and to grow up in a nurturing family environment (UNICEF, 2002). It becomes necessary then to examine those factors that make people vulnerable to child trafficking and how to effectively combat the practice.

2. Girl-Child Trafficking: The Nigeria Situation

According to a Unicef Report, the trafficking of children is one of the gravest violations of human rights in the world. Every year, hundreds of thousands of children are smuggled across borders and sold like mere commodities. Their survival and development are threatened, and their rights to education, to health, growing up within a family, protection from exploitation and abuse, are denied (UNICEF, 2002). Many unsuspecting Nigeria

boys and girls who should be in school have been coerced over the years by unscrupulous men and women into trades that do not exist in order to be exploited for prostitution, hard and domestic labour, sex slavery, drugs and even rituals or for organ harvesting (Folasade, 2009).

Those who are not trafficked outside the country are trapped in some form of employment in the urban cities like Lagos and Port Harcourt where they are expected to dress in skimpy clothes and make every effort to woo investor/customers (most especially those working in Banks) in order to meet their target. 60%-80% of girls in the sex trade outside the country are in Italy (Over 700 in Italy while Belgium and the Netherlands are experiencing an upsurge in the number of Nigerian girls) (Folasade, 2009). The average age of trafficked children is 14-15 years. The common routes of the traffickers include the West Coast of Nigeria through Mali, Morocco and then by boat to Spain, or West Coast of Nigeria through Libya and Saudi Arabia. 90% travel by road across the Sahara desert, others through airports, seaports and bush parts (Folasade, 2009).

The way children, as young as nine or ten, get engaged as servants in the urban cities is worrisome. In the past, children engagement in domestic services was done mainly through direct agreement between the child's parents and the employers. Sometimes, as a form of traditional fostering arrangement whereby children would receive education or vocational training in return for working in a household (Igbum & Apenda, 2006). This link with the child's parents and sense of obligation however, have been eroded as more and more children are procured from impoverished rural families by middlemen, driven only by commercial motive and transported long distance to work in urban households. They often work very long hours and are poorly fed and clothed. They are also deprived of emotional care and affection. Significantly the girls are also vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation, not only by employers, but often also from older male workers in the household (Igbum & Apenda, 2006).

The extended family system which is entrenched in most Nigerian cultures actually made it easy for traffickers in the persons of aunts, distance cousins and uncles to take these girls away from their parents under the guise that they would have better opportunities in the cities or outside the country to further their education and make much money. Also, religious attachments and trust that people have in religious leaders, has also made it possible for some religious leaders to take undue advantage of their unsuspecting followers who gladly and willingly hand over their children to them for training or better jobs abroad.

3. The Religio-Cultural Context

The kingdom of God is a divine project in which human beings are called through Jesus Christ, to collaborate with God in their personal lives and in the society to restore wholeness to human life and create situation in which all may participate freely in the fruits of wealth (Kirk, 1992). This is the ideal which one expects to be the focus and goal of the church and the men and women of God who daily busy themselves inviting people to their churches and preaching the 'good news'. It is saddening however to note that the increasing volume of 'holy noises' that blast the decorum of our nightfalls, the quietness of our early mornings and those that trail the massive number of congregants at our mega churches, the attendees and devotees at various 'redemption camps' and crusade grounds (Manus, 2009) are not to a large extent geared towards the actualization of the kingdom of God on earth. Rather, most of these religious activities are mere outward show of religiosity devoid of the mind of Christ and sincerity. Religion is central to the lives and social values of Nigerian, yet a lot of evil and crimes are perpetuated daily.

People performed a lot of atrocities on a daily basis in the name of religion, taking undue advantage of the innocent devotees who believe that their religious leaders are true men of God. This simple trust in religious leaders as representatives of God, coupled with the Yoruba culture which emphasises respect for authority (particularly parental authority), have become a major source of abuse for the girl-child and many women in Nigeria today. Many children in obedience to their parent's instruction were trafficked either within the country or outside it for domestic servitude, hawking, rituals, child labour or prostitution. The stronghold of religion and culture and its influence on the society cannot be ever-emphasized. For instance, the governor of Niger State, Abdulkadir Kure publicly made it known that his government could not adopt the Child's Right Act except it first passed through the council of Ulamas (an Islamic council) for approval. "The Child's Right bill before the state house of Assembly was referred to the council of Ulamas, the apex religious body in the state to take a dispassionate view of issues in the bill as the custodians of culture and religion in the state with a view to making the necessary inputs before the passage of the law"(FGN, 2004).

The speaker of the Niger State House of Assembly Alhaji Alhassan Jikantoro also reiterated the importance of the religious input by saying "it may sound worrisome to you by saying the bill is now before the council of

Ulamas. In fact, the attempt is to properly position the bill such that it will not run at variance with the laid down provisions of our religion and the customs of our people” (FGN, 2004).

Though religion is so pervasive in Nigeria and one expects that the teaching, precepts and moral standards of religion should influence the personality and the daily conduct of individuals, this has not been the case. Rather as observed by Odumuyiwa (2006) commercialization of religion, intolerance, extortion of religious followers, injustice, lack of integrity of some religious leaders and embezzlement of funds are the orders of the day. Nigeria is as religiously inclined as it is very criminal. Ehioghae (2006) also noted that the religious terrain in Nigeria today is strewn with modern Gehazis whose specious ministries are designed to pander to their desire for inordinate gains. “The gospel is commercialized and divested of the Cross.

According to Olupona (2011), the crisis of corruption in Nigeria’s public life requires that we re-examine the role of religion and morality in that realm. All available statistics indicate that public profession of faith has increased tremendously in Africa, with new churches and mosques springing up weekly everywhere. However, conversion to Islam and Christianity, and an increase in public professions of spirituality seem not to have succeeded in structuring public life and citizen’s obligations to their community. In Nigeria, there are well-organized syndicates that specialize in trafficking children for prostitution or as domestic aids. Human trafficking is evil because the victims are held against their will through acts of coercion and forced to work or provide services to the trafficker or others. Prostitution is also an abusive practice which robbed the girl – child of her human dignity. Jesus Christ in the Gospels placed a great value on the life of children “...for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Mathew, 19:13-15) girl-child trafficking is condemnable (Mathew 18:1-4) as it infringes on the right of the child and exposes them to diseases and a lot of hazards (Mark 10:13-16). The menace of human trafficking adversely negates the intended will of God in making humankind in his image or the restoration of that image (Nwaomah, 2006). It diminishes the personality of the victims and is as such at variance with the divine intention. It is therefore disheartening that in most cases human traffickers are people who claim to be Christians or Muslims or even religious leaders. How does one reconcile the belief in a God who created all men and women equally for His glory with the indemnifying practice of human trafficking and sexual exploitation of fellow believers?

4. Experiences of Some Nigerian Girls

Helen was deceived by her aunty into prostitution. She is from Delta State in Nigeria and was 16 years old when the aunty approached her parents that she was living in America and had a very big boutique, and that she wanted to assist Helen by taking her to America so that she could work in her boutique and save enough money to enable her to continue her education in America. With this, the girl’s parents were very happy as they were convinced that their daughter will fare better in America than in the village. So they accepted that the woman should take their daughter. Rather than traveling to America as promised the woman took the girl to Cotonou and sold her to a pimp and disappeared. The following day the pimp who bought her, introduced two other girls to Helen and told her to follow the girls who would enlighten her on what she would be doing. The girls explained to her all she was supposed to know as a prostitute. When it dawned on her that she had been deceived she cried and vowed that she would never be a prostitute. The pimp told her that the only thing that could rescue her was if she paid back the money paid for her purchase. After some reluctance since she had no money to pay and no where to run to, she succumbed to prostitution and had to pay the pimp 3,000 CFA daily in addition to another 4,000 CFA everyday for her accommodation. Usually in Cotonou when a man comes to sleep with a prostitute, he pays 2,000 CFA and that means she had to sleep with more than four men in a day in order to meet these payments (Hersay, 2011).

A more pathetic story is the experience of Bola, a 15 year old Senior Secondary School pupil in Ikorodu, Lagos State. She is the only child of divorced parents. She told her mother that she wanted to get a job during the long vacation in order to save some money for her university education. The mother then told her Pastor who usually assists members with jobs. Unknown to Bola and her mother, the pastor in connivance with another woman, only tricked people to recruit young girls for a prostitution ring in Tripoli, Libya. Bola’s mother handed her daughter and her younger sister over to her Pastor, a 40 year old prophetess and head of the Christ Apostolic and Redemption Church, Ikorodu, Lagos. The girls along with some other boys and girls were taken to Libya through a tortuous journey via the desert route. Once in Libya the girls were handed over to their various masters’ who had paid for them. Bola was taken to a brothel and was told she had to work and pay off her debt of \$3,000. Despite her protests, cotton wool was forced into her private part before she was forced to sleep with a man after which it was removed. The cotton was meant to prevent sperm from getting inside her. Each time the cotton wool was pulled out she bled again. When the mother got the information that her daughter was being forced

into prostitution she ran to the prophetess and pleaded with her to bring them back to Nigeria but the pastor/prophetess insisted she must pay N400, 000 if she wanted them back (Oseghale, 2010).

Reverend Raymond, a Nigerian missionary in Mali, observed that Nigerian girls were being trafficked to Mali in droves for prostitution. According to him, "it is Nigerian men who bring the girls to Mali under the pretext that they are taking them to Europe. When they get to Mali, they are abandoned to brothel owners who become their masters. A brothel can contain as many as 1,000 Nigerian girls. Each girl is made to pay as much as N2 million to offset the cost of transporting her from Nigeria to Mali. The brothels are usually much secured because prostitution is legal in Mali, making it hard for the girls to escape. They are denied contact with the outside world until they can pay off their debt. Some of the girls have died and have been buried within the brothel's premises (Oseghale, 2010).

Arinze Orakwue, head of communications, National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) Nigeria, attributed the increase in the rate of girl-child trafficking to the explosion in the sex industry of so many countries and their legalization of prostitution. He lamented that in most of the countries where these girls were taken, "they subject the girls to all sorts of things and they have sex with them day-in, day-out, sometimes as many as 30 men a day. And you can imagine that they cannot access medical care because they don't have the means to be exposed to these facilities". He reiterated that some of the girls had actually contracted all forms of diseases before even getting to Europe because a greater number of them leave through the desert, travelling from Nigeria to Cotonou, Ghana and then to Mali, where they cross the desert to Morocco and so they are constantly subjected to rape on a daily basis (Oseghale, 2010).

5. Government's Response to Child Trafficking in Nigeria

Child trafficking leads to loss of lives, increasing prevalence of STDs including HIV/AIDS, increase in violence and crime rate, increased school drop-out, impaired child development, poor national image and massive deportation of Nigerian girls. This has prompted the Nigerian government to put some measures in place to curb the menace.

An Anti-Trafficking and Child Labour Act now operates in Nigeria and it provides for penalties for breach of the provisions of the Act. Its section 28 stipulates that where a corporate body is convicted of an offence of trafficking or aiding in trafficking it shall be liable to a fine of two million naira and forfeiture of assets and closure of the corporate body. Section 29 states that any commercial carrier who knowingly carries any person in violation of this Act commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for two years or a fine of two million naira. Section 32 of the Act provides that any law enforcement officer can search, seize and arrest any aircraft, vehicle or container reasonably believed to be used for trafficking in persons. There is the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficked in Persons and other Related Matter [NAPTTP] vested with the responsibility for investigation and prosecution of offenders and the counseling and rehabilitation of trafficked persons. This agency rehabilitates and reintegrates victims to acquire pre-requisite skill in any vocation of his or her choice and also gives micro credit facilities to enable the victims complete the process of reintegration into society.

Another major development was the signing of a co-operation agreement to fight child trafficking between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. The document provides notably for a joint security surveillance team that will patrol the borders of both countries. The Nigerian government also discussed new bilateral agreements with Niger and Cameroon.

6. Education as a Control Measure

Education is defined by the oxford Learner's dictionary as a process of training and instructing, especially of children and young people in schools and colleges, which are designed to give knowledge and development skills. Nelson Mandela is quoted to have said that "education is a powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Akohomu, 2011). It is seen as the most critical factor in bringing about human empowerment and national growth in a nation. Education is a continuous process of acquiring and applying life transforming skills and experience to living a successful and fulfilling life. Educating the girl-child will go a long way to improve her dignity and help in creating awareness of her rights. It thus becomes imperative for both the government and parents to ensure that the girl-child is given the opportunity of quality education and job opportunity in the society. The rich who employ young girls as housemaids should be discouraged from such practices or mandated to give the maids basic education, at least up to the junior secondary school level. This will help to empower the girl and reduce the menace of their trafficking in the nation. Education and awareness campaign should be on the increase in all nooks and crannies of the society. Trafficking in persons as a course be incorporated into school

curriculum in senior secondary and tertiary institution to enhance knowledge and research on the phenomenon of trafficking.

7. Conclusion

Religion must stand for the enhancement of life by allowing the blood of compassion and mutual love for a fellow being to flow through its adherents. To curb human trafficking and sexual exploitation of the girl – child, religion has a major role to play. The common and beneficial values in religion particularly Christianity, such as love of God, love of one's neighbour, hard work, dignity of labour, selflessness and compassion must be emphasized. The power of religion should be utilized positively for the benefits of society. While religion is implicated in this problem it can also be seen as a solution to the problem if approached carefully. Those who engage in human trafficking belong to one religion or the other as such they can be influenced positively when their religious leaders both in teaching and by example, emphasize the evil in human trafficking and the need for their followers to desist from such practice. Religion can be used for constructive human development rather than its destructive impact which is prevalent today.

Sexual exploitation of the girl – child through human trafficking constituted a grave abuse of rights and must be discouraged by all means. There is need for awareness campaign which must involve faith based institutions and community leaders on the need to protect children from human traffickers. The socio-economic status of Nigerians need improvement so that parents can be able to cater for their children without handing them over to foster parents or relatives for training. The culture of giving or allowing children to live with relatives should be discouraged as it easily leads to exploitation of such children.

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