



Social Cultural Practices, Patriarchy and Human Trafficking in Edo State

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Abstract

The phenomenon of human and sex trafficking has become a major source of concern to all and has engaged the time and resources of state and non-state actors. Particularly high rate of human and sex trafficking cases from South-south (especially in Edo state) Nigeria to Europe is often reported. In order to understand the background to the problem in the region this paper therefore specifically looks at the relationship between human and sex trafficking and social cultural practices like patriarchy in the region. The paper uses a qualitative approach to explore action, motives and experiences of returnee victims, offenders, inhabitants, response bodies in the region in this regard. Initial conclusion from the study is that social cultural practices particularly patriarchies which are entrenched in traditional social practices in the area, may have a correlation with the phenomenon of trafficking. Unfortunately policy and programmes of state actors have failed to take this into consideration in understanding while fighting the problem.

Keywords: Human and Sex trafficking, Cultural practices, Patriarchy, South - south Nigeria

Introduction

Scholars and authorities argue that human trafficking is one of the fastest growing activities of trans-national criminal organisations (Charnysh et al 2015), with far reaching implication for individual, national and global well-being (The United Nations Office for Drug and Crime (UNODC) (2015)). There are more slaves today, according to some academic reports, than when the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished (Bales 2012). An often presented estimation which could be debated (see Musto 2009 and Weitzer, 2014) is that human trafficking generates about \$150billion globally in illegal profits annually

(ILO, 2014; US Trafficking in Persons (TIP), 2016). In the midst of the above claims and assertions researches have attempted to understand the correlation between the phenomenon of trafficking and certain prevalent structural factors especially in known source regions like Edo state in South-south Nigeria (see, NAP TIP, 2016, United Nations Organisation for Drug Control UNODC, 2006).

Researchers have tried to identify contributing structural factors outside the often mentioned challenges of poverty and poor economic conditions of human and

sex trafficking in especially developing societies which are commonly source countries (see, Okonofua, et al 2004). Okonofua et al's quantitative work on human and sex trafficking in Benin City (Edo state) was able to identify connection between human and sex trafficking and patriarchy in terms of the number of respondents in the sample size that indicated this but the work did not give details especially regarding context, and preceding experiences of victims or offenders.

Conceptual Focus of the Paper

This paper is a qualitative work that focuses on understanding the relationship between human an sex trafficking in Edo state South-south Nigeria and social cultural traditions especially patriarchy in the region. This is focused because patriarchy for example especially among the Benin people who are the dominant ethnic group in the area is an entrenched practice which is believed to be a precursor to gender poverty and various inhibitions (see, Ugiagbe et al 2011).

Methods

This paper is a qualitative work. Qualitative methods were employed to explore the research topic. Open-ended unstructured interviews and focus group discussion were conducted. Returnee victims, relatives, response practitioners, government officials and inhabitants of Ikpoba-Okha in Edo state were interviewed.

Findings/Discussion

The paper was able to arrive at certain findings that were hitherto unknown and but contribute to the understanding of the issues of human and sex trafficking in the region.

Socio-cultural Practices (Patriarchy)

The disposability of women as an item in the culture of the people of the area speaks volume. Unlike their male counterparts the women in the area are held with little or no regard as they are seen as not relevant in the socio-cultural life of the people. According to a participant: ...*In Edo state, the women are not considered as an equal of the man. She is considered as disposable...* Her degree of that sense of self-worth is dependent on how useful she is to the men in her life... {HTP07, NGO1}. The participant further noted that girls are not generally socialised like the males. The boy is said to be brought up to believe he is a leader, while the girl is taught to believe she is a follower (HTP07-NGO1).

This patriarchal tendency is seen as a cultural reality in the area predisposing women to becoming targets for the expansive sex trade in Europe. The inequality of sexes is seen as a platform that propels the booming of the trafficking business in the area which has become a key source region in sub-Sahara Africa. Society here is claimed to see women as individuals that can be dispensed for the men in their life, hence the ease they are led into sex trade outside their country with the men waiting to receive the money that she will send back home. This cultural pattern is also reflected in a situation where educating a woman is considered as a waste and not necessary. They believe educating a woman leads to nowhere meaningful. Consequently, many of the young girls in this area are not enrolled in school thereby exposing them to poaching by traffickers as found.

...There is a common saying, that if you educate a girl child, it is a waste...so base on this, some persons really don't see it as a necessity to educate a girl child. And if a girl child is not educated and she

is left at home and somebody just come...en... and say I have a tomatoes farm in Italy...{...} and said I should help them recruit worker... or they are looking for nannies... so the girl child is there to just go into it... (HTP08-NGO2).

Though this practice of not sending female children to school is now gradually changing but still appears a normal disposition among many in the region. The outlook here is when you go to most houses in the area, the boys are usually the ones that you will find at home, *while the girls are slaving it out on the street of Europe...* (HTP07-NGO, GPI). The parents usually expect money to be sent home by the trafficked daughters to pay the fees for the boys, if they are in school or to set up businesses for the boys if they are interested in businesses, or to marry wives for the boys, to feed the boys and their families (HTP07-NGO, GPI). In the same vein, because the women are said to be excluded from the inheritance of property and wealth of parents they are left with no option other than fending for themselves which respondents believe makes them sometimes follow traffickers abroad in search of wealth.

... Our culture of inheritance that the woman has no right in the parent's house or whatever, is also a fact. They are left to fend for themselves. So when such opportunity presents itself to them, they grab it with both hands to be in competition with the men... that is another reason why a lot of them go... {HTP08-NGO2}.

Field participants especially NGO workers at the focused group discussion session, generally consider sex trafficking as one of the products of institutionalised patriarchal practices in the country and in the area of

study. This seems to have a universal version (see, Warden, 2013) as most sex trafficking endemic areas around the world have strong culture of gender inequality. Apart from its direct role in the practice of sex trafficking as illustrated above, gender inequality has also been considered as contributory to some undesirable social-economic conditions including poverty in the area (Ugiagbe et al, 2011).

Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, Social Exclusion and Gender Poverty

Modern liberal societies vocally denounce abhorrent practices relating to social exclusion, patriarchy and gender inequality and claim knowledge of these as common practices in Africa, but they appear to have a conceptual preference regarding sex trafficking that says little of this. Authorities in the source country (Nigeria) have also paid little or no attention to this factor when addressing sex trafficking, especially in south-south Nigeria. My findings indicates the issues of gender inequality and patriarchy leading to social exclusion and economic hardship amongst women of the region is a key factor in explaining out migration (which precedes sex trafficking) in the area. Patriarchal values, including paying of bride price, polygamy, male child preference and desertion, entrenched (among the Bini) in the region represent women as marketable commodities (also see, Olaniyi, 2011).

If women are empowered by the male dominated society they may not easily be led to meet sex traffickers (also see, Oshadare 2004). Much of the female population here live in poverty because of the marginalisation, limitations and cultural obstacles put on them (see, Aina, et al., 2008; Anyaji and Akporaro, 2008; Hughes

2005). Generally, the practice of gender inequality and social exclusion of women is reinforced by the hegemonic patriarchal national society as also argued by some scholars. Women's empowerment initiatives are invariably superficial and often failed. Outside South-south Nigeria, patriarchy, and other gender based socio-cultural practices are argued as universal in explaining exploitative practices like sex trafficking from regions across the majority world (Warden, 2013).

Meanwhile, though out-migration is not a sure panacea for women's empowerment, researchers point to some form of gains in the process (see, Pesser, 2005). Pesser mentioned cases in Latin America, where migrant women have been able to garner economic improvement which allowed them some control over household decision making and household expenditure (ibid). Similarly, in the case of south-south Nigeria as indicated by my findings fortunate returnee female traffickers and victims leverage on their remittances to assume some level of equality with the men especially within their family and immediate community. These returnees sometimes become the bread-winners of their family or even become influential regarding community decision making process. They rely on the financial gains that comes with it (see, Campana, 2015), to make up for their socially deprived economic power.

A counter debate to the patriarchy factor, however, is that gender inequality is widespread globally, yet it does not lead to sex trafficking or related out-migration in many other regions of the world (see, Akor 2011). However, patriarchy may not necessarily lead to out migration in all cases but where it is established that it co-exists with poor economic conditions it is most likely going to lead to various kinds of

exploitation, including sexual exploitation. Meanwhile, following the feminization of migration, with women needed for all manner of jobs across the world (Castle et al 2014); those who are socially excluded or discriminated against socio-economically at home may be given the push to migrate to destinations where they feel things will look better for them. But in the process of migrating in desperation these women may become exploited or even become traffickers themselves.

Trafficking Business as Economic Options for Socially Excluded Women

'Madams' or 'Mamas', were found to be the main traffickers of young girls from the area for commercial sex in Europe. Just as the migration of victims into sexual exploitation is linked to social exclusion in the source country (as discussed above), there appears a correlation between patriarchy and the emergence of women traffickers in the region. Though the leading role of women in the business of sex trafficking particularly from Nigeria has previously been mentioned (see, Oyekanmi and Okunola 2017; Carling 2005; Mancuso 2013; Prina, 2003), none connected it with existing patriarchy in the region. Nigerian women who arrived early as economic migrants in Europe (Carling, 2005), apparently seeking for ways to escape social exclusion and economic hardship back home may have given women a sort of head start and sustained the business. Many women who became traffickers recently in the area could be those seeking ways to beat institutionalised cultural barriers especially as it relates to material aspiration. This is the reason identified traffickers in the area are quick to acquire choice properties, expensive cars for themselves and families.

and indulge in public show of wealth once they thrive in the business as my findings reflects. Some are now able to compete with wealthy politicians and economic elites who are mainly males by sending their children to schools reserve exclusively for the rich. Outside the issue of social exclusion and gender poverty, however, other explanations exist why women seems entrenched in the business of sex trafficking from Nigeria. For example, females are unlikely to be easily detected as perpetrators by law enforcement agents unlike their male counterpart (Campana 2015, Salt, 2000).

That women have a role as perpetrators in the trafficking business does not however mean cultural concept of male dominance in many source countries should be overlooked while trying to understand trafficking dynamics. Arguments canvassed the idea that it is all about male dominance and male dominated (see, Bolos 2004). This position indicates that, the concept of sex trafficking and sex work represent a cultural phenomenon deep seated in the masculine and feminine images held firmly by society. The writer's perspective arguably sees the business as a lucrative market which focuses on marketing men's pleasure, or their image of pleasure through supplying physical intimacy with women. In agreement with Bolos, blaming the men may be justified especially when they are the known end users of the product of sex work. Though Bolos (2004) view appears credible, it would be unfair not to appreciate the clear leading roles of fellow women responsible for directing the business, particularly in the case of trafficking from south-south Nigeria to Europe as common to my finding. Again, emphasis must be placed on the fact that this does not diminish the role of patriarchy as underpinning the business, nor does it

lessen the impact on the majority of female victims who will not go on to graduate to a position as a madam.

Use of Voodoo

Prospective victims, as found, take an oath administered by a voodoo priest before embarking on the journey with traffickers as confirmed by this victim: ...*After seeing the woman she did my passport... Then they took me to a shrine to swear to an oath. From there I went to Lagos where I finally left* {...} {HTP 01/04 – victim}. Common among the people in the area is the thinking that events of one's life are largely beyond one's control but instead are determined by some super natural forces. This is a socio-psychoreligious characteristic of the people wherein sex trafficking is partly embedded in the area.

The use of voodoo and oath taking, as illustrated by the above participant, is a potent psychological tool in the hands of the traffickers in securing loyalty and instilling fear in the victims. The victims believe that the voodoo or deity behind the oath has the potency to determine what will become of them so they are scared to do anything contrary to its dictates. Reluctant prospective victims are also usually compelled by relatives through the assistance of witch doctors believed to possess super-natural powers (see Oseghale, 2001). This corroborates Okonofua et al (2004) assertions that women who profess traditional religion are known to be much associated with the activities of human trafficking in their survey.

Apart from that, victims of human trafficking and their relatives, it was found, turn to spiritual support to get a 'sponsorer' (madam) willing to assist in the smuggling

Conclusion

Key findings in this paper include a culture of patriarchy, social exclusion of women and gender inequality as well as other social cultural practices like traditional religious activities in the area. Most importantly, the constraints of patriarchy arguably help to push many women into embarking on unsafe migratory journeys in search of the means to remedy their disadvantage statuses. In another sense these practices which also support the exploitation of the women often lead them to be sexually exploited at home and as migrants outside their country. This practice is entrenched in both the traditional society in the region and in the national socio-political system in the country with women disallowed socio-economic and political opportunities based on their gender (also see, Makama, 2013; Salaam, 2003; Ugiagbe et al, 2011).

Secondly, the role of voodoo use by traffickers to tie their victims to a bond is encouraged by the general practice of animism. This has relationship with the dominant belief system which has faith in witch-craft, sorcery and powers in both animals and non-living things is part of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) that the people in the area profess. This gives rise to the use of voodoo and other fatalistic practices that traffickers use as a means of manipulating and controlling the victims. With this, human trafficking especially sex trafficking practice is sustained as the business becomes self-coercing and self-policing with victims unable to default or

escape for fear of the repercussion that may come following the voodoo-backed-oath.

Way Forward

The way forward is to do a follow-up to this work maybe in the area of better aligning development and anti-human trafficking policies to explicitly address patriarchy and counter effects of certain social cultural practices that are not desirable. Further research can also be carried out to examine the existing global culture of exploitation and the ease at which international sexual exploitation and other forms of labour exploitation of trafficked persons are carried out especially in Western destinations.

Suggestions

Formal government, local traditional authorities, and general practice response need to discourage patriarchal practices that discriminate against women in the region and Nigeria. This can be in the form of consistent public campaigns in this respect. Opening up the socio-political environment to ensure the elimination of practices that undermine the participation of women in governance and certain economic activities is also important. This can help in redirecting many potential sex trafficking victims in the region into taking up meaningful engagement at home instead of travelling abroad. There may be need for the establishment in the region and the country of a social exclusion department to help deal with issues relating to the exclusion of women from the main stream socio-economic activities.

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