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Empowering women for gender equity

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**WOMEN**  
the invisible refugees

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Agenda, as a feminist media project in Africa, is committed to giving women a forum, a voice and skills to articulate their needs and interests towards transforming unequal gender relations.

We target in particular members of women's organisations, individuals and organisations interested in gender equality.

We aim to question and challenge current understandings and practices of gender relations. We contribute to the development of new knowledge about how gender relations can be transformed. In particular we contribute to the development of women and their capacity to organise themselves, reflect on their experiences and the write about this.

We, as a feminist media project, value participatory and transparent processes, and provide opportunities for individual growth and development.

We are committed to the principles of non-sectarianism, anti-racism and anti-homophobia. We will guard against all other forms of discrimination.

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Contributions of articles, interviews, book reviews, perspectives, profiles, reportbacks, biographical stories, briefings, poetry, cartoons, artwork or photographs that will enhance an understanding of gender issues are welcome.

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# No way out: the trafficking of women in Nigeria

RASHEED OLANIYI writes that trafficked women from Nigeria have been commodified in the global market

'If you run away, I will kill you!' (Agence France Press, July 28, 2000)

These words, shouted at a young woman trafficked from Nigeria by a pimp during her attempt to escape sex-work in the streets of Northern Italy, highlight the distressing experience of trafficked women. The trafficking of women is a disturbing reflection of inequality in the worldwide pattern of resource distribution. As a form of modern slavery, it has a complex nature involving migration, violence, violations of human rights and labour standards, and gender discrimination.

The United States Government defines the trafficking in persons as:

*All acts involved in the transport, harboring, or sale of persons within national or across international borders through coercion, force, kidnapping, deception or fraud, for purpose of placing persons in situations of forced labor or services, such as forced prostitution, domestic servitude, debt bondage or other slavery-like practices (Miko, 2000:3).*

This focus explores the diversity of strategies and organisational mechanisms adopted by international trafficking syndicates to recruit and transfer large numbers of Nigerian girls and women as sexual commodities to countries in Europe. It also discusses the roles of government agencies and NGOs in the campaign against the trafficking in women.

In this focus, trafficking is defined as the relocation of women from their communities of origin, for perpetual enslavement in bonded sex-work, by organised syndicates using circuitous routes and means. Women are trafficked for sexual exploitation both internally and across national borders. Both forced and 'voluntary'

recruitment for trafficking are geared towards the exploitation of women's productive labour and sexual potential. Indeed, social constructions of gender relations and sexuality facilitate trafficking for sexual exploitation by undermining women's economic potential. While males are also trafficked, with trade in young boys dominating in some parts of the world, including Nigeria, the majority of trafficked persons are women and girls. Trafficking is a highly gendered enterprise (Williams and Masika, 2002).

Globalisation has led to an unprecedented growth in this inhuman trade. In 2001, The International Organisation on Migration (IOM) estimated that between 700 000 and two million women are trafficked across international borders per year (IOM, 2001). According to the Nigerian Minister of State for Justice, Mr Musa Elayo, official statistics estimate 45 000 women trafficked per year to Europe, the Middle East and America (New Nigeria Newspaper, February 6, 2002). However, the subterranean nature of the trade, make it exceedingly difficult to ascertain accurate statistics of trafficked women.

The lucrative nature of trafficking in women resulted in a dramatic increase in the practice in the mid-'80s. Unlike arms and drugs, trafficked women can be sold many times. The United Nations estimates that the trafficking industry is worth US \$5 to \$7 billion per year (Wennerholm, 2002). The main beneficiaries are the organised crime syndicates involved in the trafficking circle who exploit the technology of globalisation, thereby making their evasion and impunity possible. In the Economic Community of the West African (ECOWAS) countries the elimination of many border controls and the free flow of migration has facilitate the trafficking of women across borders.

The trafficking of women for economic exploitation is a logical outcome of development problems such as poverty, economic deterioration, population displacement by internal conflicts, lack of female education and opportunities, and the low value placed on women. These factors provide a source of poor and vulnerable persons upon whom traffickers prey. Local predicaments and global impediments inhibit women's mobility. The complex interacting and contradictory web of power dynamics embedded in these phenomena converge to commodify women as articles of trade.

Unequal gender relations and patriarchal values underlie women trafficking. I argue that trafficking in women is another manifestation of patriarchal and familial control over female labour and sexuality. Under globalisation patriarchy has crossed the frontiers of public space into the international arena. Women are experiencing

heightened levels of exploitation, insecurity, vulnerability, poverty and illiteracy. Globalisation has pauperised women by its expansion of the sex industry, keeping them in perpetual slavery and penury.

**Patriarchy has crossed the frontiers of public space into the international arena**

### Origins of the trafficking in women

Women trafficking can be traced back to the 'engine room' of western capitalism, namely, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery, which spanned over 300 years. In the wake of its abolition, came the trafficking of women. The practice was first recognised in late 19th century Victorian England (MacNamara and Sagarin, undated) where it took the form of forced abductions, false marriages, false adoptions and forced sex-work and continued into the period which witnessed the rise of colonialism.

Women trafficking was so pervasive that the 1926 Slavery Convention drawn up by the League of Nations was supplemented in 1956 by the United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery. The Supplementary Convention prohibited the slave trade, its institutions, practices similar to slavery, and

acts having the same effects as slavery, such as debt bondage, serfdom, and the exploitation of labour of women and children (Williams and Masika, 2002). In the post Second World War era, the trafficking of women and girls was so severe that it attracted punitive measures from the United Nations viz The 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and Exploitation of Prostitution of Others. The Convention requires states to punish those exploiting the prostitution of others, even with their consent. The Convention also calls upon states parties to provide care and maintenance for victims of trafficking and to bear the cost of repatriation to the nearest border.

Trafficking in women reflects inequality on a global scale: the transfer of resources from depressed economies to prosperous ones, from periphery to the core and from the rural to the urban. I argue that it is not only about migration, but also about population displacement engendered by a militarised global economy. Trafficking occurs both within national boundaries, and across countries, regions and continents. Countries of origin, transit and destination are intertwined and overlap.

### Trafficking in Nigeria

The trafficking of Nigerian women into slavery and debt bondage in the global sex industry occurs within the larger global context of economic and social trends. Nigeria is an exporter of women for trafficking. It temporarily harbors arrivals from other countries (transit country) and acts as the destination country for others.

Across Nigeria, women are trafficked through border towns and communities including Delta, Akwa Ibom, Lagos, Imo, Rivers, Ondo, Kano, Ebonyi, Osun, and Enugu. They are trafficked by road, sea, and air (*New Nigeria Newspaper*, February 4, 2002; *Daily Trust*, January 22, 2002)

Women trafficking exists both in the import and export trade. Nigerian women are sometimes transported

## Trafficking flows within and from Africa

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN	COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION
Ghana	Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Italy, Netherlands, Lebanon, Libya, USA
Nigeria	Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, South Africa
Ethiopia	Middle East, Gulf States
Mali	Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait

Source: International Organisation for Migration, 2001.

across West African countries such as Ghana and Ivory Coast, from where they are transported by sea to Italy. Some North African countries, particularly Algeria, Morocco and Libya, are used as transit points for onward movement to Spain and France. (Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN). Women are transferred across the Mediterranean Sea, from Africa through the Middle East and onward to the Balkans. The Straits of Gibraltar remain the most popular entry point for thousands of illegal immigrants into Spain. It is only 8.6 miles wide at Tarifa - Europe's southern most point.

Many women migrate voluntarily, often over land. They migrate to Morocco in anticipation of crossing to Europe through Las Palma, Spain. In their bid to get to Europe, many perish while climbing mountains or when boats capsize, making the Straits of Gibraltar, 'the largest mass grave in Europe' in recent times (Immigration Laws, 2001:2). Young girls and women are offered large sums of money ranging from N150 000 to N500 000 by Nigerian trafficking agents together with the promise of secure employment (*Tell Magazine*, May 13, 2002). However, once they are trafficked they enter into slavery.

The trafficking of women and girls is flourishing, particularly as sex tourism has become a big business. Women's bodies have become exotic articles of trade in the global sex industry.

Local patriarchal customs such as incest, female circumcision, forced early marriages, forced sex-work or bonded labour, domestic violence, marital rape and financial instability push many women into sex-work (Ladipo, 2001). Financial hardship has been the 'push' factor and perceived financial gain the 'pull' factor in explaining why many women enter the sex industry. The trafficking industry provides finance for many to pursue their education. Sex-workers have a fairly high level of education. Over 55 percent have up to secondary level education (Lapido, 2001). Work in the sex industry is one of the few channels open to unemployed women.

### Women traffickers

Contrary to popular belief, traffickers are both male and female. Women ironically, have played principal roles as barons because of their enormous capital and connections, which they have acquired through participating in the sex trade. Men are their auxiliaries as intermediaries, recruiters and enforcers of disciplinary action. In Nigeria, many women traffickers and barons were formerly sex-workers. Their roles indicate how the global economy has been systematically structured to ensure that the exploited replicate patterns of exploitation in order to earn a living. Under-resourced police, border/immigration officials and state officials, weak law enforcement and porous borders ensure that trafficking flourishes. In urban centres, commercial sex bureaux and trade have burgeoned because of this laxity (Hodges, 2001).

Major international smuggling syndicates and mafias have taken advantage of the free flow of people, money, goods and services to extend their international reach (Miko, 2000). They are amorphous and highly mobile. Unlike those engaged in drug trafficking these groups tend to be highly organised which makes their early detection, monitoring and apprehension difficult. They are able to bypass immigration controls, mainly through the connivance of corrupt immigration officials, aviation personnel and police.

The trafficking rings that thrive in the export of Nigerian girls, exploit the porous immigration channels locally and internationally to ship many girls as whores to willing patrons overseas. Visa racketeering makes trafficking easy. Nigerians and Liberians who are living legally in the Netherlands sell or rent their Dutch passports to traffickers (*Sunday Punch*, June 25, 2000).

**Desperate families in Edo State sell their daughters to traffickers for immediate payment**

By replacing the photograph, a trafficked person can enter Europe legally. Once inside Western Europe, she can travel anywhere in Europe. The actual cost to the trafficker rarely exceeds \$1000. Further, most European immigration laws prohibit the deportation of a minor (under 18 years) who has no support in her country of origin. As a result, fake birth certificates are in particularly high demand. Forgery flourishes in Benin City and Lagos, and the skill of the forgers has astonished Western diplomats (*Sunday Punch*, June 25, 2000).

### Recruitment strategies

Traffickers acquire their 'human cargo' either through their voluntary cooperation or through coercive methods. Women are procured for example, through outright abduction or purchase from family members. Desperate families in Edo State, Nigeria, sell their daughters to brothels or traffickers for immediate payment (*Women's e-News*, August 15, 2002).

In some cases, traffickers approach women or their families directly with the offer of well paying jobs elsewhere. After providing transportation and false

documents to get victims to their destination, they subsequently charge exorbitant amounts for those services, creating a lifetime debt bondage. Some families mortgage their properties to unknowingly sponsor their daughters as sex-workers in Milan or Hamburg. Often recruiters instruct the girls not to tell their parents, in case they decline the offer. Some girls pay as much as \$40 000 to \$50 000 to traffickers who promise to supplement their travel costs (*Sunday Punch*, June 25, 2000). While some are aware they are being recruited into the sex industry, and that they will be obliged to work in order to pay back large recruitment and transportation fees, others are deceived about their conditions of work.

The lack of economic opportunities and the eagerness for a better life abroad has made many women and girls vulnerable to entrapment by traffickers. Traffickers entice victims to migrate voluntarily (legally) with false promises of lucrative jobs in foreign countries, as models, dancers, nannies, domestic workers and nurses. They advertise these fictitious jobs, as well as marriage agency databases and match-making parties to find victims. As mentioned previously, the agents, brokers and employers in these operations often have ties with powerful organised crime syndicates.

These networks demand a high price for their services, and those who patronise them are forced to work off exorbitant 'debts' under abusive and coercive conditions. Many victims are unable to distinguish between legal and illegal work opportunities, or are unaware that they are dealing with syndicates or mafias until after they have been cheated, incurred heavy debts and entered Europe illegally. While many women know they will be sex-workers, many believe they can earn their freedom by paying \$50 000 in weekly installments to the traffickers (*Tell Magazine*, May 13, 2002).

This is not the only way the syndicates operate. Nigerian professionals, particularly qualified nurses, are lured to South Africa, Europe and Saudi Arabia on promises of lucrative jobs, only to be abandoned by the syndicates who targeted them on arrival in these countries.

Syndicates paint rosy pictures of economic situations in other countries, asking for placement fees of up to \$5 000 to obtain work permits for their recruits. The victims have either been repatriated, stranded or have taken up sex-work having abandoned their jobs in Nigeria. The modus operandi of the syndicates is to collect their victims' passports, and marry them off to fictitious South African or European citizens to obtain fake accompanying spouse visas. This is done with the active connivance of officials in the migration and internal affairs departments. These officials either place the women in hostels, or in transit camps particularly in Cotonou, Benin Republic and Cote d' Ivorie. (*The Guardian*, September 4, 2002).

Traffickers often destroy victims' identification documents, provide them with false documentation and instruct them to apply for political asylum on the basis that they are citizens of Liberia or Sierra Leone (countries emerging from civil war) instead of Nigeria. The recruited women undertake ritual oaths of secrecy, so that they cannot escape even if they want to and thus remain in perpetual bondage. They face violence or even death, if they reveal what is happening to them. In order to protect themselves from unredeemable debt, traffickers use the sanctions of customary and conventional law, to which the women subscribe. In this way the debtor has a mandatory obligation to fulfill the terms of the loan. The effect of this is to ensure that the victim will neither escape nor reveal the names of the traffickers. Traffickers also employ spurious lawyers who draw up contracts under which the women agree to pay a sum of money in exchange for the opportunity to travel abroad.

### Slaves of the new millennium

Trafficked women work as sex-workers in the sex industry. Migrant Nigerian sex-workers proliferate in many capitals of the world, especially in Europe. Their major bases are in Italy and Saudi Arabia where they risk falling foul of the harsh Sharia law. Nigerian women, many of them teenagers, made up the largest percentage of illegally trafficked sex workers in Italy in the mid-'90s (*The Economist*, 1996). Teenagers are in high demand

as it is widely believed that they are too young to have HIV/AIDS or that they could even be an antidote to the virus.

Trafficked women are often underpaid or even underpaid because of the inflated monies remitted to agents and employers to cover debts. There is also pressure from their families to send money home. At their various destinations in Europe and elsewhere, their documents are confiscated and they are sold to 'Madam' barons who put them through various orientation programmes such as how to satisfy clients in return for fabulous payments, before they are put on the streets or placed in brothels for sex-work. They are forced to work in sex establishments such as closed brothels, restaurants, teahouses, bars, massage parlours and in cabarets under the close supervision of the agents. In Italy, trafficked girls are sold to Nigerian 'Madams' in the north of the country. These Madams have obtained resident permits in Europe and now control trafficking cum sex-workers' rings. They often buy women for between \$5 000 and \$7 000 from the 'sponsor' who facilitated the girls' entry into the country (*West Africa Magazine*, July 29 - August 4, 2002).

Forty percent of Italy's sex-workers are of Nigerian origin (*West Africa Magazine*, July 29 - August 4, 2002). In Italy, Nigerian women's accents and uncommon complexion are desired commodities; they have a reputation for sexual appetite and ardour. The girls' names are frequently changed to hide their identities, their debts altered to keep them in prolonged servitude and threats of violence keep them in a state of fear and compliance. In addition, they are threatened with exposure to the authorities and possible imprisonment or deportation. In effect, they are held under duress in a form of debt bondage.

### Trafficked women's dependency

Traffickers create a complex web of dependence (*Daily Trust*, January 22, 2002). They seek to exercise control

The recruited women undertake ritual oaths of secrecy



over a victim's legal identity by confiscating her passport and/or official documents. Henceforth, her stay in the country of destination becomes illegal - serving to increase her reliance on the traffickers. Debt bondage is widely used to control trafficked persons and to ensure their continued profitability. Traffickers are rarely reported to the appropriate authority because victims of trafficking are treated as criminals by the authorities of the destination countries, and are often detained, prosecuted and finally deported (*Daily Trust*, January 22, 2002; *Women's eNews*, January 21, 2002). A lack of knowledge of their legal rights, cultural and linguistic obstacles and the absence of support mechanisms combine to further isolate trafficked women, and to prevent them from redressing injustices against them.

Debt  
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trafficked  
persons

The slave master element becomes entrenched once the trafficked woman begins to remit money home, and the family feels indebted to those who have procured or deceived their daughters. For the trafficked woman, the relationship becomes one of dependency for personal security, liberty and for the return home. Many trafficked women who had bought their freedoms and worked on their own have become breadwinners for their families, particularly in Edo State (*Women's e-News*, August 2002).

Some invest in the urban service industries such as hotels, transport and estate businesses. Their business success and capital accumulation often attract others to join the sex trade (*Women's e-News*, August, 2002).

## The violence of trafficking

Young trafficked women often face abuse and violent attacks - especially from Italian men. In 1999, 189 female sex-workers were killed in Italy; 28 were killed in 2001 (*Women's eNews*, January 21, 2002). Most had been raped and beaten. Their ages ranged from 16 to 25 years; most were teenage high school dropouts or young unemployed adults who had just completed school (*Sunday Times*, October 15, 2000).

Trafficked women are often starved, subjected to domestic servitude, tortured or raped into acquiescence. They suffer from a multitude of physical and psychological health problems (Orhant, 2002). They lack access to birth control, endure constant rapes, undergo forced abortions, are denied contraceptives and do not have access to regular mammograms and pap smears and other health facilities. As such they face increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS and experience repetitive stress injuries (Orhant, 2002). Socially, trafficked women are often afraid to return to their country or community of origin because of a fear of public humiliation and victimisation. In Nigeria, trafficked women are sexually stereotyped as immoral, insatiable, perverse and carriers of HIV/AIDS (*This Day Newspaper*, July 13, 2002; *XINHUA General News Service*, August 19, 2001).

## Interventions

The Nigerian government is concerned about the trade in women. However, its position is compromised by under resourced police and immigration departments which are incapable of effectively combating trafficking (Hodges, 2001). Nevertheless, police reports indicate that in 2000, approximately 21 traffickers were arrested (*XINHUA General News Service*, August 19, 2001). This has made it possible for security agents and police to identify the mode of recruitment of victims used by the traffickers, recruitment sources, likely routes and destinations. Police reports in the media indicate that over 5 000 Nigerian women were repatriated from Rome, Holland, Saudi Arabia, Italy and some African countries between March 1999 and 2001 (*Daily Trust*, 2002). In 2001, 40 women were also deported from Guinea, one of the transit points to Europe. This was accomplished after Guinea police cracked down on an 18-man Nigerian sex-slave trafficking syndicate (*XINHUA General News Service*, August 19, 2001). In August 2000, 500 Nigerian girls were deported from Italy; in April 2002, 150 Nigerians were repatriated from Italy and 61 from Spain due to illegal immigration (Hodges, 2001). By the end of 2002, a total of 7 206 Nigerians were likewise deported from Europe and North

America (*Daily Trust*, August 13, 2002; *Daily Champion*, June 26, 2002). Ninety-eight percent of them had been sold to sex-work rings (*West Africa Magazine*, July 29 - August 4, 2002).

In response, the Nigerian immigration service has established anti-human trafficking units in Benin, Lagos, Calabar, Sokoto and Kano and has introduced machine-readable passports, sensitised immigration personnel, provided for humane treatment of victims and the upgrading of the border patrol units (*Tell Magazine*, May 13, 2002).

However, the Nigerian government's approach to trafficking has been parochial, focusing only on repatriated girls. No measure has been put in place to stem the trafficking of others. The existing legislation regarding the trafficking of women is completely inadequate. It was only in 2001 that the National Assembly considered a bill, The National Agency for Traffic in Persons Law and Administration Bill - initiated by the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) established by Hajia Titi Atiku Abubakar. The bill was intended to protect those being lured abroad for sex-work and to prosecute those involved in trafficking as well as to have their properties seized if found guilty.

In June 2002, the Federal Government enacted a law against human traffickers. Offenders are now liable to 10 years' imprisonment. The Federal Government also provided a property in Lagos for the rehabilitation of victims of trafficking. In September 2001, the Edo State government signed into law the Anti-Prostitution Act, which prescribes amongst other penalties, 21 years' imprisonment for a contravention of the law.

Since the early '90s, NGOs have been the vanguard of campaigns against human trafficking and rehabilitation of the victims. In 1994, Julie Useni established a charitable organisation called Daughters of Abraham Foundation, with the sole purpose of eradicating sex-work and transforming sex-workers into responsible members of society. The Foundation trained former sex-workers

and repatriated girls in hair dressing, knitting and cooking; approximately 139 graduated. WOTCLEF was formed in 2000 after Hajia Titi Abubakar visited Italy where she observed Nigerian sex workers in the streets of Milan. WOTCLEF has established a rehabilitation centre for 1 000 trafficking victims so that they can receive formal and informal education. WOTCLEF has been vociferous in a public campaign through newspapers, radio and television programmes and drama to raise the awareness around trafficking. This effort has largely been supported by bilateral agencies, local entrepreneurs and corporate organisations in Nigeria.

In addition to WOTCLEF, the wife of the Edo State governor, Eki Igbinedion, has initiated a programme of local and international campaigns in a bid to arrest this practice. Igbinedion has established a rehabilitation centre for women who willingly abandon sex-work, where they are assisted to acquire skills and given small-scale loans for entrepreneurial activities.

## Conclusion

The trajectory of capitalist development has pushed women into slavery and bonded labour. From the trans-Atlantic slave trade between the 15th and 19th centuries through to the contemporary scourge of women trafficking, women have been commodified in the global market. The driving forces behind women trafficking are the advance of capital over labour and nation states, economic recession, neo-liberal political transition and instability and corruption.

Most of the victims of trafficking are from poor homes. The measures taken to redress the scourge include prevention, protection and prosecution. Nigeria, as exporter of women, should re-diversify the economy from its focus on petro-business to agriculture and government assisted small-scale enterprises. The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) established by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1999 as a welfare package, could be further widened to cater for youth and women. The Nigerian government

Existing legislation regarding the trafficking of women is completely inadequate

should strive to improve women's educational and employment opportunities to help prepare them for skilled jobs. Nigerian diplomatic missions must actively defend the human and labour rights of all Nigerians, irrespective of their immigration status, sex or occupation. Finally, community based organisations and NGOs should be assisted in their campaigns against trafficking in women at the community level.

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