Victims and Couriers: Females and Hard Drugs Trafficking Business in Nigeria, 1980-2008

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Abstract

Human trafficking, like its twin phenomenon of hard drug trafficking has become a major issue in international relations, especially the aspect of trans-national migration. Although issues related to trafficking transcend gender debates, the role of females as victims of human trafficking and couriers in the illicit trafficking in hard drugs cannot be underestimated. This work is devoted to an assessment of the role of the female gender in the two categories of trafficking as victims and agents since the 1980s. It examines newspaper reports and other related documents as well as gender related theoretical frameworks to x-ray the involvement of females in the trafficking networks.

Introduction

The phenomenon of human trafficking has become a major issue of concern to policy-makers, public affairs commentators and even scholars. Although scholarly efforts such as those of de Haas (2005) Bolz (1995: 147-158) Kanics (1998), and Ogwu (2007), have provided some insights into the workings of the human trafficking networks, none of them explicitly compared the involvement of women as victims of human trafficking as well as their roles as couriers in trans-national hard drugs business. The current effort is an attempt to discuss and analyze the role of the female gender in the growth of human and hard drugs trafficking in Nigeria since the 1980s.

The global pandemic of human trafficking has become a major aspect of international migration since the 1980s when major cities in Africa became major supplying, transit and destination points. By 2008, the social malaise had taken huge tolls on the women folk because they were subjected by traffickers to the dual roles of victims of human trafficking and as couriers for the movement of hard drugs across international borders. The development was part of the escalation in the human and hard drugs trafficking business at the global level, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, in the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria was blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for her involvement in international trafficking and particularly her lack of cooperation in the global fight against hard drugs trafficking (*Tribune*, 3 September, 2007: 8). In 1985, as part of its reactions to the global outcry the military government of Major General Mohamadu Buhari outlawed trafficking in hard drugs raising the punishment to death on conviction. The idea was to check the trafficking of hard drugs into the country. Among the victims of the controversial law were late Bernard Ogedengbe and Bartholomew Owoh who were executed at the Bar Beach, Lagos. The execution was aimed at discouraging hard drugs trade in Nigeria (Ugwoke, 2006:18).

Although initially females played a secondary role and were outside the radar of trafficking records, they however became vital part of the business in the late 1980s and early 1990s

(Okpalakunne, 2006: 16). Factors such as poverty and greed have been attributed to their involvement in the phenomenon. With the dawn of the 21st century, more females became involved in the human and hard drugs trafficking business. In addition, the 21st century recorded unprecedented media attention on the involvement of women in the two aspects of trafficking (Okpalakunne, 2006: 35).

Conceptual Framework

Generally, trafficking can be interpreted as any illicit or illegal transporting, trading or transaction of human beings, drugs, arms and ammunition, and any other illicit items, locally or internationally for economic or other personal gains. This definition connotes some or all of the following elements: facilitating the illegal movement of women or men to other countries with or without their consent or knowledge; deceiving migrant women or men about the purpose of their migration, legal or illegal; controlling the women's or men's lives through coercion, abuse or physical violence, debt bondage or threats to reveal their illegal/illicit status and activities to the local authorities or their families back home; physical or sexual abuse of women (or men) as a means of gaining control over them to facilitate further illicit activity; sale or trade of women or men for the purpose of employment, marriage, prostitution, or other activities for profit; and illegal sale or movement of arms and ammunition, and hard drugs (International Organization on Migration, 2000).

The United Nations Convention against Transitional Organized Crime and Protocols provides a specific definition for human trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons by the threat or use of abduction, fraud, deception, coercion, or the abuse of power or by giving or receiving payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another, for the purpose of exploitation" (Chukwuezi, 2002; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2005). Human smuggling is slightly differently from human trafficking in that it concerns "the procurement of illegal entry into or illegal residence of a person in a state of which the person is not a national or permanent resident in order to obtain directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefits" (Chukwuezi, 2002; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2005).

The Involvement of Females as Victims and Couriers of Trafficking: Emerging Theoretical Paradigms

> Gender related issues are at the root of the phenomenon of trafficking. Between the 1980 and 2008, females dominated the number of victims of human trafficking, while in the case of hard drugs trafficking, males dominated the number of couriers and barons. However, females were employed by males to transport hard drugs into and out of Nigeria. Coomaraswamy, (2006) studied the reason for the preponderance of women as victims of human trafficking and opined that:…the lack of rights affordable to women serves as the primary causative factor at the root of both women's migration and trafficking in women. The failure of existing economic, political and social structures to provide equal and just opportunities for women to work has contributed to the feminization of poverty, which in turn has led to the feminization of migration, as women leave their homes in search of viable economic options. Further, political instability, militarism, civil unrest, internal armed conflict and natural diseases also

> exacerbate women's vulnerabilities and may result in an increase in trafficking (2006: 27; UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 2000).

Dottridge agrees with the gender perspective of trafficking and added that gender-specific features must be taken into cognizance in any meaningful analysis of human trafficking. His major contribution to the literature on trafficking lies in his emphasis on the age factor in the trafficking business. He examined the role of age in the recruitment of persons for the purpose of trafficking and argued that young people were preferred by traffickers because of natural reasons (Dottridge, 2004: 19; Dottridge, 2002: 38-42). The significance of age in the understanding of the complex nature of trafficking concerns the social and economic conditions which predispose children and women to be used for trafficking as well as conditions under which they were subjected. Truong has posited that "in many respects, the 1980s and 1990s could be referred to as the decades of 'lost growth' and 'lost human development' for Sub-Saharan Africa", and that the gender and age dimensions to trafficking became intensified during the period (2006: 56-65; International Organization for Migration, 2002: 5-29).

Truong also maintained that where intra-regional regimes of trafficking in children and women were concerned, the specificities of their vulnerability from local contexts such as, for example dysfunctional families affected by war or disaster, situations would contribute to the creation of a child-specific and female-specific demand for wide-ranging types of work within the region, including commercial sex, domestic service, armed conflict, service industries such as bars and restaurant, or into hazardous forms of work in the factories, mines, construction, agriculture and others (Truong, 2006: 56-65; International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2002: 5-29). This conclusion underscores our position that gender dynamics occupies a major position in the discourse on trafficking and the involvement of females in human and hard drugs trafficking.

Human and Hard Drugs Trafficking: the Plight of Nigerian Females

Nigerian women were part of the evolving human and international hard drugs trafficking business between 1980 and 2008. The economic and social disequilibrium in the country contributed to their involvement in the malaise (*Tribune*, 2005: 10). Human traffickers recruited females and their male counterparts, who they trafficked out of Nigeria through some strategic exit locations and areas in the country such as airports and border posts. Similarly, women were used as couriers of hard drugs for the international markets.

The *Champion* reported that a former minister of communications in Nigeria was involved in a drug cartel that specialized in the use of oil drums in ferrying hard drugs across Nigeria's borders (11 November, 2004: 34). The cartel recruited some females for the purpose. They disguised as traders but were actually couriers of hard drugs. Narcotic operatives of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) on a routine surveillance along the Nigeria-Benin border once intercepted a lorry conveying mostly women, and following a check on the tins, discovered that there were scraps of drugs neatly wrapped in cellophane bags and concealed in the tins of oil (*Champion*, 2004: 34). Further investigations revealed that the alleged kingpin in the palm-oil business was a former communication minister in Nigeria. The suspects claimed they were ignorant of the contents of the tins of oil, as their own business was to hand over the

consignment to a buyer in Cotonou as well as collect money meant for the tins of oil (*Champion*, 2004: 34). The NDLEA remarked that:

> the new drug war facing the NDLEA is that of barons who are mostly retired military and police personnel-they are being fingered as the brains behind the thriving of the trafficking business, as they now resort to using the services of innocent villagers, especially market men and women who are willing to enter into trading partnership with these barons but quite ignorant of the fact that they are being used as carriers. (*Champion*, 2004: 34).

Further, in June 1999, officials of the NDLEA arrested a 35-year-old woman over an alleged attempt to export 660 grams of cocaine through Seme border. (*New Nigerian*, 1999: 19) The then Western Zonal Commander of the NDLEA, Mr. Umar Mbombo said the suspect was arrested in the baggage section of the departure wing of the border post after successfully clearing other security checks to cross to the Republic of Benin. He also said that the cocaine, in 102 wraps, was neatly packed in a black polyethylene bag and held casually under the suspect's armpit as she attempted to pass through the baggage section (*New Nigerian*,, 1999: 19). When the lady was intercepted, she claimed the bag contained foreign currencies but after intense interrogation, she admitted that the hard drug was sent to her by a childhood friend in Bangkok. It was later discovered that she was merely a courier working for a cartel (*New Nigerian*, 1999: 19).

Moreover, thirteen drug suspects, including a 51-year old woman and two Togolese were arrested by the NDLEA at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Ikeja in Lagos in November 2003. A total of 11,480 kg of cocaine and 4,710 kg of heroin were seized from the suspects. The suspects included:

Names of Hard Drugs Trafficking Suspects and their Genders

Namesof Suspects	**Age of Suspects**	**Sex**
Gadge Kofi	40	M
Bukola Abiodun Adetunmobi	44	F
Abisoye Ganiyu Ajayi	43	F
Philemon Manyome	34	F
Darkooh Ayawovi Hana	38	F
Chibiko Okafor	42	F
Osuntoki Kolawole	40	M
Olatayo Segun Babajide	40	M
Rebecca Wilson	51	F
Victoria Agukwe	34	F

Chukwurah Victor Onyebuchi	36	M
Chukwu Stanley	27	M
Wilson Ajoku	32	F

Source: *The Punch*, 10 November, 2003 (Lagos).

The table shows that by 2008 females had gradually emerged as strong forces in the drug trafficking business in Nigeria. Like hard drugs trafficking, women were also exploited in the human trafficking business. The beginning of the phenomenon in Nigeria in the modern times has been traced to the 1980s when the country and several others on the African continent experienced economic crises. Some sources indicate that "it seems that the first cases of women who left Nigeria to come to prostitute themselves in Italy date back to the end of the 80s and beginning of the 90s. At that time, it was mature women, often widows or separated with children who were principal victims" (Prina, 2003: 30). It later expanded to involve young ladies. A government official once remarked in 2002 that about 45,000 Nigerians were trafficked to Europe every year (Okenwa, 2002). According to him:

> Many of the people who are mostly women die in the course of being ferried across the Atlantic while several others are killed in the Sahara. Most of the girls are not prostitutes as they are often tagged. They are actually victims of human trafficking. People arrange to take them abroad for one job or the other only to abuse them. Even housewives with kids are deceived on the grounds of taking them abroad for work only to be used for sex labour (Okenwa, 2002).

The Nigerian figure is part of the alarming global figure on human trafficking. The United States' annual report of 2004 put yearly figures of persons trafficked across international borders at between 600,000 and 800,000 out of which 80 per cent were usually women and girls and 50 per cent were minors. Majority of such transnational victims were trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation (Ifijeh, 2005: 20). The report observed that the alarming enslavement of people for the purposes of labour exploitation in their countries as well as transnational trafficking for sexual exploitation was gradually becoming a serious aspect of international relations (Ifijeh, 2005: 20).

The Nigeria Immigration Service's checklist of human trafficking indicates that in March 26 and 27, 1994, fifty one under-aged children, mostly young girls were rescued at Ikot Abasi in Eket Local Council area of Akwa Ibom State (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). In March 1996, three girls and a boy were saved as they were being trafficked out of Nigeria across the Atlantic to the Central African country of Gabon for domestic works (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). Similarly, in July 1996, seventy three teenagers were rescued at the point of being trafficked (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). In January 1996, over 100 people perished when a Gabon-bound ferry from Ibeno, in Nigeria capsized, killing all passengers on board including 75 children between the ages of seven and sixteen (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). Nevertheless, considering that there exists legitimate economic and cultural links between the peoples of Gabon and Nigeria, every movement of people between the two countries does not constitute human trafficking In January 1997, one hundred

and fifty children were rescued from the merchants' ship intended to ferry the young males and females out of West Africa, including Nigeria to Central Africa (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15).

A Beninoise, who was trafficked to Lagos in the early 1980s, remarked that:

> It was a dream of almost every young person in our village to be taken to Lagos as house help at that time and even up till now. So when it was my turn to come to Lagos I was very happy and was sure my life would not be that of a village girl again. We were about 20 that came at that time and I was given to this woman who took me to her house in Gbagada (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15).

In her community, she became a sort of role model to the people. Many parents chased her around to get their children fixed up in Lagos. Thus, unwittingly, she became an agent and head of a network of human trafficking. According to her, "each time I went home, I would come with three or four children but later the demands were so high that if I had 50 children I won't meet up" (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). Popularly called Iya Tope, Mrs. Bodunrin said her business fetched her over N70,000 monthly and that a prospective client would normally purchase a form at N2,000 (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). After obtaining the form, the client would pay transport fee of between N6,000 and N7,500 to bring the maid from Benin Republic, then wait for the time 'supply' will come (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). She normally deducted 20 per cent from whatever was paid to the ladies as her service charge. In addition, as the head of the trafficking network, Mrs. Bodunrin served as surrogate mother for the maids while in Lagos and settled all complaints from both the clients and the maids. As common with the exploitative nature of the trafficking business, the maids were instructed never to give their real names even to the families they were living with for security reasons. This was because "a foreign name will easily give them out and may attract the attention of the police (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). The ever-increasing demands for the housemaids and the problems posed by the immigration officers at the border encouraged Mrs. Bodunrin to expand her source of supply beyond Benin Republic to Togo and other cities in Nigeria (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15).

Conversely, many Nigerian females were trafficked to other West African countries where they were engaged in prostitution and domestic services or kept in some transit camps for onward movement to Europe and America. Between 2003 and 2005, many young women were rescued and repatriated back to Nigeria while some traffickers were arrested for human trafficking business. A study conducted by the Nigerian Embassy in Togo indicated that some Ghanaian human traffickers had contacts in Edo, Delta and many other states in Nigeria from where they recruited young girls for international prostitution (Adeyemi, 2001: 14-15). While in Togo, many of the young women were forced into prostitution in preparation for their journey to Europe across the Sahara Desert. A Nigerian official in Togo once explained that:

> There are about 200 Nigerians crossing over to this place daily because they just need N500 and you are here. Some of them just come in here, no passport, no identity card and they become consular problems for us. There are about 1.8 million Nigerians in Togo….We have Nigerians coming to the embassy-young girls, who have been misled to come out for women and child trafficking. As people are trying to get to Europe, they come through this place, try to go through the Sahara, Mauritania and Libya" (Shadare, 2005).

A NAPTIP/UNICEF situation assessment of Child Trafficking in Southern Nigerian states in a 2004 reported that 46 per cent of repatriated victims of international trafficking in Nigeria were children with a female to male ratio of 7 to 3. A breakdown of the data shows that the victims engaged mainly in prostitution were 46 per cent, domestic labour 21 per cent, forced labour 15 per cent and entertainment 8 per cent (Ojukwu, 2005: 14). This was similar to the situation in India where every year by 2008, an average of 22,480 women and 44,476 children were reported trafficked (Kaul, 2004: 34). The 2008 NAPTIP situation assessment of Child Trafficking in Nigeria revealed that females still dominated the victims of trafficking. 60 per cent of repatriated victims of international trafficking in Nigeria by 2008 were children with a female to male ratio of 7 to 3 (Kaul, 2004: 34).

In February 2005, the Anti-human Trafficking Unit of the Nigeria Immigration, Seme border command, at Ilado, near Badagry arrested one Boniface Bosu and his two brothers for human trafficking offences. About sixty two people were freed from the man who claimed to be a pastor of a Celestial Church of Christ (CCC). Those rescued included 10 girls, aged between 8 and 10 years; six boys whose ages ranged between 18 and 25 years; and women in their 40s (Okoro and Okwara, 2005: 25).

Comparison of the Involvement of Women as Victims and Couriers of Trafficking

Both human and hard drugs trafficking witnessed huge involvement of females from the 1980s up to 2008. Careful observations indicate that the rise in the hard drugs trafficking business from the late 1990s up to 2008 was contemporaneous with the increase in the global human trafficking trade. The consequence of this development was that more females were subjected to victims and couriers of trafficking than ever (Ekerette, 2009). A thorough scrutiny of the record of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA-Nigeria) indicates that age and sex determined to a large extent the scope and success of the trafficking business in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century (Ekerette, 2009; NDLEA Record, 2008). The source also indicated that many of the victims rescued from traffickers confessed that they were forced to smuggle hard drugs across the West African sub-region as well as to Europe and America as part of the trafficking networks (Ekerette, 2009; Babatunde, 2009; Momoh, 2009). Women's role in the narcotics trade was also directly connected to psychological issues related to sex exploitation. For instance, attempts were sometimes made to make victims drug users before they were sold on to the consumer markets, primarily in Europe and America as well as in the transit regions. A study indicated that the narcotic networks promoted addiction among prostitutes so that pimps and traffickers could easily exert control over them (Swanstrom, 2007: 13; *Nigerian Tribune*, 2005: 10).

Moreover, the socio-biological make-up of women could easily be exploited by trafficking networks for the movement of hard drugs from one place to another. A study indicated that barons recruited women who were willing to use any part of their body for trafficking purposes (Swanstrom, 2007: 13; *Nigerian Tribune*, 2005: 10). Official reports are replete with cases of female suspects who concealed hard drugs in their private parts. (*Nigerian Tribune*, 2005: 10) Apart from swallowing or concealment in containers, drug couriers (traffickers) sometimes used their shoes and other accessories to ferry drugs across international borders. They connived with

shoe manufacturers to manufacture shoes that would enable the substance to be hidden in them. Sometimes, they used insulator soles, which rendered results of electronic searching devices negative. A research observed that women's penchant for fashionable shoes made them easy targets for the testing of various trafficking methods and strategies (*Champion*, 2000).

Efforts to Combat the Use of Females as Victims and Couriers of Trafficking

Governmental efforts to checkmate the trafficking business in general and the use of females as "commodities" and facilitators of trafficking in Nigeria have colonial antecedents in form of enactment of anti-trafficking legislation. (Criminal Code Act (Cap 77), Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, pp.109-111, 137, 146, 175, 176, 161, 72, 75; National Archive, Ibadan (NAI), Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO): 26: 06353: Drug and Poisons Ordinance, 1915; and NAI: CSO: 30055/8) However, unlike in the colonial period, contemporary trafficking business is wider in scope and strategy. Routes have assumed the tripod of land, sea and air, with air and sea constituting the easiest form of movement of persons and hard drugs across international borders. The new trend has come with its challenges and complexities. This notwithstanding, the Nigerian government developed some measures, which benefitted from international initiatives on the matter. With respect to human trafficking, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) was the most effective governmental agency established to combat the illicit trade in women, children and men. It had a multi-faceted mandate, which included investigation, arrest, prosecution of traffickers and counseling and rehabilitation of victims (Ekah, 2005: 16).

The establishment of NAPTIP was anchored on relevant anti-human trafficking legislation in Nigeria's constitution and the Criminal Code. Specifically, in the Criminal Code of the Laws of the Federation 2004, there are several sections such as section 223(b) inserted to prescribe the punishment or a fine of N10,000.00 for any female person who engages in prostitution or other immoral acts within or outside Nigeria; a new Section 223 (c) prescribes two years imprisonment or a fine of N10,000.00 for any man who patronizes prostitutes; and Section 223(d) punishes any woman who lures or induces any man to engage in sexual intercourse with her for any gratification. (Criminal Code Act (Cap 77), Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004) The new Section 225 increases punishment of the offence already defined from two years to ten years in prison or fine of N50,000.00; the new Section 225(a) substitutes "every person" for "Every able person" and increases the punishment by adding N50,000.00 fine to the existing two years imprisonment for offenders. (Criminal Code Act (Cap 77), Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004).

NAPTIP's effort was boosted by collaborations and cooperation from international organizations and associations. For instance, the assistance of the United States Agency International Development (USAID) towards the alleviation of trafficking in women (and children) was outstanding. The agency granted $500,000 to the International Office for Migration (IOM) to support shelter in Lagos for returned trafficked victims, mostly women deported from Europe. The USAID also promised to provide approximately $3million to support anti-trafficking efforts in the areas of policy dialogue, information dissemination, publication and direct support by 2008 (Laba, 2004: 22).

On hard drugs trafficking, efforts were made to combat the illicit business and by extension reduce the use of women as couriers. The United States of America was a leading external actor

in the fight against hard drugs trafficking in Nigeria. At the signing of a bilateral agreement between Nigeria and the US, the US government granted a $1 million dollars in assistance to Nigeria to finance programmes in the following areas- $150,000 to the National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency for training at its academy in Jos; $400,000 for the police modernization programme to train the trainers and officer cadets at the Officer Academy in Kano and $560,000 for expansion of basic recruit training to the Police College in Maiduguri, Enugu and Lagos. Indeed, the total United States' government assistance to Nigerian law enforcement programmes to combat hard drugs trafficking amounted to about $10 million since 1999. (Onwubiko, 2004: 13) As a result of Nigeria's positive response to the various international assistance the country got a drug free certification for three consecutive years 2001, 2002, and 2003. (Onwubiko, 2004: 13) Nigeria was also admitted into the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (UNCND) after four years of exclusion (Onwubiko, 2004: 13). The country received more positive recognition from international bodies by 2009.

Conclusion

The worldwide incidence of women trafficking for illicit transnational activities has continued to pose a major challenge to gender-related issues in African studies. Although the exact figures of cases of female trafficking remain difficult to obtain because of the illicit and clandestine nature of the trade, the impact it has had on the women-folk cannot be underestimated. The commoditization of females is gradually changing the traditional female roles as mothers and role models to future generations.

This paper has shown that the female folks were exploited in the process of trafficking and as couriers to generate resources for those who recruited them. Push and pull factors such as poverty, ignorance, greed, unemployment and the socio-biological make-up of females predisposed them to the manipulative tendencies of the traffickers. The paper concludes on the note that all necessary national and international mechanisms must be mobilized to combat trafficking and liberate women from being used as victims and couriers in the trafficking chains (Kaul, 2004: 34).

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