

## **MIGRATION AND PROSTITUTION AMONG WOMEN FROM COUNTRIES OF ISLAMIC MAJORITY**

*(Being a talk given by Sr. Patricia Ebegbulem, SSL at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street to be held in Rome May 15 – 17, 2006 and sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral care of Migrants and Itinerant People)*

“ Slavery, Prostitution, selling of Women and Children and the disgraceful working conditions where people are treated as instruments of gain rather than free and responsible persons as ‘infamies’ which poison human society, debase their perpetrators and constitute a supreme dishonour to the Creator” (Guadium et Spes)

### **PREAMBLE**

Nigeria is often counted among “countries of Islamic majority” but in fact she is not. It is more exact to describe her as a country with a large percentage of Muslims than to describe her as a country of Islamic majority. There are places in Nigeria where Muslims are not found. But there is no place where there are no Christians. Moreover it is a demographic myth that says the far north of Nigeria is far more populated than the south. The far north is in the desert and more people live where there is water and vegetation than where there is a desert. The great Bantu migration that took place in Africa centuries ago, sequel to the emergence of the Sahara desert, led people to settle in the rainforest of Africa. The myth that there are more people in the far north than in the south is combined with another myth that there are more Muslims where there are more people. It is then concluded that Nigeria is predominantly Muslim which is not the case.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Human migration is generally dictated by two major factors, one normal, and the other ugly. Normal migration is commonly due to economic factors, people in search of greener pastures not available at base. Ugly migration is caused by some serious hardship, be it due to some human exploitation or some natural disaster. In either case, migrants, who set out without due provision, often ignore moral values and religious dictates in practice. And where women are involved, sex is not spared commercial use and exploitation.

This paper focuses on women of Islamic majority groups engaged in prostitution both at home and in foreign lands. It debunks the notion that Moslem women controlled by

strict Islamic legislation would not be much involved in commercial sex. But the contrary is the case. With my first-hand knowledge of this problem having lived and worked among Muslim women in Kano (Northern Nigeria), an exposition is given here on causes and means employed in women trafficking in developed and developing countries, with the consequences and efforts being made to combat them. In conclusion recommendations are put forward for intensified worldwide efforts for combating this social evil and for rehabilitation and social integration of the victims.

At the early stages of the involvement of the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious (NCWR) in combating Trafficking of women for forced prostitution, it seemed Muslim women were not part of this terrible experience considering the stringent stipulation of the legal system which imposes the death sentence on sexual abusers, one would think there would not be cases of trafficking for prostitution. However, my investigation and findings have proved the contrary and the fact of it is that the percentage is high. Many factors are responsible for this and would be examined under the following headings – Economic, Sociological, Religious, Cultural and Political.

**Economic Factor:** From my findings during an interview I conducted, majority gives the economic factor as a reason for being in the trade. Many of the women in this trade are driven to it by hardship and poverty. This is very closely linked up with the cultural factor of marriage. When parents are unable to meet up with the necessary requirements for marriage such as the payment of bride price/dowry they force their children into hawking of goods to raise money. These hawkers are mostly girls who carry such items as cola nut, groundnut, biscuits and so many other items. Men call them, give them money, use them and then send them off to continue with their hawking. Here is sexual abuse and a subtle form of trafficking. These hawkers virtually live their lives on the street and pick up all the ills that go with street life! Many of these girls are deprived of education because of street hawking. Moreover, in some African Muslim societies the oligarchy discourages western education. Still on the level of poverty, some parents may be paid as little as £10 to lease their offspring to the Arab Gulf, United States, Lebanon and Europe.

Furthermore, the issue of poverty is aggravated by the fact that many of the Muslim women are not allowed to work. They are solely dependent on the men who often exploit this dependency for sexual purposes. Again discriminating laws depriving women of their rights to inherit property or own a share of their marital assets heighten this poverty especially in the lives of women. In most cases, they are seen as property to be inherited especially when a husband dies leaving behind brothers who see the wife as part of their brother's property. No wonder women are treated the way they are! Archbishop Agostino Marchetto has a clear grasp of what these poor creatures go through when he states, "many of these women and girls live in a

situation where their minimum personal rights are not respected, as their own bodies are the object of trading and trafficking in people”<sup>1</sup>

### **Sociological Factor: Gender Discrimination:**

Trafficking is a highly gendered phenomenon; the majority of trafficked persons are women and girls who are generally devalued and treated as second-class citizens. They are typically either uneducated or under-educated, which makes them less able to compete in a market economy. They are valued in the home only for their housekeeping skills and reproductive role. Persons, especially women and children, who live in poverty, have no parents, are widowed or divorced, with little or no education are willing to migrate for work and thus become extremely vulnerable to being trafficked. And traffickers target the society’s most vulnerable members.

Also, women and children are often forced out of their homes through physical abuse. Discriminatory laws depriving women of their rights, for example, to equality in the family, to inherit property or to own a share of their marital assets renders women vulnerable inside and outside the family. It is sad to say that the gender gap between boys and girls is still too wide in countries of Islamic majority because of cultural values. The preference for boys’ education is very high despite the pledge of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to bridge this the gap by 2005.

### **Cultural Factor:**

Nigeria is a multicultural country of about 120 million people as per the 1996 census and 333 ethnic groups. Unfortunately the Nigerian woman faces different forms of discrimination from her cradle to her old age. At birth she is coldly received by a culture, which shows preference for the male child. In some of the Nigerian cultures, when a boy is born, victorious songs welcome him with great celebrations. But when a girl is born, the songs are those that celebrate the money that will be realised as bride price when she is married. Again she is seen as a source of revenue – appreciated only for her economic value. It again becomes more glaring at the naming ceremony where the girl is named – “Chinyere” – God’s gift, implying that God has given this and we cannot reject it! When a boy is born you hear ‘Tunji’ ‘Emeka’, ‘Segun’, ‘Kunle’ which is a way of welcoming the following attributes – Vibrancy, Gratitude, Victory and Fullness in the home, respectively! The girl is not given any sense of belonging to the home!

This discrimination against women is actually contrary to what is taught in the Koran:

- *They attribute daughters to Allah. Blasphemy! And they have what they desire. And if any of them is informed that he has a girl, his face falls black and he is despondent. And they try to hide from the evil they have*

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street held in Rome June 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> 2005 and sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral care of Migrants and Itinerant People

*been told. Should he hold onto it with shame or bury it in the earth. How evil they judge. Sura 16*

- *Ask them whether the Lord should have girls and they have boys. Sura37*
- *Did he take daughters from what he created, while favouring you with sons?*
- *And if it is announced to one of them that there has been born to him such as what they attribute to the Merciful, his face shades down to black and he is despondent. Sura 43:17*

Early marriage is another serious problem. Some cultures have so made it that as soon as a girl attains the age of puberty, she is given out for marriage and sexual life begins. This is between the ages of 11 and 15. In fact some are promised in marriage right from the womb and are allocated to their so-called husbands even before attaining puberty. Such become victims of Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) and Recto Vaginal Fistula (RVF).

Studies have shown that a large number of (VVF) and (RVF) patients are under aged girls. These girls have no knowledge of the institution they are lured into. When eventually the union breaks-up as a result of the effects of these diseases where the husbands can no longer stand the company of their wives, pressure, now arising from parents, relations, peer group, etc may result in the young woman running away to where she is not known thereby giving herself up for money, in cases where she is sent away with her children, she quickly goes into prostitution, to cater for herself and her children.

The cultural idea that reduces women to chattel and property is responsible for a man having as many women as he likes and this encourages prostitution because women are viewed as objects to be used for a man's pleasure and then discarded at will. The men could twist the law to their own advantage by sacking one of the women for another. Hence you find men dropping and picking women as if they were in a grocery store!

The sacked one easily becomes a prey to prostitution or worse still to trafficking.

### **Religious Factor:**

*It is interesting to discover that Islamic Sharia explicitly condemns the exploitation of the girl-child especially in the area of street hawking because of the dangers of sexual exploitation by pedophiles and other morally bankrupt members of the society. The Quaran states: "... But force not your maids to prostitution when they desire chastity in order that you may make a gain in the goods of this life" (Qur'an 24:33)*

Owing to the high moral standard expected of every Muslim, it is generally agreed that early marriage is an insurance against sexual and moral degeneration. However,

experience and research have shown that this is not the case. Rather these early marriages are responsible for the high degree of VVF

### **Political Factor:**

In war ravaged nations, since women are not war mongers and can least defend themselves they become the hardest hit in these situations where they are raped at will, widowed and not only widowed but also left to bring up children and so many other unfortunate dependents. Their sensitive, caring and nurturing qualities often lead them to do anything to survive and improve their lot and that of their dependents. Once they cannot find a viable means of livelihood, they are strongly tempted to take to prostitution.

**ILLITERACY** is a factor that largely explains this phenomenon. The inability to read or write robs women and girls of the opportunity to learn about life. Literacy is the greatest means of communicating knowledge and life. To be deprived of this medium is to be deprived of the knowledge of life. Ignorance itself is an evil and women deprived of basic education are vulnerable to the ills of society and as such they cannot be well informed about diseases or viruses associated with casual sex, street hawking and peer association influence.

### **WHERE TO FIND THEM**

Muslim women and girls, victims of trafficking are never brought to countries of counter religious culture. Their traffickers/promoters being Muslims themselves have their agents in similar Muslim countries. And as such you should not be puzzled that in the midst of about 30,000 Nigerian ‘women of virtue’ lining the various streets of Italy, you hardly find a Nigerian Muslim among them. This is because their route and destination is to such Muslim countries as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and several others. In most cases, Saudi Arabia is the main destination and because their route is through Kano and Libya, you find them engaging in the trade in these countries.

This Day Newspaper (2002) made the following revelations: “no fewer than 1098 Nigerians have been deported to the country as victims of human trafficking between September 1999 and June 2004, by eight different countries. The countries include Italy, Spain, Germany, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, United States of America, Switzerland and Ireland”.

### **CONSEQUENCES**

Some of the consequences of this unfortunate phenomenon are:

- The deadly sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, Vesicovaginal fistulas, (VVF), unwanted pregnancies, high rate of abortion, giving rise to bareness and often resulting in death.
- Mental instability due to inability to cope with the stress of going through childbirth. As Fatima B. Ibrahim states in her essay, “emotionally such

traumatized patients are antagonistic towards parents, husbands and society in general. They in turn are abandoned by the very people they expect love from.”<sup>2</sup>  
Result? Breakdown!

## COMBATTING

I wish to acknowledge efforts made so far by various groups and individuals especially in Nigeria to combat this menace. Because of time I will just mention these bodies

1. The Nigeria Conference of Women Religious (NCWR), which set up the Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women (COSUDOW). This committee has rehabilitated over 40 women in collaboration with its Italian counterpart, Union of Major Superiors of Italy (USMI).
2. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria through its Pastoral Letter: – *Restoring the Dignity of the Nigerian Woman* – has condemned various acts of injustice meted out to women
3. Also deserving recognition are the late Mrs. Stella Obasanjo, wife of the Nigerian President and Mrs. Titi Abubakar wife of the Vice President of Nigeria, and Mrs. Eki Igbinedion, wife of the executive Governor of Edo State, to mention just a few. These women, in their various capacities have created awareness of abuse and trafficking in women on the international scene. Some of them have projects at discouraging trafficking in young women/girls.
4. The Federation of Muslim Women’s Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN) is to be commended for its efforts to empower and uphold the dignity of Muslim women.
5. There are numerous International Organizations that are committed to this cause. I will mention one or two of those who collaborate with us (Women Religious) in Nigeria and they are –International Organization for Migrants (IOM) and Solidarity with Women in Distress (SOLWODI) founded in Kenya in 1985 by Sr. Lea Ackermann MSOLA a German religious. We also commend the programmes of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on Child Labour initiated in 1992
6. Nigeria is embarking on a new educational program – Universal Basic Education (UBE) aimed at enhancing “unhindered access to quality basic education to the children, especially to the girl-child”. The Minister of Education in Nigeria, Mrs. Chinwe Obaji recently stated that “no fewer than 246 million children worldwide were used as domestic servants” Obviously this number is from developing countries showing that there is still a lot to be done

The following groups have important roles to play in the combating and amelioration of this evil in our society:

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<sup>2</sup> Promoting Women’s Rights Through Sharia in Northern Nigeria (A Project of Centre for Islamic Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria)

## Parents

The role of parents in the on-going phenomenon cannot be over emphasized. Parents:

- ❖ Need to understand that they are the primary sex educators of their children and therefore should guide their young daughters. Mothers, in particular should be close to their daughters and encourage them to share their sexual problems and ask questions freely. In the African setting, and Nigeria, in particular, sex is not discussed or talked about in the homes. As a result, young people, especially girls get their knowledge about sex from their peers.
- ❖ Should not force their children into marriages especially into early marriages. Rather they should educate them and leave them to marry the men of their choice when they attain maturity.

## The Church

It cannot be overemphasized that “the Church has a pastoral responsibility to promote the human dignity of persons exploited through prostitution and to advocate for their liberation and economic, educational and formative support. The Church must keep up the defense of the legitimate rights of women”. Having said this, I wish to affirm the noble role of the Church in the numerous pronouncements of the *Magesterium* upholding the dignity of women and womanhood.

The Second Vatican Council regretted the fact that women’s fundamental personal rights were not being universally respected:

Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 29*)

The late Holy Father, John Paul 11, wrote an exhortation dedicated entirely to the dignity of women and womanhood, titled, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (“On the Dignity of Woman,”1988). In that document, the Pope said, *inter alia*, that the Church

.... desires to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the “mystery of woman” and for every woman....(No.31)

The same Supreme Pontiff addressed a *Letter to Women*. (1995). In that document, the Holy Father again stated:

Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. (No.3)

Our late Holy Father went on to “condemn the widespread hedonistic and commercial culture which encourages the systemic exploitation of sexuality and corrupts even very young girls into letting their bodies be used for profit.” (No.5).

Glad to say, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), the same Holy Father devoted a paragraph to the *Dignity of the African Woman*. In that exhortation, “the Church deplores and condemns, to the extent that they are still found in the African societies, all the customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them”. With all this we see that the Catholic Church has been on the vanguard for the restoration and promotion of the dignity of women and womanhood.

## **The Government**

Since poverty is at the root of all our problems in Nigeria and third world countries as a whole, any reform that does not first address the issue of poverty will hardly succeed.

It behoves Governments therefore to ensure that

- ❖ Policies and regulations that liberate and empower women are **implemented**.
- ❖ There are beautifully commendable policies that;
  - Condemn all forms of violence and abuse against women and the girl-child,
  - Discourage early marriage and
  - Aim at putting an end to this modern slave trade!

Unfortunately these policies are hidden in papers/blue prints

What we need is **IMPLEMENTATION**. We need to make the education of the girl-child a reality in line with the MDG which promised to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005”. Here we are in 2006 and not much has happened! We should all act as watchdogs to ensure that these governments fulfill their pledges. We need to put pressure on them.

## **Further Recommendations:**

- In view of the fact that a lot of the atrocities perpetuated against these women is out of sheer ignorance, education of the populace/entire society is imperative. We therefore have to embark on an awareness campaign, targeting men, women, parents and all those who seem to be directly involved.
  - ✓ We must encourage volunteers who would use their time and energy to educate this affected segment of our society in a proper perspective in order to conform to standardised human values and dignity
  - ✓ Compulsory education of girls must be a thing of importance to all governments at all sectors. We must rise to the challenge of making it a crime for any parent who fails to educate the girl-child in the formal education way to a standard minimum of the high school level. It must be noted that this is not going to be a matter of legislation alone but to make use of persuasion and pressure groups such as the Church, the mosque, the NGOs to educate and

make the parents to see that the better alternative to prostitution should be encouraged.

- ✓ There is need for quality and holistic education; not just acquisition of knowledge and skills but most importantly acquisition of virtue and character formation.
- ✓ Women should be given their rightful position in the society – involve them in decision making especially in those issues affecting women.
- ✓ Biographies of women who can serve as role models should be produced and presented to the younger generation to appreciate hard work and good life and make them to have a belief in themselves that they could be good citizens who contribute to the common good.

## **CONCLUSION**

- In conclusion I want to use the purpose of this paper to propose that the year 2010 be declared the year of ***WOMEN DIGNITY***. Therefore all hands should be on deck to ensure that the status of women is elevated in all facets of life. There is need for the governments to ensure that they implement those policies that would dignify the status of womanhood at all times and at levels of governance. We have to continue lobbying governments for legislative intervention to put an end to these evil practices. I therefore call on ALL to come out en masse and support this crusade!

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