



Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria: Experiences of Some Young Girls who have Survived Trafficking

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Abstract

Human trafficking has been a global issue and has assumed a dimension that is difficult to control. It is an abuse of human rights of those who have been trafficked. In most researches it has been found out that girls are mostly the victims of human trafficking. There is a weak border control and this makes human trafficking in Nigeria a lucrative business. There is also a sort of collusion between the traffickers and immigration officials. This study focuses on 5 survivors of human trafficking in a community in Edo state, Nigeria. The research methodology is feminist qualitative approach which explored the lived experiences of these survivors. Findings from this study indicate that some factors like family instability, feminization of poverty and gender inequality are ingredients that facilitate girls' trafficking. Government in Nigeria should tackle gender inequality and poverty which make it possible especially the trafficking of young girls.

Key words: Trafficking, Vulnerability, Gender, Young girls, Survivors, Exploitation, Feminism.

Introduction

Human trafficking has become a major issue in the world today because people are not commodities and should not be sold and also because of the inhuman treatment meted to victims. All over the world human trafficking exists. It is prevalent in Asia, Latin America, South America and the Pacific countries. According to CNN's report in its freedom day focus on human trafficking, about 5 million people are trafficked and mostly women and children are the most affected in human trafficking (CNN 2019). The United Nations office on drugs and crime has identified Nigeria as one of the top eight countries in the world that is involved in human trafficking (Ohonba et al. 2019; Cherti

et al. 2013). Although all categories of people are exposed to human trafficking, or put in another way have been victims of trafficking, but most of the victims are young women whose age are between 16 and 30.

Human trafficking is a crime against humanity. It dehumanizes the victims and they lose their freedom. Human trafficking is also a sort of forced labour, sex trafficking, bonded labour, debt bondage, voluntary servitude and this makes the victims to lose their humanity (Iraor, 2019). It is very complex and various definitions have been proposed. It is a process of recruiting people from their native country to other countries for forced labour and exploitation (Ohonba et al, (2019); Braimah, (2013); World Bank 2009; Carling, (2005); Chukwuma, Osakwe & Ekpeyoung, (2002). Some other people have defined it as process of people being recruited in their community and country of origin and taken to other destinations where they are exploited for purposes of forced labour, prostitution, domestic servitude and other forms of exploitation (World Bank 2009). It could also be defined as illegal trade in human beings through abduction, threat, deception for the purpose of exploitation and forced labour. Human trafficking has also come under the category of migration and immigration because in this case there are also traffickers in the process of bringing people through violence to another country. This is the case in the trafficking of human beings in North Africa where migrants are transported through the Mediterranean Sea to countries in Europe such as Italy and Spain.

Mediterranean Sea does become what could be described as the “sea of death” because most of the migrants die in the process of transporting them by boats to these Southern European countries.

Nigeria as earlier pointed out is regarded as a major centre of trafficking of people. The federal, the states and local governments have been trying to stop human trafficking and have set up all kinds of bodies to assist and resettle victims of human trafficking. Iraor, (2019); Ohonba et al. (2019); Dunmoye et al. (2019); and Braimah, (2013) opine that Edo state is the epicenter of human trafficking in Nigeria. Edo state is known as the place where young girls are recruited and trafficked to various places in the world (Nwokeoma et

al. (2019), Oyebanji, (2017). In Edo state several programs have been enacted to raise people's consciousness about human trafficking as well as educate people about the pernicious or inhuman treatment of trafficking. Despite all these programs, human trafficking still occurs. The fight against human trafficking is still much on going involving several stake holders, NGOs, activists, multilateral organizations, etc. All these organizations and individuals have brought or have captured the attention of the general public to the inhuman aspect of human trafficking. With the publicity given to human trafficking, researchers have produced data about this unending phenomenon.

A research into human trafficking which has gender perspectives is essential. Most of the research studies on human trafficking that are empirical have met with several challenges because data as well as generalized statistics of quantitative studies have not been able to unmask the actual nature of human trafficking in the society. The data of most quantitative studies are inaccurate hence data provided lack accuracy. This clearly shows that combating human trafficking by using quantitative method only will not be as effective as addressing the issue from the source. Consequently research studies on experiences of trafficked survivors will give us a better approach in terms of understanding of the processes, dynamics, and the way human trafficking is organized. This research therefore approaches human traffic from what could be called feminist qualitative perspective. In this way meaning is produced from lived experiences of the survivors of the victims of human trafficking rather than from figures obtained from the quantitative survey. Due to the secret nature of human trafficking, it is extremely difficult to get to the root of it and survivors are difficult to reach because of the stigmatization attached to being trafficked. Research studies on survivors are however very important because one can get to the very nature of human trafficking and achieve effective anti-trafficking policies (World Bank 2009). Therefore researches of this nature cannot be considered inappropriate because of the increase in human trafficking.

This study centers on the survivors of those who have been trafficked and what they experienced in their own words. The feminist

qualitative approach of this study tries and seeks to understand the social realities and impacts on lived realities of the survivors of those who have been trafficked and the society. One of the key elements of feminist approach is to provide alternative to mainstream or dominant research methods. It looks at some of the elements and differences which the dominant approach has neglected. The reason behind this study is that the targets are young women who are vulnerable because of their gendered position in the society. Moreover their vulnerability has been brought about by economic and societal values (Ezeibe et al. 2019; Adepoju, 2010). The rationale behind this study is therefore to bring up the voices of these marginalized trafficked victims, and in doing this subjective experiences such as poverty, lack of access to information and illiteracy are all taken into consideration in terms of their vulnerability to being trafficked. It is therefore essential that trafficking of young girls becomes an important feminist research problem. The research methodology used is feminist approach which gives voices to survivors of human trafficking. It does not allow empirical data obscure the experiences of the survivors in the research (Oyebanji, 2017); in other words it goes deeper to unmask the subjective experiences of the survivors of human trafficking (Ligaga, 2020; Ravlick, 2020; Dunn, et al. 2019; Westmarland, 2001).

This research will therefore focus on the lived experiences of the trafficked survivors in order to understand the nature of trafficking of young women and their vulnerability to being trafficked. This study will contribute towards the ongoing discourse as well as the fight against trafficking of women, especially young girls, not only in Edo state, Nigeria but globally. One of the basic ingredients in the process of human trafficking is that violence is involved either in a subtle way or by open force. It also involves psychological violence and the victims lose their agency or free will. In this case therefore, human trafficking is particularly a means of making people to lose their freedom. There are other several definitions of human trafficking but the one that captures human trafficking succinctly is the one proposed by United Nations Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish

trafficking in persons especially women and children. This protocol defines trafficking in persons as constituting the following:

“trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN 2000).

This study will adopt this definition of trafficking because it captures the main elements of human trafficking. It also shows how traffickers recruit their victims, the means by which the victims are taken away for the purpose of trafficking. In Edo state human trafficking is a highly organized business which is like a syndicate. The traffickers recruit their victims from the local communities and they have a way of luring young girls especially from their communities. In some cases the parents of the young girls are involved in the trafficking of their children because of poverty. Some of the parents even sell their young girls to traffickers. In the course of this research it was revealed that the parents of the girls are involved in oath taking which makes it difficult for the girls not to escape wherever they are taken to. They believe that they might be struck by any kind of disease or illness if they escape. In view of this they must not expose the activities of the traffickers. In other words they believe in the supernatural power of the oath (Degani & Ghanem 2019); Adams, (2011).

Methodology

This research is anchored on feminist methodological approach and also Intersectionality which is also a feminist concept. Intersectionality is a concept coined by Crenshaw, (1989) in her paper “Demarginalizing

the Intercession of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of the Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-racist Politics.” It is a framework which conceptualizes a person, group of people or social problems as affected by discrimination and disadvantages. In other words intersectional theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion. The identities that exist create what could be called hierarchical and this hierarchical brings about a dominating identity at both the micro and macro level of the society. At the micro level of the society in Edo society, the dominating figure is the male because it is a patriarchal society. Hence the father makes decisions or takes decisions for the family. As earlier pointed out most of the victims of human trafficking are women and they are mostly from rural areas and few are from urban areas. Some of them are lured into it because of poverty. The traffickers use deception and coercion and in some cases they abduct these girls into trafficking.

The subjects of this research were survivors of human trafficking who escaped with some other girls from Libya. They were initially reluctant to participate or to be interviewed for this research but after much persuasion and assurance that their identities will not be revealed they agreed. Their ages are between 16 – 25 years. In this study the identities of the subjects will not be revealed. The following research questions were generated for this study:

- (a) What are the interconnecting factors that aid the young girls’ vulnerability to being trafficked?
- (b) What were the experiences of the girls when they were trafficked?
- (c) How has trafficking impacted the lives of the girls?
- (d) What were their experiences of reintegration into the society?

Review of Empirical Literature

Many researchers on human trafficking such as Nwokeoma et al. (2019); Cho, (2015); Crane, (2013); Mahmoud & Trebesch, (2009); Gajic-Veljanoske & Stewart, (2007); have stated that there is an exceptionally challenge of obtaining a reliable, representative data on

human trafficking. It is noted that human trafficking by its very nature is an underground criminal activity and the traffickers conceal the crime and the victims are often unable to report the crime due to lack of access to information and the barriers put on their ways. Aronowitz, (2009) opines that “because of its clandestine nature and the hidden economies, in which trafficked victims are forced to work, accurate statistics on the magnitude of the problem are elusive and available statistics are notoriously unreliable.” Therefore obtaining reliable data on human trafficking is extremely difficult and any literature on human trafficking should just be considered as an estimate not necessarily an accurate one.

It is in this regard that a feminist approach on human trafficking becomes imperative because it is not empirical, positivist approach; it is rather an alternative discourse to the empirical approach. It must be emphasized that the feminist approach unpacks the lived experiences of survivors human trafficking. Feminist theorists of every stripe have investigated human trafficking and they have condemned it as an inhuman treatment which should be abolished especially as it affects young girls mostly (Scholz, 2010). All the strands in feminism – liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, cultural feminism and post modernism all abhor human trafficking especially because women are mostly involved. They believe that human trafficking debases women who are trafficked and as such it violates their human rights. They also argued that women who are trafficked are exposed to prostitution. There is however disagreement among feminists about human trafficking and sex work. Some of the feminist believe that human trafficking and sex work have the same characteristics because the process has the same organization, practices and experiences (Weitzer, 2014). Some feminists disagree because according to them the two cannot be equated.

Moreover there is no negotiation in sex trafficking and this violates human rights. Furthermore sex trafficking involves coercion, while sex work is voluntary. Because of the violence involved in sex trafficking, it is a violation of their human rights. Apart from this it is exploitative in nature (Pharoah, 2006). The liberal feminist argued that prostitution is

a means of survival by women hence it is not something that should be condemned by feminists. They argued that the agency of sex workers is not violated. It is according to liberal feminist a free choice of employment hence it is a legitimate occupation. They argued further that sex work has been an occupation for decades and women are engaged in it. Hence they support women who engage in sex work. However some feminists especially the radical feminists believe that sex work produces sex trafficking (Weitzer, 2014; Chuang, 2010; Dempsey 2010; Limoncelli, 2009; Jefferys, 2008; Outshoorn, 2005; Aghatise, 2011; Raymond et al. 2002.)

Some feminists, like Kathleen Barry (1984), believe that there is no demarcation between sex work and trafficking as both of them are a form of female sexual slavery. Sexual trafficking is anchored on male domination of women and as such it violates human rights. Radical feminists believe that sex work and sex trafficking are a form of forced labour. Examples of these are: bonded labour, debt bondage, involuntary servitude, and forced labour (Elezi, 2011). All feminists fight for the rights of women in the society. But as can be seen there are divisions among them as it pertains to sex trafficking and sex work. Feminist scholarship fight for the rights of women as earlier pointed out. The arguments among feminists of different stripes about sex work and trafficking is that one is voluntary and the other is not. However it has to be noted that because of the structure of society sex work has become a source of employment for some women in order to survive. In conclusion it has to be noted that both the liberal and radical feminists are against human trafficking.

There are some scholars who have argued that gender is much more relevant in trafficking. It is known that gender is constructed (Butler, 1990) since it shapes and informs what is expected of the two sexes in society. In most cultures masculinity is celebrated over femininity. Simone de Beauvoir, (1994) contends that both femininity and masculinity are learnt through socialization hence it is not through biological difference. Trafficking and gender go hand in hand. Most researches that have been conducted on trafficking show that women and girls are mostly trafficked (EUROSTAT, 2015; William and Masika,

2002). Women's bodies are seen as embodiment of sex hence they are sold and abused exploitatively. The issue of human trafficking must therefore be approached from a gender perspective because most of those that are trafficked are women and young girls. In most trafficking processes most of the traffickers are men whose behaviour shows power domination and control over women (Henson, 2015). It is therefore not surprising that feminists are concerned about human trafficking. The vulnerability of women is also shaped by power relations and societal values which place women at lower ladder of society. In Nigeria, traditional gender roles are such that there are inequalities between men and women. Women and girls are considered to be inferior and weaker and as such women are vulnerable of being trafficked.

Predisposing Factors on Human Trafficking

Gender Inequality

In furtherance to what has been said above patriarchy is common in most sub Saharan countries. It is complex and dynamic in nature. Patriarchy and gender are relational as they are displayed according to cultures and context. In Nigeria patriarchy is a system of social differentiation based on sex which privileges males over females (Asiyanbola, 2005). It also involves gender inequality and this is manifested in the inequality between men and women (Ellis, 2020; Andrew, 2019; Bridges & Messerschmidt, 2019). In environments, like Nigeria, that have severe gender inequality, those environments are more susceptible to trafficking. In other words those at the lower ladder like women are trafficked. Of relevance to this study is structural Intersectionality because women are mostly trafficked. Intersectionality is used as a tool by feminists to bring to light those who are marginalized in society like women (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Lindsay, 2019; Bailey et al. 2019; McCall, 2005). Structural Intersectionality stresses the social division of gender which expresses the diverse impact of intersecting factors of women's lived experiences (Monks, 2011).

Poverty

Gender inequality also involves poverty. In other words there is what we call feminization of poverty, and this makes women to be vulnerable to human trafficking. In some studies it has been found out that because of poverty in some countries some females would want to leave their countries and seek for greener pastures and in the process there is a likelihood of falling into traffickers' hands that will lure them and traffic them (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011). Agreeing with this, Nwokeoma, (2018) identifies poverty as one of the factors that makes Nigerian migrants fall prey into the hands of human traffickers. Owobu, (2014) also corroborated this statement by saying that poverty is one of the root causes of human trafficking.

Polygamy

Another factor is polygamy which is common in Africa than anywhere in the world today. Polygamy is patriarchal in nature and it gives hegemonic power to men. The family in most polygamous homes is unstable because some wives are favored over others. There is also the fact that the girls from most polygamous homes are deprived of basic fundamental rights and education is one of them. Some parents attach higher importance to the education of boys than girls, and thus bring about the disempowerment of girls who are then exposed to traffickers (Ohonba et al 2019; Braimah, 2013; Aderinto 2001).

Cultural Practices and Inferiorization of Women

The traditional culture and practices in Nigerian societies are prone towards making women vulnerable to trafficking because women are considered as inferior to men. Young girls are therefore easy targets for trafficking. In some cases, as earlier pointed out, the family heads trafficked their young girls and they do not have any say or power to resist being trafficked because they are coerced into trafficking. Deceit and lies are also used in trafficking these young girls as Ohonba et al, 2019; Irabor, 2019; Nwokeoma et al, 2019; Attoh, 2012) in various studies carried out across some towns in Nigeria. Thus in Edo state young girls are deceived and lured into trafficking by painting where they are going to be taken to as a land full of roses.

Global Inequality

Another factor that has contributed to human trafficking is the global inequality. According to Okojie, 2009; Adepoju, 2005; the global inequality has made human trafficking a much more compelling factor because most people especially young girls would want to leave their poor countries for greener pastures in Europe. In some cases they fall into the hands of human traffickers (Elabor-Idemudia, 2013). Globalization has created gaps among developed and developing countries. The impact of this globalization is that developed countries are richer than developing countries. As pointed out above, people from the poor regions of the globe would want to migrate to the rich ones and thus they might fall into the hands of human traffickers who will take advantage of their desperation to migrate to Europe (Onuoha, 2011; Anderson & Davidson, 2003; Bales & Robbins, 2001; Beare, 1999; De Dros, 1999; Kempadoo, 2000; Salt & Stem, 1997; Skrobanek & Sanghara, 1996; Williams, 1999).

Low Level of Education

Another important element in all these is that they have low level of education. Some of them are drop outs and this is one of the contributing factors to their vulnerability to being trafficked. Education is therefore an important instrument in human trafficking. In some communities in Nigeria there are no schools which children can attend and where there are, teachers are not available. Education is an important tool which empowers people who have it to exercise their agency. In view of this girls who are trafficked lack knowledge to discern proper way of living their lives.

Participants

The participants were survivors of human trafficking from Libya who were interviewed for this study. They were five in number and they were aged between 16 and 25 years. Their schooling did not go beyond senior secondary school. Trafficking is a very sensitive issue and most survivors of human trafficking are hard to come by because they do not like to be known in view of stigmatization in the community. The interviewees who were the survivors of human trafficking were presented with some questions about their

experiences. Hence their stories guided the interview sessions. The interview guide only assisted in shaping and framing the stories of the participants. The narratives of survivors of human trafficking are taken into consideration and their stories became the basis of this research. Questions were only asked where and when necessary for clarifications and further explanations. This aspect of research is very important because as Auchter, (2019) has argued, the way women have told those stories and acted upon is not just worthy of analytical actions but can form the basis of engaging violence that are unleashed on women. The research is foregrounded on the lived experiences or voices of human traffic survivors (van Ingen, 2020). This qualitative approach that has been adopted here gives a richer understanding of the subjective experiences of survivors of human trafficking in Nigeria especially in Edo state.

Victims' Accounts of Human Trafficking

For the purposes of keeping the identities of the 5 participants anonymous, their real names are not given. In the interview, it was discovered that two of them came from polygamous family where the parents are living apart. It was their mothers who were taking care of them and they did not have the financial means to cater for all the children. They were exposed to bad influences like engaging in sexual activities at a relatively young age. One of their friends told them about a man who wanted to take them to Italy and they agreed. The man was a trafficker and he deceived them and they were taken to a transit camp from where the journey started to Libya. At this junction it dawned on them that they have been trafficked. They recounted that they went through all kinds of dehumanizing experience – sex, pornography, as well as massaging of men.

One of them said it was through peer influence that she was trafficked and taken to Libya. Another of the survivors related her story as follows: she lived with her mother who normally did not come home until late in the night and as such she had free time to go out to meet men for sex and she had monetary gratifications in return until she fell into the hands of a trafficker. The fifth survivor had a pathetic story to tell. She was taken by a relative to Lagos, Nigeria who promised her

that she was taking her overseas. She later got to know that the relative was a trafficker. This man trafficked her to Libya but she found her way back but she had been abused and exploited during the course of trafficking. All the survivors spent between 2 -3 years in Libya. From the interviews, what has emerged from the experiences of these girls was that they were lured into being trafficked. In other words at the initial stage of being trafficked they were not told the truth about their being trafficked.

Conclusion

There are some factors that aid human trafficking like poverty and those mostly trafficked are women because of gender inequality (Bloom, 2020; Twis, 2019; Mawere, 2019; Braimah, 2013) The girls were from poor homes. These girls are also from unstable family structures which expose them to human trafficking. The educational background of these girls was also low. Hence they were easily exposed to human trafficking. Because of the poverty situation of their families some of them were sent to relatives who promised to help them acquire education or skills but these relatives in some cases trafficked them. Some were promised greener pastures overseas and at the end these girls were trafficked and so many predicaments befell them which they recounted in the course of the interview. The girls experienced a sort of manipulation and control by those who trafficked them through supernatural powers (diabolical means), and oath. The diabolical means and oath was a sort of control mechanism which made the trafficked girls submissive to the traffickers (Degani & Ghanem, 2019; Adams, 2011). They were also made to understand that they were under debt bondage because the money used to transport them has to be repaid and they were asked to repay these monies through sex work. In their captivity they went through physical and psychological violence. They were caged, starved and beaten if they refuse to engage in sex work with any suitor. Threats, intimidation and violence were used by the traffickers and in most cases these broke their spirits and it is ingrained in their minds.

Recommendations

The issue of human trafficking in Nigeria has to be addressed. Therefore this study recommends some ways for policy implementation. The issue of gender inequality should be addressed. It is therefore suggested that our educational curriculum should include gender education which will teach women especially about gender equality in every section of the society. Women should be empowered economically so that they can be financially independent. Young girls should be educated in terms of skill acquisition so that they can be self-dependent. Soft loans should be given to girls so that they can set up businesses in terms of the skill they have learnt. Some of the survivors have learnt some trade before being trafficked but could not set up the trade because of lack of funds and this exposed them to trafficking. There is a body National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIT) which is set up by government to stop human trafficking and rehabilitate those who were trafficked. The survivors in their narratives were counseled but there was no follow up by (NAPTIT) and also they were not given seed fund to set up their business. The Nigerian borders are porous and people can come in and exit it without any travel documents. There should be put in place a stricter control measures which will deter illegal entries and exits across the borders to curb human trafficking. It is also a fact that the traffickers bribe immigration officers and this aspect has to be looked into by the Nigerian government. Traffickers who were apprehended by law enforcement agencies in most cases are not prosecuted or were given light punishment. The government should ensure that appropriate punishment is meted to them in order to deter human trafficking.

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