

The New Slave Trade

By Hisham Aidi, Africana.com

Some work in houses in West Africa, others along the streets of Italy. Some perform domestic duties – cleaning, cooking – while others are sex workers. They range in age from children to adults, but all are female and none of them are there voluntarily.

At last month's First Pan-African Regional Conference in Trafficking Persons, Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo strongly denounced what he called "the new slave trade" and called for leaders and activists to stop the sale of women and children into prostitution in Europe.

"It is disheartening to observe that several years after colonial rule, Africa still suffers what it faced those years now," Obasanjo declared at the meeting, held in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, and attended by representatives from 20 African countries and officials from numerous non-governmental and human rights organizations. "Every effort must be channeled towards totally purging this evil from among us."

Tima Salah, director of UNICEF West Africa, told conference participants that poverty and falling living standards are the leading factors in the growth of human trafficking. Salah called for renewed attempts to prosecute traffickers and for promoting education and economic opportunities as a way to "fight the trade in human beings." And Nigerian human rights activist Haija Zainab Maina told the BBC that "the illegal sale of women into prostitution abroad had become an everyday occurrence," particularly in Nigeria.

It's not just happening in Africa, although most authorities say the problem is worst on the continent. UN statistics estimate that 700,000 women and girls worldwide have been smuggled out of their countries, and sold into domestic and commercial labor or sexual slavery. Shifting the focus from gender to age, a recent *Time* magazine report said that as many as 300,000 child slaves existed in Haiti alone. The scourge of child slavery had until recently been seen as endemic to war-ravaged societies such as Angola, Sudan and Somalia, but evidence is now emerging of child trafficking in such peaceful West African nations as Cameroon, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Nigeria.

Children are taken from their parents, sometimes in exchange for a cash payment, sometimes simply kidnapped off the street. In Africa, the children are often taken to neighboring countries, where they are given to host families, who work them long hours for no pay.

Some estimate that hundreds of Togolese girls are sold every year, and that more than 1000 Togolese girls have been sent to Gabon alone. In July 1997, according to BBC reports, authorities in Benin arrested five traffickers who were preparing to ship 400 child slaves to Gabon.

The BBC went on to explain that the children, the vast majority of them girls, are bought by local agents, who pay for the journey and whatever bribes and fees are needed to cross national borders. "Voodoo is used to coerce the girls into working for their sponsors," one source

told the news agency. The girls are then taken through different West Africa countries, and are delivered to the “Madame” before departing for Europe, the ultimate destination of many in the new slave trade.

In 1996, a children’s market was discovered in a five-story building in Lagos, where dozens of malnourished children, aged 7 to 17, lived in cramped conditions. A special child slave market has long existed in the Marche du Plateau, a popular market in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, where wealthy women come to get so-called “helpers.”

“Everyone is affected,” Grace Osakue, the founder of Lagos-based Girl Power Initiative, told the BBC. “It’s either a daughter of a family or a daughter of a friend who has been trafficked.” Jane Osagie, coordinator of Nigeria’s International Reproductive Rights Research Group, has worked with a number of girls who have been trafficked. “A lot of them die,” she told the BBC. “A lot don’t come back. There were two girls who were trafficked and because they refused to go into the trade, they were banned from eating. They were starved and so these 13- and 14-year-old girls had to urinate for each other to drink so they would not die.”

“The issue of trafficking is becoming a national issue in Nigeria because of the number of people who are trafficked,” says Christie Onyekachi, executive director of the Gender Rights Project in Nigeria and now a visiting fellow at the Center for Human Rights at Columbia University. “And it is not out of order to call it a slave trade. In 1994, 20 people from Nigeria were arrested in Italy—it didn’t get national attention. But between March 2000 and December 2000, 1180 Nigerian women were deported from European countries.”

Onyekachi says that dismal economic prospects and lack of clear legal sanction combine to create the situation. “We know that many of these girls went there because of the unemployment at home—they are not illiterates, many are graduates. They were driven by the incentives of employment and the promise of papers. The problem is how did they get there—many of these girls take oaths not to disclose the names of their owners. One of the reasons that people can get away with this trafficking is that there are no laws against it. There is a law being debated right now before the [Nigerian] National Assembly; the bill is proscribing prostitution, and is intended to protect girls and criminalize the trafficking. We are also trying to make evidence anonymous to protect those who speak out, and we’re trying to prosecute traffickers and parents, who often withdraw their children from school to send them abroad.”

For many of the girls sent to Europe for prostitution, Onyekachi adds, deportation does not end their troubles—she points out that “50 percent of the people deported last year were HIV-positive.”

Help for the deportees is incomplete at best. Eki Igbenedion, the wife of the governor of Edo state in northern Nigeria, established a rehabilitation center after seeing the situation of Nigerian girls in Italy. Another rehabilitation center has been opened in Benin City, where the victimized children are offered sewing and literacy classes.

“Many of the hundreds of girls from Nigeria sold into sexual slavery in Europe have been trafficked through England,” a recent British press report stated. “There’s no doubt this is

modern day slavery,” Detective Chief Inspector Chris Ambler of Sussex told reporters. “They are nothing more to the people who are using them than a commodity to make money.”

According to the *London Times*, English authorities have long dealt with West African girls arriving in England and claiming asylum at the airport. As minors, the girls were placed in foster homes, only to disappear within weeks. Police investigations found that most were taken to other European countries, primarily Italy, where they were forced into prostitution. Many of the Nigerian women, police said, lived in a state of sexual bondage, working to pay off debts of up to \$50,000.

Detective Superintendent Dave Gaylor told the *Times* that much responsibility lies with the Nigerian authorities, but added that the European Union should do more in terms of promoting cross-border police cooperation, harsher sentences for traffickers and anti-trafficking legislation.

Calls for international cooperation to end human trafficking echoed as well through the Abuja conference in February, and were included in the five-point statement released at the meeting’s end. “With the spirit of determination,” said conference chair Titi Abubakar, founder of the African Women Trafficking and Child Labor Eradication Foundation, “we shall collectively rid our society of this horrendous act, which is an assault on the dignity of womanhood and humanity as a whole.”