

(Edited)

FEATURE

HUMAN TRAFFICKING: IS HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF? By Nwoha Roland

Trafficking in persons is no new phenomenon the world over. In Nigeria like in most West African and developing countries of the world, trafficking in children for labour and trafficking in young girls and women for prostitution in Europe, the Middle East and America has become a growing trend. What is new however, seem to be the manner in which the victims are currently been tricked. To present a clear picture of the situation and assess whether the phenomenon is new, we shall examine and compare how young girls and women are been trafficked today for prostitution in Europe and the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa as far back as the seventeenth century.

Some historians have argued that pre-colonial African societies had an organized political system of government, a stable, though crude agricultural practices, a vast and rich indigenous art, social life and customs deeply rooted in tradition and culture, where good and evil are recognized. The custodians of the traditions and culture of the people condemn and sanction evil.

The coming of the Europeans to West Africa however, to a large extent, brought about a negative and distorted attitude to life that has existed till today which has affected the value system of the people.

According to a renowned historian, Adu Boahen, the Atlantic Slave Trade started supposedly as a good gesture in 1441, when Gonzalves, one of the Portuguese explorers, returned to Lisbon with 10 Africans whom he presented to Prince Henry. These 10 Africans were received by Prince Henry with great pleasure because he had hoped to convert them into Christianity, educate the most talented among them and send them back to their countries as missionaries. Though Henry's hope never materialized, more and more Africans were brought into Portugal as slaves and the original intent of evangelization together.

By the time of Henry's death in 1460, between 700 and 800 slaves were brought from west Africa annually to Portugal and by the 1830's the number of slaves exported to Europe and the Americas had soared to 135, 000 annually. Records reveal that over 11million slaves were taken away from Africa during 400 years of the illicit slave trade.

It is disheartening to note that the enslavement and sales of these unfortunate Africans from the seventeenth century were facilitated by Africans themselves, especially the kings and their elders who received monetary rewards. Initially, criminals and prisoners of wars were the ones sold to the Europeans, then followed by debtors. Various forms of raids were then carried out in communities, capturing and selling them as slaves. A European explorer, Captain John Hall, who voyaged to Africa in 1772 and 1776, reported

that an appearance of a slave ship in Calabar was the signal for the Africans to go upstream in their war canoes returning usually two to three weeks later with their canoes loaded with African slaves. These slaves were bartered for European goods such as spirits, guns, mirrors, gun powders, cloths, beads etc. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the average cost of a healthy male African delivered on board ship was £10. By the middle of the century, it increased to £15 and by the end of that century, it rose to £27.

This article is not intended to bore us with the squalid tale of the Atlantic Slave Trade. It aims at comparing the Atlantic Slave Trade and modern human trafficking. While the humanitarian, economic and industrial revolution eventually led to the abolition of the hideous trade, the practice today seems to have resurfaced. Human trafficking today is modern slavery. The modes of operation of the former and later are the same. Even though the reasons people engage in trafficking are different.

So much has been said and done in respect of trafficking in young girls and women in Nigeria particularly in Edo State where the trend assumed an unimaginable dimension. A report from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Person and other Related Matters (NAPTIP) indicates that Edo state has the largest market in this modern slave trade.

What continues to baffle concerned people of the State is the level of ignorance displayed by the victims, their parents and relatives who encourage them. Several reports which point to cases of human trafficking in Edo State evoke so much feeling of resentment among the many good people of the state.

The journey to Europe especially by land borders is a tale that could best be described as a journey to the evil forest; chance that one would return successful is like a camel passing through the Biblical eye of a needle. Cases abound where many young girls and women were abandoned in strange lands by their traffickers, cases abound where most of the women got pregnant for men who would demand sex in exchange for food and other basic needs in the course of the journey. Many of the women contracted HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted diseases. Recounting their ordeal, a victim who was among those rescued by the Nigerian High Commission in Gambia and assisted back home by Mrs. Eki Igbiniedion narrated “sometimes we hide in rocks, caves and desert sands just to escape from border patrols. Sometimes we starve for days without food. We carry the weak among us, and to quench our thirst, we sometimes drink our urines. Some of us got pregnant for men we never knew. We had no medical attention and finally we were abandoned in Gambia”. There have also been several reports of victims been stranded in different parts of Africa unable to either move forward or return back to Nigeria. Several cases of death have also been recorded in the course of the journey.

Despite these sad stories; and efforts made to combat the menace of trafficking, traffickers and some of the victims seem not to be deterred. Parents, husbands, brothers, relatives, friends, acquaintances and even strangers have continued to devise different tactics to hunt their young girls and women to sell to prostitution. Deployed middlemen and agents roam the streets visiting people’s home, approaching and taking advantage of

the ignorant, the weak and the poor with promises of securing good jobs abroad to turn around their situation. More worrisome also is the clandestine nature of the trade, some traditional priests have also become involved, compelling victims to take oaths, this ensures that the victim does not break the covenant, absconds, and that the victims pays an agreed fee within a stipulated period of time etc.

It is evident that the same dragon of avarice, stupidity, crass, selfishness and unnecessary quest for materialism which made our leaders and elders sold their brothers and sisters as slaves to the Europeans centuries ago is on the loose again, and like a cankerworm, the trend has eaten deep into the moral and social fabric of the society. Little wonder a politician in a bid to secure the vote of his people in one of the gubernatorial elections in the state promised to encourage the illicit trade.

The introduction of harsh economic policies by the military governments, insecurity, poor living conditions, unemployment, greed, corruption and respect to wealth irrespective of how; were some of the factors that contributed to the out-flux of people abroad.

The effect of this modern slavery like the former in terms of manpower loss, moral decadence and the breakdown of cultural values is unimaginable. To use the words of one historian of the 1890's "the effect of the slave trade was 'an unmitigated misery' first, it led to an unpardonable destruction of the population, during the period of the trade, it was estimated that somewhere between 30 and 40 million souls were lost to Africa. What is particularly lamentable is that the victims were the most virile and active of the people of West Africa.-The young and the healthy men and women. Finally, the slave trade brutalized all the people who took part in it, black and white, and brought to Africa a vast disruption of its culture. In all, the historian described the slave trade as one of the greatest crimes committed against Africa and one of the most disastrous episodes of its history.