THE PRICE OF LIFE

Every year, it is estimated that between 700,000 and two million women are being trafficked across international borders. Almost every country in the world, whether as a source, transit or destination for victims, is affected by this form of modern-day slavery, and what is one of the great human rights causes of our time. Bill Stephens talks with lawyer and human rights activist, Bisi Olateru Olagbegi, about this grim underside of globalisation and finds that in the case of Nigeria alone, business involving "human goods" is rampant.

Words by Bill Stephens

In 1996, Nigerian lawyer, Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi visited the country's Edo State to help investigate human trafficking for the United Nations. On that visit, she was shocked to find widespread trafficking of young Nigerian women to work as prostitutes in Europe.

Nigerian and foreign traffickers, she learned, transport unsuspecting Nigerian women north with false promises of jobs and job training in Europe, where they are forced into brothels. "My research in Edo State opened my eyes," Bisi says in her Lagos office. "Nobody knew the extent of the abuse and suffering. I was so outraged that I wanted to fight this."

Nigerian trafficking became the focus of Bisi's non-profit WOCON (Women's Consortium of Nigeria) human rights organisation. Bisi ultimately learned that Nigerian women are Europe's leading source of trafficked sex workers, and that over years, Nigerian traffickers have perfected trafficking to Europe into a smooth network.

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Bisi's WOCON office sits on a modest street near the middle of the crowded, bustling megacity of Lagos. Her office is on the second floor of a plain building. Just returned from a business trip, Bisi's busy phoning and reviewing various files supplied by assistants. A middle-aged woman adorned in traditional African dress, she's ebullient and friendly.

According to Bisi, Edo State, in south central Nigeria, is the centre of trafficking activity – especially cross border trafficking for prostitution or sexual exploitation. The Edo State residents who started human trafficking, she says, were originally traders who began travelling to Italy during Nigeria's oil boom in the 1970s to buy jewellery, clothes, and shoes for resale in Nigeria. After Nigeria's economy went bad, these people travelled to Italy to work for short periods in agriculture, particularly during harvesting. The wages earned were used to buy goods to sell in Nigeria. Later, these jobs went to eastern Europeans. So the next activity was prostitution. Ultimately, a trafficking network grew. "Going abroad for work was considered a good chance to earn foreign currency and improve your life," says Bisi, who adds that because Nigerians like to travel, it wasn't hard to convince people to go to Europe.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, a series of military dictators mismanaged the Nigerian economy, contributing to a steep decline in living standards. In 1999, civilian rule returned to Nigeria. But poverty remains a big problem, leaving women especially vulnerable. "The trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe is part of globalisation – the movement around the world of money, products and people," says Bisi. "Sex trafficking is a huge, profitable, and growing global business." Nigerians are big traffickers, she adds. It's a large, lucrative business. Local Nigerian traffickers work with Europe-based traffickers, Nigerians and Europeans, who run brothels. The Nigerians and foreigners work together in trans-national criminal networks.

Anti-trafficking activist, Bisi Olateru Olagbegi outside her Lagos office.

Bisi says traffickers used to look for victims – teenaged girls and women in their early 20s – mostly in Nigeria's Edo State. Now, they look for victims all over Nigeria. And traffickers are more professional. Before, when traffickers took Nigerian women to Europe, they travelled by air. But now, because of passports and fingerprinting, they go north by road – on foot and by camel through the desert. They often travel from Nigeria to Benin Republic, to Mali, and then they cross the desert to North Africa and Tangiers, then by boat to Europe. "We estimate that thousands of Nigerian women have been trafficked into prostitution in Europe," Bisi says. "More than 50,000 Nigerian prostitutes are working in Europe today. In Italy, 60 percent of all prostitutes are Nigerians."

Nigerian prostitutes are especially prevalent in Italy, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and England. Although most Nigerian women, who are trafficked abroad, travel to Europe to work as prostitutes, some also go to Saudi and various African countries for that purpose.

Bisi's activism evolved over the years. The daughter of a judge, she studied law and began practicing in Lagos in 1976. In 1995, she and some professional women formed WOCON, focussing on women's rights issues. That led in 1996 to an assignment from the U.N. to study human trafficking in Nigeria. The wife of a lawyer and mother of four, Bisi works long hours, but makes time for social dancing on weekends.

In the late 1990s, to raise awareness about trafficking, Bisi and her WOCON team began travelling to Nigerian communities. She says there is general lack of knowledge of trafficking among most Nigerians. The WOCON team met with people in local markets, where recruiters often recruit girls. In Edo State, Bisi launched an information campaign through local transport and market workers. In some villages, she started successful task force committees to report and prevent trafficking. In Lagos, she organised rallies against trafficking. Bisi conducted many workshops, lobbied the government to fight trafficking, spearheaded many media campaigns, and produced a documentary that brought global attention to Nigerian trafficking.

Bisi also began receiving rescued victims of trafficking returned from Europe. She recalls a young Nigerian village girl named Rita, who was recruited by a local friend who said her auntie ran an Italian hairdressing salon. The friend was actually a recruiter for the aunt, a trafficker. Bisi says most traffickers are women, some as young as 22. And some who were victims before, become traffickers. The friend told Rita she could go to Italy, learn to be a hairdresser, work for some time there, and then come home. "Most of the Nigerian women are deceived," Bisi says. "Some suspect they're being sent to Europe for prostitution. They think they can do it for a while, then stop it, and do something else. But they get trapped. Traffickers take their money and their passport, so they don't have anything, or a connection with anybody."

She says sometimes, impoverished Nigerian parents, eager for money, try to find recruiters to take their daughters to Europe. Some parents know what will happen to them, some don't. "In one case, when we told the father what happened to his daughter, he just fainted. Some men have many children from many wives, and can't keep track of them, or don't care. Male children are considered more important."

After Rita agreed to go to Italy, she was taken to a local shrine to do a traditional ceremonial secrecy oath, Bisi says. The girl believed that if she broke the oath, she'd be punished by spirits, or that her parents would be harmed. After the ceremony, she travelled by road to Ghana where she received sex worker training. After Ghana, she was taken to Mali where she began

Women's Consortium of Nigeria anti-trafficking market rally in Lagos.

the journey north through the desert via a network of agents using camels and carts. Eventually, Rita reached North Africa, Bisi says, where she worked as a prostitute to afford boat passage to Italy. The girl thought things would get better when she got to Italy and a hair dresser job.

Finally, travelling by boat to Italy, Rita was greeted by her Nigerian friend's auntie. After a week of relaxing, the girl was told that she owed the auntie a large debt for transporting her to Italy, and that the only way to pay this off was through prostitution. The girl realised she was in Italy to work as a prostitute. She had nothing. No papers. She had never been abroad, had never left her village.

Bisi says that often, trafficked Nigerian girls are forced to engage in unprotected sex several times a day to repay their debt – which can take three to five years, or longer, to repay. The victims often face physical abuse. Bisi says that from 1994 to 1998, about 116 Nigerian prostitutes died in Italy because of physical violence from customers or Madams.

The auntie reportedly told Rita that if she talked to anybody, she'd be shipped back home or put in prison. If she talked to the police, she was told, she'd get into trouble." The auntie then gave the girl some skimpy clothes and took her to the Red Light district, where she started working as a prostitute. One cold night, Rita staggered into a phone booth and fainted. A passerby took her to the hospital. From there, an NGO helped her. After the girl told her story to the police, she was taken to the Nigerian embassy. Bisi travelled to Italy, picked Rita up, and brought her back to Nigeria. After a two-year ordeal, the girl came home with nothing – except AIDs. Back in Nigeria, Bisi helped her get medical treatment, housing and job training.

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In her ongoing fight against trafficking, Bisi has faced dangers. When she and her son went to the Lagos airport to receive two trafficking victims returned by the International Organisation for Migration, a gang of traffickers chased them through the night by car. After Bisi tried to prosecute another trafficker, he showed up at her office to harass her.

Because of Bisi's lobbying with other groups, the Nigerian government became more aware of human trafficking, and ultimately, passed a stronger human trafficking law. In 2003, the government started NAPTIP (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons) to prevent trafficking, prosecute traffickers, and help victims. NAPTIP has been trying to deal with the trafficking problem in recent years, Bisi says. "NAPTIP's effective in some areas, but the government has limited resources." The penalty for trafficking is now two years to life in prison, and there have been some prosecutions.

"Trafficking is still a big problem in Nigeria," Bisi says. "There are thousands of traffickers. Abut 60 have been sent to jail since NAPTIP started." She adds, "The government is dealing with experienced criminals who have an international network. Once the trafficked Nigerian woman is in Europe, it's hard for Nigeria to deal with the issue without support of the international community and the destination community. Nigeria is trying to partner with Italy and many European countries to solve this problem. "We collaborate with NAPTIP," Bisi says. "NAPTIP likes working with me. Because we're well-known in the community, people tell us about trafficking. Then we contact NAPTIP and identify traffickers." WOCON also works with NAPTIP in identifying victims and getting them help."

NAPTIP has eight shelters in Nigeria. Bisi's organisation provides learning and recreational material to the Lagos and Edo State shelters. "NAPTIP gives temporary shelter to victims and is supposed to do skills training," says Bisi. "But victims only have six weeks in the shelters, and there's not enough rehabilitation and skills training."

Bisi's satisfied that her pioneering work has brought the trafficking of Nigerian women to international attention. WOCON now has three offices, 19 employees and many volunteers. It's funded by Bisi's law practice and by international and local grants. Today, she continues to do public outreach and information campaigns in Nigerian communities, villages and small towns. "We'll set up a tent and talk with local leaders, police officers, merchants, transport drivers, young women and families. Sometimes, we take victims along with us to narrate their experiences." The goal, she says, is to educate people about the dangers and illegality of human trafficking.

Bisi's also very involved with the re-entry process for victims. "They come to my office and I help them. We provide free legal consultation services to victims. We help them get housing." These days, she's especially focussed on helping victims recover emotionally. "Victims are traumatised and depressed, and it's hard to help such a person readjust to life back home. So mental illness is now a major focus for us." She adds, "Government shelters have counsellors, but it's not really mental health counselling." Now Bisi is trying to get a mental health specialist from the U.S. to visit a NAPTIP shelter to do training of shelter workers.

These days, Bisi also does research in Nigeria and Europe to learn about human trafficking. "There isn't enough information because traffickers and many victims don't want to talk about it." Her research information gives NGOs data to help in the fight against human trafficking. But in spite of her efforts and achievements, Bisi's frustrated about not seeing the results she wants to see. "Despite our efforts, trafficking of Nigerians is growing." For instance, a shelter for trafficked Nigerian women in Spain grew from 600 to 1,700 residents within a year. The shelter is run by a Nigerian woman who was trafficked.

Bisi says the Nigerian government, Nigerian NGOs, and international organisations need to work together to address the root causes of human trafficking in Nigeria. Those include poverty, low education of women, inequality of women, lack of financial and employment prospects in rural communities, and lack of health facilities. "Women become victims because they're poor and don't have opportunities," she says.

Programmes that can make women less vulnerable to human trafficking, Bisi says, include skills training, women's cooperatives for cottage industries, micro credit programmes, job creation programmes, shelters, and free legal services. The challenge of human trafficking is daunting. But Bisi is continuing the fight. "When a woman is sexually abused, it's terrible, because our privacy and our bodies are important.

"I'm angry that some people are exploiting their fellow humans," says Bisi. "I hate to see people suffer." M2W