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TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: THE GENDER GAP



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Abstract:

The academic and grey literature paying attention to human trafficking have primarily focused on female victims. As such, this paper argues that they have suffered a gender bias. Based on field research conducted in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Abuja, the paper intends to bridge the gender gap by studying the experience of Male Sex Workers (MSWs). It points out the variety of places and networks used by this population in the FCT. It also pinpoints series of migration trends that account for the presence of MSWs in Nigeria. As such, it looks at the various biographical trajectories of Abuja MSWs and provides an outlook on the community's perceptions of trafficking, along with a comparison with the classical female sex networks.

Key Words:

Human trafficking, Male Sex Workers, gender, gay

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1. Introduction

This work considers internal trafficking in Nigeria among adult males for sexual exploitation. The study arises from the following observation: although, research in Nigeria admits the prevalence of trafficking among women and children (boys and girls), cases that deal with adult males for sexual exploitation are hardly mentioned. In the instance of women and girls, international trafficking for prostitution is highly emphasised². Other research and reports focus on the internal trafficking of boys and girls for domestic and agricultural labour. Trafficking among adult males is usually related to labour exploitation³. There appears to be a gender gap in trafficking for sexual exploitation literature as emphasised by an International Organization for Migration (IOM) report⁴.

Vijayarasa⁵ accounts for this gap by pointing out the gender inequality predominant in trafficking literature; Females are mostly presented as victims who suffer at the hands of male perpetrators. The male perpetrator/client dominates discussions on trafficking for sexual exploitation⁶. Males are rarely conceived as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. This is probably the reason some literature on human trafficking for sexual exploitation assume that only the female gender (girls and women) is affected⁷, others who admit that adult males may be trafficked⁸, discuss this in relation to labour and not sexual exploitation. The male victims of trafficking for sexual

²Adepoju, A. 2005. Review of research and Data on Human trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa. International Migration. Vol. 43. UK: Blackwell Publishing

³Aghazarm, C. and Laczko, F. 2008. Human Trafficking: New Directions for Research. https://www.iom.int/...human_trafficking_new_directions_for_research.pdf

⁴Aronowitz, A. 2009. Human Trafficking, Human Misery: The Global Trade in Human Beings. USA: Praeger Publisher

⁵Vijayarasa, R. 2015. Sex, Slavery and the Trafficked Woman: Myths and Misconceptions about Trafficking and its Victims. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

⁶Aronowitz, A. 2009. Human Trafficking, Human Misery: The Global Trade in Human Beings. USA: Praeger Publisher

⁷Daley, E. 2015. Hungarian is first man sentenced in Florida for Human trafficking of Gay men. *Advocate*. <http://www.advocate.com/crime/2015/12/16/man-who-ran-international-sex-slave-business-sentenced>

⁸Daley, E. 2015. Hungarian is first man sentenced in Florida for Human trafficking of Gay men. *Advocate*. <http://www.advocate.com/crime/2015/12/16/man-who-ran-international-sex-slave-business-sentenced>

exploitation are largely invisible and the media is partly responsible for perpetuating this stereotype.⁹

In recent times, male trafficking for sexual exploitation has been featured on the international scale,¹⁰ while the internal stage (in the case of Nigeria) has received less attention. As a result of this gap, anti-trafficking activities as well as rehabilitation programmes by Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governmental organisations do not focus on male victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Hence more research on adult male trafficked victims for sexual exploitation is needed.

This study was carried out among adult males who engage in transactional sex (Male Sex Workers, MSWs) in Abuja, Nigeria. But why Abuja? Abuja is the federal capital territory and it happens to be a luxurious city. Being the centre of excellence, it attracts the rich as well as it offers vast opportunities to the poor. As a result, Abuja has one of the biggest and economically lucrative sex markets among other major cities in Nigeria. Hence, Male Sex Workers (MSWs) form a significant population of the Abuja sex market and there is the possibility that members of this sub-population could be easy victims of internal trafficking for sexual exploitation (since they are highly mobile and prone to migration).

The MSWs sub-population is a highly sensitive and stigmatized group, especially after the ban on the gay orientation in January 2014 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with members of the gay community¹¹ that met the inclusive criteria¹² of the research. In-depth interviews were conducted with about 40 members of the gay community. While the youngest was 19 years, the oldest was 38, and they were from the North (Benue and Kaduna states), East (Imo, Anambra,

⁹ Except in the case of males being raped in prisons

¹⁰ Greve, A.2014. Human Trafficking: What about the men and boys? *Human Trafficking Centre Blog*. humantraffickingcentre.org/men-boys/

¹¹The gay community is made up of those who sell sex (MSW- Male Sex Workers) and those who do not(MSM- men who have Sex with Men).

¹²Inclusive criteria for selection of interviewee: (a) “Men who have Sex with Men” (MSM) and “Male Sex

Workers” (MSW) between the ages of 18 and 45 who have migrated (whether voluntary or involuntarily) to

Abuja from other States within Nigeria for transactional sex.

Enugu, Abia states), South (Edo, Port Harcourt and Delta states) West (Ondo state) of Nigeria.

This field research sought to establish the possibility and existence of an adult male population who is victim of internal trafficking of sexual exploitation. Another objective was to understand the techniques used to ensure that trafficked victims remain in the trap of sexual exploitation. The study focused on internal trafficking (across local borders) especially from other states in Nigeria to the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Additionally, comparison was made between the male network and the classical female network. A final stage of the research was on the community's perception of human trafficking.

In a bid to understanding the dynamics and modalities of internal trafficking for sexual exploitation among Male Sex Workers (MSWs), this paper deals with meeting places and Networking for the MSWs. It then addresses migration patterns and indebtedness as related to the male workers. It follows an analysis of original intentions, the community's view of trafficking, a comparison with the classical network.

1. Meeting places and Networking sites

The study points out that members of the MSM/MSW community meet new partners both physically and through virtual communities online through the use of social media and networking sites. Before the ban on the gay orientation in January 2014, it felt safe to meet new partners physically in clubs, hotels, parks, gardens and other public places. With the ban, most members of the community have resorted to the use social media and networking sites such as Facebook, Badoo, Whatsapp, BBM, Imo, Instagram, 2go, Hornet, Grindr, Adam for Adams, ManJam, Planet Romeo, gay Romeo and so on.

“Before the ban, we used to hang out in Sheraton, Transcorp, Gardens and Bars where we meet whites and politicians. After the law was signed, we had some issues and they banned anybody coming to sit there, hanging out and buying drinks. We no longer hang out because everyone is scared. So we resort to social networks like Hornet, Gay Romeo, Planet Romeo, Badoo and Facebook. Although Badoo and Facebook are general sites, we know the way to know who is who (gay) inside Badoo and Facebook”. (Interview respondent, voice 1).

“The social media are the easiest place to meet new partners, although its not safer than the physical meeting because one

might be exposed to being blackmailed by would-be partners. One has to exercise a little caution to ascertain the genuineness of the new partner”. (Interview respondent, voice 4).

“I meet more partners online and I feel its safer. Through the online meeting, you can discuss anything to know more about the person since the person cannot see you. I am free to ask any question without the fear of being judged since the person cannot see me”. (Interview respondent, voice 5).

“I prefer meeting people physically before hooking up with them. Although, I meet more people online but I must be careful because it is easy to *Kitto* (set up or blackmail) a person”. (Interview respondent, voice 7).

The use of phone calls was also highly emphasised; members of the community also get to meet new partners through connections by friends and pimps. Phone numbers are exchanged and new partners are met and services rendered. A friend or a pimp could recommend an MSW to a client and at the end of the transaction a percentage of money received could be remitted. Additionally, a Population Council report states that: “Private gay parties and private homes (which are sometimes de facto brothels) are also common meeting places¹³”

2. Migration Patterns: push and pull factors

On Abuja field, it was discovered that using the term “trafficking” among members of the target group was demeaning; considering the sensitivity and stigmatization associated with the gay orientation. As a result, the term trafficking was tentatively replaced with “Migration” in order to be able to open up conversation with members of the target population. The study therefore proceeded to understand the migration patterns of members of the sub-population especially the associated socio-economic push and pull factors. Members of the sub-population consist of those who have migrated to Abuja within the past four years (2010-2014), most were invited to Abuja either by a friend, partner or relative. All respondents were in search of greener pastures and better opportunities in life. While some were promised good jobs, education, others

¹³The Experiences of Men Engaged in Transactional Sex with Other Men in Urban Nigeria - A Size Estimation and Qualitative Study. 2012. Population Council Nigeria.

were openly told that Abuja was a more lucrative place to do transactional sex.

Interview with a pimp revealed that the increase in migration among MSWs from other states to Abuja was basically motivated by three pull factors: more financial prospects in transactional sex, human rights protection for gay persons especially after the ban and free health care services from organizations protecting gay interests. Such Organizations provide free HIV Counselling and Testing (HCT) services as well as STI screening and treatments. Other participants commented that:

“My motivation was that I would get a good job, better salary” (interview respondent, voice 35).

“My motivation was that I would go to school but after my uncle died, hustling started” (interview respondent, voice 15).

“To get a good job, live big like my mates (interview respondent, voice 22).

“To get a good job so I can assist my family” (interview respondent, voice 9).

“My friend promised me that he will get me a job, something that will make me live better than where I was before” (interview respondent, voice 13).

“I was invited to Abuja from Lagos by a friend saying that I could make more money through transactional sex in Abuja by meeting politicians and other big men. (interview respondent, voice 1).

“I was told that Abuja was more friendly to MSMs than Enugu state, because one could easily be blackmailed, beaten up over there in Enugu” (interview respondent, voice 4).

It was also discovered that most members of the community were educated and poverty was not the main push factor behind migration and trafficking for sexual exploitation. While some hold Bachelor’s degrees, others have Ordinary National Diploma (OND). From the survey, it was recorded that over eighty percent of respondents had basic education and could express themselves clearly in English language. Youth unemployment and the desire for better opportunities were the basic push factors in most cases. Although the study focused on internal trafficking, few respondents admitted that they were

sent by pimps to other neighbouring African countries (such as Togo, Benin Republic, Cameroon and Ghana) for sex work. This is an indication that there is a connection between international and internal trafficking. Internal trafficking cannot be completely detached from the international as the former, ultimately leads to the latter.

3. Modalities of Enrolment and the Change of Original Intention

Respondents could be divided into two groups: those whose original intention was to come to Abuja for transactional sex and those who did not intend to do it. Summarily, 88% of respondents fell into the first category. The latter are grouped as victims because in one way or the other, they were lured or cunningly deceived into transactional sex when they migrated to Abuja. 12% of respondents could be viewed as victims because their original intention of coming to Abuja was not to do transactional sex. This 12% admitted that somewhere along the line, there was a change of agreement or original intention regarding their coming to Abuja. The change in agreement or original intention is the major criterion which was used to establish victimhood among male sex workers in Abuja. The experience of some respondents is as follows:

“the agreement was when I come, get a job, live good and start living better than where I was in the East. But then when I came here, it wasn’t as rosy like I thought it was going to be. He introduced me to transactional sex, a way of making money pending when the good job comes...” ((interview respondent, voice 3)

“A football team mate invited me to Abuja: he left Kaduna and came to Abuja but we kept on talking on phone. I was like: I want to come to Abuja from Kaduna to get a job. He said right now there is no job, but two months later, he called me that he found a job for me; it’s just to collect the appointment letter and resume work. When I got to Abuja, I was told that the job has already been taken by someone else. So I have to wait for another job. As I was waiting, he told me there is something (transactional sex) I could be doing”. (interview respondent, voice 16).

“A former classmate who left from Abuja to Imo state invited me to Abuja. He dressed very fine, he had sway and wore attire that guys in the area admired him. I asked him if he could link me up to know how he got all those things. He told me that if I

could come to Abuja that there is a job that he will get for me. I asked him when? He said anytime am free. Although, He didn't tell me the kind of job I was coming to do. So I have to take permission from my mum, collect some transport fare and came to Abuja without knowing anybody. I called him on phone so he told me where I will drop and he will pick me. So I came there and he picked me up and brought me to his house. So after a day or two I asked him about the job, he said I shouldn't worry, that he's going to get me through on some certain things. At the end, he introduced me to some guys he brought to the house, and I had no interest and no idea what was going on. I felt they were just friends that worked together with him. It was later on that in the midnight that he told me about the transactional sex business. At first, I didn't accept it.

But he insisted that if I can't do it then I will have to leave his house". (interview respondent, voice 9).

"I met on Facebook when I was in port Harcourt, we were chatting. I asked him: "what do you do in Abuja that gives you a lot of money to dress the way you do?" He said he works in Abuja, so he asked me what I do and I told him. I was selling in my Aunt's supermarket. He said if I can come to Abuja that he will get me a job. I now left my Aunt's supermarket. I didn't live in a good way. I came to Abuja and stayed with him for like four to five months. I wasn't doing anything, there was no job, I later discover that he himself was not working and

he stopped giving me the money he normally gives me, and food, he started frustrating my life. So I asked him what kind of job can I do even if he doesn't give me money or food? He said: do I want to really work? I said yes anything. He introduced me at first to transactional sex which I rejected. Later on, the frustration became too much then I said okay and he hooked me up with a man and that was how I started transactional sex". (interview respondent, voice 7).

"When I was in the University of Port Harcourt, I lost my admission and was frustrated. I met this guy on Facebook and we used to chat. He asked me what I was doing? I said for now, I lost my admission, am not doing anything. He said he stays in Abuja, then I said I would love to come to Abuja one of these days. We continued chatting for months, then he sent me transport fare to come to Abuja and I lived with him with the hope of getting a job. I stayed with him for some months but the job didn't come. He is a businessman and I used to follow him to his shop. At a point we discussed and I told him this was not what we discussed, I was coming to Abuja to work, but what is happening? He told me that there is no job that I have to use what I have to get what I want. I told him what does he mean by that? He introduced me to the gay lifestyle and told me about transactional sex, I didn't agree to do transactional sex but after some time, since I didn't want to go back to Port Harcourt, I agreed to do transactional sex. He started linking me up with his friends and I started getting money". (interview respondent, voice 5).

Like other victims (women and children) most adult male victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation could not be said to be under complete coercion. Rather, they fell into other forms of deceptions¹⁴. Deception occurs when individuals who have been promised jobs in a legitimate economy, or are told half truths... only to find themselves "forced" or cajoled into sexual slavery¹⁵. While some had limited information regarding the nature of jobs they were coming to do in Abuja, others knew that some forms of exploitation maybe involved, although they were unaware of the extent to which they will be exploited, controlled,

¹⁴Aronowitz, A. 2009. P. 2-3

¹⁵Aronowitz, A. 2009. P.3

intimidated and indebted¹⁴. Notwithstanding, victims believed that they would be better off compared to their initial socio-economic status.

4. Mechanisms of exploitation

Apart from the modalities of enrolment, the study also considered the mechanisms used to keep victims in a state of perpetual sexual exploitation. In this wise, two major factors were recognised: demands of pimps and family expectations.

“At the early stage, my parents were aware that I was coming to Abuja to look for a job because I told them before I left the East. When I came, my parents were expecting that I send them money at the end of the month since am working. At the early stage, I didn’t have a job, but the guy that I stayed with used to give me money to send to my parents every month. So my family thought I was working, but after like three months, he stopped giving me that money. The pressure was there from those at home that I should send money and my guy told me that I don’t need to sit at home. Then he was staying at Zuba. He took me to town and introduced me to transactional sex, to his friends that stay in area 2 which was a big joint where big men come to pick us. Because of the pressure from home, I had to fend for myself”. (interview respondent, voice 24).

“Even when I saw him and his outfit, I admired him. He gave me a clue that if I should come to Abuja that he will get me a job that will enable me to acquire such outfits, Not knowing that he had something in his mind which I had no idea about. Before I left home, I told my parents and they were happy that I was finally going to Abuja to fend for myself. So anything I could send back to them at the village so they can start up something is okay by them, not that they want to depend on me. When I got to Abuja, I thought things will be so rosy, but he was giving money which lasted for some few weeks. It was not the kind of money I wanted. A day or two he introduced me to his friends and also transactional sex and he told me that if I don’t do it, I should get out of his house. I don’t have anywhere to go to and don’t know anybody in Abuja, so I have to agree to do transactional sex, at the end of it all, he has the bigger part of each payment I get”. (Interview respondent, voice 9).

Pimps as well as partners use psychological force to ensure that victims remain in their hold. Sometimes, depending on how

much is involved, one is supposed to give a larger percentage to the Pimp.

“I fell victim of a bad pimp; he was wild then. *You will not even know how much you were being paid.* They really used me then, I went for big runs and at the end of the day, in the morning I will be looking for transport to go home. When I asked the clients, they will say they have settled the person that sent me. If you know Vik la’Pelle, he did that to me countless times. I have to use my own money to go home. When I meet the pimp and ask of my share, he will say that even the house I was squatting in area 2, (he owns it) that he will tell the person in the house to send me parking. And if I leave there, I don’t have anywhere else to go”. (Interview respondent, voice 24)

When it comes to working with Pimps, victims could be categorized into two: those who know how much is being paid by the client and those who do not know. The most exploited of victims are those who don’t know how much they were being paid for every runs, while those that have to give a certain percentage of how much they were paid to the pimp seem to be relatively greater freedom and are less exploited. Speaking with a Pimp who was a former victim, he avowed that:

“based on what I have passed through; that is, the treatment I received from other pimps when I first came to Abuja, I can’t just link a person up for free. I will collect my own 30% from the person”.

“In my case, I was being paid direct but he told me I had to remit 70% of all I earned. He was aware of how much I was being paid so I dare not lie to me. But it got to stage where I told him I cannot continue giving him 70% because I was the one bearing all the risk of the job. Anything that I want to give you I will give you. The pain I go through every time I have sex, he doesn’t go through it. I also meet clients online and he expects me to give him 30% of what I earn”. (Interview respondent, voice 16).

“When I first started, I had to remit 50% of all I earned and because I was still staying in his house and he was feeding me. As time went on, I started meeting clients online which he did not know about. The money I got was mine because he didn’t know of such clients”. (Interview respondent, voice 9).

“Initially when we started, the money was paid to him, he will only give me transport fare. I got most contacts by asking their phone numbers after everything. I started meeting these clients on my own without him because I have their contacts and any money I got was mine because he was unaware”. (Interview respondent, voice 29).

However, a worst-case scenario is when the pimp accompanies the victim to the hotel; the client might be a big man and will be in a suite. He will probably be at the parlour and will give the money directly to the pimp and the victim is left with nothing, not even transport fare to go back home. Most victims admit that they resort to *knack out* (stealing from the client); since they know they will not be paid anything by the pimp. One victim who experienced this said that he practically did sex work for free (without pay) for a whole year because of the kind of pimp he worked for.

Again, friends and partners who introduced victims to transactional sex used psychological force (threats and other forms of maltreatment) to ensure that victims comply with their demands. Playing on victims vulnerability and their individual determination to be successful in a new city, and being stuck in Abuja (because most victims knew no one in the new area), most victims admit that their benefactor threatened to throw them out on the streets if they did not comply with the demands of transactional sex. Individual determination to be successful coupled with family expectations back home, gave victims no choice than to comply with the demands of transactional sex.

Additionally, most victims are unaware that human rights and anti-trafficking organisations exist and as a result, fail to seek needed assistance.

5. Comparison with classical network

In comparing the classical network with the gay network, it was discovered that both networks were totally separate. This is because most MSW networks are strictly gay and not bi-sexual. Out of forty participants, one person admitted to be bisexual and went out for runs with females; it was only in this case that both networks coincide:

“Like me, am bisexual and I know some lesbians too. There is this lesbian that used to take me out for runs, and we go to see a white man whenever he is around. So three of us ; me she

and the man will play together and then, the man will give her the money, then she gives me my share” (interview respondent, voice 5).

Notwithstanding, there appears to be rivalry between the male and female networks because both compete in the same sex market. However, one major similarity between the two networks is that both are faced with the same risks and fears. Members of both networks faces similar health risks associated with having sex without condoms such as HIV, so many STI’s, like anal warts, gonorrhoea, chancroid, syphilis, and trichomoniasis. Again, they are both exposed to sexual violence, pressure to have sex with animals and the fear of being harmed by ritualists. Exceptionally, the MSWs are prone to being blackmailed and handed over to law enforcement agents because of the ban on the gay orientation.

Additionally, members of the MSW community rely heavily on the use of online social media to meet new partners more than those of the classical network. As a result, the MSWs showed a high level of technological advancement especially when it came to the use of phones and social networking softwares. In comparison with the classical network, the MSWs appeared to be more educated and some of the middle class. Poverty was therefore not the basic reason most MSWs started doing transactional sex.

6. MSW Community view of trafficking

What is the link between Migration and trafficking? Could someone be trafficked without knowing? Is there a possibility that adult males could be trafficked from other states to Abuja for sexual exploitation? These questions were specifically posed to victims during the Focus group discussion (FGD) and it was surprising to note that most members of the community expressed ignorance and indifference to the subject matter. Ironically, they did not see themselves as victims of trafficking; rather they pointed to other example. The indifference and ignorance expressed shows the common agreed notion that trafficking is always international; the idea of internal trafficking did not make sense to them:

“Some years ago, I dated a Cameroonian guy who proposed to take me abroad to act pornography. But I rejected the offer. I think this is part of trafficking we are talking about here”. (Interview respondent, voice 5).

“I have received offers of international trafficking, but am the only male in my family. I can’t just continue to live that kind of life: going abroad and prostituting” (Interview respondent, voice 16).

Some victims are also aware that one could be trafficked without knowing it based on the idea of change in original intention. They admit that there is this element of deceit associated with trafficking. Most people are cunningly lured into sex work and exploited.

“Yes, it is very possible to be trafficked without knowing. You can be asked to come to Abuja (by someone you know very well) for a job and nobody explains to you what kind of job it is and when you come the thing changes, you don’t have any other option than to

comply. And you don't want to go back home because, there are people at home looking up to you and expecting much from you" (Interview respondent, voice 4).

Basically, it appears that the MSW community sees internal trafficking as mere migration and nothing more.

7. Conclusion

For internal trafficking, the situation of victims seems milder or less cruel than that of the international victims. At least one's international passport is not seized. In international there is the use of physical and spiritual force (swearing of oaths). But in the internal, one really don't have to go through the process of swearing an oath, rather it is emotional, mental, psychological force that is used against victims.

The ban, secrecy and stigma associated with the gay orientation have made it difficult for victims to seek help from non-governmental organisations and anti-trafficking agencies rendering help to victims of trafficking. This is probably one reason why anti-trafficking organizations do not have adult male victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in their shelters.

This field research establishes the fact that there exist a population of males who are victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation among male sex workers. However, Interventions and rehabilitation programmes by anti-trafficking agencies do not reach them because they are unrecognised by the law. Despite the ban on the gay orientation, this work concludes that the attention of relevant stakeholders in anti-trafficking should be drawn to the male victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

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