chapter 11

Coercion or Volition: Making Sense of the Experiences of Female Victims of Trafficking from Nigeria in the Netherlands

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Introduction

This study examines the claim that Nigerian girls working in the unregulated parts of the Dutch sex market are trafficked victims for commercial sexual exploitation. In the last decade, various discourses (Aghatise 2004; Monzini 2005) have arisen on how women of Nigerian origin are coerced by a madam and her syndicates. The girls are supposedly taken to a shrine to swear an oath of allegiance to comply with all instructions, many of which include, but are not limited to, engaging in forced sex work and other hideous crimes. However, this study aims to systematically produce new and emerging evidence that goes against this notion of coercion leading to or being part of trafficking in the women’s journey into sex work in Europe. Close examination reveals that many ‘trafficked victims’ are sex workers seeking better professional pathways in Europe and, in fact, approach smugglers to assist in transporting them to countries of destination for better opportunities.

Context

Global integration has made an outstanding contribution to development, as many previously inaccessible corners of the Earth are being opened to transnational immigrants with new ideas and capital for investment. But global integration has also caused a ‘social exclusion’ and ‘marginalization’ of the impoverished as well as other disadvantageous groups of persons (Elson & Cagatay 2000: 1347). One vulnerable group that has been particularly hard hit are women: the effect of transnational migration has resulted in a large number of them entering the sex market owing to its limited requirement for formal skills or expertise and the huge amounts of money to be earned in a short space of time (Gülçür & İlkkaracan 2002: 411). The migration experiences of women are outcomes of a changeover to ‘service economies’ by countries of the global North. This has been coupled with the ‘structural adjustment
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policies’ of global financial institutions, which have resulted in both drastic cuts in formal institutions (where formerly women earned a living) and in little or no ability to obtain social services (Elson & Cagatay 2000: 1354, 1355; Agustín 2005: 99).

A structural divide exists between women who are tricked into the sex market and those who choose the career path of being sex workers. In this regard, forced sex work is an abuse of free will and is differentiated from free-will sex work, the latter being defined by Doezema (1998) as a labour practice based on women’s independent use of their own bodies as a main source of income. The effect of the various discourses has been a major focus on the negative experiences of trafficked women while simultaneously ignoring the necessity for sex workers to seek better socio-economic status outside the shores of their home countries (ibid.). The independent decision by many women to migrate is the result of a desire to improve socio-economic status, of a shift in gender responsibilities, and of a high demand for female workers in the informal sectors in many economies of the global North (Phizacklea 1998). In spite of various school of thoughts on forced and voluntary sex work, it is obvious that the marginalization of global South migrant sex workers in Europe establishes a livelihood for these workers that involves increased health dangers, ‘violence’ and abuse from law enforcement agents, pimps, and customers, and the stigma of being illegitimate migrants (Anthias 2013).

Concerning the status of victims of human trafficking, studies such as those of Aghatise (2004: 1129) and Kelly and Regan (2000: 5) took the position that many trafficked women are in fact naïve about the type of occupation they will be engaged in in a foreign country and, out of desperation to leave their country of origin, they are compelled to swear an oath of allegiance which often involves ‘magic juju’ sacrifices and the use of private body parts. They emphasized that these poorly educated and vulnerable women are often not properly enlightened on the terms of ‘indebtedness’, ‘exploitation’, and ‘control’. The women imagine they can earn huge amounts of money doing any kind of job in a wealthy country and that this will lift themselves and their families out of the trap of impoverishment. Similarly, Plambech (2014: 384) describes trafficked women as susceptible persons lured from the security of their homes as a result of impoverishment into ‘sexual exploitation’ and differentiates them from emigrants who seek better socio-economic status, even though the trafficked women can also be described as ‘economic migrants’ (ibid. 385). On the other hand, Agustín (2005: 97) is of the view that many women, in a bid to improve their statuses, decide to travel out of their countries and, on arrival at their destinations, engage in informal occupations to hide and survive as a result of their illegal status. She argues that the debates on trafficking in