

Namibia: Human Trafficking Mirrors Society's Underbelly

Catherine Sasman

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Windhoek — The downside of regional integration and concomitant improved road infrastructure is an increase in illicit movement of people, says researcher Merab Kiremire.

At the age of 16, Herlyn Uirab and her friend - also 16 at the time - hitchhiked a lift to Windhoek from Walvis Bay on a truck. Between them, they only had N\$50, not enough to buy a ride on a taxi. The two girls had heard of a modeling event in Windhoek and wanted to attend.

Two men were in the truck and were happy to give the girls a lift. On the way to Windhoek, the two truckers told the girls they were on their way back to Johannesburg, South Africa.

"They told us how wonderful South Africa was, about the great shops, clothes and wonderful things," Uirab told a human trafficking-based gender violence and HIV/AIDS conference in Mexico last year.

"We were curious and excited. They asked us to escort them to Johannesburg and promised to bring us back to Namibia after a week with lots of clothes and goodies. We accepted."

What transpired with the two girls illuminated the secret, dark world of human trafficking.

Because the girls did not have travel documents, the two truckers hid the girls between packed bags behind the driver's seat and covered them with blankets as they approached the Namibian-South African border.

"We could hear an officer walking around the truck, he didn't check inside the truck and didn't see us; the same thing happened at the South African border," told Uirab.

Once the truck passed the two border posts and stopped at Potchestroom on the South African side, the two truck drivers insisted on having sexual intercourse with the girls.

"I refused. One driver threatened to beat me. I felt helpless and begged him to kindly use a condom. He put on a condom and forced himself on me. The condom burst. I asked him what he had done, he just laughed. I was hurt, I was crying, I was scared, terrified."

Both girls were raped.

When the truck reached Johannesburg, the girls were dropped off at a house of a friend of one of the drivers and told not to dare escape or to report the incident to the police, because they were foreigners without proper travel documents.

Uirab continued: "When we refused them sex, they refused to buy food. They left us and went on their travels. We were so hungry we approached a man and begged for food and a place to stay. He took us to his friend's house. After about two months, the man came to take us to a nightclub. He demanded sex in return for his food and accommodation.

"When we refused, he teased us and asked us how we expected to be fed and accommodated for nothing. I told him I had been repeatedly raped by a truck driver and felt very sick. He insisted I was

well enough for sex, that I looked healthy, only that I could be pregnant. He raped me without a condom. The inside of me was very painful - I was in agony."

The man eventually threw her out on the street because she got too sick, and she met a kindly young man who took pity on her and took her to his family. One of his family members was a police officer, who was reluctant to deal with the matter, reportedly because she was an illegal alien in South Africa.

When she got so sick and fearing she might die, she "slowly" ran to a police station and reported herself and her friend, who the police later retrieved from the house they had been living at.

Both were taken to a safety house and tested for HIV. Both were found to be HIV positive. After a protracted time in hospital, they were discharged and deported to Namibia.

Now aged 23, both are back in Walvis Bay. The friend, an orphan, has a baby and full-blown AIDS, and has gone "wild". Uirab is gathering the pieces of what is left of her life, but, said Kiremire, she has grown into a great advocate and counsellor to other troubled youth.

The story of Uirab, related Kiremire, is one of many failures: of a broken home and disintegrated support systems, and outright abduction and exploitation.

According to Kiremire, this is also a typical manifestation of the nature of human trafficking in Southern Africa.

In simple terms, she defines human trafficking as taking a person from one place to another for other purposes than stated or agreed upon through coaxing, deception, convincing, fraud, abuse of power, outright abduction, or coercion.

Human trafficking is also described as the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or receipt of people for the purposes of slavery, forced labour (including bonded labour or debt bondage), and servitude.

Exploitation includes forcing people into prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude.

"I see a great deal of this in Namibia," said Kiremire.

"The main traffickers are truck drivers. Every one on the street talks about truck drivers. I hear this story over and over again."

Other perpetrators of human trafficking, she said, are more often than not pimps, drug dealers and older prostitutes, and less so the well-organised rackets or syndicates, though these exist and are fully operative between borders.

One such syndicated case was recorded in Zambia in 2000. An Australian man was arrested when he tried to "move" young girls between the ages of 14 and 16 first to Malawi and crossing eight borders before he was apprehended. The man is reported to have lured the girls under the pretext that they could become "dancing queens" in Australia. When caught, he claimed he was "promoting tourism"; the girls were reportedly destined for a ring of paedophiles waiting for them in Australia.

After speaking to 230 prostitutes - of which 37 were between the ages of 10 and 18, and 170 aged between 19 and 35 - Kiremire found that 68 of these women claimed that they have been trafficked, and 122 claimed that they knew someone who had been trafficked.

Twenty-three of these reported incidents of trafficking occurred last year, one as recent as last month, and 55 cases a few years ago.

The profile of the traffickers of prostitutes, said Kiremire, is that of people on the move. Drug traffickers because they use prostitutes as cash cows for food and lodging. Truck drivers, although less intentionally so, but because they often feel cheated by the companies they work for, are often abandoned by their wives [one truck driver reportedly said that it was like returning from Robben Island to an empty nest], and hence in search for company and comfort.

"Trafficking is a crime, and those perpetrating it, although they are criminals in the main, are often as desperate as their victims; they share more or less the same socio-economic backgrounds and educational attainments as that of their victims."

The relationship between the perpetrators and victims, said Kiremire, often starts out from an exploitative and parasitic relationship, into a more symbiotic one, mostly when the woman's options run out, when the victim needs the perpetrator for sustenance and protection when they find themselves without legal documents in unfamiliar environments.

"They start to subsist from each other, and then the symbiotic relationship develops. The tragedy of the situation is that many of the women I have spoken to [in Namibia] said they cannot return home, that they are no longer kids, and have to live like this for the rest of their lives."

Of the women interviewed, 143 reported to suffer from diseases such as HIV and AIDS, herpes and a range of other sexually transmitted infections, and even Ebola.

With the exception of five, all other respondents were addicted to drugs, be it cocaine, heroine, dagga, cigarettes and alcohol.

Eighty-four of the girls and women reported that they had been subjected to violence, and 14 percent said they had been raped, by street gangs, traffickers, police and pimps, and truck drivers.

With increased and improved road infrastructure between borders, said Kiremire, movement generally into the direction to South Africa from primarily eastern and western Africa, is on the increase.

Namibia, which was previously more or less outside the loop, has become a factor with the opening of the Shesheke Bridge that links the Caprivi Region to Zambia. Before, said Kiremire, movement generally took place through Botswana and Zimbabwe.

According to Kiremire, a popular route is Lusaka-Windhoek-Cape Town, because it is "cheaper, easier and straight".

The movement of people is away from shrunken opportunities in countries plagued by bad economics and war, to the brighter lights of better-off states.

The equation changes in South Africa when drug dealers take prostitutes back to the failed states they originally came from to peddle drugs.

"B1 is an incredible highway. It is a wonderful carpet initially meant for development and regional integration, but with high rates of destabilisation and collapsed economies of surrounding states, it is leaking with ill-fated movements of people. Regional integration is a double-edged sword," commented Kiremire.

And women and children often find themselves on the dark and dangerous side of freer movement.

When Kiremire asked a Zimbabwean prostitute what she would say to her President, she responded: 'I will not blame him for anything. All I want to tell him is Mr President, please help the girls.'