

Country Report: Zambia Trafficking of Women in Zambia: A New Slave Trade for Africa?

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AT AFCAST WORKSHOPS WE CONTEXTUALISE the topic, situating it in the lived reality of the particular country being examined. We aim to look at a topic through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), applying the values of this teaching to a problem that we feel needs clarification so that a response can be motivated.

When I agreed to offer a brief presentation on the Zambian reality of “Women in Conflict Resolution,” I was, to be honest, very stymied. For all of our many problems – economic, political and social – we have not had, in the 41 years of independence, an explicitly violent conflict situation. No civil war, no ethnic clashes, no sustained rebellion. We are, one could say, the envy of our neighbours, those immediately bordering us and those on the wider continent of Africa, who have suffered severe conflict situations.

How, then, could I speak of women in conflict resolution in Zambia? Surely, “Violence against Women” could be addressed, for Zambia sorely suffers the tragedies of domestic abuse, rape, defilement, discriminatory legal practices (even constitutional discrimination), bias against the education of the girl-child, property grabbing, employment and wage discrepancies, political marginalisation and so on.

Mentioning this challenge of mine to a woman friend, I was surprised to hear her suggest, “Take a look at the issue of trafficking of women.” Zambia certainly did not have the problem of trafficking of women that, for example, Nigeria and other West African states have. Or so I thought. Imagine my shock when a quick “google” search brought up dozens and dozens of articles and reports, long and short, on the topic of Zambia and the trafficking of women and children.

I have only read a bit of that material, but enough to suggest further exploration of the topic by our Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) staff. Here, I will follow the methodology of the “pastoral circle” offering stories to illustrate what is happening, reasons for why it is happening, a faith reflection on its meaning (guided by CST), and some lines of response to it.

What Is Happening?

On 3rd May 2005, the Zambian media carried a story of a Congolese woman, Wasalusu Basala Carmec, detained at the Chirundu border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. She was trying to cross in a vehicle loaded with 10 girls and six boys. She had entered Zambia through the Kasumbalesa border with Congo with passengers who could only call her “Auntie” since they did not know her name. She was arrested and charged with attempting to take young people for illegal purposes, probably prostitution or forced labour. The case continues.

Earlier, a 16-year-old Zambian girl living in Lusaka had been enticed to go to South Africa, where she was promised a richly rewarding modelling job. Air ticket to Johannesburg, lodging in a nice hostel outside the city, companionship with several other girls her age, and “safekeeping” of her passport by the host all seemed quite nice. Until the modelling instruction included submission to rape and introduction to prostitution. Eventually, she did escape and returned, traumatised, to her Zambian home.

These are only two of many stories I found on the web, revealing that Zambia is part of a worldwide problem of trafficking – a lucrative “business” estimated to annually earn over US \$2 billion, rivalling the arms and drug trade. Indeed, the articles referred to Zambia as both a source and a transit country for women trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Many women are moved into South Africa and then on to other places in Europe and Asia.

Women caught up in this racket are victims of either abduction or enticement. That is, they are either captured against their will (possibly drugged or threatened) or allured with their consent (attracted by offers of money or travel).

But what is also happening is that women from neighboring countries caught in Zambia – one would like to say “rescued” – in the midst of this trafficking are frequently confined to jail while waiting to be deported. Without proper documents, they are considered illegal immigrants!

Why Is It Happening?

A full causal analysis of this worldwide phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper. But let me list several reasons that trafficking of women exists in Zambia.

The first causal influence on trafficking in Zambia, either as a source of trafficking or a transit point, is poverty and material suffering. Conditions of hunger, minimal education, unemployment and lack of opportunities all contribute to an environment where the offer of a “better life” can be very attractive. We know the consequences of being in a country where over 70 percent of the population are living – surviving – below the poverty line.

Escape from war-torn regions in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other nearby Great Lakes countries also is a motivating factor. In-deed, displaced persons and refugees are particularly vulnerable to trafficking.

Parents often are willing either to encourage children to escape poor conditions or even to sell their children, with the feeling that the local situation is so bad that somewhere else surely could not be worse.

A second influence is that trafficking frequently occurs within a highly organised criminal syndicate. It is good business! Links with traffickers around the world mean that women caught up in this system are easily transported to other countries outside Africa. It is estimated that 45 of 54 African countries are involved in trafficking, with South Africa being a major receiver and transit point. Zambia is a landlocked country, serving well as a transit country.

A third influence is the weakness of protective legal systems. There is in Zambia, for instance, no clear legislation explicitly criminalising trafficking. Persons suspected of this may be arrested on grounds of promoting prostitution or promoting delinquency of minors. Immigration officials are often caught up in the system and are bribed to look the other way at border points. Often documents are not fully available or utilised.

A fourth influence is simply the lack of public awareness of the problem in Zambia. There are no good statistics and little or no media attention. And ignorance, of course, leads to the continued presence of an evil, unattended to by public outcry or legal recourse.

What Does It Mean?

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) offers at least three basic principles that should clarify our understanding of the problem and motivate our response to it.

First, trafficking is a blatant abuse of the dignity of the human person. A woman, made in the image and likeness of God, is treated as a mere commodity in the international market. She can be harvested, transported, sold, used and discarded like an agricultural product. Rights are denied, liberties are restricted and integrity is violated. CST emphasises the inherent and inviolable dignity of each and every person crying out for abolition of this trafficking described as a “new form of slave trade.”

Second, preferential option of the poor surely is relevant to this situation. It is the poor, vulnerable and marginalised who suffer from trafficking. The simple and tragic fact is that poor women are more subject to abduction or enticement into the world of trafficking. Our special concern for the poor should raise this phenomenon on our agenda of attention and action.

Third, the principle of good governance focuses on the failures of effective public order. Governments with their attendant legislation and institutions should work for the common good

of all, promoting an environment within which rights are respected and development fostered. But breakdowns of police protection, immigration oversight and social development programmes point to deeper problems, such as bad governance, that go beyond the immediate instance of trafficking.

By looking at trafficking through the CST lens we see that the problem is not simply a legal or economic one, but fundamentally an ethical and moral one. Examining the problem in this way clarifies terms of reference and motivates a response.

What Is The Response?

To bring to closure our pastoral circle approach to this problem of trafficking of women in Zambia, let me suggest three obvious responses for all concerned parties whether churches, women's groups, or civil society organisations.

The first response is to deal with the underlying causes of this phenomenon, in particular the problems of poverty and poor moral development. As long as social conditions of deprivation of basic needs are the prevalent situation in the nation, there will be temptations to engage in trafficking of women, either as promoters or as victims. Improved moral development may not eliminate the ancient immorality of prostitution, but may heighten demand for better protective and punishment mechanisms.

A second response is an improvement in the legal system. Women (and children, too) deserve more adequate protection of their basic rights. If discovered and rescued, they should be cared for and not put into prison! Better legislation that clearly outlaws trafficking should be put into place in Zambia. Law officers should be trained to be particularly sensitive to this problem.

A third response is simply better public education about the problem of trafficking. Civil society organisations should promote a clear understanding of the causes and the extent of trafficking. The media has an important role to play. Education should be aimed at cautioning women in Zambia (and elsewhere, of course) not to succumb to temptations of "improved living conditions" and should inform the public at large of the tragic effects of this criminal activity on women. I have seen posters at Zambian border check points warning people of strong police action for attempting to take ivory products out of the country. Why not similar posters focusing on the trafficking of women!

Conclusion

Before looking at this issue of trafficking of women in Zambia, I was aware of campaigns going on in other parts of Africa and in Europe. Members of religious women's congregations, for example, have recently become involved in assisting the victims and fighting against the mechanisms of trafficking. But with the motivation to look at the problem in the context of this AFGAST workshop, I have been enlightened in unexpected ways.

A human rights issue, a special suffering of the poor, and an indication of bad governance – these CST concerns have provided both new insights and new demands. *A new slave trade for Africa?* Surely a challenge for all of us!

Notes

* Data and examples found through "Google" search, under title of "Women Trafficking Zambia," November 2005.