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Gendered poverty breeds trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes in Zambia

Merab Kambamu Kiremire

abstract

In August 2002, while briefing the press in Lusaka, a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) official warned Zambia to brace itself for increased sex work, crime and exploitation if food contingency measures were not immediately addressed. UNICEF feared the food and water crisis and increasing poverty in the country's southern province might create a new set of social problems for women and children. MAPODE (Movement of Community Action for the Prevention and Protection of Young People Against Poverty, Destitution, Diseases and Exploitation), an organisation running a street children and sex worker outreach programme in Lusaka City, was not surprised by UNICEF's concern. That same year, the organisation had conducted a study on sex work and trafficking of women and children in Zambia. This focus relies on these findings, pointing to the link between poverty, sex work, trafficking and the global sex industry. It contextualises these issues by pointing to gender and feminist concepts and proposed prevention and protection strategies.

keywords

sex work, Zambia, education, poverty, marginalisation

In December 1999, Zambia had publicly recorded its first human trafficking case. Two males, an Australian and a Zambian, had been arrested by Zimbabwe border authorities at the Chirundu border post with Zimbabwe. The men had allegedly tried to traffic five Zambian teenage girls into sex work in Australia. The girls were arrested as well. At the request of one of the girls' mothers, MAPODE secured the teenagers' release from the remand prison. But surprisingly, during the five-month trial, the 'victims' constantly pleaded to be left to go and earn $500 a week in Australia rather than starve at home. In April 2000, owing to inadequate laws, the accused were acquitted, after which rumours reigned that they eventually trafficked the girls through the Malawian border.

In Zambia, a female, young or old, who sells her sexual services for a living is regarded as worthless, highly despised and stigmatised. Sex work, which under the Zambian law is described as the 'the act of privately soliciting cash money in exchange for sex between a sex vendor and a sex customer', is illegal, although there are no legal provisions to criminalise or prosecute perpetrators. When law enforcement agents arrest sex workers, they usually charge them for loitering, idling or trespassing. Clients of sex workers are hardly ever arrested. Of particular interest, too, is the fact that street sex work as a
In Zambia, poverty, sex work and trafficking of women and girls are tightly interlinked.

means of income generation is a fairly new trend in Zambia. It became a public activity in 1979, when 20- to 30-year-old women were first seen parading along some of Lusaka streets, soliciting passing cars for customers. During this time, Zambia was in midst of an economic crisis that would last until 2000. Since then, the number of sex workers has increased dramatically in the country, with children as young as eleven selling their bodies. Yet, sex work has remained a masked phenomenon, little studied and understood.

The US State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Human Trafficking in Persons (CTIP), which surveys counter-trafficking activities in 150 nations, has listed Zambia among 45 African countries that are taking the lead in this ‘human, transnational organised crime which forces foreign women into sex work and whose main cause is the buying of sex’. Still, Zambia continues to have neither laws against human trafficking (CTIP, 2003:7) nor any formal data.

Research methodology and findings

It was in this context that, in 2002, MAPODE decided to gather data and systematically document sex work and trafficking to establish their connection to sexual exploitation, exploitation of labour, slavery, illegal migration and drug courier services in and out of Zambia, as well as their possible linkage to economic deprivation and poverty, especially among women, young girls and children. Because this research covered a new area of study in the country, coupled with the stigma linked to sex work itself, the researchers used a
multi-dimensional method, which entailed involving sex workers in the project.

Two sex workers and a young woman who had previously been trafficked into sex work overseas and returned home were trained in simple research methodologies and subsequently formed part of an eight-member research team that gathered data in 15 towns as well as border and transit points in six of Zambia’s nine provinces, including the country’s two cities, Lusaka and Livingston. The three sex workers participated in formulating the questionnaire, which was distributed to 1,000 street sex workers aged between eleven and 29 years. Stakeholder consultations included law enforcement agencies, immigration, customs and prison officials, police and anti-drug agencies. The study was limited by inadequate literature, stigma, poor mobility in some border areas, possible dangers from syndicates and limited coverage (six of the nine provinces).

**Traffickers facilitated the travel, usually without proper travel documents**

The study showed that sex work and trafficking of women and children are on a dramatic increase. The majority (71 percent) of interviewed sex workers had entered the trade fairly recently (1998-2002), while 13 percent had started sex work between 1993 and 1998, and only five percent before 1992.

Although the general public was little or unaware of the existence of human trafficking, MAPODE’s research found that sex work in Zambia is intertwined with and the bedrock of human trafficking.

More than 35 percent of the study respondents indicated that they had been trafficked, most of them being teenagers. They originated from all provinces of Zambia as well as from outside the country. About 15 percent of the Zambian sex workers had at some point been trafficked to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Namibia, Malawi, Botswana, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and to several overseas countries.

More than 20 percent of the interviewees were foreign nationals – mainly from Malawi, the DRC, Tanzania, Namibia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and other African and Asian countries. Many young Congolese girls living on the streets of Lusaka and Kitwe said they had run away from the 1998 Eastern Congo war. The interviewees reported that traffickers and facilitators came from a variety of backgrounds, including active and retired sex workers, development workers (through temporary marriages), truck drivers, businessmen and -women, border personnel, tour, travel or entertainment entrepreneurs and paedophiles.

The study found that all border and transit points in the six provinces, including airports and rivers are trafficking entry and exit points. The vast majority of trafficked persons travelled by road, in taxis, buses and trucks. Their traffickers facilitated the travel, usually without proper travel documents. Use of day passes to cross borders by road was common. One woman, who had been a full-time trafficker for many years, reported:

‘The girls I escort have no passports. I get a day pass for them from the immigration. I charge $100 per person. I pay the immigration officer $100 on the Zambian side and $100 on the Zimbabwean side for each group. Oh, I can’t imagine how many girls I have [helped] cross the borders. I have crossed so many to South Africa. There were so many girls going to South Africa, until South Africa complained, especially coloured girls. Most of the time, I don’t use my passport. Otherwise, it will be too full. Daily “shopping” is a busy business. Sometimes, I cross the border eight times a day. One time, I trafficked a woman with nine children.’

Both sex work and human trafficking were found to be highly demand-driven. Customers are adults
from all walks of life, irrespective of race, colour, creed or professions, including law enforcement officers themselves. The study established that each sex worker sees an average of three to seven clients per night. Child sex figured prominently among male sexual preferences as an 18-year-old sex worker who worked with her 13-year-old little sister confirmed: ‘The men prefer the baby. She is a goldmine.’

Unprotected sex ranked exceedingly high at 78 percent. Sex charges ranged from the equivalent of $1 to $50 in hotels, with a preference for European tourists and business executives who are believed to pay more and to be safer. It fetched much more cash, while most respondents worried little about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS, since they believed they had already been exposed. Given the high HIV prevalence rate of 20 percent in Zambia (at the time of the research in 2002), each sexual encounter carries an extremely high risk.

Almost 65 percent of the questioned sex workers attributed their entry into sex work and/or trafficking to poverty, while the rest said friends, family rejection and divorce was the reason, and a few saw sex work as a business. Their educational status was generally too low to find sustainable employment – less than six percent had completed school until Grade 12. Sex workers and trafficked persons named witchcraft, child abuse and neglect as reasons for their situation and expressed feelings of regret, anger, aggression and vengeance. Almost 80 percent wished to quit sex work, 30 percent wanted to acquire a skill to find employment, and 25 percent dreamt of starting a business.

The report registers high levels of violence and sexual abuse. Thirty-five percent of sex workers said they had been raped, and 27 percent had been assaulted or harassed. As many as 80 percent of the sex workers reported having suffered from STIs, such as candida, gonorrhrea, syphilis, bola bola (genital swelling), kaposi sarcoma and herpes. Alcohol and drug abuse was common at 43 percent. A number of sex workers said they had been forced into perverted sex, such as bestiality, and had knowledge about human organ and skin trafficking.

Sex work and trafficking in Zambia have heavily gendered features. Of the 1,000 sex workers interviewed by MAPODE, only one was male.

Although commercial sex is embedded in urban economics and social day-to-day activities, it is doomed to remain an underground activity. Female sex workers are socially alienated, excluded and grossly discriminated against. This societal picture distinctly betrays patriarchal traits. Male society closely interacts with sex workers yet strictly rejects female sex workers on a social level. While female sex workers are stigmatised, their male and promiscuous clients are not.

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Saint Thomas of Aquin highlights the contradictory character of society’s intolerance of sex work in his historical characterisation of sex work: ‘Sex work is like the filth in the sea or a sewer in a palace. Take away the sewer, and you will fill the palace with pollution. Take away sex workers from the world and you will fill it with sodomy’ (Shanghala, 2000). Giddens (2005) adds that ‘modern-time sex work has worn and continues to wear an invisible face’.

Sex work and human trafficking in the Zambian context

Giddens (2005:133) defines sex work as ‘the granting of sexual favours for monetary gain’. The word prostitute borrows its origins from the 18th century, when sex vendors and their clients became unknown to one another unlike in ancient times when ‘purveyers of sexuality for economic reward were courtesans, kept mistresses (concubines) or slaves, usually known to each other, and often times enjoyed a high status in society’.
Kingsley Davis points out that, ‘during the Victorian period sex work flourished as a safety value that helped to maintain the respectability of the marriage institution’ (Scott and Marshall, 1994). This implies that sex work in the old European social order was not only socially and culturally recognised, organised and regulated but intertwined with human sexuality – yet, it was not commercialised to the same degree as it is today.

Sex work remains illegal and consequently a masked phenomenon, little studied and understood

Noteworthy is the fact that the period Giddens (2005:13) refers to, the European 18th century, coincides with the modernisation of feudal societies that culminated in the 19th century industrial revolution. The emergence of the capitalist mode of production produced rapid social, economic and political changes and revolutionised social organisation. The change from pre-modernity’s casual life to capitalist modernity involved the optimisation of human labour and entailed a more orderly and bureaucratic process. Inevitably, the transition dramatically impacted on peoples’ individual and collective lifestyles and behaviour patterns, including their sexuality.

The culturally regulated framework of sex was disrupted to such a degree that in 1824, the British House of Commons (parliament), under pressure from British protestant theologians to abolish sex work, passed the Vagrancy Act. Its section 3 made it a punishable offence for a common sex worker to wander in a public street or place of public resort and thus engage in ‘riotous or indecent behaviour’ (Shanghala, 2000). 125 years later, in 1951, the United Nations passed a resolution that condemns those who organise sex work or profit from the activities of sex workers but did not ban sex work. A total of 53 member states have since adopted the resolution. Although sex workers itself are legal in countries such as Britain, soliciting in public, brothel-keeping, procuring and living on the ‘immoral earnings’ of a sex worker remain illegal.

When Zambia became independent in 1964, it inherited colonial British laws. As a member of the United Nations General Assembly, Zambia’s constitution incorporates a bill of rights that provides for equality and protection for all. It prohibits any discrimination on the basis of sex, nationality, colour or creed as well as all abuses relating to sexual violence. Sex work, however, remains illegal and consequently a masked phenomenon, little studied and understood – despite it being a visible public activity. Yet, there is no specific law to prosecute its offenders. When arrested, the offender is charged for trespassing, loitering and breaching of social peace, while the customer, who in the Zambian context is mainly male, is hardly ever arrested.

The US State Department (CTIP, 2003:7) has categorised Zambia as both a source and transit point of human trafficking. It also noted that the Zambian government does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking as it still does not have a comprehensive anti-human trafficking law; and has neither a formalised victim screening and referral process nor an intensive public awareness programme in place'.

Suspected perpetrators, if ever arrested, can only be charged for kidnapping, smuggling or rape.

In July 2004, the Southern African Campaign Against the Abuse and Trafficking of Children (SACO) confirmed that all Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries are affected by trafficking. CTIP (2002) reports show that 83.4 percent of the impoverished African nations, overburdened by large populations, external debt, civil strife, HIV/AIDS, heavy military spending and negative economic growths, account for more than half of the world’s countries of ‘origin’, with up
A counsellor is giving support and advice to a trafficked woman.

to 300,000 children and young women trafficked per year. These nations account for only two percent of the world’s Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Receiving nations are mainly industrialised countries, which dominate about half of the world’s trade and account for more than half of global FDI.

Trafficking has become an integral part of the inequalities created by globalisation, as Zambia’s then vice president, Dr Navers Mumba, expressed while launching the United Nations Inter-Agency Consolidated Appeal in Lusaka in September 2003:

'The single biggest challenge facing our country and our continent is poverty eradication. And our progress in all areas of human endeavour is directly dependent on the extent to which we tackle this, coupled with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which tends to thrive under conditions of poverty. Poverty and HIV/AIDS are evils that will continue to undermine our development efforts and lead to food insecurity, chronic child malnutrition and exploitation of the vulnerable unless we eradicate them.'

But perhaps sex work just reflects the general societal framework. Sociological studies show that the 'provision of sexual favours for financial reward has been institutionalised in the form of sex work in every society that has had a coinage, and that the number of sex workers increases when there are fewer other job opportunities for

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women, while their international movements are nearly always from poor countries to richer ones’ (Scott and Marshall, 1994).

This notion is concurred by the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice (2006), who described human trafficking as, ‘nothing less than a modern form of slavery whose traffickers prey on the most vulnerable and turn a commercial profit at the expense of innocent lives’.

Poverty as a social consequence and legacy

Contrary to widely held perceptions that sex work and trafficking are not necessarily poverty-driven, MAPODE’s study was able to show that, in Zambia, they are profoundly economical issues, deeply rooted in poverty.

A few years before the majority of the respondents of the study were born (those in the age group between 19 and 26 years) Zambia was the worlds’ third largest copper producer. Copper had made Zambia one of the richest countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In the mid 1970s, when sex workers were first seen in the streets, the price of the world copper market had fallen, and oil prices were on the rise. This was also the period when Zambia spearheaded the Southern African Liberation (Benjamin and Gregory, 1992:180).

It is clear that a country's economic situation impacts negatively on the lives of women, young girls and children

By 1987, the World Bank dropped Zambia in rank from a middle-income country to one of the world’s 15 poorest countries, with a per capita income of $290. By 1989, its external debt burden had escalated to $7.2 billion, which constituted $1,000 debt for each of its 7.8 million people. By 1993, 86 percent of the population was believed to live below the poverty line of approximately $2 a day per person, the majority being females. Today, Zambia has one of the highest unemployment rates (50 percent) in the world. More than half of the country’s women are not in gainful employment (Benjamin and Gregory, 1992).

The drastically ailing economy greatly curtailed Zambia’s ability to deliver the crucial promise made at Independence to its young: education. With the revocation of free schooling, 40 percent of pupils dropped out of school for financial reasons. By 1996, education was in crisis. Government allocated a budget of only three percent of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education, or $0.25 per child. As a result, one third of the total population remained illiterate (Kelly, 1996).

When Zambia’s mining industry and with it huge, state-owned companies were closing by the day in the decade of 1990 to 2000, more than 40 percent of MAPODE’s study respondents dropped out of school and did not secure educational qualification. The study shows that for most women, old and young, entering into sex work mainly resulted from lack of alternative means of survival.

Almost 65 percent of the respondents said they were sex workers due to poverty, and 79 percent wished to quit if they had a viable economic alternative. More importantly, the majority of them felt that if going abroad brought them better prospects for better life, it was worth trying. This situation is confirmed by UNICEF which believes 1.8 million people face life-threatening situations such as sex work and being trafficked for exploitation because they live in orphan-hood and vulnerability.

From this discussion, it is clear that a country’s economic situation impacts negatively on the lives of women, young girls and children. But is this unique to Zambia? The unceremonious collapse of the East Asian money market in recent years, for example, has thrown the whole region in an economic pandemonium. While African women and girls are on sale for $500 in Asia’s ‘Las Vegas’, Thai girls offer street sex in South Africa and Zambia, as Asian sex recruitment gangs and kidnappers roam African city streets.
Japhet Banda, journalist of the Sunday Times in Zambia reports the following:

'A number of Thai commercial sex workers have invaded some entertainment night spots in Lusaka, plying their trade to interested patrons. The women travelled to Zambia after being departed from the ever expanding and dangerous South African sex business over a month ago. [...] One sex worker, who only identified herself as Kerry, said her colleagues had been illegally living in South Africa for the past six years after international commercial sex gangs kidnapped them from Thailand and took them to that country to work in brothels or feature in pornographic fills.'

**Women's social, economic and political status in Zambia**

Sex work and trafficking of women and young girls for exploitation purposes in Zambia reflects the level and extent of social injustice to women and the limitations of existing empowerment strategies as a whole. The last two decades have witnessed some positive achievements in Zambian women's struggle against social, economic and political marginalisation. This is reflected in the number of female Cabinet ministers, which rose from two in 1996 to six in 2006, and female parliamentarians, which increased from 13 in 1996 to 19 in 2001.

Still, the 27th Session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 'expressed grave concern at the many violations of women's rights, covering a wide range of issues, among them education, health and marriage', and warned Zambia's government representatives that pervasive traditional stereotypes and prejudices regarding women, as well as across-the-board discriminatory provisions in the country's legislature and common law, were undermining the country's efforts to gender equality.

MAPODE research results demonstrate that sex work and human trafficking of women and children in Zambia and its neighbouring countries are perpetuated by poor national and regional economies. The study also showed the degree to which social and cultural attitudes affect females and their sexuality through structures of class and power. Women in Zambia remain disadvantaged and exploited, primarily because they are females. Traditional customs, beliefs and practices...
determine their future, as one female lawyer explained during this research:

'My husband and I met when we were at the university. We got married after we graduated [...]. He was a lawyer, too. We were both successful and established our own law practice. Everything went very well. But how was I to know that one day I would share him with another woman. He never told me. As a lawyer, I knew that he could not marry again – until he came and told me he was marrying his mistress under the customary law. He said he was moving to our farm. I screamed. I yelled! But all he could say was that he was sorry. That in his tribe, he could not stay with only one wife. He was a son of a village chief. I reminded him that we had married under the statutory law, that he had committed bigamy, but he just laughed. He told me to go and read my law books! [Soon after] he got sick and died. And we are still in court, struggling to divide the family property, between me, my children, his wife and their two children. Property she did not work for. Tell me about the law and us women! I don't know. We have a long way to go.'

This woman's experience is not far from Durkheim's theory on gender inequality: 'A woman is to a far greater extent the product of nature... a product of socialisation' (Durkheim in Giddens, 2005:670), a position shared by Karl Marx who found gender inequalities and the appropriation of women's bodies and sexuality enshrined in the patriarchal system he described as, 'a form of private property owned by men through the institution of marriage who will only be free from their bondage when class divisions are overcome' (Marx in Giddens, 2005:670).

To date, Zambian marriage law integrates both customary and statutory laws. However, customary law, which is administered by the local courts, supersedes statutory law and is governed by the lobola system under which families are united through the husbands' payment of bride price for their wives. This practice, while widely regarded as a token of appreciation, cherished and clung to, increases female vulnerability to polygamy, violence and abuse. Husbands and their families believe the wife is their possession since they paid for her.

Customary marriage law also interprets a girl's biological maturity (16 years) as 'marriageable' and as such promotes child marriages. This increases the risk of marital desertion, early widowhood and disinheritance since the husbands are usually much older than their young brides. Customary law denies women access to family property rights and/or maintenance on dissolution of marriage. It increases female vulnerability to different forms of exploitation including sex work and trafficking, as the experience of a 24-year-old mother of two little children illustrates:

'My husband made me pregnant just before I finished my Grade 12. I was only 17. He was working in a hotel, with a good job. I came from a good family. We had a lovely white wedding. After my daughter was born, we went to Botswana where my husband got a very good job. We were happy. We had good money and a good life. Then, he started moving around with girls. He moved out of the house and left me with two babies. He would stay away for weeks, without bringing food home. The children were hungry. They cried. I cried, too. So, I sought help from a friend. She led me to a brothel. Now, I could earn my own money. My husband heard about it. He got really angry and reported me to our Embassy. I was forced to return to my country with my children. I had no job, no money, no life. More than anything, I was ashamed. How could I tell people about my situation? My friends advised me to sue my husband and
claim support. But he was in Botswana, and I was here. I had no money to go to court. So, I just continued my new profession. Now, I manage well. My children are growing. My friends and I look after them. I do not need to worry when I am away in South Africa or even in Bangkok. They are ok. I don’t care about my husband anymore. I wish him luck. May be one day he will desert his new wife or wives.’

Conclusion

It is clear that the young girls and women who sell their bodies on the streets and fall victim to trafficking do not do so because they like it but because they lack essential prerequisites for a safe and better life. Poverty quickly leads to street destitution, which in turn pushes them into exploitation, disease and premature death. They are part of the millions of the world’s female ‘sex slaves, forced to work against their will’ (CTIP, 2003). What they need are safe and gender-sensitive socialisation structures (homes, communities, schools, workplaces), guided by socially and economically empowered families and a responsible local, national, regional and international leadership that designs women-friendly social, economic, political policies and laws and ensure their adequate implementation.

Notes

3 Penal Code, sections 87/105 of the Laws of Zambia.
4 SACO Open Letter to the African Heads of State and Government at the AU Summit in Maputo, 10 July 2003.

References


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