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22/04/2020 TtT update 01 – African global Networks (AGN)

## 'Turning the Tide' - human trafficking & exploitation of Africans

TELEPHONE MEETING 21.04.20 @ 14.20

Notes relating to the meeting between Princess (co-founder of PIAM in Italy) and Ri Iyowwaye (Head of AGN in UK) (including additional thoughts of Ri Iyowwaye)

In addition to the questions I asked Princess I also put questions to her from members of the AGN 'Turning the Tide' team; Yaa and Aminata.

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### Starting PIAM/ origin of victims:

Princess started her charitable work in Italy during the year 2000 with 4 girls. She was trafficked and exploited before breaking out of that situation and co-founding a charity that deals with the issue. In response to a question raised by Yaa about whether she only caters for Nigerian girls, princess says initially 80% of the victims were from a southern state in Nigeria. These days most of the girls that her charity caters for still come from the same part of Nigeria. She has also taken in girls from Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Morocco as well as Europeans.

### Cause and effect:

I ask Princess what she believes is the fundamental cause for the horror that has led to the increase in human trafficking and she sites poverty. There was a time when you could say people back home were completely ignorant and therefore susceptible to believing the lies of traffickers. While that still holds true in some cases it is no longer the case for many.

Some people are well aware of what is in store and they know the risks include dying along the way, either in the desert, at camps, at sea or at the hands of traffickers and pimps who go too far yet they see being trafficked as an option for making something of their lives.

The choices are stark, either stay where you are until you finally have nothing left to hope for or take the risk and even though you will have to endure much suffering, shame/ indignity for some years if you survive the journey, eventually you will be able to pay your debt and be free to build a life for yourself. While that is the hope there is no guarantee things will work out that way.

Princess says even though you will have talked and talked and talked before you know it the same people you have been talking to have quietly slipped away in order to risk their lives and suffer indignity in order to reach Europe. It is truly a sad state of affairs. The reality is that without viable alternatives for people to develop themselves they look for a way out no matter how risky.

Princess is skeptical about sensitization campaigns. She has engaged in them and knows of other organisations that have done so. It's not that such campaigns are a total waste of time and it can't be denied they do have some impact but even then many such campaigns take place in areas where rural people cannot easily access them and they are often aimed at people who are in education and less likely to try to get to Europe illegally as they are likely to have more options if they do well at school. Princess reveals that many of the girls from Africa that she caters for were not able to finish their schooling, usually due to economic hardship.

There are a myriad of languages, rural areas and villages in Africa. Mounting a comprehensive sensitization campaign is not without its challenges and even then that still leaves the issue of what does a person do if they decide to heed the warnings. How long will they stay in the same position before they are tempted to take the risk. They will be aware of others who have gone through the mill and are now sending images and messages back that reflect a more comfortable lifestyle.

Sometimes such reports can be misleading because the people sending the images and stories back have now become madams and are looking to recruit girls for the benefit of their selves and the criminal gangs they are in cohorts with. However, while such deception is not always the case, it is unclear what percentage of girls are able to pay off the sold called debt and break free of the cycle of exploitation and degradation without help. Sometimes other factors come into the equation that make it virtually impossible for a victim to ever break free.

A phenomenon Princess observed from around 2014 was that some of the girls were being trafficked as wives. Men would marry them back home before bringing them through Libya to Italy. Once she became aware of this practice she would endeavour to separate such couples and remove the girls from the situation, even if the girls were pregnant for their

husbands. It transpires the men, who would meet with the girls parents and marry their daughters were also looking for a way out. They would be induced by offers of free passage and opportunities in Europe if they bring a girl with them.

My own view is that if this is the type of deceit and duplicity being used to entrap women the message must be getting through. The sad part is that reports from different sources indicate trafficking is on the rise.

#### Beyond sensitization:

Princess' answer to the question about 'what more can be done' is to provide alternative pathways for women to empower themselves economically. To this end she is developing a project plan that will focus on micro-finance. Initially she plans to fund the initiative out of her own pocket and will look to start with 20 to 30 women in the state she hails from in Nigeria. The project will provide funding via low interest loans and training for women to start a small scale commercial enterprise.

This is not a new approach in fact the current quarter's interview in the 'Arts View' section of our website highlights an artist (Elivava) I interviewed last month who does a similar thing (<https://africangn.net/arts-view/>) in Ghana.

#### Toxic male syndrome:

I ask Princess why the new initiative she is planning will only focus on women. Initially she is reluctant to say. Eventually she opens up and says one of the problems she faced as a young lady were men's demands for sex when she would apply for a job, service or government program etc. This point resonates with what Elivava says in her interview. Princess reveals this pervasive demand for sex from men, some in senior or responsible positions, some of whom were married and sometimes older than her father is something women continue to face.

This just shouldn't happen. Such people should do the job they are being paid to do instead of abusing their position. She says some women get so fed up they take the view to risk going to Europe even though they know they risk death or abuse and exploitation for an extended period of time. They would rather face such risks which potentially could lead to a better position financially than perpetuate a practice that undermines the psyche and value of a women in her own country.

Looking at this from the outside it appears that for some it is a judgement call about which route has a higher potential return since sex is being demanded of them anyway. Some don't want to give into such mens demands and may also be fearful of bringing shame to their families if found out. Ironically some of the family members whose honour they are concerned about are men.

As a man I do empathize with women who face such terrible behaviour. I of course hold no brief for men who behave that way as such behaviour does nothing to deepen trust and enhance relationships between men and women. It makes it difficult for us all.

My concern is that if only the women are empowered in such places this could lead to the men who also face a life of hopelessness seeking to exploit the women locally. It can be argued that this is better than such men seeking to traffic them to Europe or elsewhere with all the danger, peril and indignity that entails.

As things stand I fall into the camp of people who argue for solutions that meet the needs of both genders in terms of tackling poverty i.e. a comprehensive approach to tackling the issue. Thus we return to the universal challenge of alleviating poverty as both it and inequality increase exponentially across the globe, even in advanced economies.

#### Threats/ intimidation:

An issue raised by Aminata and myself was that of security. Princess says it is her faith that she relies on to deal with intimidation and the threats that are sometimes directed towards her. As a result of doing this work she receives numerous death threats and intimidatory calls.

She does not let any of it bother her and says when she receives threats she usually threatens the person back. Her faith is her shield and she believes no other person can match that. She takes a firm line with traffickers who contact her demanding she release the girls she has taken in. She tells them that as soon as a girl seeks out her help and is with her they should forget about that girl.

#### Training/ development:

I raise a question that Yaa put forward about the wellbeing of girls in her care. Princess says that while the girls are in her care they receive help applying to regularise their stay in Italy and they receive some support in terms of helping them with other aspects of their welfare, this can include training and skills acquisition.

They also provide each person with a small sum of money to enable them buy personal items and so forth. Some are job ready with skills acquired in Africa. Once their applications have been successful and they are legally able to work in Italy her charity helps them find work. Some go on to become domestic workers, care home attendants, cooks and so on.

Once a girl is legally able to work and goes on to get a job it is then possible to start with something basic and move up from there even if that means retraining. She does come across girls who have moved on from her care and gone on to make something of themselves. She says I see them driving their cars and they wave as they go by. Such a scenario is definitely a success.

It does lead me to wonder whether some of the girls who see these images back home and are enduring grinding poverty will only become more determined to take the risk. Interventions such as Princess' are desperately needed in the destinations people arrive at where they are being exploited. It would be helpful to know what percentage of people are able to turn things around, what percentage die en route or at the hands of criminals along the trafficking chain.

It seems the best place to intervene are in peoples home towns, villages/ rural locales. To coin a phrase, 'to nip it in the bud'. It seems the best form of intervention enables people to develop and help themselves. In reality is this not how people used to live?

#### Men/ young boys:

Aminata asks whether her charity only caters for women. Princess' states her charity does cater for males too. Having said that the overwhelming majority of people she caters for are women and to a lesser extent women and their children. A higher percentage of women tend to be successful in having their status regularised.

I think back to the comment Princess made about separating couples where she determines they are a legally married under false pretences and I wonder what percentage use their married status as a ploy to increase their chances of being successful in their applications due to being a family unit, especially where a child is involved.

Of course one needs to be careful that families who are constituted on the right grounds do not end up being torn apart because men desperate to change their situation have observed being a family increases ones chances of beating the system and are therefor mudding the waters for genuine couples/ families. It is clear the challenge is to identify which men are genuinely with their wives and which ones will pass them on to the trafficking ring they connived with once their change in status has been successful.

#### Partnerships/ Funding:

Aminata asks about partnerships and involving embassies and commissions that relate to those in her care. Both Aminata and Yaa ask about funding. Princess doesn't have much dealings with embassies or commissions. She is in touch with a few Nigerian embassies such as the one in Italy and they have been helpful in issuing new passports for girls who have had theirs seized by traffickers. Funding for her operations is primarily provided by the regional authority in Italy and other bodies in the country including the group that represents the area she comes from in Nigeria.

#### Manifestations of human trafficking and exploitation:

Princess reveals that some forms of exploitation are very hard to address e.g. exploitation of domestic workers who may also be sexually abused. As this tends to happen inside homes, unless the victim is strong they will suffer in silence. Sometimes the perpetrators are wealthy and have a high status.

Victims will be fearful that no one will believe them especially where they are a foreigner. If they are not taken seriously and have to return to the home of the person they have tried to seek redress against, that does not feel like an environment in which a better outcome will be achieved. Of course not all exploitation involves sexual contact. For some the violence, cruelty and dehumanizing behaviour they face is unrelenting. In reality different parts of the

world have different profiles in terms of the type of experience trafficked and exploited people face.

### The way forward:

Many of us have heard of human trafficking and exploitation. As is the case with most things one has some general awareness of, it's only when you start to actually delve into it that the complexities start to reveal themselves. It's a legitimate right for people to migrate in search of better opportunities. Uganda is a country that has sought to shield its citizen from exploitation by regulation. The following link provides some insight; <http://cepa.or.ug/the-externalization-of-labour-bill-why-uganda-needs-to-embrace-but-regulate-the-labour-export-industry/>

No approach is perfect but recognizing the issues and taking concerted action is usually better than doing nothing. There are also overlapping and grey areas to consider. Such as where a person is deemed in some eyes and by some actors to have been trafficked but not by others of a different local cultural persuasion, even where the person purported to have been trafficked does not agree with the definition being applied from outside and does not want their situation to be changed.

Principles, values, definitions, matter. Given definitions are contextualized to a lesser or greater degree by actors articulating a position from their own cultural persuasion. Whose outlook should be the barometer and hold sway? Where an Italian may see it one way a Nigerian may not and so on. Outcomes can sometimes hinge on who holds the purse strings and/ or wields greater clout.

Then there is the issue of sexual exploitation and sex work, the latter being legal in some African countries as it is in other parts of the globe. Some argue all sex work should be classified as exploitative and therefore banned. There are instances of some activists who skirt with breaking the law in order to disrupt sex work that is being conducted on a legal basis.

It is a compelling argument that the majority of people who bear the brunt of sexual activity in the sex industry find it damaging to a lesser or greater extent, so therefore even if a small minority don't and are ok with it, on balance it's just not worth it. Especially when the lines can sometimes appear blurred between legal and exploitative practices, where such blurring is intentional or otherwise.

There is also the issue of toxic masculinity as outlined above. Having said that although there isn't necessarily an expression for women who tend to operate on the wrong side of the law and/ or have their own way of oppressing others it is a reality. Females do traffic and/ or exploit other females and males (adults & children).

In the final analysis it is clear that sensitization does have some benefit. The challenge is to also get the message to rural areas and to be able to express it in terms and possibly local languages that will have the strongest impact. It is also apparent that looking into initiatives that promote or support local economies is also pivotal.

### **What are your thoughts?**