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Making a difference in the lives of prostitutes in the midst of a Muslim Sharia State: a voyage of discovery by a female librarian in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

For over fifty years a community of women whose lives have been violated physically mentally or financially have been settling down as prostitutes in a local village outside the predominantly Muslim state of Kano in Northern Nigeria. The community started with four prostitutes in 1957 but has now grown to be the largest community of prostitutes in Nigeria with 1831 living permanently in 126 houses, 78 lodgings accommodating couples on a nightly basis. Over 90% of the prostitutes are not educated at all and as such are not aware of and do not use any protection against sexually transmitted diseases and as such AIDS is so common that patients death is no longer kept on records. Dead prostitutes are hurriedly buried in the local graveyard of the settlement.

Kano is a Sharia state and as such prostitutes have no right to social services such as education, health and economics. They are shunned and untolerated by both the government and their relatives. As such the level of death in childbirth and diseases related to pregnancy and childbirth is very high among these prostitutes. They have no means of furthering getting education and engaging in economic work. Their number is growing and so also their problem. Nobody cared to seek and find out how these women's lives could be enhanced, how they could be empowered to change from social "misfits" to social "most fit".

This study is a personal attempt by a local librarian to find out how libraries in Kano could make the first attempt to collect, analyse and present a report on the needs of these women in terms of education, health and economics (things they will need to get empowered) and then to report the findings to the government and non-governmental organizations in Kano for appropriate action to solve the problems and change the lives of the prostitutes of Gada village, Nigeria. have been going through various difficulties in their lives, for example for a long time girls are refused to attend school and are married off early in their lives. Every female indigene of Kano, Northern Nigeria has to get married and the earlier the better. These marriages are often arranged and forced onto the young female by the parents or guidance. Such women often have children too early which as a result end their short lives or live them with horrible mental and physical diseases. Women often have no right to get out of such marriages even where their violations are obvious to the people near them. Women are supposed to bear any physical and mental violation from their husband and leave everything in the name of God. For the last forty years some women have found a way out of this bondage. They have opted out and chose prostitution as a means of breaking away from the tradition of female bondage and second classness to their husbands.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF PROSTITUTES IN THE MIDST OF A SHARIA STATE: a voyage of discovery by a a female librarian in Northern Nigeria.

1 INTRODUCTION

The whole issue of the concern for women since the last few decades is "Making a positive difference" in the lives of all women no matter what creed, color or culture. This concern has been taken very seriously by female librarians in most countries of the world but with far less enthusiasm by female librarians in Nigeria. Female librarians in Nigeria are more concerned with dealing with issues within the walls of their libraries. We see ourselves as just custodians of many books and some few computers to surrender to users who bother to come into our libraries to seek information from these tangible things. Female librarians do not venture out and delve into investigating social issues because most of them think that our work is limited within the library building. The goal of this study is to show my female librarians in Nigeria that librarians can do a lot to bring about good change in the lives of people in our communities.

I chose to study female prostitutes because my State is a strict Sharia state and as such regards prostitutes as serious state criminals. Female prostitutes are treated with disgust and shunned by the government and even by their families. As such they are the most disadvantaged

women in my state. Nobody is ready or willing to have anything to do with them publicly. It is clearly important to carry out research in order to find out what the situation of female prostitutes in Kano state really was. Special attention was given to Gada prostitutes because the population of prostitutes in Gada village has been growing very rapidly, the rate of AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases so alarming and extent of destitution is so pathetic as to warrant this research NOW. Female prostitution is defined by Aisha Zubair (2003) as a “situation where a female agrees to engage in sexual intercourse with a man (or woman) for money or other benefits agreed before hand, by both parties”

This study aims to seek information from the prostitutes in Gada about what they need in terms of education; health and economics, the three factors that would enable them change their lives positively. The librarian is thus bringing the story of these women into limelight and was acting as the link between these women and their governments and local Non Governmental Organisation, with the aim of arousing public interest, sympathy and action.

GADA VILLAGE IN KANO, NIGERIA.

Because prostitutes are shunned and highly detested in a normal (Muslim) society, they almost always run away and form their own communities at the slightest opportunity. Such community of prostitutes has existed since the last fifty four years in a small transit village 18 miles outside the city of Kano along the main road to the capital city of Abuja. The company constructing the first high way linking Muslim northern Kano city to the southern parts of the country and the then capital city of Lagos first established this small village to serve as its base. As a result of the number of laborers working there, two houses were constructed by two individuals a male pimp and a local prostitute living near the construction site. These houses were then rented out to the laborers. Single women were encouraged to settle there as prostitutes and cooks for the laborers. In 1973, there were less than 50 prostitutes living in Gada. By 1993, this community has grown to over 1800.

Now, there are over 187 houses with an average number of 7 rooms rented to female prostitutes in Gada on a monthly basis. There are 78 lodgings with an average number of 9 rooms for daily rentage to passers by (couples) needing a the use of a room for just a night or two. Former, older, prostitutes normally own these lodgings. There are 19 beer parlors all owned by men.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

To the female prostitutes in Gada, an understanding of the forces that lead to the improvement of their lives would bring greater life contentment, greater self-awareness and greater self respect and dignity. The result from this research would give government planners in Nigeria some empirical evidence of what needs female prostitutes in Nigeria are not able to meet from their governments and their societies which has lead them into prostitution. On the basis of such information adequate strategies may be developed to improve the economic, social and health of females and thus removing those reasons, which drove them into prostitution in the first place.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To find out the demographic variables if the prostitutes in Gada

2. To find out the reason why they choose to become prostitutes.
3. To find out why they choose to locate as prostitutes in Gada
4. To find out the type and level of social services in terms of health, education and economics available to them by the local and state governments and non-governmental organizations.
5. To report the findings of this research to the Government and Non Governmental organisations in Kano State for appropriate action.
6. To sustain relationship between the public library and the prostitutes in Gada in terms of acquiring, organizing and dissemination of information and information materials they need to better their lives.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Prostitution in Sharia Societies

“Islamic societies detest prostitution so much so that a prostitute could be disowned and thrown out from the family home by her own mother” (Abdullahi: 2001) ”In Islamic countries where Sharia Law is practiced, prostitutes are likely to face “80 lashes of cane if caught in the physical act of sexual intercourse. If the either the prostitute or her sex partner is still legally married, then the two could face the death penalty by stoning if caught in the actual act of sexual intercourse by three credible witnesses” (Aminu and Hassan: 2004). Prostitution is not tolerated in all Islamic Sharia societies as they are religious offenders and as such are penalized just like any other law offenders in the society. Haitham (2003) reiterated that “... they should not be tolerated or supported in anyway that would motivate them to enjoy what they were doing as their employment”. As one Nigerian Sharia cleric mentioned... “Prostitutes are a threat to the health and social tranquility of the formal family groups and so a threat to any rational society and should be punished whenever they are caught carrying out this dastardly very old trade’

Factors that motivate women to become prostitutes in Developing countries

Some gender studies and especially the study of prostitutes among the Tiv, the Ibos and the tribes in Nigeria have stated that some factors are responsible in motivating women to become prostitutes. According to Johnson (2001) on her report about prostitutes she mentioned poverty as the . one important factor in forcing Tiv women to become prostitutes. Johnson affirmed that prostitution in Tiv society is not a criminal offence and women who choose to become prostitutes are not shunned or sent away from their family homes because of it.

In another study of prostitutes amongst the Ibos, Chukudi (2001) said that the one factor she found to be the reason why women among the Ibos become prostitutes was both poverty which often force some parents to send their daughters far and near their communities to work as maids in other people’s households to enable them send their earnings to take care of the families. She also revealed the fact that unlike the communities in the Northern part of Nigeria, prostitution and sex before marriage is tolerated amongst the Ibo community. In a similar study in Ghana, Dafoe (2002) listed poverty and social tolerance as some of the factors that encouraged some women in some southern provinces of Ghana to engage in prostitution.

In the more traditional society of Northern Sudan, arranged marriage and early marriages and also poverty were said to be factors that led women into prostitution (Salim:2002).

The need to conduct the research on the prostitutes in Gada .

There has been an alarming increase in the number of AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Nigeria in general and in Kano state in particular. A recent research carried out in the Northern state of Jigawa revealed that the reported victims of AIDS in the state has grown from 1208 in 1997 to an alarming 54,301 in 2002 (Mainasara:2003). It has been revealed by Musa, Hussain and Muazzam that AIDS cases in the Muslim states of Northern Nigeria was very small at first, in fact Kano and Katsina states recorded no known AIDS's cases between 1984-1990. They reported that in the study they just concluded they have found out that AIDS and STDs have increased and was spreading more rapidly in some Northern states now than in the Southern states of Nigeria. This they said was because men in the Northern states hardly use protection and they would also not allow their female sex partners to use any either.. Prostitutes are the worst to suffer from this because "most men would not wear condom when they were having sexual intercourse with a prostitute"(Aminu: 2004). Because prostitutes needed the money for subsistence, they almost always had to succumb to what their male customers wanted.... and to the consequences!

3 METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH TECHNIQUE EMPLOYED

A survey methodology-using questionnaire with both close-ended and open -ended questions was used to collect responses from 183 prostitutes in Gada town. Because 92% of the respondents could not read or write, the questions were first translated into the local language and then they were read to the women and their answers either ticked or written down as they were answered.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Each of the four sections has been summarized individually thus

▪ Demographic Characteristics of prostitutes in Gada, Nigeria.

The results of the data collected has revealed that majority of the prostitutes are indigenes of Kano state and that almost 78% of these prostitutes are in fact Muslims. One of the disturbing aspect of what this research revealed is that more than 54% of the prostitutes in Gada were women under the age of 25 and that there were prostitutes as young as 11 years in Gada town at the time of this study. It is also very alarming to find out that 85% of all the prostitutes in this study were between 10-39 years of age, the ages when women are physically and mentally at their highest peak.

The study also revealed that 24.59% of the prostitutes in this study were young single girls who had never married before, all of these class of respondents had run away from their parents or guardians rather than being forcedly married to men whom they did not like in the least. Of the prostitutes who were married earlier, 44.80% got divorced from their husbands while they were still they were still teenagers. Again from the total of the prostitutes who were married 77.53% were married off between the ages of 10-15, 63.56% of this number had their first child when they were between the ages of 11-15.

64.49 of the respondents who were married had 1-3 children by their marriages. 21.01 infact had seven or more children before they came to Gada as prostitutes. Birth rate is high in this community because majority of women do not know about contraceptives or in many cases, even if they know about birth control they often could not be able to afford it or their husbands would not allow them do it. The prostitutes would send home some of the money they made in prostitution to be used for the care of the children they left back home and as gifts for the people who offered to care for the children so that they can be free to carry out their prostitution.. **It is often bad when the money was not good enough and a woman could not send home anything for the month. This study has found out that over 90% of mothers in Gada had to pay for the care of their legitimate children, ex-husbands almost always did not care anymore after the marriage was over.** 60.14 of all the respondents' marriages lasted less than a year. One respondent told the researcher that she ran away to Gada after the first night of her marriage. In fact 82.60% of all the marriages of respondents of this study lasted just three years or less.

Majority of the prostitutes in Gada had no educational background at all. Over 56% of them did not attend any type of school. Only 42.62% attended primary schools and secondary school education is the minimum requirement to get a job in Nigerian organisations now.

▪ **Family Background**

Information about the family background of the prostitute revealed that the majority of the parents, the husbands and the current boyfriends of the respondents were indigenes of Kano and were also Muslims. At least 88.8% of at least one of the parents of the respondents was alive at the time of this study. The data collected from the prostitutes in Gada also revealed that even though over 40% of the sex partners of the prostitutes had some education, the educational background of the parents was just as bad as the respondents'. Over 85% of the mothers of the prostitutes in Gada were not educated at all. Economically, 76.51% of the respondents said that their parents were very poor. Only 23.49% of the respondents said that their parents were living in satisfactory economic condition. When respondents were asked whether they were economically better off now than before they went into prostitution 94.5% said they could feed and send home money, the rest said life was better now for them because they could do as they like.

Most of the respondents of this study are more attached with their mothers than with their fathers, infact over 55% of them said they were close with their mothers while only a little over 11% said they felt any attachment with their fathers. All those who said they were not close with either of their parents were those who grew up with adopted parents.

On the other hand when respondents were asked who they blamed for their current situation a whopping 67.75% blamed the financial difficulties they were facing at that time as the one major reason for making them chose to go into prostitution to try to solve their problems. 25.13% of the respondents blamed forced marriages of forcing them to run away and join prostitutes in Gada.

- **Life in Prostitution**

Respondents were asked where they first learnt about the existence of Gada village as a haven for prostitution. 92.34% learnt about the community from their female friends who were already prostitutes in Gada. On the other hand, 28.77% were taken to Gada by their girlfriends who were already prostitutes there, a whopping 67.75% were taken to Gada and into prostitution by their male friends who rent them rooms, pay for their feeding and in return these male friends keep these young girls as their own properties in Gada village. Respondents were asked how long they were living in Gada village as prostitutes, the data collected showed that 79.77% of the respondents were in Gada from one to over four years (1-4+).

The next question was to determine the extent to which prostitutes in Gada community were faithful to their sex partners, 93.44% said they had numerous sex partners and were not faithful to any one of them. Only 6.56% said they kept to one sex partner. Again the respondents were posed with the question of whether they can vouch for their boyfriends' faithfulness to them. 91.72% said they know that their sex partners had other girlfriends too. 74.41% of the respondents' boyfriends were married anyway, over 50% of the male sex partners had more than one wife.

When asked whether they use any protection from sexually transmitted diseases the study revealed that less than 2% of the total respondents always used protection against pregnancy and diseases, 84.15% of the respondents have never used any protection for anything at all. When asked why they did not use protection 60.22% said that their boyfriends would not let them, 30.93% could not afford to buy what they needed to protect themselves. 66.12 of the prostitutes in Gada village have never being tasted for HIV or any of the common sexually transmitted diseases amongst women in their employment.

- **Future Plans**

Respondents were asked what they were planning to do with their lives in the future. They were asked whether if they were given the right chance that they would quit prostitution or not? All respondents responded that they were willing to quit prostitution if given a job or some form of trade to earn a living.. All respondents also said that they would join adult education centers and use information centers if set up in Gada for them. 3% of the respondents pleaded with their government to provide them with small scale industries i.e tailoring centers, soap factories, small scale farming loans etc to make them economically empowered. 80% of the prostitutes in Gada mentioned the need for information and advisory center where they could go whenever they required advise or information on things they needed to know.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prostitution is the major cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Kano community (). 78.4% of the men having sex with the prostitutes in Gada are aged between 17-36. 69.7% of the prostitutes in Gada are below the age of 30 and less than 2% know or engage in “safe” sex (i.e using condoms, having only one partner, or using contraceptives). This means that most of these young people are in danger of getting and then spreading HIV/AIDS amongst themselves and to their spouses sooner or later.

Another problem is that of the number of illegitimate children delivered by the women in Gada annually is increasing and this not only increases the economic burden on the mothers but the children grow up also shunned and despised by the society (on the 26th of December, 2004 alone, I visited six women in the area who had given birth only three or four days earlier, one of them gave birth to her second baby in Gada) there.. These situations increase the economic and health hazards not only to the prostitutes but also to their families, (whom they almost always went back to when they are really ill with AIDS) and to the government and the society in general.

The lives of young women in Gada are lives of misery, which they were able to endure because they could lace this misery with drugs, alcohol and unfettered sex. No government or society should allow a community such as Gada community to exist in its midst without doing something to put it right.

The researcher having spent months studying the women in Gada has come up with the following recommendations

1. That the government in conjunction with religious leaders should promulgate marriage law making forced marriages to girls unlawful. This law should be enforced whenever and for whomever it deemed necessary
2. One overwhelming finding was that majority of respondents were not educated at all. It is recommended that a minimum of secondary education should be made to be mandatory on every girl before she is married off. This level of education will ensure that each girl could get employment should she found herself divorced or widowed later on in her life. Parents should also be counseled about the importance of letting their daughters get some education before they get married
3. Again many of the respondents of this study went into prostitution between the ages of 10 and 11, the government in Kano should make it unlawful to have sex with prostitutes that are under sixteen years of age. The government should come up with a minimum consent age for girls as that could discourage parents marrying off daughters that are below that age.
4. The respondents have expressed their willingness to take up other employment if given the opportunity, Kano state government should include these women in its social change policy and provide them with suitable jobs, soft loans to start up small scale trading or production.

5. The government should open an adult education center with provision for both primary and secondary school education classes. It should be free and women in Gada must be informed about it and encouraged to join.
6. The government of Kano state must open a health center with proper manpower and equipments necessary for this community. Many of the prostitutes could not afford to buy condoms and birth control pills etc, these should be provided to these women free or at a subsidized price. It is of paramount importance that female condoms are provided to women in Gada free of charge. With the collaboration of the Federal Ministry of Health, the state government could arrange this.
7. The public library should open up a permanent branch library with seasoned personnel and the right collection. The public library once opened must be very active in convincing the community to use it for education, recreation and information.

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