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Full Length Research Paper

The road to a better life: A critical perspective on human trafficking, global inequalities and migration from Mozambique towards Europe

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This work discusses the root causes behind human trafficking in the sex industry, from Mozambique to South Africa and, eventually, Europe. With examples taken from younger Mozambican women called *curtidoras* since 2007, social obligations towards poor families, awareness of global inequalities and dreams of going to Europe are major drivers of migration northwards and that current anti-trafficking policies do not take this into account. Instead, these policies fail to address poverty and global inequality and risk making migrants more vulnerable to trafficking, not only by leaving them in a poor and desperation situation where they are willing to take great risks but also by reinforcing tight anti-immigration laws. These laws make it impossible for migrants to enter into Europe legally and thus one of the only options is to be smuggled or trafficked in, jeopardizing female migrant even more.

Key words: Migration, human trafficking, global inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

In Mozambique, believed to be the main trafficking corridor to South Africa's red light districts (UNESCO, 2006), poor young women dream of moving to a rich country where they will be able to provide for themselves and their kin. As Maria, a young woman of 21 years, told me, 'If only I could come to South Africa or Europe, my family would no longer suffer and I could take care of them'. Carrying out extensive ethnographic studies among young women in Maputo, the Mozambican capital, it is understood why many African women sell sex in order to ensure the well-being of their families and why some hope to end up in a richer country despite the risks involved (Adepoju, 2003). As a first step on their journey young Mozambican women migrate to Maputo or to South African cities where they generate an income through transactional sex with "sugar-daddies", or working as erotic dancers in sex clubs or working in brothels (Groes-Green, 2014, 2011; Hunter, 2010; Cole, 2010). Yet, trying to move on to a richer country they risk ending up in the arms of smugglers or traffickers who provide transportation under highly unsafe circumstances or who exploit them in the sex industry (UNESCO, 2006).In Mozambique, there are many young women whose ultimate dream is to move to Europe with a white man (*mulungo*) or to sell sex there, and where going to South Africa is merely a steppingstone towards reaching that aim. The question addressed here is how we can understand the root causes and structural factors behind

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migration and human trafficking on the road from Mozambique to Europe?

FIELDWORK IN THE SEXUAL ECONOMY

The reflections in this article are based on numerous fieldworks in Maputo since 2007, where interview and participant observation were done with more than 30 young women who were active in the sexual economy exchanging sex for money with older men, or working as erotic dancers in strip clubs or working in brothels, and many of whom went to South Africa or Europe to sell sex or to stay with a sugar-daddy or to marry a white man. The author followed these women in bars, discotheques, cafes, and in the city's red light district but after a while was also allowed to go with them to the poorer suburbs to visit their families. These women are locally known as *curtidoras*, meaning "women enjoying life". The *curtidora* notion derives from the Mozambican expression *curtir a vida*, which means "to enjoy life" and refers to a lifestyle of going out to bars and discotheques. This category also connotes obtaining money, luxuries, and other benefits through intimate relationships with men. *Curtidoras'* mostly older white partners and sex clients are popularly known as *patrocinadores*, meaning "donors" or "sponsors". This term often refers to expatriates (expats) from Europe, North America, and South Africa who have migrated to the city since the 1980s as businessmen, development workers, and diplomats, but it can also refer to older rich Mozambican men who exchange money for sex with multiple younger women. The sponsor is a figure located somewhere between the categories of a sex client and a boyfriend, depending on the content of the transaction, the duration and seriousness of the relationship, the sense of mutual obligation and the degree of emotional attachment. This is also why *curtidoras* are best described as "informal" sex workers. Because, the intimate trade that occurs between them and their male sponsors is in a number of ways quite similar to the logic that shapes the city's informal economy in a broader sense. Personal ties and obligations intersect with economic interest and there are few formally agreed upon rules around the trade. This is where part of the sex trade differs remarkably from the sex industry known from other parts of the world, in particular the global north, where prostitution or sex work is often much more institutionalized and formal, and where the trade includes an agree upon service, time span, and with fewer strings attached in the sense that after the sex is completed people do not necessarily expect to meet again. However, some *curtidoras* also work in brothels in the city or travel to South Africa, mostly Cape Town and Johannesburg to work in brothels or strip clubs. Gaining the trust needed to gather knowledge on these intimate matters was a great challenge. In order for the women to trust the author and allow for more unfiltered discussions of sensitive issues, the author adopted a social role as an "older brother" who could give them advice in relation to their work, life private and life of going out with clients and sponsors and about the risks and opportunities of migrating abroad. The "brother" notion (*irmão*) had real implications in terms of social duties while it also encompassed strict limits to sexual intimacy. The protective brother role fitted well with the author's older age (33 when he first met them, 39 years when he last interviewed some of them in the end of 2013), and most*curtidoras* ended up accepting his insistence on being an ''older brother.'' This also paved the way for more relaxed relationships to *curtidoras'* male friends, sponsors and clients, who no longer saw him as a competitor for women. Besides speaking Portuguese the author also learned basic Changana[1], the mother tongue of many informants. This served to guarantee access to the study group and enabled *curtidoras* and their families to better identify with the author (Groes-Green, 2012).

Why do poor Mozambican women migrate to Europe?

Human trafficking is a serious social problem, which affects women across the African continent (Carling, 2006; Adepoju, 2003; Fitzgibbon, 2003). In order to prevent human trafficking and put an end to bonded sexual labour, one first need to understand why so many people in Africa wish to migrate to Europe, and how they end up being vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of abuse on this journey. Of course there may be great regional and local variation when it comes to motives for migrating and the extent to which migration to more wealthy countries is an attractive option. In Mozambique, it has become clear that there are at least two major reasons behind the migratory processes that women become involved in, both of which are often overshadowed by a strict focus on criminal networks and the use of witchcraft (Leman and Janssens, 2013). The first reason is the general condition of poverty combined with famine, insecurity and poor health. Unemployment in Mozambique, and indeed, most of Africa, is massive, the general population has scarce access to health care and social support, and families struggle with hunger, malnutrition, insecurity and HIV/AIDS (Baulch, 2012; Hanlon and Smart, 2008). Under these circumstances, daughters and sons often feel obliged to and are encouraged by their impoverished families to embark on the risky road of migration where they become vulnerable to exploitation.

Neima, a 24-year old curtidora, said:

> "How can I think of anything else when I see that my family needs me. When I see that they could not survive if I did not make a sacrifice. I would do anything for them. Even going to Joburg to sell sex. This gives

[1]A local Bantu language spoken by the majority of the population in Maputo.

me the income I need to pay for food and medicine for my mother and the kids. No one can get a normal job anymore. We are getting desperate."

Stories like this were very common and similar notions of obligations towards poor families are known from many parts of Africa (Hunter, 2010; Cole, 2010; Plambech, 2014). This testifies to the fact that poverty is a significant driver of human trafficking by creating permanent conditions of desperation, where some people are motivated to defy incredible risks in order to help their kin, and where others try to make a profit by exploiting their vulnerable situation.

Awareness of global inequalities and the role of remittances

The second reason, which is related to the first, is the growing awareness among people in a place like Mozambique about the opportunities and wealth of Europe, which many African countries historically have been deprived of. Poor and unemployed African migrants who dream of jobs, money and helping their family members financially know where to travel to fulfill these dreams, even if reality does not always match expectations.

Lucia, a 26-year old *curtidora*, said after she met a Portuguese sponsor in a bar in downtown Maputo who was willing to bring her to Portugal:

"I don't care what happen to me as long as my family is well. Also this world of poverty and no jobs gives me nothing. I need to move. All I think of is one day to live in Europe. If I can go there I will do any kind of job. That is my dream. I think Portugal is a good place. It is rich and safe. They also speak Portuguese. If I cant find a husband to take care of me and my family back home I can just work in a club [strip club] or sell sex."

A range of younger women who enter the sexual economy in Maputo shared the notion that Europe was a place of wealth, security and an ability to be someone in the eyes of their kin. And most of them saw the sexual economy of bars, brothels and strips clubs as a first step towards Europe. They hoped that one day they would meet a sponsor or sex client who would marry them or otherwise help them get the legal papers needed to be able to move to their dream destination. Besides migrating to Europe, migrant women in Africa increasingly try their luck in North America and emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, China, India, and the Middle East (Adepujo, 2003). A central element in the global sexual economy is the remittances that female migrants send home to their mothers, fathers, siblings or husbands through financial transfer systems. Remittances sent home by migrants constitutes the second largest financial inflow to African countries exceeding international aid (IFAD, 2009), and a part of this money is generated in the sex industry or through sexual relationships (Luke, 2010; Sassen, 2002). The great amount of remittances that female migrants send home to their kin testifies to how important migrating to richer countries or regions like Europe is for the subsistence of poverty-ridden families (Morrison et al., 2008).

Who is responsible and why are root causes ignored?

Every so often governments in the US and Europe ignore these root causes in anti-trafficking campaigns and instead use all efforts to address trafficking as merely a criminological question rather than as a social question and a question of global inequality. Moreover these governments, one could argue, are directly responsible for aggravating global inequalities and creating poverty through neoliberal development programs, also called structural adjustment programs. A range of scholars argue that rather than eradicating poverty in Africa structural adjustment programs implemented by the International Monetary Fund and The World Bank have instead deepened inequalities between rich and poor populations by putting pressure on governments to introduce market economies, privatizing national companies and cutting public spending (Ferguson, 2006; Hanlon and Smart, 2008). Fighting poverty and global inequality, which serve to nurture the trafficking process and make sex workers and migrants vulnerable, it requires a more even distribution of global wealth, more direct financial support to poor families in Africa, as suggested by Hanlon et al. (2010), and higher levels of local security and safe migration routes. But since such an approach is most likely seen as a threat to the economic and political dominance of the Global North, the aim of anti-trafficking campaigns is limited to fighting local criminal networks taking advantage of conditions of poverty. One indication of the reluctance of governments and the UN to implement global redistribution measures is the silence with which the UN and the World Bank has met suggestions for redistribution through programs for direct money transfers to poor families globally (Hanlon et al., 2010). While the fight against criminal networks of traffickers is certainly important unfortunately it overshadows the fact that countries and organizations in the Global North bears the overall responsibility for the root causes behind human trafficking worldwide, especially by increasing global and local structural inequalities through neoliberal reforms.

THE LINK BETWEEN ANTI-TRAFFICKING CAMPAIGNS AND ANTI-IMMIGRATION POLICIES

Another issue that seriously jeopardizes African migrants is how anti-trafficking campaigns implemented in European countries risk making these women who are

potential victims of trafficking ever more vulnerable. Not only do national governments and the EU tighten border controls, they also introduce stricter immigration laws to protect national interests, and so they argue, to prevent human trafficking and smuggling (Tichtin, 2011). But instead of serving the interest of female migrants from Africa and elsewhere anti-trafficking measures end up becoming an excuse for stricter immigration policies and forced deportation. As a consequence, there are many instances where these campaigns jeopardize migrant's security rather than guaranteeing their social protection and human rights (Sharma, 2005). For example, in 2011 members of the Danish parliament agreed to increase border surveillance to fight drug smuggling, criminal gangs and not least – human trafficking. Although this policy was presented as a security issue and a humanitarian move it also fits perfectly well with the nationalist agenda of political parties, especially for those wanting to keep poor and unskilled migrants from the Global South from entering the country. At the same time, it became a legal instrument for catching, tracking down and deporting illegal immigrants. In the European Union victims of human trafficking are almost always sent back to their home countries by force, even though most of them prefer to stay and work in the EU (Adams, 2003). Politicians argue that forced repatriation of victims is justified because migrants are better off in their home countries where they are safe from exploitation. However, it is unlikely that migrants have better opportunities in their countries of origin that are torn by unemployment, poverty and instability. In fact, such anti-trafficking policies ignore the challenge of ensuring that migrants' own nation states give them access to stable jobs, security and acceptable incomes. There is evidence that female migrants and victims of trafficking who are sent back to Nigeria end up being less well of than when they were in Europe or before they migrated northwards (Plambech, 2014). This also goes for women in this study who were sent back to Mozambique. Whether they had been in Europe as wives, sex workers or as domestic workers; they saw life after deportation to Mozambique as worse than before they embarked on the journey.

Tightening border control and anti-immigration laws jeopardizes migrants

Although current anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns in the US and Europe do respond to grave human rights violations, these campaigns sometimes have highly unfortunate consequences for migrants. The fact that anti-trafficking measures are well intended does not make it less important to critically address their regrettable side effects. Research shows how poor undocumented female migrants are wrongly identified as victims of trafficking and sent back to their countries of origin by force. They are approached by NGOs and police convincing them to leave the sex industry and move to so-called 'safe houses' where they are sometimes kept against their will (Gallagher and Pearson, 2010). This tendency is partly due to conflating migration with trafficking and conflating migrants in the sexual economy with either victims or perpetrators (Doezema, 2010). But if all illegal and undocumented cross border movements are seen as signs of human trafficking we risk making all forms of migration suspicious, especially migration from poorer parts of the world to Europe and the US (Agustin, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2010; Desyllas, 2007). Mozambican migrants in this study who ended up selling sex in for example Portugal or Scandinavia complained that the police often targeted them as either criminal traffickers or as poor victims who needed to be saved from the sex industry and sent back to their families, even when they denied that this was the case and insisted they wanted to keep working. Furthermore, setting up migrant surveillance systems, including border controls and strengthening law enforcement, may force migrants into the arms of criminal gangs and make them travel routes that are more insecure and potentially fatal (Plambech, 2014).Paradoxically, the more impenetrable the borders of Europe become, the more migrants become dependent on people who can help them penetrate these borders by organizing illegal transportation and human smuggling. Recent years' stories of thousands of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean Sea as they desperately embark overcrowded smuggling ships from Northern Africa to Europe are tragic illustrations of unfortunate outcomes of not being able to enter Europe by legal and secure means (Lucht, 2011).

Conclusion from fighting visible symptoms to fighting invisible root causes

So by focusing solely on the persecution of human traffickers and closing off national borders, the Western politicians today merely battle the highly visible symptoms of a globally disparate world system. Maybe it is time to address the more invisible root causes of human trafficking and the social conditions under which it is allowed to flourish. To do this effectively politicians and citizens must pay attention to poverty, social inequalities and unemployment in poor regions of the world and above all discuss the sometimes unintended, sometimes recognized but self-interestedly not seriously dealt with social and lethal consequences of impenetrable borders around Europe. It is unlikely that legal instruments of policing and border control will ensure that migrants can live in a safer or more just world. Merely focusing on criminal aspects of migration and sexual labour without addressing the structural root causes will not give daughters of poor African families' access to alternative livelihoods, safety on the road and freedom from bonded sexual labour. It is time to address the global structures

that nurture human trafficking and the policies that fail to prevent it. It is time to provide enduring safety and basic human rights to migrants and other potential victims as they move through a world of social inequalities. Fighting for the safety and rights of migrants implies that we begin to understand why they migrate and how they become vulnerable. When developing anti-trafficking measures governments and NGOs need to include the perspectives of migrant workers and trafficked persons. Listening to migrant organizations and focusing on migrant workers' and sex workers' rights and protection might be the first step in this direction.

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