



On the Record: Girls for Sale

Issue 5: The Advocate

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The Advocate

It was a delicious moment, definitely not to be missed. The Deputy-Governor of Lagos State -- one of Nigeria's most prominent women politicians -- was receiving a delegation that wanted her support for their campaign against the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe.

Trafficking is not the concern in Lagos that it is in Benin City, and the Deputy-Governor seemed preoccupied by other matters. She wanted to talk about the participation of women in politics, about which she has plenty to say.

But Olabisi Olateru-Olagbegi, who headed the visiting delegation, was not to be deterred. Not only was she determined to get the Deputy-Governor on her side, but she wanted the state government to fund a center of rehabilitation in Lagos for girls who manage to escape the traffickers. Bisi pulled out a written text, read it carefully for the assembled television cameras, and waited innocently for a response.

There was no way out for the Deputy-Governor. A center would eat into the state budget, but trafficking was an issue that had even caught the attention of the wife of the Vice-President of Nigeria. There could be no equivocating in front of the media. What better time to sign up than here and now -- with the cameras rolling? The Deputy-Governor fell into line and pledged support for the center. One more influential voice in the campaigners' corner. One more notch on the star-studded belt of Olabisi Olateru-Olagbegi.

Bisi (as she is known by one and all) is easy to underestimate. Stocky of build and with a wicked sense of humor -- "I have to watch my height!" -- she is equally at home in a law court and a wedding. (The brighter the outfit the better.) Ask her a silly question and you get a wide-eyed expression that will likely dissolve into a fit of giggles.

Behind this disarming exterior lies one of the sharpest minds in human rights and certainly one of Nigeria's most effective advocates. We saw it many times in our recent visit. At one press conference, a journalist stood up with a slightly truculent demeanor and suggested that the trafficked girls are getting what they deserve because they choose to be prostitutes. He had seen it for himself.

The question needed to be asked. Why indeed do so many women volunteer for prostitution? But at the same time, there was something too vehement -- almost too personal -- in his interest. How could he -- a man -- have "seen it for himself?" Subtly and without intending it, he had put himself on the wrong side.

Bisi was onto it like a flash. She answered coolly and without a hint of condescension, but by the time she had finished she might as well have shouted it aloud -- "people like you are part of the problem!"

Society of Women

Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi is a successful advocate in Nigeria because she understands Nigerian society. She understands society because she is part of it.

Her great-grandfather was a king (paramount chief, also known as "Oba") in Oshun State. Her husband is a king in Ondo State. Their authority is vested in her, indiscernible to outsiders but evident to Nigerians.

This, and her connections, gives her extraordinary access. In two weeks she opened doors not just to the Deputy-Governor of Lagos State, but the wife of the governor of Edo State, the acting ambassadors at the Dutch and American embassies, and the Assistant Inspector General (AIG) of the Nigerian Federal Police Force.

We were able to see Mrs. Abimbola Ojomo, the AIG, without a pre-arranged interview because Bisi grew up with her sister. In fact, it turns out that Bisi is related to at least three senior police officials. It helps to call on an extended family like this -- particularly when you may end up criticizing police behavior or seeking to monitor the detention of Nigerian prostitutes after they have been deported from Europe. More than anyone, Bisi would know when to tone down the criticism.

She has great authority and she can also be authoritarian -- but without being pompous. No one can be pompous in Lagos with its crush of traffic, its 100-degree humidity, its faulty generators, and its piles of garbage. Paramount chief or pauper -- everyone is put through the same wringer.

Bisi sweats and smiles through it all, watching her weight. She is not always easy to work with, but she is always fun.

Prepared for Risk

Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi is the perfect partner for the more reticent activists like the Catholic sisters of Benin City, who are happy to work in the shadows. They shun publicity; she loves it. She is also ready to take risks and embarrass people.

It requires "chutzpah" to advocate for human rights in Nigeria. A lot of it. During the 1990s, Nigerians lived through the rule of one of Africa's most wretched military rulers, General "Sunny" Abacha. Abacha snuffed out democracy by nullifying elections on June 13, 1993. He then went on to embezzle millions and turned his country into an international pariah by hanging Ken Sarowiwa, the renowned Ogoni leader and poet, on a trumped-up charge of murder.

Women's groups had been relatively cushioned from military repression, but Sarowiwa's execution shocked everyone. Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi and others protested on the streets and were tear-gassed by the police. She remembers how hot it felt in her lawyer's robe and wig.

Bisi showed that she was not to be daunted again in late 1998, after a young Nigerian woman, Semira Adamu, was suffocated to death by a Belgian policeman during her deportation from Brussels.

Semira Adamu's death caused a storm in Nigeria and Europe. Not only did it show the desperate lengths to which Nigerian women would go to enter Europe, but it also underscored the risk they ran from deportation. Nigeria's military government was silent until human rights groups protested. "We told them to ask for an apology and reparations, which they finally agreed to do," recalls Bisi.

It was October 1998, and the military government forbade demonstrations. But several prominent Nigerian women's groups, headed by Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), wrote a letter to the Belgian Ambassador and announced their intention to march on the embassy. Five hundred women turned up and found the embassy ringed by armed tanks and soldiers, with the ambassador quaking somewhere inside.

With the press and TV in attendance, Bisi (the Nigerian coordinator of WILDAF) and another representative were allowed inside the embassy to meet the beleaguered ambassador. He conceded that Ms. Adamu claimed to have been trying to avoid marriage to a man aged 60, who already had three wives. Nonetheless, he explained, she had tried to enter Belgium illegally five times, and there were such things as immigration rules. The ambassador did agree to go outside and publicly apologize.

Bisi will need all of her resolve in the fight against trafficking. She had a taste of the risks recently when she went to Lagos airport to meet Rachel and Sonia, the two girls who returned from Europe. They found the traffickers also waiting for the girls. Bisi and Sister Regina confronted the traffickers and rescued the girls.

This was unnerving, but such things come with the territory. In one recent case, a girl who had been trafficked reported that her mother was killed by "the mafia" -- the generic term given to traffickers -- after she gave a statement to police. The fight against trafficking is not for the faint of heart.

The Lawyer

Respect for law runs deep in Bisi's family. Her father was a high court judge in Lagos. She herself graduated from law school in Lagos and was called to the bar in 1976. She is currently in a private practice that pays the bills for her human rights work and the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), which she founded in 1994.

She first became engaged in human rights through law in 1977, when she helped to uncover a major discrepancy in the Nigerian tax code under which male heads of households, but not women, were allowed to benefit from a tax exemption. Together with other women lawyers, Bisi started writing letters to tax officials and MPs. They got the code changed.

She was a member of the Nigerian branch of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and served as FIDA's Vice-Chairman between 1984 and 1986 and FIDA's Nigerian President in 1993-1994. FIDA campaigned for Nigerian ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). FIDA also campaigned successfully on local issues. In one example, electrical wires fell into a crowded market place and electrocuted two children. FIDA pushed the Lagos government to widen the streets and clean up the gutters.

It was during a FIDA organized visit to Minnesota in 1993 that Bisi got the idea for the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON). She went to a brown bag lunch hosted by the Minnesota Women's Consortium and was impressed by the number of different issues and campaigns that it had spawned. Something like this was needed in Nigeria, she felt. WOCON was registered as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in 1995.

It was fitting that her organization in Nigeria emerged from Bisi's international networking and not the other way around, because she is comfortable in international meetings. She was a founding member of the Nigerian branch of WILDAF, a regional group established in 1990 in Zimbabwe to build on the achievements of the U.N. Decade on Women. As the Nigerian coordinator of WILDAF for the last three years, she has used the organization to develop women's civil society.

WILDAF current consists of 44 NGOs, and each year for the last four years, it has organized a week of events on violence against women. This year, under Bisi's direction, WILDAF was able to get over 2,000 Nigerian women out for a march that culminated in a mass rally on March 8 (International Women's Day).

Membership of FIDA and WILDAF has given Bisi a reputation in the African women's movement, and she was able to extend this to the United Nations in June 1998, at the plenipotentiary conference in Rome to create an international criminal court. Bisi was a prominent member of the NGO women's caucus, which succeeded in getting a gender perspective into the statute of the new court.

This proved to be one of the most controversial items on the Rome agenda, and the women's

caucus ran into a firestorm from the Vatican when it tried to incorporate forced pregnancy into the list of gender-related war crimes. But Bisi herself emerged as one of the most responsible caucus leaders. She was conciliatory but firm (as one would expect of a campaigner against trafficking), and she impressed observers -- including the Advocacy Project. From that association grew this series of On the Record.

The Issue

Trafficking is the perfect vehicle for a person of Bisi's talents and the network she has created. It is a key issue in one of Africa's key countries at a key time in the struggle for women's rights. And Bisi is just the right person to put it on the international agenda.

The mystery is that it has taken this long. All of the recent international attention has been on trafficking from Asia and East Europe, almost none on Nigeria. Yet Nigerian women have been a familiar sight in Europe for years, and the issue is red hot in Nigeria itself. At one conference in Lagos, Ufot Ekaette, a prominent Nigerian businesswoman who visited Italy recently, said that prostitution in Italy is so closely associated with Nigerians that "decent" black women are liable to have their breasts and buttocks fondled by Italian men.

Although trafficking from Nigeria has not received the attention it deserves in international circles, it goes to the heart of the country's transition from military rule. During the 1990s, traffickers were able to exploit the poverty, corruption, and collapse of services that occurred under military rule. To many Nigerians things do not look much better after a year of democracy: there are tensions in the Muslim north, basic services are still unreliable, and security remains a problem.

Most serious, poverty and underdevelopment remain chronic -- and from them comes trafficking. There are ominous signs that the traffickers are moving out of Edo State, where they have been concentrated. Two Nigerian women recently came out of hiding in the north, after being trafficked to Saudi Arabia and escaping. They had thought they were heading off for the Haj pilgrimage. According to the Nigerian police, girls from 14 different states have been among those recently deported from Europe.

It is too much to expect that this can be prevented by development assistance, but aid donors should certainly start to consider trafficking in designing aid programs. It might be one way to inject badly needed funds into education and other social programs.

This would seem obligatory on Italy, where Nigerian prostitutes are treated badly and then kicked out of the country. Bisi nodded vigorously during our meeting with Nigeria's second most senior police official, who observed coldly that Italian men seemed to like sex with Nigerian girls and that maybe -- just maybe -- Italy might just bear some responsibility.

WOCON took up the issue of trafficking in 1997, at the request of the United Nation's rapporteur on violence against women. Bisi and Grace Osakue jointly authored a report on trafficking, which revealed the practice to be far more widespread than they had previously thought.

WOCON's members met and decided to launch a campaign. "There was a lot we did not understand," recalls Bisi. Like a growing number of Nigerian campaigners, Bisi took it on herself to visit some of the women while she was in Rome for the conference on a criminal court. "You could tell the ones who were abused," she says. "They looked so shifty. It was very strange."

Trafficking challenges Bisi as a woman, a mother, a lawyer, and an advocate. The lawyer in her objects to any contract that relies on duress. Bonded labor is, to her, one of the ultimate abuses.

In spite of this, she does not feel that laws are necessarily the best or only solution. She is particularly wary about calling for prostitution to be declared a crime. As well as being unenforceable, she feels that this would criminalize the victim, force the practice underground, and -- like abortion -- increase the risk of abuse.

"If you want to use your body there should be sufficient laws to protect you from abuse. It's the harassment and slave-like conditions that need to be criminalized."

Bisi the mother has four children, two of them girls in their early twenties, and she cannot imagine what it must be like to learn that a daughter has been sucked into prostitution in a far-off country. "I would die. I would feel so empty and sad." The threat from HIV-AIDS adds a new and ominous dimension. It is every parent's worst nightmare to watch helplessly as a child engages in destructive behavior. Prostitution is as risky as it can get.

The Organization

In WOCON, Bisi has fashioned a vehicle for her own unique brand of advocacy. In its own way, WOCON is also a perfect example of women's civil society in countries that are emerging from a prolonged crisis. Its equivalent is to be found in Kosovo, Cambodia, Guatemala, and Bosnia.

Rather like AWEG in Benin City, WOCON has a core group of (25) individual members who each contribute 500 Naira (\$5) a year. Eleven women's organizations are affiliated. But WOCON's real strength lies in its extended family of friends, colleagues, and partners who drift in and out depending on the issue.

It is personal -- almost tribal -- in nature. Bisi's closest collaborator, Toyn, is a former classmate and lawyer who was the chief magistrate in a northern state until she was forced to leave by unrest. She came south to Lagos, set up her own law firm, and gravitated back into Bisi's orbit. Low key and practical, as well as being an excellent lawyer, Toyn provides an important foil for Bisi's inspiration.

Another friend and collaborator is Tosin, a journalist and broadcaster who works in the press department of the Women in Law and Development Centre Nigeria (WLDCN), a WOCON network member. Tosin is always available for a WOCON press event and acts as unofficial WOCON spokesperson.

Zuwaira Gambo is another close friend from northern Nigeria and WOCON member, who is married to a senior police officer and serves as Secretary-General of the Defense Officers' Wives

Association. The police were associated with military rule and were detested during the Abacha era. But they are also being killed in large numbers in the line of duty, leaving widows who find it hard to collect a pension. This is a mainstream women's issue. Zuwaira is considering opening a WOCON office in the north.

When Bisi was looking for a collaborator to research trafficking in 1997, she asked Grace Osakue, the Nigeria Coordinator of the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (IRRRAG). Grace is a considerable authority on women's issues in her own right, and IRRRAG works with 36 women's groups in the three states of Edo, Kaduna, and Cross River.

Last December Bisi went looking for speakers on trafficking for a conference she was organizing in Lagos. Among those she asked was Nosa Aladeselu, the President of AWEG in Benin City, and her AWEG colleague Esther Onosode.

Nothing is more important to WOCON and its friends than to have a clear and sober understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of this formula.

Like AWEG in Benin City -- and so many successful women's groups -- WOCON illustrates the flexibility of women's civil society and the effortless way it coalesces around a cause. Last year it might have been elections. This year it could be trafficking.

Its small staff is formidably determined, and in this it reflects the outsized personality of its founder. Bisi's great success lies in having persuaded others to buy into her vision, and once they have set their sights on something, they can put up with astonishing amounts of incompetence and discomfort. Press statements get printed in the middle of an electricity blackout, speeches get written, conferences get launched. Last year WOCON completed five quite complicated and demanding projects for five distinct (and demanding) donors.

But this strength is also a weakness. There are few internal checks and balances in a group that is so dependent on a single individual, and this can lead them to overreach themselves and forget what they do best. In our view, Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi and WOCON are at their strongest when advocating. They are at their most vulnerable when delivering a service.

This has important practical implications for WOCON's campaign against trafficking. WOCON should probably concentrate on serving as an international mouthpiece and taking the campaign to the United Nations and to Europe. It should act as a catalyst for research and even coordinate research, but the actual research might be better handled by others, like IRRRAG, which have solid roots in the villages. Education against trafficking and prevention in the schools should be done by AWEG's educators like Esther and Jane, who have the expertise. Rehabilitation and counseling of girls like Berta would be best done by Catholic sisters, who have patience and experience in humanitarian work.

This kind of division of labor would make sense and play to the strengths of these partners -- all of whom need each other. The question is how they can pay for it. Volunteerism is great, but it will not buy a rehabilitation center, or a press campaign, or the protection of witnesses, or an email campaign, or the price of a plane ticket to Rome to coordinate with international NGO

partners.

At present, WOCON is subsidized entirely by Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi's law practice, with the result that both are trapped in a vicious circle: the more that Bisi has to raise funds for WOCON, the less time she has for her law practice, and the less funds are available for WOCON -- and trafficking.

The same is true of AWEG and probably of IRRRAG. Working on shoestring budgets puts these women's groups at a severe disadvantage against a practice as organized and well funded as human trafficking.

In some countries they might turn to the private sector. But not in Nigeria. Here, corporations will contribute to charities -- particularly those that are blessed by the wife of a governor or president -- but they do not contribute to civil society organizations. The one exception is to be found in the troubled Delta, where oil companies are trying to purchase the cooperation of local communities.

Until WOCON can show that trafficking is bad business, it will have to rely on foreign governments and aid agencies. Are these donors sufficiently concerned to respond? The question is one everyone's mind.

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Five Ways to Help: A Donor's Guide to Civil Society

If the answer is yes, then the Northern governments which pride themselves on supporting civil society will have to shed a considerable amount of baggage, because many of their assumptions and procedures are totally unsuited to Nigeria's fight against trafficking. There are five critically important dos and don'ts.

- Do spread money evenly.

Donors will not help to create a broad-based coalition if they throw money at computers and research, while ignoring other key components like advocacy and the rehabilitation of victims.

- Do support "core" funding before projects.

This is one of the perennial laments of civil society, particularly groups like WOCON, because project funding often does not allow them to do what they do best. There is nothing in the WOCON budget that pays Bisi to hold a press conference or lobby the Deputy-Governor of Lagos State, which are the things that really terrify traffickers.

In fact, Bisi has to resort to subterfuge to fund her advocacy, by slipping in vague cliches such as "outreach" or "promotion." More often than not, such interlopers will be spotted in the Hague or

London and struck out by a sharp-eyed civil servant who neither knows nor cares about the context in Lagos.

- Do take grantees on trust.

Funding civil society requires a leap of faith. Consider the sight that greets a potential donor to WOCON's office. After they get used to the crushing heat, they will probably notice the broken Xerox copier (not knowing how many times WOCON tried to get the local Xerox people to repair it). They will find it hard to talk above the roar of the generator (when it works).

They will try and check their email and wait impatiently to connect to the service provider. They may be told that the best time to access the internet is before 8 a.m. -- while America is still asleep -- or after 8 p.m. -- when Asia has gone to bed. This is a comment on how Africa is being bypassed by the new information technology, but it doesn't help busy aid donors, who likely have another appointment. Out they go, into the impossible traffic, wishing they were back in Brussels.

The wonder is that so much gets produced under such conditions. Yet last year, WOCON completed five separate projects (election monitoring, governance, trafficking, voter education, civil education). Each one resulted in a product.

- Do get the amounts into perspective, because they are likely to be small and well spent.

WOCON's entire budget last year was \$50,000. Small women's groups of this kind hoard their income like widows and probably make far better use of a taxpayer's dollar than the governments that fund them. Yet the smaller the amount of money requested and the more difficult the working conditions, the more demanding the donor is likely to be. WOCON will be put through more hoops to obtain a \$10,000 grant than a European emergency relief NGO asking for millions in Kosovo. A perverse Parkinson's Law seems to be at work here -- the more deserving the claimant, the harder it is for them to obtain a grant.

- Don't impose an agenda.

Donors do real damage when they try and impose their own needs on civil society. Last year, WOCON decided to hold a conference on trafficking. It approached one European government known for its commitment to civil society but was turned down. WOCON then went to UNIFEM, the U.N Fund for Women, and received some money to hold the meeting, which produced a useful report.

By now, the European government realized it had a problem in Nigeria. Its courts were beset by a sudden spate of Nigerian girls seeking asylum, and judges were beginning to ask whether it was safe to return trafficked women to places like Benin City. European NGOs were issuing critical statements. The embassy in Lagos found itself on the spot, so it turned to WOCON for help.

With no other immediate prospect of funding on the horizon, WOCON responded eagerly and put in a request that included the kind of things that would not otherwise get funding (electricity, transport, rent, light). This was duly noted back in Europe, and clarifications demanded. More forms were redrafted.

Then the government's priorities changed, and the parameters of the research shifted again. Another redraft. Then WOCON was asked to cut its request in half. Another redraft, more demands on WOCON and its staff, and less time for dealing with trafficking.

This donor was paying for research that it needed to get out of an asylum mess. This is fair enough, but this was not the same as supporting civil society to combat trafficking. In the process, it tied WOCON in knots. This sort of thing is desperately discouraging to a group of mainly volunteers.

None of these five principles will be easy for donors or for civil society. Most likely, both sides will continue in this strange minuet for some time to come.

What matters is to keep the ultimate goal clearly in view. If Western governments are sincere about putting an end to trafficking (and their recent rhetoric has certainly been deafening), they will have to invest in civil society like WOCON -- on civil society's own terms.

There is really no alternative: WOCON, AWEG, IRRRAG, and the sisters in Benin City are on the front line in the war against trafficking. No one else is ready or able to mount the same kind of challenge. And they are starting to have an impact.

Left to do it in their Nigerian own way, they will -- with the right support and encouragement -- more than fulfill their side of the bargain.

Advocacy Corner - The Partnership Between WOCON and The Advocacy Project

The Advocacy Project (AP) first met WOCON and its Executive Director Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi at the 1998 Rome plenipotentiary conference on the creation of an international criminal court. Last year, WOCON asked us for help, and three members of The Advocacy Project -- Teresa Crawford, Sieglinde Friedman, and Iain Guest -- visited Lagos in May. Together with WOCON, we agreed on a partnership aimed at strengthening WOCON's ability to advocate against trafficking at an international level.

To this point, The Advocacy Project has made the following contributions toward this partnership:

- Produced this series of *On the Record* for distribution to the WOCON and AP email distribution lists on the occasion of the Beijing Plus 5 conference.
- Delivered a video camera to WOCON in Lagos for use in WOCON's advocacy and trained the WOCON team in its use. The camera was provided by Fluidarity, an association of web developers and overseas development specialists, based in

Washington, DC, that is working to assist grass-roots groups (email: mark.cimino@juno.com).

- Identified WOCON's information technology needs and identified a technical expert in Lagos who will help to manage WOCON's computers.
- Drafted a proposal to provide WOCON with laptops, and other technical equipment that will now be submitted to donors.
- Designed a WOCON [website](#), which will be posted in early July.
- Produced a brochure on WOCON and trafficking.
- Taken still photos and video footage, which will now be used in the new WOCON web site and the AP web site (currently under construction).
- Written press statements, a press release, appeared at a press conference and conducted several television interviews -- all in partnership with WOCON.
- Developed a WOCON listserv.
- Covered the costs for Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi to participate in the Beijing Plus 5 meeting and set up a series of meetings for her in New York and Washington.