

US STATE DEPARTMENT IGNORES TRAFFICKING TO THE UNITED STATES, SAY  
NIGERIAN ANTI-TRAFFICKING ADVOCATES

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Washington, DC: Advocates in Nigeria and the United States have criticized a major new report from the US State Department for ignoring the trafficking of Nigerian women into the United States, and warned that the omission could undermine efforts to draw the huge Nigerian diaspora into the fight against household slavery in the United States.

Nigeria is among 149 governments that are rated for their efforts against trafficking in the latest Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, released annually by the State Department every June. The 2006 report assesses all governments that recorded more than 100 cases of trafficking in 2005, with the exception of the United States.

The exclusion of the United States from American human rights reports routinely irritates many foreign governments. But advocates are also upset that this TIP report appears to downplay the importance of the United States as a country of destination, even though as many as 17,500 women are trafficked into the United States each year.

Nigerian advocates pointed out that the TIP report does not list the United States among the 12 countries cited as destinations for trafficked Nigerians, in spite of several lurid cases involving Nigerians that have surfaced recently in the United States.

This was described as a "lost opportunity and a serious omission" by Africans in America Inc. (AIA), an advocacy group in New York whose president was herself trafficked from Nigeria to the United States at the age of 13. The group recently located a 67-year-old woman who had been held for 12 years in a basement by a Nigerian-born social worker in New York before she managed to escape. The woman had been hired as a maid in Nigeria and promised \$300 a week.

Bonaventure Ezekwenna, the founder of AIA Inc., said that a strong reference to such cases in the TIP report would have helped his group to publicize trafficking in the Nigerian diaspora, which numbers over 12 million, and also spread information about the risks back in Nigeria - the key to preventing the trade. "If you don't identify the problem it won't get attention or resources," he said.

This was echoed by the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) in Lagos. A WOCON statement described the omission of the United States as a country of destination for Nigerians as "quite striking" because it fails to appreciate the link between supply and demand.

An official in the US State Department told AP that the United States was specifically excluded from the scope of the TIP report by the US Congress, but that the US domestic trafficking

program is regularly reviewed by the US Justice Department.

The dispute is ironic because this year's TIP report seeks to broaden the focus from sexual trafficking to forced labor, which clearly affects Nigerians being trafficked into the United States. Nigerian women who leave for Europe, in contrast, are trafficked into prostitution - a point that is made in the TIP report.

Another goal of the report is to better understand demand in countries of destination, and here again the US would seem highly relevant. Several recent cases have involved Nigerian-born social workers, now residents in the United States, who engaged relatives in Nigeria to recruit the women as maids and then forced them into household slavery when they arrived. Mr. Ezekwenna said this sort of abuse - by people in authority who exploit their contacts in the diaspora - is an example of demand that deserves study and action.

Africans in America Inc. is now lobbying for a change in the TVPA to make it more favorable to survivors. Although the law treats trafficked women as victims, not criminals, and offers them the chance to receive a special immigration status ("T visa") in return for denouncing their trafficker, only 112 "T visas" were issued last year - a small percentage of those who are actually trafficked.

One reason, say advocates, is that "T visas" are given to those who report within about three years and are able to testify in court against their traffickers. Many survivors who escape are so traumatized by their ordeal and illegal status that they go underground instead of reporting to the authorities.

AIA Inc. is seeking an amnesty for all trafficked survivors in the United States, and an amendment in the TVPA that will remove the unofficial three-year limitation. AIA Inc. will also lobby US State Department officials to improve the reporting methodology.

John Miller, Director of the TIP office, told a congressional hearing last week that next year's report will focus more on the work of NGOs, and list best practices. Some would like the United States to go further and intervene diplomatically on behalf of advocates who face intimidation from traffickers. In one example, Mr. Ezekwenna from AIA Inc. is being sued for defamation in a Nigerian court by the relative of a man and wife who were jailed in the United States for trafficking. The case will be heard on July 10 in the town of Ogidi, Anambra state. Mr. Ezekwenna has received threats against his life.

The Advocacy Project has been working for six years to publicize Nigerian trafficking and support anti-trafficking advocacy. AP has recruited three interns to work on trafficking with AP partner organizations in Nigeria and Italy this year, and is working with Africans in America Inc. to bring advocates to the United States to publicize Nigerian trafficking with the Nigerian diaspora.

- [Africans in America](#).
- Visit [WOCON's](#) website.
- Visit [TAMPEP's](#) website.

- Read the blogs of [Jessica](#) and [Laura](#) from Nigeria and [Anya](#) from Italy.