

Seminar Report: 'Experts Seminar on Strategies to Address Contemporary Forms of Slavery'

VENUE: MacArthur Foundation, Abuja.

DATE: 4TH JULY, 2017

On Tuesday July 4th 2017, LEDAP conducted a seminar on contemporary slavery with representatives from law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations and charities that directly support victims. After a general introduction, participants were reminded that the seminar was aimed at practical solutions to the problem of contemporary slavery and encouraged all participants to be results oriented in their comments and discussions.

The introductory presentation was given by Ameze Belo-Osagie, LEDAP's research assistant. She presented a paper that overviewed major developments in Nigeria's approach to contemporary slavery cases in light of the Trafficking in Persons Prohibition, Enforcement and Administration Act of 2015. Following this talk, participants asked questions about the research methodology that the paper used, asking how interviews with NAPTIP agents were organized and structured. One particularly pointed comment suggested that it would be better to focus on the economic push factors that facilitate contemporary slavery than focus on the minutiae of the law.

Subsequently, Mr. Mbami gave a presentation that focused on human trafficking in Northern Nigeria, paying close attention to the religious and cultural factors that facilitated the problem. He noted that sexual harassment and early marriage were major problems, exacerbated by the fact that there tends to be a large age gap between women and their partners. The prevalence of early marriage has caused vesico-vaginal fistulas to become a significant public health challenge and has implications for maternal and infant mortality. He reported using petitions as a source of public pressure to force police to intervene in cases when they were otherwise unwilling.

In addition, he brought along two victims of early marriage who shared their experiences, Aishatu and Fatima. Aishatu was married off at 16 by her paternal uncle to a much older man. Her schooling was interrupted by the marriage and her mental and physical health were severely affected as her husband began to physically abuse her. She ran away repeatedly, seeking refuge among various relatives but was always returned. Eventually, her father agreed to help her break the marriage and she sought further help to return to school. She has now successfully returned and received her diploma, demonstrating that programs to reintegrate victims of forced marriage into education can be successful.

Fatima had a very similar story, having also been married off by paternal relatives. She spoke movingly about her husband's issues with alcoholism and the maltreatment she faced from his other wives and children. After running away to her relatives, her parents agreed to support her in getting a divorce. She has now returned to secondary school and is reenrolled in SS1. Their stories stressed the importance of safe havens for young women who escape from forced marriages and highlighted some of the

psychosocial challenges that women face after leaving these marriages, including social stigma and difficulties entering into new relationships

After a short break, Dr. Gamawa, a legal academic gave a presentation that focused on his experience attempting to address child marriage in public interest litigation. He argued that most marriages in Nigeria are actually informal, since they are often not filtered through the legal system or registered in any official way. Thus, there is a lack of evidence on how widespread and pronounced child marriage actually is. Because of a strong cultural precedent supporting child marriage, punishment is often counterproductive and can prompt backlash amongst local communities.

Instead, Dr Gamawa argued that campaigners should focus on sensitizing communities to the economic, physical and social consequences of early marriage and the benefits of educating young women. He argued that secondary school principals should be better leveraged by these activists, as they were often the first community leaders to be aware of girls dropping out of school. Additionally, he argued that campaigners should try to undermine the cultural belief that parenting is a responsibility that should not be subject to any kind of outside scrutiny. Rather, we should promote the idea that there are some general standards of behavior and treatment which all parents should follow, albeit in slightly different ways.

One commenter took issue with Dr. Gamawa's assertion that punishment was ineffective, arguing that any kind of effective enforcement would require penalties. She also noted that a lack of coordination and competition between agencies and various campaigning groups was harming the progress of the movement to eliminate child marriage. Dr. Gamawa contended that, while enforcement can be successful, Nigeria lacked the infrastructure needed to enforce marriage laws consistently. Enforcement alone doesn't form long term habits.

A representative from NAPTIP then gave a presentation that focused on the challenges of enforcement. He noted that NAPTIP had improved its capacity to investigate cases, using more and more digital evidence from mobile phones. Commenters questioned on why cases that had drawn media attention had not been successfully prosecuted. A representative of the Nigerian police argued that police officers often felt that they had limited legitimacy in enforcing the law, particularly in areas where traditional or religious leaders appeared not to endorse their presence. He claimed that the police did not always have a monopoly on violence in Nigeria and could risk their lives by trying to arrest influential or powerful individuals.

After a short break, Barrister Adebayo Iyanda, representing the Center for Counter-Fraud Awareness gave a presentation on child labour. First, he defined child labour, noting that it referred to work interrupted children's education, was hazardous to their health and was illegal. He offered statistics to contextualize Nigeria's problem stating that, with 15 million child labourers, Nigeria was 8th most affected country in the world. Barr. Adebayo analysed the causes and effects of child labour, particularly stressing how it affects the human capital and economic potential of the population by taking children out of school. To conclude, he discussed the work that the CCFA were doing to address child labour. Apart from trainings and sensitization workshops at schools to make children better informed, the CCFA is also compiling a database of individuals who are engaged in child labour and collate statistics. Similarly to a previous commenter, he stressed the importance of treating economic root causes to solve the problem.

Finally, Mr. Chino Obiagwu summarized the major points highlighted in previous presentations and stressed the need to collaborate and take better advantage of synergies in various programs tackling contemporary slavery.