Helping the Lost Youth of Tanzania

“I feel really bad about what happened to me. I’ve lost my virginity and... the pain I felt when I was raped... if I hadn’t run away, my life would have been lost.”

A simple, factual statement by a 14-year-old Tanzanian girl delivered matter-of-factly on the trauma she suffered during the last month of a seven year human trafficking ordeal.

P. was seven years old when her maternal uncle turned up at her home with a stranger, a female soldier. He convinced her mother to let the soldier take P. to Dar es Salaam to work in her home. In return, there were promises of schooling and being well looked after.

Although P., the eldest of four children, didn’t want to leave home, her mother forced her to go. She trusted her brother.

Instead of going to school along with the soldier’s own children, P. spent long days cooking, cleaning, washing clothes – and being beaten. A lot, she adds. The trafficker had never shown her how to do things, so when she didn’t do things right, she would get a beating.

“Even her own children were scared of her. They would run away from her whenever she was around, so you can imagine what it was like for me,” she says.

After several months of this, P. was sent by the trafficker to another house as a domestic servant. Her new “employer” paid the trafficker a regular sum for her services.

P. was desperate to go to school, but it was three years before her employer relented, feeling guilty at seeing P. work so hard with no reward. Wanting to see the girl do well, the employer sent her to an informal school with tuition so she could pass an examination allowing her into a formal school.

It was hard work combining household duties with school, but P. didn’t mind so much because she had got what she had been promised. But it wasn’t to last. A few years later, the trafficker heard about her schooling and came to take her back. The employer was too scared of her to protest.

Back in the trafficker’s house, P.’s situation was to take a turn for the
worse. Using her as a domestic slave was no longer enough for the trafficker. One day, the trafficker took P. to a place and left her there with two men.

With the barest of details, P. recounts how one man held her down while the other raped her. She remembers she was in a “bad” state when she was taken back to the house. Bleeding, she told a neighbour and one of the trafficker’s daughters what had happened. They were kind enough and took her to the hospital for treatment, much to the trafficker’s fury when she found out later that evening.

It was not long before another rape was organized. But this time, P. screamed so loudly and so repeatedly that the men got scared and ran away. Her cries had brought others to her. Seeing her, they took her back to the trafficker’s house.

“I realized that if I stayed, there would be much more of this. So I grabbed my kanga cloth and ran,” she recounts.

She was to be lucky. A woman on the road saw P. crying, in scant, dirty and smelly clothes and clearly bleeding. She was in a pitiful state. The woman contacted Kiwodhede, a non-governmental organization (NGO) assisting vulnerable women and girls which, since 2005, has been supported by IOM to help girl victims of trafficking.

P’s story is not unique. Nor is it an example of the worst suffering at the hands of a human trafficker. But it is one that is being repeated in various forms across the country, particularly in Tanzania’s urban centres such as the capital, Dar es Salaam.

Economic growth and development in urban areas coupled with climactic changes, lack of irrigation infrastructure and decreasing water supplies that make farming a less viable and popular way of eking out a living, have sparked a massive rural-urban migration flow in recent decades.

With that migration has come new social trends with worrying consequences. The exodus to towns and cities has created a growing demand for domestic servants in urban Tanzanian households, no matter one’s social standing.

“Human trafficking has been around for a very long time,” says Sabas Masawe, project coordinator for Dogodogo, Tanzania’s oldest NGO working with street children. “It’s just that now we have a name for it.”

It’s an allusion to the age-old African custom of putting one’s child into the care of another family member or friend so they are better provided for. But the traditional “fostering” system is being abused, as elsewhere in Africa, to exploit children for free labour.

Social workers say extended family structures in Tanzania that have provided a safety net for children have changed or are falling apart. Rural-urban migration, economic development, the impact of HIV and AIDS which has decimated families, and the declining importance of tribal identity, have all contributed to breaking bonds and undermining the traditional extended family structure and with it, the sense of responsibility for others other than your own.

Omari Abunga, is a social worker for Child in the Sun (CIS), one of seven NGO’s that IOM is supporting with Japanese and US government funding through training, and the provision of food, shelter, educational, livelihood, counselling, health, and family reunification and reintegration assistance for victims of trafficking. In the two years that IOM has teamed up with CIS to help boy victims of trafficking, 65 children have been assisted.

Often going to rural areas to reunite children with their families or for follow-up visits, Omari says that villagers are increasingly telling him of strangers coming to them from urban areas and asking for children for work.
An Invisible Victim

A beautiful woman of 32 years of age, Mama J., stands tall in a tiny room barely big enough to swing a cat. It houses a bed, a small cupboard, a set of drawers and a couple of chairs. Thanks to a policewoman, who rents it out to her for 10,000 shillings a month, it is home to her and her two daughters, aged six and four. All three are HIV positive. And no-one among her knows.

Mama J. was trafficked by her brother to Dar es Salaam from her home region of Kaghera when she was just 16. Arriving with lots of gifts and promises, he had told her she would be able to study in the capital and she had willingly gone with him. But instead of school, she became housemaid to him and his wife for three years. There was no pay, leftover scraps to eat, very long hours and only a floor to sleep on when the others had gone to bed.

Her situation only ended when she married a truck driver friend of her brother’s who had been sympathetic to her situation. In time, they had two children. But her husband became sick. Dying from AIDS, he told his family in the northern town of Mwanza to come and get him, blaming Mama J. for the disease. So they left her and the children on their own with no means of support.

She doesn’t want to talk about how she and her daughters survived after that, but it is not hard to guess. For two years she got by, but often by having to depend on the kindness of others. It was only when she met a policewoman in 2007 who rented her a room in her compound with deferred payment for six months that things looked more hopeful. Borrowing money from a friend, she bought stock to set herself up as a second-hand clothes seller. It’s not an easy life, but she cannot return to her home village. Her mother cannot look after her, nor does she have the hope of being trafficked to Tanzania to work in various industries including fishing, domestic market, but also in the fishing and to Zanzibar to work not only in the gold. In a country where the majority of the population is dependent on subsistence farming, such myths act as a significant pull for mainly illiterate and as garden workers.

But human trafficking isn’t the only consequence of this rural-urban migration. Urban areas are also magnets for another group of children, mainly boys. In recent decades, Dar es Salaam, Moshi, Arusha and other urban centres have increasingly become home to thousands of street children who have run away from home. No-one knows how many.

Social workers from the NGOs CIS, Dogodogo and Mkombozi which works in the north of country, all agree that numbers are increasing even though the occasional police crackdown forces the children to go underground for a period of time.

Father Anthony, Rector of CIS, thinks the growing prevalence of children on the streets is a combination of several factors. Urban migration has fuelled the myth of getting rich quick and the “city” has become a paradise where streets are proverbially paved with gold. In a country where the majority of the population is dependent on subsistence farming, such myths act as a significant pull for mainly illiterate children from broken, dysfunctional families where marriages have broken down and remarriages cause tension and often violence and abuse.

Usually struggling to feed and look after their children, parents in rural areas are becomingly easier to trick into parting with their offspring. Although not common, some parents are giving a child away, he says, for between 60,000 -100,000 Tanzanian shillings (US$45-US$75).

However, the typical profile of a trafficker is rather different.

“Through our outreach efforts and direct assistance to victims of trafficking, we know that 80 per cent of victims are trafficked by either family members or close family friends,” says IOM’s counter-trafficking specialist in Tanzania, Monika Peruffo. “In some cases, people are using their own siblings as slaves.”

Although there is incidence of people being trafficked to Tanzania to work in various industries including fishing, human trafficking in this large East African country is mainly internal. And while there is also evidence of trafficking for sexual exploitation, Tanzanian children are largely trafficked for labour, especially to big cities like the capital and to Zanzibar to work not only in the domestic market, but also in the fishing industry and as garden workers.

“Although our primary focus is in helping child victims of trafficking, we know that we cannot separate their plight from that of street children, some of whom turn out to be trafficking victims too,” IOM’s Peruffo says. “We are partnering with NGO’s that have been set up for street children because they are an existing structure helping abused and exploited children, even though until very recently, there was no awareness of human trafficking and so no-one was looking out for such a thing.”

Through that partnership, some issues have become clear. There is a need for
Work is underway to build a new kitchen and dining room at the vocational training centre for vulnerable women and girls run by the NGO Faraja in Arusha. The building work and support for victims of trafficking is funded by IOM through its Japanese and US-government counter-trafficking programme. © IOM 2009 (Photo: Jemini Pandya)

Trafficked girls learn new skills that will provide them with a livelihood option once they leave Faraja’s vocational training centre. © IOM 2009 (Photo: Jemini Pandya)

Dogodogo social worker, Omari Abunga, persuades eight-year-old Alphonse to leave the streets and go to the NGO’s shelter in the city. It will be some time before his true story is known. © IOM 2009 (Photo: Jemini Pandya)

Older boys at an IOM supported Child in the Sun shelter are given livelihood training as well as schooling to give them something with which they can earn a living after they leave. © IOM 2009 (Photo: Jemini Pandya)
Thirteen-year-old Medad is an engaging child. Intelligent, creative, gentle and full of smiles, he isn’t shy of sharing his aspirations. He wants to be like Akon - a Senegalese-American musician known the world over.

Rescued from the streets of Dar es Salaam by Dogodogo, Medad now has a chance for a future that would have been unimaginable a few months ago.

The fifth of six children to parents in Rukwa region in western Tanzania, he ran away from home in January 2009. His story is typical of Tanzania’s street children. A broken family with parents each remarrying with neither step-parent wanting him around, Medad was torn into two. He had to drop out of school through non-payment of fees and was often at receiving end of “serious beatings” from an increasingly drunk father.

Sneaking onto a train to Dar, he survived for two months on the streets but only because other street children at the railway station took him under their wing. But he didn’t like his new life of petty crime, begging and smoking dope so he ran away from the other children too. He had other ideas for his life.

After surviving two days on the streets by begging, he had the good sense to agree to go to the Dogodogo shelter when one of its social workers approached him.

He hasn’t looked back since. Wanting to practice the English that he is rapidly picking up, he wants to tell his story in this new language. And only gives up after much effort and great reluctance. But you know that it won’t be long before he gets there. He’s enjoying his return to formal schooling that being at Dogodogo entails. His aptitude means that doors could open for him giving not only him hope for a better future but also Tanzania which needs to make the most of all its human potential.

Dogodogo, the latest of IOM’s NGO partners providing assistance to child victims of trafficking, says it has “given identities to 2,000 children” since 1992, according to its founder, Sister Jean. However, lack of funding beyond the end of 2009 could soon shut down the organization and the shelter that for longer than any other organization has been a safe haven for the capital’s lost youth, commanding widespread affection everywhere.

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better and age-appropriate counselling techniques, both of victims of trafficking and of street children. Unable to trust others, especially adults, it takes a long time and sometimes never, for the children to reveal who they are or what happened to them, making it much harder to assist them and eventually to reunite some of them with their families.

That reunification and reintegration back in their home communities, particularly for victims of trafficking, is the preferred solution for IOM and the NGOs in a country where there is no long-term institutional support available for children if they refuse to go back home. But reunification is not always possible. Almost all the children prefer to stay in the shelters where there is a reliable supply of food and school or vocational training. Life back in rural areas would be much harder. For some, there is simply no-one to reunify with. Parents or family members have died from malaria, AIDS or other diseases.

Unable to assist them indefinitely, all the NGO’s can do is reluctantly acknowledge that some of the street children and victims of trafficking will end up having to fend for themselves.

Regina Mandia, the counter-trafficking project officer at Kiwodhede, which has helped 188 girl victims of trafficking since it teamed up with IOM, says half of the girls don’t want to return home.
“What we have to do is to look out for the children’s future. Parents don’t care for their children. They value their land, cows, wives, many wives, but they don’t care about their children’s future,” she stresses.

Tanzania’s new anti-trafficking law passed in 2008 is proving to be useful she says in raising levels of consciousness that trafficking is not a good thing.

“We find families are feeling guilty. They start to realize that what they did or are doing is bad. Before the legislation, we couldn’t say to families that we could take them to the police. Now we do and it scares them,” she says with a smile.

It’s an attack on the weak because it has proved notoriously difficult to bring the traffickers to justice. In their history, Kiwodhede have only twice gone after traffickers with the law – not for trafficking, but for rape. One case ended in imprisonment. The other is stuck in legal quagmire.

Regina says she would like to go after P.’s trafficker. But it is a forlorn hope.

For P., happy in the knowledge that she is safe now, the future is infinitely brighter. At the centre for less than a month, she seems to have settled in relatively well and is looking forward to going back to school. Her plans for the future?

“Before, I wanted to be a nun,” she says self-consciously. “But if I can’t be a nun, then I want to work in an office,” she ends laughingly.  □