En/Gendered and Vulnerable Bodies: Migration, Human Trafficking and Cross-border Prostitution in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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Abstract

In this paper, incidents of forced migration, human trafficking and cross-border prostitution are interpreted as negative consequences of globalization. Data for this paper are taken from Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, which privileges a state of heightened feminization of migration for clearly exploitative intention(s). The novel reinforces the capacity of literature to implicate the globalization of economic opportunities, which has been identified as one of the factors responsible for forced migration and the trafficking of vulnerable women into cross-border prostitution. Thus, the novel privileges vulnerability as a major condition for trapping disadvantaged women into the intricate web of sexual enslavement, exploitation, bodily harm, and sometimes brutal death. The paper concludes that the condition of vulnerability, push/pull factors, and the socio-economic problems created by globalization in disadvantaged countries must be addressed, to deprive vices such as human trafficking and cross-border prostitution virile recruiting grounds.

Key words: vulnerability, cross-border prostitution, human trafficking, migration, globalization, postmodernity

Introduction

In today's globalized world, there is a clear connection between migration, human trafficking, and cross-border prostitution. The relationship among the three phenomena can be located in the extant reality that sex trafficking is a common form of trafficking in persons (Efrat, 2016). Meanwhile, sex trafficking is being increasingly fueled by the feminisation of migration as human traffickers target vulnerable women for exploitation under the banner of globalisation. Further underscoring the link between human trafficking and prostitution, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (2009:6) reveals that 79% of human trafficking is reportedly for prostitution. Article 3 of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, otherwise known as the "Palermo Protocol" also establishes a nexus between human trafficking and prostitution:

> trafficking in persons shall mean by the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (UNHCR, 2000).

The Palermo Protocol is explicit in placing human trafficking and prostitution together. However, it also admits the connection of both phenomena to what I call the 'condition of

vulnerability,' which makes the exploitation of persons possible in the first place–which is the central argument of this paper. Therefore, this paper contributes to the debate on migration, human trafficking, and cross-border prostitution, by casting the phenomena as independent but interrelated concepts invariably tied to globalization. As an epoch, globalization's core principles are encapsulated in the idea of the world as a global village, where the free movement of goods, services and persons is the order of the day. However, since its ascendancy, the epoch appears to have created more grounds for the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable by the rich and powerful.

Several studies have been conducted on migration, human trafficking, and cross-border prostitution (Poulin 2003; Outshoorn 2005; McFadyen and Collins 2009: Eze 2014; Efrat 2016) either as distinct concepts or to show the nexus between them. The difference of this work from others is that it privileges globalization and its capacity to create the condition of vulnerability on which migration and the trafficking of persons for sexual exploitation rests. The central argument in this paper, which explores Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, is that persons who are trafficked into sexual slavery, whether they are coerced, tricked, migrate on their own and/or willingly submit themselves to be trafficked, are victims marked out for exploitation due to their status, which is created by the globalization of economic opportunities in a highly interconnected world. By focusing on the existential predicaments of four trafficked and exploited women, Unigwe's novel becomes a veritable site for espousing the position that vulnerability is the first condition human traffickers locate in the recruitment of persons for sexual exploitation.

Globalization: Linking Migration, Human Trafficking and Cross-border Prostitution

The nature of migration, human trafficking and prostitution have morphed over the years, changing from the pre-modern era due to remarkable transformations occasioned by today's

globalized world. The shift in the nature of prostitution in particular is tied to a new world order of modernity and globalization, both of which facilitate the movement of goods and persons across international boundaries. Subsumed within this shift is the twin concept of space and place and their relationship with the discursive engagement of globalization based on what is considered as the "dialectical intermingling of the local and the global." (Connell and Marsh 2011: xiv)

Outshoorn (2005:141) defines prostitution as "the exchange of sex or sexual services for money or other material benefits." Invariably, cross-border prostitution, which is the practice where women provide sexual services as economic migrants, mostly as victims of human trafficking or because they are in search of survival opportunities, has gained global attention and notoriety. With goods and services "freely" crossing borders on the back of globalization, prostitution as a form of service could no longer be strictly confined within national borders. Since "the script of globalization may already … be engendering economic differences" (Gibson-Graham 2011:44) which manifest in wide disparities among countries, the agency and urgency of survival which are known to leave very little to chance, have increasingly forced some vulnerable women (mostly from disadvantaged countries) into cross-border prostitution as escape routes.

Locating the nexus between new levels of forced migration, human trafficking, cross-border prostitution and economic disparity in a globalized world, Outshoorn (2005:141) writes that "partly due to improved transportation and communication networks, migration and trafficking have grown immensely on a worldwide scale. It has led to a different composition of the sex work labor market in the West and has renewed interest in women being trafficked from poorer countries to provide these services." Clearly, a world of high modernity and glaring economic disparities has created an ugly reality in which vulnerable women from poorer countries are ferried away as sex slaves to richer ones, where they exist to satisfy the sexual fantasy and

libido of persons who pay for sex. This atrocious reality also brings to the fore the roles which race, class, place, and privilege play with regard to migration, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation of women globally. It is well depicted in Unigwe's novel that the place and privilege of those who buy sex, often so glaringly accentuates the race and vulnerability of most women who trade in sex for survival.

The metamorphosis of the sex trade on the back of globalization has also been acknowledged by Connell and Marsh (2011:2), who capture the trend within "the neologism of glocal" which is further encapsulated in "the dialectical movement between the local and the global, or between the particular and the universal." On the same subject, Aderinto (2015:175) asserts that cross-border prostitution has morphed by "becoming one of the foremost features of the new globalization." The assertion implies that prostitution has adapted to a changing economic world order, transforming from national, sub-regional and continental variants into an intercontinental one, which thrives within the wider migration and human trafficking framework.

The belief that globalization supports the economic enslavement of persons from disadvantaged societies is supported by Alamu (2016:3), who opines that the epoch exists mainly to promote the "capitalist restructuring of the international order beginning with the internationalization of the phenomenon of slavery and the subsequent economic enslavement of the Third World." Arising from the foregoing, a significant percentage of humanity has now been enslaved within national boundaries, partly due to the dire economic realities brought on by the globalization of economic opportunities, which empowers rich and powerful countries to the detriment of the poor ones and their citizens. Globalization has therefore led to "the emergence of a homogenizing capitalist culture" (Connell and Marsh 2011:2), which allows the big capitalist economies to swallow the smaller and fragile ones as the global economy is viciously compressed

to the advantage of the former. As a result, citizens of poor and developing countries are left vulnerable, unprotected and in a heightened state of desperation to survive within or outside boundaries, as they daily confront the crises of globalization, of which forced migration, human trafficking and cross-border prostitution are emblematic.

Economics Online defines globalization as "the integration of markets in the global economy, leading to the increased interconnectedness of national economies." The definition underscores the role of modernity in engendering the interconnectivity of people and space, a strong plank on which globalization rests. Anthony Giddens, a renowned scholar on modernity, expands the argument on the connection of globalization to modernity. Giddens (1991:64) defines globalization "as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." James (2014) places globalization within three broad categories: "embodied globalization" of which the movement of people is totemic; "agency-extended globalization" which is codified in the circulation of agents of different institutions, polities, and organisations; and "object-extended globalization" which is responsible for the movement of commodities and other objects or means of exchange including sex. Thus, James (2014) supports my argument that forced migration is a crisis of globalization through his classification of all forms of globalization including movement of refugees and migrants as "embodied globalisation".

Clearly, it is quite difficult to separate the ascendancy of globalization from the advent of modernity/postmodernity; the two are closely related. As a matter of fact, globalization is built upon the foundation of high modernity. The 'global village' nature of today's world did not happen by chance; rather, it is the product of a postmodern world which became inevitable immediately after World War II. The Second World War had seen humans pushing the frontiers of technological

advancement especially in the area of communicative and transport technologies. The link between globalization and postmodernity is acknowledged by Habib (2008), who credits postmodernism with the role of creating today's world of larger economic and cultural tendencies. Putting the historical connection between postmodernity and globalization in perspective, Habib (2008:114) writes:

> Postmodernity designates a society and culture that has evolved beyond the phases of industrial and finance capitalism. This society is often consumer capitalism, a phase characterized by the global extension of capitalist markets, mass migration of labor, the predominating role of mass media and images, unprecedented economic and cultural interaction between various parts of the world, and an unparalleled pluralism and diversity at all levels of culture.

Habib's (2008) position strikes the right chord in linking postmodernity to globalization. In that sense, "the global extension of capitalist markets" and the vagaries of "consumer capitalism" explain how prostitution, a highly "localised" profession until the advent of globalization, has so easily crossed geographical and cultural borders.

The realignment of the local with the global which globalization engenders is identified by Giddens (1991) for its capacity to redefine societies and persons. Opining further, Giddens (1991:80) claims that "in a post-traditional social universe, reflexively organized, permeated by abstract systems, and in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global, the self undergoes massive change." Thus, the realignment of time and space which underlines the link between globalization, "mass migration of labor" and human trafficking cannot be missed, together with how it (globalization) has fostered "unprecedented economic and cultural interaction between various parts of the world" (Habib, 2008:114). These extant realities are well espoused in

Unigwe's novel's subliminal association of the condition of socio-economic vulnerability, sex trafficking and forced migration with the era of globalization and its consequences. *On Black Sisters' Street* helps to document how the four major characters: Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce undergo pernicious metamorphosis, conditioned by their vulnerability. In referential significance, the novel vividly illustrates how disadvantaged women can be so easily compelled to adjust their dreams and expectations to their existential predicaments and realities.

It is against this backdrop that the analysis of Unigwe's novel is built on the concept of vulnerability as the theoretical standpoint through which the position that trafficked cross-border prostitutes are "agents of their own fate" is vehemently challenged. Critics such as Aderinto (2015) reject 'victims' as a fitting categorization for all trafficked cross-border prostitutes. Advancing the position of these critics, Aderinto (2015:178) submits that "… the imposition of the language of victimization on all adult women who engage in transnational prostitution blurs personal agency by not recognizing that some women took the international voyage with prior knowledge of the risk." Aderinto (2015) argues further that some lives are not grievable because they hold no claim to "victimhood". Hence, all women who risk everything to migrate from disadvantaged societies and oftentimes end up being exploited by human traffickers should be condemned to their fate according to these critics. This paper disagrees strongly with the position that some trafficked female bodies are not grievable because that position indicates clear ignorance about feminist theorization on female bodies as well as the vulnerability and lack of autonomy which underline these bodies from birth. The position also fails to understand how globalization has heightened vulnerability in general and creates the fertile grounds on which sexual exploitation of women thrives.

Feminist Theorization on Vulnerability

The nuanced implications which the concept of vulnerability imposes on discourses on female body, conditions, and related matters, deserve some attention from the point of view of feminist theorizing. Gibbs (2018: 3) opines that vulnerability "must be understood as an affective and malleable concept, and one which performs changing work depending on the sites, subjects, and discourses to which it is attached." Therefore, leaning on vulnerability as theoretical paradigm for analysing Unigwe's novel, underscores this paper's appropriation of the concept's transformative capabilities within the wider framework of feminist privileging of women as gendered and vulnerable bodies.

There is no doubt that vulnerability privileges how socially constructed limitations are often imposed on female persons and bodies. Positing a "reconceptualization of legal personhood" in relation to feminist theorization on the "vulnerability of bodies and vulnerable embodiment," Matambanadzo (2012:71) submits that "a feminist theory of the person should ground its insights in theoretical paradigms that emphasize the shared vulnerability of human bodies and precarious possibilities embedded in embodiment." It is within this context that the dangerous and precarious possibilities embedded in the feminization of migration (on which cross-border prostitution rests) must be understood. As vividly illustrated in Unigwe's novel and the sad stories it contains, a discursive engagement of the lives and actions of female economic migrants who are trafficked for sex must recognize their condition of vulnerability. In many ways, vulnerability is tantamount to weakness and dependence; the sexual exploitation of women is usually built on both significations. Though one of the cores of feminist thinking and theorization is the argument for the autonomy of female bodies, the prevailing lack of autonomy has led to increased vulnerability

and victimhood for women in patriarchal and disadvantaged societies. As victims, women are easily prevented from gaining autonomy as Unigwe's novel shows.

Gilson (2016) establishes a strong connection between vulnerability and the victimization of women. However, she admits that the concept (vulnerability) is a vexed and controversial one for feminist theorizing, especially with regards to the sexual exploitation of women. The controversial nature of vulnerability has been noted, but it does not vitiate the fact that trafficked women exist as victimized vulnerable bodies. After all, women in many circumstances are known to negotiate for power from a position of weakness and dependency due to the condition of vulnerability. Lending credence to the issue of vulnerability (of all female bodies) within the context of feminist theory, Butler (2004:26) unequivocally highlights the existential realities being faced by these bodies:

> The *female* body implies … vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others … to touch and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprints, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do."

If a woman does not really own her body as posited by Butler (2004), would it be right to classify a female economic migrant or cross-border prostitute as an agent of her own fate and deny her of victimhood? Daily, the realities across the globe indicate that a woman's body "implies …

vulnerability, agency" while the flesh and skin of women/girls are constantly exposed "to the gaze of others … to touch and to violence" (Butler, 2004:26) from which they oftentimes do not escape. Hence, this paper insists that the condition of vulnerability is the first enabler in the migration and trafficking of women for cross-border prostitution.

Moreover, the vulnerable status of trafficked women/girls is usually marked by the presence of any, some, or all these conditionalities: beauty, lowly birth, naivete, helplessness and hopelessness, low education/lack of education, joblessness, excruciating poverty, sexual abuse and above all, desperation to migrate to a better place due to a lack of access to a better life. The presence of these conditionalities cannot be denied in the lives of Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce, the major characters in *On Black Sister's Street*, who are related not by birth but by the accident of their birth and the situations that leave them with almost no better option than relocation abroad as economic migrants and sex slaves.

From Lagos to Antwerp: On the Trail of Traffickers and Cross-border Prostitutes

The capacity of literature to refract and reflect the human society in all its goodness and grim realities is well known. Oftentimes, writers deliberately hold the torch to their society, peeking into its soul to reveal either beauty or darkness because: "if writers are the conscience of a nation, they must not be expected to select only the good to tell" (Unigwe 2012:32). By choosing to bring cross-border prostitution (together with migration and human trafficking) to the center of discourse, Unigwe's *On Black Sister' Street* like Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, identifies women as the carriers of precarious bodies. Humanizing women who go into prostitution to survive, Unigwe's novel protests the conditions under which these women are exposed to the grim realities and dangers of cross-border prostitution. Unigwe and Shaw are united in positing that

prostitution is not an act of moral failure or recklessness for the women who engage in it, but that it is rather the only choice some women are left with as an act of economic necessity, defiance, and survival, especially when faced with limited economic opportunities contrived by globalization and patriarchy.

On Black Sisters' Street "documents the plights of African bodies fleeing pain and annihilation" (Eze 2014:90); privileging in the process the important themes of migration, human trafficking, sexual enslavement, and exploitation of women as well as the commodification of female bodies. Through the treatment of the four women protagonists as mere commodities, the novel also helps to validate the notion that women are often denied the autonomy to own their own bodies in the real sense of ownership. As the plot of the novel unravels, what becomes apparent is that four vulnerable African migrant women, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, have fallen under the exploitation and money-making spell of a pimp-daddy. Dele the pimp lives in the sprawling city of Lagos, from where he traffiks women to Europe under the guise of giving them better economic prospects, charging a fee of thirty thousand euros (€30,000) per head.

Dele is a vulgar, subtle, conniving, and ruthless recruiter who employs threat(s) and brute force to assert his authority and keep the trafficked women in line: "No try cross me o. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!" (42), he warns one of the recruited girls, Sisi, of the consequences of playing smart once she lands in Europe. Underscoring the organized crime credentials and seriousness of human trafficking rings, Dele again boasts to Sisi: "I get connections […] As long as you dey ready to work you go make am. You work hard and five hundred euro every month no go hard for you to pay. Every month I send gals to Europe. Antwerp. Milan. Madrid. My gals dey there. Every month, four gals. Sometimes five or more" (42). In the same breath, Dele also establishes the link between globalization and human trafficking, by inadvertently revealing how

the former has helped human traffickers to carry out their nefarious trade across much of continental Europe.

As noted earlier, vulnerability is crucial in the recruitment of women into cross-border prostitution. Arguably, no one becomes a prostitute entirely by choice. Most of the women, if not all, involved in cross-border prostitution were enticed, lured, tricked, forced, and in some cases, threatened into the trade based on the condition of vulnerability. These existential realities are well explored in *On Black Sister's Street*, where extreme poverty, a severe reduction in economic opportunities, multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantages and the abuses faced by many women are recognized as risk factors that make them increasingly vulnerable in their countries of origin, to being recruited, coerced, and trafficked into the sex industry (Zimmerman et al. 2006). In the novel, these extant realities are associated with Nigeria, where the struggle for survival is a formidable battle for many.

In this light, Lauren Berlant's concept of economic precarity birthed by globalization and neoliberal restructuring becomes instructive and germane to this paper. According to Berlant (2011:192), "everyone whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms" must necessarily confront willy-nilly the urgencies of livelihood and survival. The four cross-prostitutes at the center of attention in Unigwe's novel –Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce, carry precarious bodies and epitomize "how different kinds of persons catch up to their new situation of economic vulnerability" (Berlant 2011:192). As owners of precarious bodies, Unigwe's women are left with few options of survival as citizens of geographical spaces identified as sites of "political, social and economic dysfunction" (Eze, 2014:90). The voices and stories from the novel not only accentuate vulnerability as the first condition for the sexual exploitation of women, but also combine to indict all the factors that condemned them to their unenviable fate.

The Graduate Prostitute

Sisi, (whose real name is Chisom), around whom most of the novel's suspense revolves, is supposedly a child of destiny who carries the hopes and aspirations of her family for socio-economic security. Born into moderate poverty, Sisi is encouraged to be studious and serious by a father who drums into her ears that "the only way to a better life is education" (18). She graduates in Finance and Business Administration from the University of Lagos with good grades but "she was never even invited to an interview," (22) let alone able to find a job after several attempts. She watches helplessly and hopelessly as her life and dream of rescuing her family from the clutches of poverty are foreclosed. When by fortuitous arrangement she meets Dele, the pimp and trafficker who sends her on the voyage to Europe, she is past caring because the alternative to working as a prostitute in Europe is to continue to live in the margins of life and add to the grim statistics of existence in her homeland, Nigeria. Despite initial reluctance and serious misgivings, Sisi agrees to coerced migration to Europe to pursue her dreams of helping her family out of the pit of poverty and to achieve self-actualization. For Sisi, "self-actualization is understood in terms of a balance between opportunity and risk" (Giddens, 1991:78). In that case, Sisi knows the risk, but her condition of vulnerability also allows her to see the opportunity. Despite the risk(s) underpinning her migration and foray into cross-border prostitution, spurning the opportunity to fulfill her dream is a risky option Sisi refuses to even contemplate owing to her precarious state of existence.

The Girl-Mother

Efe is a teenage mother struggling to raise her son without any form of support from the child's father; a male benefactor who abandons her to cruel fate as soon as she announces her

pregnancy following numerous sexual romps. Following the untimely death of her mother, her father's drunkenness, depression, and total neglect of his children, Efe is prematurely forced by the vicissitudes of life to step into the gap, becoming a single parent to her siblings and her own illegitimate son at a relatively young age. Faced with grinding poverty which manifests in constant lack and want, Efe's vulnerability sticks out like a sore thumb. She discovers sex at a tender age in a desperate bid to survive:

> Efe discovered sex at sixteen at the back of her father's flat […] The man who held her buttocks tight and swayed and moaned and was responsible for all the pain was forty-five. He was old. Experienced. But most importantly, he had a fortune that was rumoured to be vast. *Money wey full everywhere like san' san*'. He had promised Efe new clothes. New shoes. Heaven. Earth. And everything else she fancied [...] as long as she let him have his way (49, italics in the original).

Sadly, the bubble bursts for Efe, after she becomes pregnant and is abandoned by her lover, thereby sinking her deeper into the poverty pit. When the offer of migration to Europe arrives at Efe's doorsteps, she jumps at it because she feels the offer provides her with the means of taking care of her family and fighting off poverty, which has transmogrified her to a destitute in her own country.

The Victim of a Pedophile 'Father'

Ama's story is not so different from Sisi and Efe's. She is the product of an abusive and nightmarish childhood in which she is molested by her stepfather; a highly religious man whom

she respects and initially thought was her father. In the eyes of many, Ama's stepfather, Brother Cyril is the epitome of saintly attributes:

> Brother Cyril […] wore a white robe to church. White for Holiness. His whiteness rivaled the pastor's and when they stood together at the altar the congregation was hard pressed to decide whose robe was purer. At home Brother Cyril wore white safari suits and white danshikis which did not tolerate stains and which his wife had to boil in a huge pot of water before washing to ensure that the cloths' whiteness glowed (131).

But behind the veneer of Brother Cyril's churchliness is the biblical wolf amid sheep, one that hides his predatory and pedophilic face behind the veil of religiosity. Ama is eight years old when:

> … her father floated into her room in his white safari suit. In the dark and dressed all in white, Ama thought he was a ghost and would have screamed if he had not pre-empted her by covering her mouth with one broad palm and smothering the scream in her throat. With the other hand he fumbled under her nightdress, a cotton lavender gown with a print of a huge grinning bear. That was the first time it happened (131-2).

Ama decides to take charge of her destiny by fleeing the site of parental sexual abuse. With the framework of her flight from home, Ama comes to a painful realization that "taking charge of one's life" as she has done "involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open opportunities" (Giddens 1991:73). The opportunity to live in Lagos with her aunt, Mama Eko, with whom she takes refuge well out of the reach of a pedophile births another opportunity; a chance meeting with Dele, who offers her the alluring prospect of going "… to Europe to work as a nanny

…." (169) For Ama, survival is paramount, and it is her "dream that spurred her on in Antwerp; the men she slept with were, like Dele, just tools she needed to achieve her dream" (169).

The Refugee and Victim of War

In terms of choice and nativity, Joyce is not much different from the other women. The chain that binds these girls is race (they are all Africans) and vulnerability (they are from disadvantaged societies and socioeconomic backgrounds). A black Sudanese, Joyce (whose real name is Alek), was a victim of the brutal Arab militia group known as *Janjaweed*, which is the nemesis of many blacks who live in her home region, Darfur, in Sudan. Marked and attacked for her race, she is gang-raped as a fifteen-year-old by a band of *Janjaweed* militiamen after the atrocious massacre of her entire family and the complete sacking of her village: "One by one the other men came and thrust themselves into her, pulling out to come on her face. Telling her to ingest it; it was protein. Good food. Fit for African slaves" (191). Orphaned, violated and lonely, she finds herself in a United Nations-run refugee camp where she meets a Nigerian peacekeeper: "… Alek met Polycarp. A Nigerian soldier" (197) with whom she falls helplessly in love.

After fleeing to Nigeria, Joyce's dream of enjoying a relatively better life there quickly turns to a mirage. The dream is shattered by the blatant refusal of Polycarp's parents to accept her as their son's wife-to-be. Again, her nemesis is her nativity. The Igbo culture of Polycarp's people forbids him from marrying outside his ethnic nationality: "I'm the oldest son and my parents want me to marry an Igbo girl. It's not you, Alek, but I can't marry a foreigner. My parents will never forgive me" (225). Without a family, home, or money, and abandoned by her boyfriend in a strange environment, Joyce experiences an "increase in vulnerability and in risk" (Berlant 2011:195). Faced with the reality of heightened vulnerability, Joyce is coaxed into prostitution by Polycarp,

as a salve for his conscience over his acquiescence to tribal sentiment and his need to get her off his back for good.

The story of each trafficked woman in *On Black Sisters' Street* and the "push role" men played in their lives validates a feminist standpoint, which privileges the vulnerable status of women and how that general outlook is reflected in the way "… women are given orders, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another" (Butler, 2004: 28-9). In that sense, for instance, the willful actions of *Janjaweed* militiamen, Polycarp, and Dele combine to undo Joyce, in a way that they brutally expunge the life of happiness she has dreamt for herself and force her to take the migratory route to Europe and life as a prostitute.

***On Black Sister's Street*: A Tale of the Vulnerable**

On Black Sister's Street strongly concretizes the claim that most of the women who engage in cross-border prostitution are victims of the condition of vulnerability, both individually and collectively. Butler (2004:29) argues that vulnerability is "highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions" (2004:29); a clear reference to the precarious socio-economic situations often prevalent in the countries most cross-border prostitutes migrate from. Literature, in the case of *On Black Sister's Street*, refracts the society through a lens that shows that women who are trafficked into prostitution are vulnerable and often poor, like Ama; jobless, frustrated and struggling to survive harsh socio-economic realities like Sisi; desperately in need of an escape route like Efe; victims of war, lonely, abandoned and lost like Joyce. These extant existential realities have been acknowledged by scholars (Naqvi et al. 2007; UNODC 2008; cited in Efrat

2016)), whoidentify them as conditions of vulnerability caused as "a result of poverty, lack of education, or other social, economic, and political circumstances" (Efrat 2016:37).

Those in precarious, vulnerable, and marginal categories of existence are often either forced to migrate or are susceptible to the allure and promises of well-paid jobs in faraway foreign cities; and an imagined better living, which represents long-awaited escape from a life of misery they are enduring. Some of the jobs often used to lure these women, include working as domestic workers, nannies, waitresses, dancers in night clubs and sometimes, even as office assistants or secretaries. Dele tells Joyce she is going to Europe to work as a nanny: "Make you go look after people. Nanny work … his eyes bright, a brightness that Joyce would only understand in hindsight" (231). As it often turns out when victims of human trafficking reach the "point of no return," they find out too late that the promise of decent blue-collar jobs only serve as the bait to lure unsuspecting women into prostitution abroad.

According to one of its human trafficking reports, the US State Department estimates that an approximate 800,000 persons are trafficked across national borders each year, excluding the millions who are trafficked in their own country. It is further estimated that women and children constitute the highest percentage of trafficked persons worldwide (McFadyen and Collins 2009). The reason is not far-fetched. It is because this category represents the most vulnerable. Also, the vast majority of transnational victims of human trafficking are females trafficked for commercial sex exploitation (Efrat 2016:34), and a significant part of the elaborate trafficking scheme see to it that vulnerable victims are sent abroad at no cost. "Na when you get there, begin work, you go begin dey pay. Installmental payment we dey call am! Mont' by mont' you go dey pay me" (35), Dele informs Sisi about the repayment plan.

As it often turns out for trafficked migrants, reaching the West and other fabled lands of opportunities is the easier part. It usually does not take long for these migrants to be hit with the harsh realities of life in destination countries. It is worth the mention that once these women are successfully trafficked out of their home country under shady and criminal arrangements, their travelling and identification documents are usually seized by their agents; and they are usually sold or taken by prior arrangement to brothels or red-light districts, where they are left with no other choice than to work as prostitutes. Sisi is confronted with this brutal reality when Dele's agent in Belgium, Madam, orders her: "… hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it" (119).

To underscore her condition of entrapment, Madam submits eerily to Sisi: "Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all this for you… Now until you have paid up every single kobo…every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back" (182-3). To recover their documents and regain freedom, these migrants are often obliged to pay back through installments, the amount incurred for their procurement, transportation and feeding, housing and medical expenses. In addition to the seizure of their passports and other documents, victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation have earnings withheld from them, while incredibly high repayment plans are laid out by agents before passports and other documents can be returned at all (IOM Newsletter 1994; Zimmerman et al. 2006).

On Black Sisters' Street also brings to the fore the dangers associated with cross-border prostitution, human trafficking and forced migration. The criminal gangs trafficking in persons are known to be ruthless, unforgiving, and deadly. These gangs are manned from the top to bottom by ruthless persons like Dele, Madam and Segun, who usually stop at nothing in ensuring a strict compliance with the modus operandi of their organisation. Running away or going into hiding is

not a straightforward solution, which victims can seek. Sisi is not unmindful of the danger inherent in running away and hiding from her pimps, Dele and Madam. But when she falls in love with Luc, the dream of a better life numbs her to the danger inherent in any plan, which does not include paying back her debt in full as a trafficked prostitute.

Sisi's attraction to Luc proves fatal. A trafficked and enslaved prostitute is not allowed the luxury of falling in love: "She could not fall in love with Luc […]. There was no room for love in her life, not if she wanted to earn as much as she could and pay off Dele as quickly as possible" (266-67). Since falling in love is not part of the job description of a trafficked prostitute. Therefore, any attempt to escape into the relative safety of settled life, the kind of life and future Luc promises Sisi is mere hallucination. "*I can just up* [*sic*] *and walk away. Start a new life with my man*" (271, emphasis in the original), Sisi dreams. In her tragic fantasy, Sisi is preoccupied with visions of a new life with Luc: "they would marry and, in a few years, she would be a bona fide Belgian. She would have her own children. A different life" (271). The cruel tragedy of life is that fate allows Sisi to dream, and she basks in the euphoria of love, relegating Dele's menacing refrain: "No try cross me o. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!" (42) to the background of inconsequentiality.

Sadly, Sisi forgets her status as an indentured woman; someone who does not own her own body. On the other hand, the arms of human traffickers like Dele are very long; they can stretch from Lagos, Nigeria to fatally strike someone in Antwerp, Belgium. On the day Sisi is murdered for absconding from her work and responsibility as a trafficked, migrant prostitute, she did not see her own death coming: "So the hammer hitting into her skull had come as a shock. She did not even have time to shout" (293). It is cruel fate that Sisi's dream does not stand any chance against the brutality of human trafficking/traffickers.

The brutal killing of Sisi in the novel, points to the author's desire to properly place the strongarm tactics of the criminal gangs that traffick women for sexual exploitation. Dele's eerie warning to Sisi at the outset assumes a life of its own in the way and manner her killing is executed with brutal finesse. With the killing of Sisi and the continued enslavement of her co-travellers–Efe, Ama and Joyce—the novel offers little hope of escape to trafficked women. The novel also foregrounds the fact that trafficked women can only be truly free when they pay back the debts they owe their traffickers, either with their bodies, lives, or both. Clearly, the most tangible offer on the table for these women is cruel optimism, which is symbolized in the irony of Efe's dream of continuing in the sex business, whenever she succeeds in paying off her debt to Dele: "Efe […] was already talking of maybe acquiring some girls, becoming a madam herself" (278). With Efe's musing and future revealed, cross-border sex trade is normalized and also guaranteed to survive far beyond and above the fate of victims in the most ironic but troubling way.

Conclusion

The motivation behind this paper is located in the need to flag vulnerability as a key factor in the trafficking of persons for sexual exploitation in the era of globalization. The lives and stories of four trafficked women in Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* are used to reinforce the position that vulnerability is crucial to the recruitment of women as sex slaves by human traffickers. Resting on that position, this paper attempts a contribution to the debate on how the ascendancy of globalization has intensified the sexual exploitation of vulnerable women, mostly from disadvantaged societies. The sexual enslavement and exploitation of Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce by a ruthless ring of traffickers grimly testifies to globalization's capacity to create the economic

conditions, which expose vulnerable women to the dangers of forced migration and aid human trafficking as an organized crime.

Furthermore, this paper acknowledges the victimhood of trafficked women and attempts to humanize them despite their human imperfections because "the condition of primary vulnerability … signifies a primary helplessness and need" (Butler, 2004:32). The paper agrees with Butler (2004) that instead of condemning vulnerable women to their fate, ignoring their helplessness, weakness and lack of body autonomy, critical scholarship should acknowledge and protect their bodily vulnerability without contradicting it, while locating the critical interface between the two lines. This paper concludes that literature has performed a utilitarian function by privileging the vagaries of globalization and appropriating the hermeneutics of Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* to implicate vulnerability as the first condition crucial to the sexual exploitation of women in a globalized world. Ultimately, the concept of vulnerability is deployed in this paper as valid ground on which to demand understanding and social justice for all exploited women such as the ones portrayed in Unigwe's novel.

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