

Liberating girls from 'trokosi'

Campaign against ritual servitude in Ghana

By Nirit Ben-Ari

Hundreds of families and guests came to Adidome, Ghana, on 10 November 2001 to celebrate with 128 women freed from years of forced labour in the service of local priests. The women were graduating from a vocational centre run by a local non-governmental organization, International Needs Ghana (ING), which helps women reclaim normal lives in their communities. "Changing centuries old customs and practices is not easy," said Fiaga Togbe Kwao, the chief of the Mepe Traditional Area in his address at the graduation ceremony. He urged the crowd to support efforts to raise the status of women throughout Ghanaian society.

The women at the vocational centre had all been taken to serve as *trokosi*, literally "wife of the gods" in the local Ewe language. According to the customary practice in Ghana's Volta region, which has lasted some 300 years, if someone commits a serious crime or social infraction, traditional leaders order that a young girl from that family be sent to the shrine as a form of atonement. She is expected to serve the priest for three to five years, after which the family might redeem her.

The practice, however, has commonly resulted in exploitation and sexual abuse of the young girls. Ms. Dora Galley, now 22 years old and one of the women who learned hairdressing skills at the vocational centre, spent seven years in a shrine. She says she was compelled by the priest to work on the shrine's farm from morning until evening without any payment or food.

"I had to cut down trees and uproot tree stumps to burn into charcoal to sell and make some money to take care of myself," she says. "I did not have the right to take crops from the farm unless the priest allowed me to. Occasionally my parents sent me some food, but that was kept in the priest's room and I had to request it any time I needed some. I was forced to have sex with the priest as one of the rituals in the shrine, but luckily I did not get pregnant."

Ms. Patience Akope, now 31, tells a similar story. She spent 21 years at a shrine and has one 15-year-old child. "The priest did not allow me to visit the clinic for prenatal care or go to the hospital," she explains. "Throughout the pregnancy, I had to fend for myself."

Trokosi is also practiced in Benin, Nigeria and Togo, but most information on it comes from Ghana. Since its inception, the ING has liberated and rehabilitated 2,800 trokosi women and children, although thousands more are thought to exist. All the graduates in Adidome spent between 6 months and 3 years in the ING's vocational centre. They were taught skills such as batik, tie dyeing, soap and pomade making, hairdressing and baking, which will be valuable as they try to build a new, independent life.

'Trokosi is a crime'

In June 2001, the ING received \$50,000 from the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to improve its anti-trokosi programmes, including vocational centres, psychological counselling,

schools for trokosi children, and campaigns to educate people on laws and activities aimed at changing trokosi practices.

Ms. Florence Butegwa, UNIFEM's regional programme coordinator in Lagos, Nigeria, notes that trokosi is just one kind of abuse against women, among many around the world. In other places, she told *Africa Recovery*, it might be widow burning, female genital mutilation or physical assault by family members. "Women's rights abuses are not unique to Africa," she says. Nevertheless, when viewed as "violations of the rights of women," practices such as trokosi are simply unacceptable.

Ms. Akope is adamant: "The practice of trokosi is a crime and it should be stopped completely. Human beings are not animals to be sacrificed. The government should move quickly to arrest and jail those who are still perpetuating this evil and dehumanizing practice of keeping and abusing young innocent girls in the shrine."

Laws are not enough

Members of the ING and other activists in Ghana have influenced the government to outlaw the trokosi practice. In 1998, the Ghanaian parliament passed a law banning all forms of ritualized forced labour. In early 2001, President John Agyekum Kufuor, commenting on the practice of trokosi, declared, "Girls should go to school, not to a shrine." He pledged to enforce the law. So far, however, no priest or family member has been jailed for continuing the practice.

Ending behaviour that is embedded in tradition is not simple. Cultural practices "die hard," Ms. Wisdom Mensah, the ING project coordinator, told *Africa Recovery*. In October 2001, she noted, the ING held a seminar for police officers in the Volta region. A majority of participants said they were not familiar with trokosi and were not aware of the law against it. The ING's focus, she explained, is to sensitize people about trokosi, aiming at its gradual elimination. Legislation alone cannot do that.

Ms. Butegwa is similarly critical of only "criminalizing the practice without understanding why the practice continues to exist." As a result, she says, trokosi may be perpetuated "in another form or underground."

Some local groups have accused the ING of trying to destroy traditional culture. "We are not against our culture," Ms. Mensah explains. "We are against servitude, slavery and child labour." In response to accusations that her group is attacking the constitutional right of freedom of religion, she answers: "Your freedom ends where someone else's freedom begins. If you have a religion, a belief system or a traditional practice that enslaves people, puts them in servitude and reduces their dignity, then you violate our national constitution."

Because of her work, Ms. Mensah has received death threats. But she is undeterred. "It's worth devoting one's life to the cause of women." ■



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