

CHALLENGES OF UNDERCOVER REPORTING IN AFRICA:

A NIGERIAN HUMAN TRAFFICKING EXPERIENCE

PREMIUM TIMES, NIGERIA

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BACKGROUND

In Africa, going undercover is sometimes the only way to seek information and the truth, as getting official papers could be Herculean and impossible. There are certain investigations that are best done through going undercover as a reporter would have to embed him or herself in the process to know the truth. Human trafficking in Nigeria, as an instance, is one of such. This kind of investigative style comes with great challenges and could be enormous. We'll use the Nigerian experience in highlighting how and why.

METHODOLOGY

THE NIGERIAN HUMAN TRAFFICKING EXPERIENCE:

A short plan on how to investigate human trafficking

Covering a human trafficking investigation, especially going undercover, involves three stages:

Pre-investigation
Investigation itself
And post-investigation

Pre-investigation:

Do a preliminary research about the subject matter if not so familiar with it. I was familiar with it. Then a story map should be done. It's a guide draft. Here's Premium Times':

Story map

1. What are the conditions that support and trigger these willful migration?
2. How do these factors that support the willful migration contrast with the conditions of forceful migration?
3. What patterns do the two migration patterns share?
4. What are the mechanics/conditions that support and help to channel the route?
5. Where and how do they pass

6. And why is this so (why that route)?

7. Are airlines operators aware about the operations of those who go via flights?

Answer: Yes? What have they done?

Answer: look the other way. Why?

8. Are there deviant or errant cases that depart from this norm?

9. The consequences of those who deviate in the routing process?

10. Beside sex trade are there other activities/jobs the girls are involved in when successfully trafficked out?

11. If, yes, what kind of jobs and how do they come about them?

HUMAN FACTORS:

1. What is the characterization of every human element at every stage of the process?
 2. Is there some counselling matron?
 3. Where is she from and located?
 4. Why that location?
5. What are the peculiar implications of all these elements?
 6. Are there porters, that is, escorts?
 7. What are their experience?
- What is the definition of human elements that come to play?
 8. How do they cross the border?
 9. Are there different porters at each stage of the journey?
 10. How much is involved in this?
 11. How much is the financial implication?
 12. How much do each of the people involved collect?
 13. Is it only females that are trafficked? Are there also males?
 14. What are the factors that support/trigger their willful migration?
 15. How is their migration process- same as that of the females?
16. Beside sex trade, what other activities/jobs do they engage in when at their final destination?
 17. How do they come about the jobs?
18. What are their preparation processes from Nigeria- same as the females?
 19. How common is willful male trafficking?

HEALTH & PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING:

1. What is the psychological element/stage of preparedness of the girls, boys, the matron, the porters?
2. Does the matron feel that this could be my child?
3. How do the girls and boys feel- such as afraid, etc and the couriers themselves?
4. Are the health and wellbeing status of the girls and boys ascertained before and after being trafficked such as carrying out of HIV screening and other tests?

POST TRAFFICKING: EFFECTS/CONSEQUENCES

1. Once out of the country, are the girls boys allowed to return home to visit their family members?
2. If so, how often and what qualifies them for such?
3. When a girl/boy falls really ill, such as contracting HIV, anal gonorrhoea, amongst others, what becomes of them?
4. Are there such girls or boys presently in Nigeria?
5. What has become of them? Are they accessing medical treatment?
6. What are their family members doing about their condition?
7. Those who have successfully paid their traffickers through meeting their targets, what are they presently doing?

LEGAL ELEMENT:

1. What are the statutory issues: what does the law say or doesn't say that makes this happen e.g international treaties as regards migration?
 2. Is Nigeria part of any of the treaties?
 3. If yes, has she domesticated it?
 4. If not, why?
 5. What has been the pattern of case law with regards to this?
6. Have people been arrested and prosecuted before as regards this?
 7. Is there an ECOWAS protocol/policy or policy on this?

PRE-INVESTIGATION

During the pre-investigation stage, take note of the various persons you would be needing for the story. People like security personnels in various security agencies, the bad boys and girls you know, etc.

This stage is imperative because these are the groups who would help you with actual details. Of course, they must never know who you are. Your knowledge and understanding of criminals and criminality will help you a lot.

CHALLENGES OF THIS STAGE/ADVICE:

A reporter cannot hit the streets combing for traffickers, about-to-be-trafficked persons or already trafficked persons. In Africa, this is a very shady business that requires relating with the underworld.

Regular interviews will produce 'regular answers'.

Thus, the investigative reporter on such story **MUST** understand criminality and know how criminals work.

As an investigative reporter, you **MUST** note and 'befriend' security personnels in every environment you find yourself. They always fall

under this group:

THE GOOD

THE BAD

THE UGLY.

It's imperative to always 'befriend' those that fall under the UGLY. They would do for you what the good and bad can't do. It is the ugly ones that helped me in the course of my work.

You should also know and 'befriend' some of the criminals in every environment you find yourself, particularly those that fall under the ugly.

Of course, you must always hide your real profession.

These persons will help you in the course of your work and even in your personal life!

These groups have access to and complete details about the underworld.

Don't wait until you need information before searching for them.

And befriend very good lawyers in every environment you find yourself. There could be emergencies that would require their services. Depending on your quality of relationship, you could get pro bono services.

THE INVESTIGATION:

After identifying the various groups needed for the story, get into the 'act' with them. In my case:

I had a former senior school mate who's not only in the Nigerian Army but a senior officer. He's always been 'the ugly' right from our days in college. His becoming an army officer has been very helpful to me professionally and personally.

Right from my days in college, I deliberately select those I befriend. They always fall under the good, bad and ugly. I didn't stumble into journalism, so I have always known they would be useful at any point in my life. I make friends with all shades of persons but place them in groups and make sure none of them get so close to me though they think we are close.

Another challenge of undercover reporting in Africa is that you must be very secretive yet appear simple and friendly. Be ready to laugh and chat a lot but actually withholding vital details and observing closely the other party. This is to give a wrong impression about you and make the other party relaxed when with you. You must never be predictable. Make such people think they know you when in actual fact, they know nothing. You will need insiders ALWAYS. I used my army friend for most part of the story.

You can't do such investigation without speaking to girls who have been trafficked and those about to be. To get such girls who have been trafficked, you can speak with organizations who assist trafficked girls. They would gladly provide you with such ladies provided you keep their identity anonymous. Such organizations can never help you with ladies who are about to be trafficked!

Men of the underworld share a lot in common. They often drink, smoke various substances and womanize. You don't have to take part in any of these if you don't do such but once in a while, sitting with them and buying them what they indulge in will help you get free information easily! Before ever knowing I would work on a story of this nature, I have been doing these. That is why I used to walk around so late at night without being attacked. These are the same people who protect me at night when out so late.

These group of persons know ladies who have returned to the country after being trafficked. When they connect you with such girls, you will get undiluted accounts about how they were trafficked.

These bad guys also know the various syndicates and know some of the ladies who are about to leave the country for sex work. They will get you what you want but depending on your quality of relationship with them. You must NEVER let them know you're on an investigation.

In my case, only the army officer knew my real identity. We have been friends in college and have been mutually helpful to each other. He assisted me with some of the persons who have been trafficked but are now back to the country.

To get undiluted details about how trafficking works in your country (or wherever), you have to be a part of the process. If you simply ask questions (from whoever), they would tell you what you want or need to hear.:
REGULAR ANSWERS!

ADVICE:

Get embedded but be alert.

I was introduced to some prostitutes, while I got details of others, trailed and befriended them. I posed as one of them and became their friends in order to gain access to most parts, if not every parts of their activities. There were nights I joined them on the streets as a sex worker awaiting customers. I went to parties with them and shared some good moments with them.

Advice:

Befriend prostitutes. They also have access to the underworld. For a story as this, they know some of the trafficking syndicates if not most.

When certain you've become a part of their lives, subtly throw the idea about you taking your trade to the next level. The next level among sex workers in Nigeria is going abroad to earn better. Since they don't have the necessary travel documents to obtain visas, they often approach trolleys to trafficking syndicates. This is when and where abuse sets in.

In my case, I subtly told them I wanted to move to the next level and pleaded for their assistance. They already considered me one of them. They assisted me with some of the syndicates I got involved with. The army officer and other criminals who fall under the ugly group assisted me with others.

A major challenge you might face while working with a security personnel who already knows you before ever being commissioned to do such a story, depending on your relationship, you would have to come to an agreement with him.

very uncomfortable with the trolley of the syndicate I traveled with, yet disobeyed that still voice within me. I paid the price because they turned out to be more than traffickers.

Never get desperate to complete the story. If you do, you will make mistakes and get into trouble. Out of desperation to complete the story so I could move onto my next story, I decided to travel with the syndicate which the still voice in me had been against.

Follow your instinct. If it says stop, please do. I ignored mine when it prompted me to stop and I got into trouble.

Never tell any other person you're working on such story or even other investigations you do. Only your managing editor, head of investigations and any other member of the team need be in the know. Even fellow colleagues must not be aware. You could be dealing with an enemy pretending to be a friend in the form of even a colleague. In the past, (before joining Premium Times), I made the mistake of letting a colleague know the stories I was working on. One of the persons I was investigating happened to be his uncle (I didn't know) and he gave me away. Be friendly but very secretive even among your colleagues (but not your editor).

Someone in the newsroom must know where you are at all times. I advise your compass should be your editor.

Determine the extent you want to go with the syndicate(s). And plans should be made, especially on how to escape. But note:

There could be what I'll call an X-factor awaiting you around the corner. Things could get out of hand or the trollies could change movement dates and this would affect your escape plans.

In my case, things didn't go as planned so the journalist who was to help me after breaking away from the traffickers waited endlessly until much later when I had the opportunity to run away.

Never expect all your plans to happen the way you penned them. There could be surprises around the corner.

POST-INVESTIGATION:

- * After completing the investigation, notwithstanding the degree of exposure, seek medical assistance.
- * Management of the media house should keep an eye on the reporter for any changes especially in behavior. This means having some knowledge about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and related ailments would be beneficial. Depending on the degree of exposure, the reporter might not be able to tell you all that transpired immediately. But from behavioral changes, you can help her (if a female) seek medical assistance, especially therapy.

Some of the symptoms to watch out for include:

Often being irritated,
Very angry,
Picking fights,
Eating too much or stops eating,
Sleeping too much or lack of sleep etc.

To get accurate information, I suggest moving the reporter to a safe house where you can monitor her closely. You can't completely rely on the information the family gives you, if she's with her family. Reason? The family might fear she would lose her job if the truth about her condition is revealed.

If the reporter is up to it, allow her write the story. Depending on the degree of exposure, don't re-traumatize her if you notice a particular question breaks her emotionally, let things be until a latter time.

If the reporter has weeping spells, there's need for urgent Medicare. That means there are information she's having difficulty sharing with anyone. Such information are usually very unpleasant. As she heals/recovers in therapy, she would be able to disclose more details. It's a gradual process and requires tons of patience.

If the reporter says she can't disclose names (for instance, in my case, the army officer), don't press further. It's better not being told than being given the wrong information.

Advice to reporters:

Try as much as you can to be open with your team members, particularly your editor. If you don't trust your editor, then there's no need working with him in the first place.

I recommend understanding criminality and knowing some of these bad guys (whether undercover or not) but the knowledge should be left to you. Never share such information. Learn to prioritize. Sharpen your observation skills, and you **MUST** learn to place people where they should be:

"We must learn who is gold, and who is simply gold plated".

Advice to media organizations:

A major post-investigation undercover challenge (depending on nature of story) is that your reporter might breakdown. Be prepared so you're not taken unaware.

If the reporter breaks down, be ready to spend much time and resources in the hospital. You could end up having a psychiatric case at hand.

Mental and emotional injuries take long to heal. For over a year be ready to be in and out of the hospital with the reporter.

Some of the things that could happen to your reporter include:

Losing his/her memory

Having amnestic dissociation

Coming down with depression, anxiety and horrible mood swings in addition to PTSD

Being suicidal

Losing touch with how to write

Subsequent forgetfulness

Losing basic everyday skills (how to bath, brush etc).

Many others!

WHAT TO DO:

Depending on the size of your human resource department, you might have to designate someone from that unit whose major job for that period would be caring for the reporter.

Acquire extra patience! Your reporter has become a baby so will need to help and teach her everyday skills

Make sure he/she is never alone. No one will believe you didn't kill the reporter if he/she makes a successful suicide attempt!

Be ready to assist in the memory recovering stage and helping him/her with learning how to write. One of your very experienced and patient editors can help.

Have the doctors direct phone numbers. There are days, even nights that you will make emergency calls.

Closely monitor the reporter especially taking of medications. As a result of forgetfulness, dissociation, anger, etc he/she might skip or out rightly stop taking his/her medications. Better to have someone give the medications and ensure they have been taken.

But let the reporter know you're doing all these so he/she could rest, not because you don't trust him/her lest you build mistrust. Mind you, anger and suspicion comes with the health challenge. Don't worsen the situation.

Be ready to nurse a 'baby' for a very long time.

Sudden and excess weight gain should be expected. You'll have to shop for an exercise coach to help the reporter lose weight lest terrible low self esteem sets in.

Getting to have him/her exercise won't be easy. Be ready to buy many exercise shoes if the reporter says that's the reason for not wanting to jog or do any exercise. As a result of mood swings, he or she will whine about every exercise items given him/her. Be patient. Even get someone from your office do exercises in his/her presence as a motivation to do same. All a patient at this stage does is overeating and sleeping!

Depending on what part of Africa you're located, you might have to check the reporter into a rehab, possibly in one of the developed countries.

FINDINGS

www.app.premiumtimesng.com

THANK YOU!!!

