

## **Transcript of Speech by Panelist Dr. Esohe Aghatise, Founder and Executive Director of the Association Iroko Onlus**

Thank you very much! Ladies and Gentlemen, your excellencies, I am really happy to be here and I want to thank OSCE-ODIHR for inviting me to participate in this panel. I want to thank Maximilian for the presentation of that report. As Gregoire already stated, we also support the analysis of that report and we will also assist in sharing it amongst other networks. My organization, Iroko, works in two countries right now, In Italy and in Nigeria. And the experience we have had in these two countries is part of what I will bring during my presentation.

As we know, COVID-19, the COVID-19 pandemic, has devastated human lives, the global economy, and it is impacting, it has impacted and continues to impact the most vulnerable women and girls, especially. In a country like Nigeria, for instance, what we have seen is that the situation of women and girls has become worsened, has worsened considerably during the pandemic. Parents lost their work and their livelihood. Most of those who were impacted are those who worked in daytime jobs. And then, apart from that, we have had situations of young people, and women, being locked in, not having the possibility of exiting from areas from where they were locked in, where they were exploited.

And then in addition we have seen a huge spike in cases of rape, cases of incest, cases of sexual violence on women and girls. While in the past before the pandemic we were getting reports of say 5 cases or such incidences in a year, in this year alone, in the first 6 months of this year, we have had reports of more than 27 cases in one state of sexual violence, rape and incest. And we are trying to bring some of these cases to court.

In Italy on the other hand, we have also seen a huge situation of the exploitation of women and girls. A lot of them lost their housing, they lost the little access to support that they had. A lot of organizations like Iroko could no longer afford to deal with the requests of many of them. So a lot of them were forced to return to the madams, to the exploiters, the pimps, that they were with before, because they had nowhere to go. Some of the cases that came to us, we reached out to networks of organizations that we work with to find accommodation and shelter for them, and this was not always easy. Unhappily, there was not enough support from government agencies to respond to the needs. Some of the women that we support, some of the reports they brought to us, is that during the pandemic, what has happened is that while organizations providing support have lost some of their funding and have been unable to provide that support and the women, some of them have had to return to their exploiters, they find that it's been easy for criminal organizations to build up their knowledge and further exploitation of the women. And we find that these trafficked women are being offered online to their buyers by their exploiters, by their pimps, because they had to return to them. And that is just a tip of the iceberg in some of these issues. Then we carried out a survey, a very quick survey, amongst some of the women that we provide support to, and what we discovered it's much easier for – because the question that is sometimes asked is: ok, now during the pandemic, travel has stopped, it has been restricted, so traffickers are no longer able to exploit people, to carry them across borders etc. etc. – but in reality it's really different, it's not true that because of the lack of travel the exploiters are not able to carry on with the exploitation. On the contrary, they are using very sophisticated online measures to exploit and sell the women and girls that they are exploiting. they found new ways to go across borders. And indeed, a few weeks ago, we also saw on the news how a lot of the women and girls who in the meantime were being groomed to be carried across borders, are already beginning to be

transported from Northern Africa to the Italian coast. A few weeks ago, we had the report of new arrivals of migrants in those places. And this is continuing. So these are some of the issues that we are having to face in this period.

I want to quickly refer to a program as a solution to some of these issues. Because generally, what we find, is that there is a lot of solutions being offered in countries of destination, in Europe and Western countries, to support victims of trafficking, but there is not enough attention being paid to collaboration with local agencies in countries of origin, like Nigeria for instance. Now, a program that was thought of by the British government in 2019 to 2020 was the “Stamping out slavery in Nigeria” program, with was really a very, very innovative, it was supposed have been a [...] program to address the issue of trafficking and of safe migration from a country of origin like Nigeria. And the idea of it was: working together with local agencies to bring together civil society organizations, and members of local government in EDO state to work together to find a solution to trafficking and unsafe migration parting from a preliminary research. Now, three pieces of research were carried out to understand the who, the why and the how of trafficking and unsafe migration. And it was having quite a positive effect in just the 15 months in which that program was implemented. It was already having a very positive impact in bringing together local and international organizations to find solutions to trafficking and unsafe migration. But unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 impact on the British economy, this program was stopped and so did not continue. So as a final issue here, is that we need to address not just the issue, the question of providing support in countries of destination to victims of trafficking, but also to consider the importance of providing that support in a way that they don’t leave in the first place, that they don’t end up in these dangerous situations of unsafe migration, which also pushes them into conditions of being trafficking victims. And so these are some of the ideas be believe should be attended to. And also the question of inadequacy of response by governments right now to the question of online exploitation. There is a huge area of online exploitation going on, and then there is also a huge issue of the so called “pro-sexwork groups “going to developing counties like Nigeria. And this is part of what we have discovered in our work, to push for the legalization of prostitution as sexwork in those countries. Now you have these criminal organizations grooming young girls, and also in many cases young boys, and as soon as – they are waiting for borders to reopen completely – as soon as borders reopen, where are they going to end up? In Europe. Across the borders in Europe. Now the question of legalizing prostitution is not going to be a solution to the question of lack of opportunities and development in those countries. So there is a need for governments to address these issues in the countries of origin, so that victims, so that vulnerable women and girls, do not continue to be victims of trafficking in those counties.

Thank you very much!

*(Unverified transcript by Caroline Sander (GGMH). Do not quote)*