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## 9-yr-old housemaid set ablaze by mistress

AUGUST 3, 2013 BY KUNLE FALAYI 10 COMMENTS



The young girl set ablaze

She was on fire from head to toe. She ran out of the house screaming, 'Madam has killed me' –Eyewitness

It is not likely that nine-year-old Eno Bassey has heard the word 'trafficking' before. She was not even educated past primary one when, two months ago, a woman came to her mother's house in Calabar, Cross River State and asked that she should be allowed to go live with her in Lagos.

Going to Lagos would have been a dream-come-true for Eno.

In May 2013, after discussing with Eno's mother, she left with Mrs. Nkeze Iroakazi, the fair looking 'Madam', who promised Eno's mother she would be enrolled in school as soon as they got to Lagos.

But before they took off for the Centre of Excellence, where Eno thought her life would be turned around, they made a detour and picked up another girl, 13-year-old Happiness Bassey, in another part of the same surname but are not related.

On Monday July 29, 2013, our correspondent visited the Burns Unit of the Gbagada General Hospital where little Eno had been rushed to, two days earlier, after her 'Madam' allegedly doused her from head to toe and set her alight.

The screams emanating from the girl's throat seemed to strike everyone in the ward with the intensity reflected the girl's pain.

"Water! Water! Water! Please! Please! Please!" the heavily bandaged girl screamed after a while in her native Ibibio language got no response.

Eno's body was heavily bandaged from her neck down to the toes.

The only part of her body that did not seem to have been damaged much was her face, the top of her head and neck.

"She sustained 95 per cent third degree burns," a medical personnel, who was one of those in charge of Eno, said.

As the girl screamed in agony, asking the nurses to give her water, some relations of other patients in the ward, who could not withstand the scream of agony, dabbed at their eyes as they hastily left the ward.

Eno could not lay her badly burnt and bandaged body on the bed. She dragged herself off the bed.

"Stay, please stay on the bed," a nurse told her, but Eno dragged herself off the bed, fell to the floor and let out another scream.

As she crawled agonisingly as if in a trance, our correspondent realised she was reaching for a wash basin in a corner of the ward to get water.

But four nurses rushed in before the girl could move much and momentarily considered how to pick her up from



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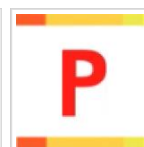


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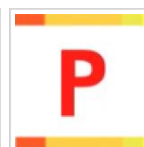
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the floor without hurting her.

A nurse handed our correspondent a glove. "Please, you can help too," she said.

But as Eno was carried back to the bed, she let out another scream. It was evident that every part of her body was hurting her.

Beside the bed, Happiness sat on a chair. She could not help crying as she looked at the bandaged figure of her friend of two months. She dabbed at her eyes.

A moment later, a consultant specialist, Dr. Idowu Fadeyibi, of the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital walked in. He is an Associate Professor of Burns and Plastics.

He said the restless behaviour of Eno was owing to the fact that she was severely in pain and dehydrated.

Fadeyibi directed that the girl be given some analgesics intravenously and given little quantity of water gradually.

As this went on, the victim seemed to become calm, our correspondent summoned Happiness for a conversation.

Fright was clearly written on the girl's face. She could have met the same fate, she probably thought.

"Did you see when Eno was set ablaze?" our correspondent asked her.

"No, I did not see. I was inside the house doing some chores. I heard when Madam was beating her. She was crying then. But later, I went outside and saw her burning and shouting," she said.

She narrated how they came to be house-helps in Iroakazi's house.

Happiness said, "I stopped schooling in primary four. Two months ago, Madam came to our house and told my mother that I should follow her to Lagos and that she would put me in school.

"I came to Lagos with Eno from Calabar. Madam said she would put us in school but we have not attended any school since we got to Lagos.

"Madam beats us all the time, especially if she asks us to do something and she says we are too slow on it. She wakes us up by 5am and we are only allowed to sleep by 12 midnight."

Our correspondent asked what kind of work the two girls did in the house.

"When we wake up, we sweep the house, mop the whole house and wash madam's clothes. We wash that of Aunty Ijeoma (Iroakazi's daughter) too," she said.

Happiness looked at her feet as she spoke. She seemed to be scared. With assurances that nobody would hurt her, our correspondent asked again if she saw when Eno was doused with kerosene and lit on fire.

She fell silent and looked at her toes.

"Did they tell you to say you did not see anything?" our correspondent asked her. She nodded.

Happiness however did not say who told her to lie about what she saw.

The girl did not know her mother's phone number. She said 'Madam' was the one who contacts her mum.

Officials of the Lagos State Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation later came to take Happiness away. She has since been put in the care of the Child Transit Home, Idi Araba, Lagos pending the time her parents could be notified.

An official of the ministry said efforts were still being made to contact the families of the two girls.

A medical personnel at the hospital, who did not want her name in print because she was not authorised to speak on record, said the 95 per cent burn sustained by Eno puts her survival in the balance.

"Dr (Fadeyibi) is a specialist in burns and will definitely do all that is humanly possible but her survival is still in the hand of God. All the parts of her body including her private part are severely burnt," she said.

On Tuesday, our correspondent went to the No 7, Adeniran Ogunsanya, Surulere, home of Iroakazi, where the attack on the house-help allegedly took place.

The storey building has some stores in the front but an attendant in one of the stores said the residents live



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When our correspondent asked for the Iroakazi's family, the young lady said none of the occupants of the apartments behind the house were at home.

The lady would not offer any answer to inquiries as she was obviously cautious of speaking about the incident.

Another resident of the area, a security man, who witnessed the incident later gave a chilling narration of what happened the day the incident occurred.

He said, "The girl suddenly ran out of the compound, she was on fire from head to toe. She was screaming as she ran to the front of the house, screaming 'Madam has killed me! Yeeeee! Yeeeee!' A man who was driving stopped and quickly took a fire extinguisher from his car and sprayed the girl. She would have died on the spot if not for that man.

"That was when we learnt that she poured kerosene on her before lighting her on fire. People around here would have lynched that woman because everybody was so angry.

"Someone quickly notified the police and they came to arrest the woman. It was also sympathisers who rushed the girl to the hospital."

Our correspondent later went to the Bode Thomas Police Division, Surulere, where Iroakazi was being detained.

Officials of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, who were at the police station also asked Iroakazi why she attacked little Eno in such a violent way.

"I did not attack her. I was inside when I heard her screaming. I went out and saw her burning," she simply said.

The Divisional Police Officer of the station declined vehemently to allow her photo to be taken.

"You have to go and take permission from the Area Commander at Iponri to take her photograph," he said.

The police also did not give any personal information about the suspect.

The fair complexioned woman seemed to be in her early 50s. Our correspondent learnt that she is an indigene of Delta State.

Founder of the Esther Child Rights Foundation, who notified WAPA about the case, said all necessary avenues to ensure justice on behalf of Eno would be explored.

She said, "This is not just a case of attempted murder. I have been to the office of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and Other Related Matters. This is equally a case of child trafficking.

"We will not relent in our efforts to ensure that what exactly happened to that little girl comes to light.

"Since I have been dealing with cases involving children, I have never seen one this brutal. What could make a sane human being do that to a little girl?"

Zonal Commander, NAPTIP, Mr. Joseph Famakin, said WAPA is its partner on child trafficking issue.

He said, "We will work with the ministry on the case. The first thing that needs to be done is to determine the status of the girls to see if they could be categorised as victims of trafficking. When we have all the information, we and WAPA will take immediate step on the children.

"Also, the police are our partners on this issue and I believe they will take appropriate action and get us involved where necessary."

He said contrary to views that girls are mostly trafficked to Lagos from places such as Calabar and Akwa Ibom, the menace of trafficking had become widespread.

"Gone are those days when we have some parts of Nigeria termed as endemic areas in the country as far as trafficking is concerned. The problem now cut across many states at the moment," he said.

Spokesperson of the state police command, Ngozi Braide, said she had not got a report of the case, when our correspondent spoke with her on the phone.

"I will find out about the case and where it stands and get back to you," she said.

Trafficking of children for domestic labour with its attendant violence has become rampant in Nigeria.

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The 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report published by the United States Department of State, says, "Trafficked Nigerians are recruited from rural and, to a lesser extent, urban areas within the country, women and girls, for domestic servitude.

"Nigerian traffickers rely on threats of voodoo curses to control their victims and force them into situations of prostitution and labour."

The report states that at least 25 traffickers were convicted within the past one year, while as at the end of 2012, 143 prosecutions remained pending with NAPTIP.

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