The Real Cinderellas

Girls as young as nine are being put to work as Cinderella slaves in Togo's capital city. *Jane Labous* reports.

It was a hot day in June when Esther's aunt announced the holiday, and the teenager imagined the wide beaches of the capital, the sea air, the grand adventure. Her parents were keen; after all, their daughter would be fed and looked after for the summer, one less mouth to feed in the over-stretched household. The woman and the girl left the village the following morning, the pair of them squeezed like tinned fishes onto a crowded bus that rattled its way south to the coast.

A week later, Esther found herself in a strange house in Lomé, with a terrifying boss who beat and starved her. The 13 year-old slept on a mat in a shack near the kitchen. Every day she rose at five and worked, cleaning plates, cooking, washing the clothes and looking after the baby. Her wages went directly to the aunt who had, mysteriously, disappeared.

"I wanted to leave," says Esther, now 14 and back in her village in northern Togo, where the mud buildings rising from the red earth and the teak flowers silhouetted in the blazing dusks couldn't be further from the chaotic streets of the capital. "My aunt said I had to stay. I used to cry, and I dreamt of returning to the village."

There's a silence as Esther considers the past. "It hurts me when I remember all that."

Esther is a slight, solemn child with close-cropped hair who looks no more than 11 or 12, and it is difficult to imagine her doing the back-breaking work of a domestic servant. Yet in hundreds of villages all over rural Togo, the story is the same for young girls like Esther. This slim country sandwiched between Ghana and Benin, bordering Burkina Faso to the north, is a prime source and transit point for traffickers.

Contrary to widespread clichés, girls are not taken from their homes by strange men in the dead of night. Rather, the traffickers – known by the Nigerian term, *ogas* – are close female relatives or family friends who promise girls money and other rewards if they accompany them to Lomé or the bordering capitals – Lagos, Cotonou or Accra – on what is euphemistically referred to as 'an adventure'. There, the girls are put to work as domestic servants, roadside vendors, porters or sex workers. For boys it is another story; the *ogas* are male and equally well-known to families, offering motorbikes and four-battery radios if boys come with them to the cassava, cocoa, cotton and tobacco plantations of Benin and Nigeria, where they spend gruelling months as field hands.

Over half of Togo's population lives below the poverty line* and people tell me that in the villages *la traite,* or trafficking, does not astonish anyone. Somehow, in a world where every child is another potential drain on one's income, their trade and movement has become a cultural norm. Parents, ignorant of the risks, ground down by poverty, allow themselves to believe the tales of holidays, better schools or training opportunities woven by the *ogas*, or are unashamedly seduced by a chimera of the riches their child will eventually bring home.

"Trafficking is much more complex in this sense," explains Ouro Gbeleou, project manager of Plan Togo's Anti-Trafficking Project. "The traffickers are not strangers; they're often members of the

family; friends, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, and this is why people won't report them. The phenomenon isn't recent either, because it's victims of trafficking themselves who become traffickers in the end, and this means it carries on."

Bella*, now 16, had just turned ten when she agreed to go to Lomé with her older sister. Her mother, a single parent who sells *gari*, or manioc paste, in the local market, was struggling to provide for Bella and her five siblings. The sister promised that Bella would go to school in the capital, but when they arrived she was left with first one boss, then another, where she was made to do the household's domestic work.

"I was the one washing the dishes, cleaning the floors, cooking and taking care of the children," says Bella. "The boss used to beat me; she'd make me kneel down and whip me on my back. I was eleven at that time."

"I wanted to tell someone about it, but I was afraid," she remembers, her face emotionless as she describes the ordeal. "I couldn't tell anyone because I thought they would fire me or hurt me."

Bella escaped via a friend of her sister who agreed to take her back to the village, and she is now learning to be a hairdresser. She seems happy enough at the tin-roofed salon packed with extensions and hair relaxers on the dirt highway that runs through town, where young men on motorbikes earned after their own harrowing journeys zoom past. Bella is, by all accounts, one of the lucky ones.

Dédé is a pretty, delicate-featured girl, with the kind of light caramel skin that men – unscrupulous men who prowl Lomé's boiling markets – are willing to hunt down and pay for. She is 14 and works in the capital as a porter and pineapple seller, so it is a surprise to discover that she is at her journey's end and not its beginning.

When she was ten, Dédé agreed to travel with a friend and her mother to the oil state of Odjo in Nigeria. There she worked for a prostitute, who wanted the teenager to join her in sex work. When Dédé refused, the prostitute made her sell petrol.

"We used to go to the bush in order to steal petrol from the pipelines," remembers Dede. "The place was very dangerous, they kill people there, they can just shoot you dead with a gun – I saw that with my own eyes. I didn't like this work, but my employer forced me to do it."

Eventually Dédé escaped, but with no work available in her home village, and her mother struggling to feed her five brothers and sisters, she decided to seek her fortune in Togo's capital. She now works as a pineapple seller and porter girl, and lives in a *maison des portefaix* – a porter house, an open compound in Lomé with hundreds of other women, hoping to one day save enough to pay for a hairdressing apprenticeship.

"I pay the place to sleep," she says. "I pay to pee, to shit and for the bath. After paying all this, I only have CFA500 left that I can save, or sometimes nothing."

Washing hangs on string across the walls; there are cooking pots and carrier bags piled up in every free space, and children scatter as we push open the makeshift wooden door. Amid the bowls of pineapples, a woman performs her morning toilette. At night, men come by looking for girls like

Dédé as they sleep in the open with the other *portefaix* and their children. The dangers for a teenage girl are extreme.

"For a human, these are unsupportable conditions," says Abdoulaye Ilnouawa, a social worker from the National Catholic Bureau of Togo who works specifically with *portefaix* like Dédé. He shakes his head as he points out a woman in her twenties with a young girl of around seven. 'You see her,' he says. 'She brought that kid here to look after her baby while she works.'

Later, we sit in a corner and talk as the women drift in and out, cooking and washing in the square of space allotted them. "You'll see lots of children sleeping like sardines," says Ilnouwa. "There are all sorts of health risks, and it's a place where there is no respect for human beings. It's no place for a child."

In 2005, the Togolese government introduced a law criminalising trafficking, with considerable fines for anyone found taking children. Yet according to Tcha Berei, an education specialist for Plan Togo, laws alone cannot end the problem.

"The real work exists at the family level," he explains. "The law only comes into play at an intermediary and national level, so trafficking escapes the authorities, mainly when the families are accomplices and there is a lack of denunciation."

Plan Togo's anti-trafficking project works in northern village communities, supporting trafficked children to get back to school or vocational training, and raising awareness amongst families about the risks of sending their children away with *ogas*.

It was staff from Plan's programme who discovered that Esther had left her village, and asked her parents what had happened. Esther's father Djibril, 57, and mother Rabi, 40, who had allowed Esther to travel with her aunt because, they reasoned, 'it wasn't Nigeria', say that when Plan told them their daughter was working as a servant, it was a shock.

"When you send your child away, it's because of poverty," says Djibril. "We're now aware of child trafficking, whereas before ignorance drove us, and we thought the children could help us. Ignorance brings many ills."

Former *oga* Moussilia Attiyédé agrees. She became an *oga* because she herself was trafficked at the age of nine, and at the height of her career, she could make a salary of around CFA150,000 per year (approximately £168) if she had a number of girls working for her. Now she believes the only way to break this cycle of poverty is to ensure employment opportunities for young people are available in their villages.

"The first time I went to Nigeria, the youngest child I took was 15, and the second time, the youngest child was 12," she says. "They cried, saying that they wanted to go home, but my goal was to make money from the whole adventure and not care about their suffering."

Moussilia finally gave up trafficking when one of her girls became ill. "Fortunately she didn't die, because I would bear her death on my conscience if she had died. I also realised that my friends who are working here in the village were living a better life than me."

In Moussilia's village, there are many *ogas* operating; mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, all scouting for girls and boys to take off on an adventure. Hundreds of children will go, enchanted by visions of motorbikes and new clothes, school, holidays, riches and a better life. Many will, in time, become traffickers themselves, driven by dreams and promises.

ENDS

*World Bank Indicators http://data.worldbank.org/country/togo

**This name has been changed for child protection reasons*