

My Statement

The first time I was raped, I was fifteen years old, scarcely more than a child. That act of violence and degradation wrenched away my innocence, my childhood and my trust in other people, leaving me with physical trauma, severe pain and fearful anxiety. I was not the only one- there were men in our community in Liberia who abused women and girls with impunity. Like in many West African cultures, there were fixed expectations of men's and women's roles and in this context, not all men showed the respect that women would hope for. To protect me from further violence, my parents sent me to my mother's home village in Nigeria to stay with my grandmother. So, at fifteen, I left my parents, sister, two brothers and my childhood home in Liberia, which was all I had known till then.

Like many Mandingo people, my dad was a nomadic market trader travelling throughout West Africa. One day my dad came to my mum's village in Nigeria; I like to think of him going all that way, catching mum's eye and sweeping her off her feet. She followed him to Liberia where his family had a cocoa plantation.

The rape was traumatic and I was worried about my sister too. Being sent away from home felt like a punishment, but my grandmother was kind and took care of me. Sometimes life was good in my new home in Nigeria and people were happy. But it was hard for most villagers to make a decent living. Many boys and young men joined lawless gangs controlled by influential local leaders who used them to build up their power and wealth. The murderous struggles of local politicians made western Nigeria a place of terrible insecurity and, as the years went by, a place of deadly violence and no justice.

My parents came to see me every year but it was hard to be separated from them. I was devastated when my father and brothers died during the civil war in Liberia when Samuel Doe was overthrown. My sister got married but died in childbirth. I think my mother died of grief. My grandmother arranged for me to marry and I obeyed. Life with my husband followed the pattern of many in Nigeria, including the beatings. But we had some good times and were together long enough to have five beautiful children.

When my husband was also killed in the political violence in Nigeria, I fled with my children. I thought I had found sanctuary in Ogba near Benin City under the protection of the church. But the church leader sadly passed away and as a single mother, I was again without protection from violent gangs who had killed the men in my family. When my house was burned down, I hoped my children would be safe with a friend, but they threatened her too, and she fled with them to Lagos. Then I was captured. They sexually abused me and tortured me- they beat me on the legs causing permanent damage. I thought I was going to die. However, I escaped and was able to make my way to Lagos. Of course I was alone without friends or support and it was not long before I put my trust in a man who seemed kind and helpful. That man deceived me and trafficked me to a brothel in Cotonou in Benin. I cannot understand how any man can sell a woman into the degradation and misery of

forced prostitution. When at last I escaped, I was rescued by a priest who helped me to get out of the country. He arranged for me to be placed with a Ghanaian family in London. I did domestic work for them and they also helped me to find work locally as a cleaner. After a while, I was taken to another family in Leicester.

Ever since I had fled from the violence and brutality in Nigeria, I had been living in a state of traumatised dependency, as a captive, as a prostitute, as a trafficked woman. Later, when I was working for people of goodwill in domestic service, I became dependent on them. It was several years before I reached a stage where I was ready to take control of my own life, be responsible for myself and perhaps have a chance of seeing my children once more. In 2004, I decided I would try to get a proper job with a proper wage. A friend who understood the system said I needed ID and a National Insurance Number; she helped me to get the papers I needed and I got a job in Ashton Lodge Residential Care Home in Leicester. During those years, my old injuries from the violence I had suffered began to cause me increasing pain. But no physical pain could hurt as much as the despair and devastation I felt when I received terrible news from home in 2006- my house had been burned down and my son Chuwudi had been killed. He was just fourteen years old.

I continued working, trying to save money to send home for my children. In 2009 I had an operation on my leg. It was difficult to walk and I had to use crutches at times but I continued to work. I wanted to earn better money and while I was still recovering I registered with an employment agency for a second part time job.

Some people might say I was naive; all I knew was that I thought I was in a place of safety after surviving great suffering and terrible dangers in Africa. I didn't understand when the employment agency, instead of offering me a job, reported me to the UKBA as an illegal immigrant. I was shocked when the police came to arrest me. They said it wouldn't take long to register my details at the police station and they would bring me back home. But I was locked up in a police cell with no change of clothes and without my own wash things- not even a toothbrush. They took me to court the next day, I was remanded in custody and sent to Peterborough prison. It was a whole week before I was able to wash properly. While I was in prison, no consideration was given to my health. Prison staff ignored all my requests for the medical attention I needed in the aftermath of my operation and for the long term injuries inflicted during the years of abuse. I am still in constant pain and at present am waiting for an operation on my ankle.

After three months my case came to court. A probation officer who had visited me in Peterborough presented a sympathetic written report and the judge said I should be released as I had already spent three months in prison. However, the immigration authorities had me locked up in Peterborough again. This time, it was finally explained to me that I should claim asylum as a victim of trafficking and I was allocated a solicitor who helped me to start an application for asylum. I was released and returned to Leicester where I had some friends I could stay with. I received a letter from the Home Office instructing me

to register in person at the Immigration Reporting Office in Solihull. I had no money and no means of travelling from Leicester to Solihull. The letter did at least provide the number of the Refugee Council in Leicester so I made an appointment and they spoke to the Home Office for me. As a result, I was transferred to the asylum seekers' reception hostel at Stone Road, Birmingham and in January 2010 went to register at the Immigration Reporting Office in Solihull. From Stone Road I was sent to live at a house in Witton with four other asylum seekers. They too had their own health problems and serious difficulty accessing appropriate health care.

My asylum claim was rejected and two appeals failed, in spite of the fact that the judge said that there was "an error of law." I believe the solicitor who represented me was not competent. As a result, I was evicted from my accommodation by G4S and made homeless in April last year. I slept on friends' floors, sofas and on the streets. The danger, insecurity and discomfort made my damaged knees and ankles even worse. Eventually, a friend introduced me to Hope Housing and they gave me a place to stay and found me a new solicitor. I was also now on the waiting list for an operation on my ankle.

I understood that Hope would house me for eighteen months; unfortunately, they required me to leave after just twelve months in June this year. My solicitor helped me to apply to the National Asylum Support Service for support and G4S offered me accommodation in Leicester. I explained I was waiting for an operation and needed to stay in Birmingham. They offered me accommodation in Stoke-on-Trent. So once again, I am homeless and must depend on friends who have a little space in their home and kind hearts.

I did not choose to be abused, tortured or trafficked. I did not choose to be separated from my children. I come from a part of the world which is violent and dangerous, especially for women. Since being brought to the UK I have done my best to earn my living and send money for my children whenever possible. When I was in prison with women who were there for theft, shoplifting, violent assault and even murder, they could not believe that I had been arrested and locked up as a result of looking for work. Since being labelled an illegal immigrant, I have been unable to work and the stress and insecurity have seriously weakened my physical and mental health. If I had a safe "home" to go to anywhere in West Africa, I would not choose to live like this. Back in Nigeria I would be killed- like so many of my family. So I have no choice but to live like this.

Irene Uchie Danny

24 September 2014