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Rom scam: How African fraudsters now make £80million a year ripping off women (and a few men) so desperate for love they'll believe anything

By [Lesley-ann Jones](#) and [Emily Hill](#)

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Few love more fervently than the middle-aged and lonely. Which is why last week's revelation that divorcee Kate Roberts lavished £80,000 on a handsome American soldier – only to find out he was a fictitious creation of a heartless gang of Nigerian conmen – came as yet another salutary warning that not everything is what it seems on the Worldwide Web.

Kate, who had to sell her house to pay off her debts, is one of a rising tide of women (and a number of men) who have fallen for a new and worrying crime phenomenon: the romantic scam or rom scam.

One widowed grandmother, identified only as Jean, lost more than £100,000 to a fake soldier who told her he was raising a teenage son alone. She answered his calls for help with bills, school fees and getting his 'son' out of military prison.



Lost £80,000: Kate Roberts thought she was being wooed by this U.S. soldier

Police managed to trace some of the money to accounts in Nigeria and California and recovered just over £13,000.

The scammers' modus operandi is simple. The fraudsters register with dating websites using false identities and photos of good-looking people culled from the web. They typically pay subscription fees with stolen or cloned credit card details – and act quickly to inveigle their way into long-distance 'love affairs' over the net.

Sometimes they will send gifts or flowers. They'll flatter and flirt. They know, after all, that most members of the dating site wouldn't be there unless they were lonely and vulnerable.

Once a relationship is established, they'll move in for the sting. This can be an elaborate ruse lasting weeks – perhaps they will concoct a trip abroad and later a sudden crisis that leaves them in urgent need of cash.

'We are seeing a great deal more romantic scamming. It appears to be mainly women who are the victims, although we do know men who are affected. Public awareness is vital. People must be told what's going on.'

Sometimes they will spin a yarn about sending money to their victim's current account and ask him or her to forward some of the money on. Weeks later, the original transfer will bounce, leaving the victim thousands of pounds in debt.

Often the victims are so embarrassed and ashamed that they don't involve police.

However, Colin Woodcock, a senior investigator with SOCA – the Serious Organised Crime Agency – said: 'This crime affects hundreds, maybe thousands of people in the UK, to the tune of up to £80million a year. Victims typically lose from £50 to a couple of hundred to several thousand pounds, but some individuals have been taken for over £275,000.'

Mr Woodcock, who was awarded the MBE in 2009 for services to law enforcement, has devoted two years to exposing rom scams – many of which operate from Ghana and Nigeria.

He said: 'We are seeing a great deal more romantic scamming. It appears to be mainly women who are the victims, although we do know men who are affected. Public awareness is vital. People must be told what's going on.'

So why are so many ordinary, educated, otherwise discerning people falling for this scam and being stung for such huge sums?

'Love is like alcoholism, gambling or any other addiction,' Mr Woodcock said.

'Some people think they'll win the next race, or pick the winning Lottery ticket. Others don't want to believe that someone paying them attention may not be genuine.'

'Some people are so desperate to be loved that they will do almost anything. They get sucked in, and they can't turn back. They are not prepared to admit that they have fallen for a fantasy. They feel embarrassed and ashamed, they don't want friends or family to know.'

'Some lose their dignity along with their life savings, their homes and even their sense of self. For some, being conned out of everything you ever worked for is too much to take. I know of two suicides which occurred as a direct result of romance scamming. One was a woman, the other a man. Taking their own lives must have seemed easier than owning up to having got it so wrong'.



False sense of security: Some victims soon begin to feel comfortable with their potential suitor - even though they have never met them

Romance scamming had its genesis in the lottery scams of the Eighties. These developed into advance-fee frauds, in which victims targeted by letter or fax dispatched modest amounts to the senders in the hope of receiving larger sums back.

Variations involving obtaining bank account details included the Nigerian letter, also known as the Nigerian bank scam or 419 fraud – named after the clause in Nigerian law dealing with fraud. As Nigeria's oil-based economy declined and unemployment surged, conning Western businessmen into bogus deals became widespread.

Similar scams arose in Russia, the Ukraine, Canada and other countries.

'Frauds are like viruses, they mutate and move on,' said Mr Woodcock.

'Romance scamming has morphed out of earlier scams, which at first relied on handwritten letters, then typed ones. Then email became the rage. The internet is now very sophisticated in Nigeria and is the main reason that scamming has taken hold. Most people have access.

'Once the fraudsters obtain your bank account details, there is no stopping them. But we have caught many of these men. They do go to prison for several years, in the UK or in Africa.'

Not that West Africa is the stronghold.

'Scammers can keep relationships going for months or even years. We call this grooming. For a long while, they ask for nothing. The victim believes their 'suitor' must genuinely love them. But sooner or later there will be a specific request. Whether it's for a visa or a marriage, the scammer will eventually ask for something.'

'There is no world capital of heartless scamming,' said Mr Woodcock.

'Ghana is a big problem. Thanks to the West African diaspora it also goes on in hundreds of other locations, according to information reaching the National Fraud Reporting Centre – anywhere that the internet can be accessed routinely.

'We work closely with colleagues in African countries to intercept tens of thousands of letters in circulation. We have reciprocal arrangements with the police in the United States and other countries.

'It's a huge operation, and we are making progress but people are still falling for it in worrying numbers. Where next? If we knew that, we'd go there first. People have to report it so that we can act.'

While widely described as the work of 'mafia-style' organisations, evidence to date suggests that romance scamming is more the work of individuals acting alone.

'In reality it's now a bit of both,' Mr Woodcock said.

'Many criminals working similar scams will help each other. It's primarily small groups of disenfranchised young men – poverty-stricken, ill-educated – finding it virtually impossible to get regular work and make any sort of living.

'They frequent internet cafes, witness what others are up to and get involved. Someone learns how to do it, teaches others and it develops into something of a franchise. Small amounts of money will change hands for information. They may have a girl to help them, and she'll be on a modest retainer too.'

Not all victims are 'quick hits' either. Some of the cleverer and more entrepreneurial scammers take time to woo their victims, hoping to earn even richer returns.

Mr Woodcock said: 'Scammers can keep relationships going for months or even years. We call this grooming. For a long while, they ask for nothing. The victim believes their 'suitor' must genuinely love them. But sooner or later there will be a specific request. Whether it's for a visa or a marriage, the scammer will eventually ask for something.

'Moral codes and expectations in these cultures are not the same as ours. We are fair game to them.'

Mr Woodcock cites several examples of victims who refused to face that they had been defrauded. 'We've had women who, even after we've demonstrated categorically that a 'relationship' is a fraud, will not accept it.

'One guy even admitted to his victim, "I know I'm a fraudster, but I still love you". It was all she wanted to hear. She continued with him, kept sending him money. Victims have to accept the truth before they can be helped.'

In the most extreme cases, victims have become money mules, moving cash from Britain to Canada, America or the Netherlands en route to Africa. These women, and a few men, then cease to be the victim and become the criminal.

'They can end up having their bank accounts frozen, their passports seized,' Mr Woodcock said.

'They take massive personal risks which the criminal himself is avoiding. They can even go to prison themselves.'

While not wishing to deny the lonely middle-aged an opportunity to find love online, SOCA stresses that safety of customers is paramount. The agency now works closely with some internet dating agencies to reduce the risks.

'The important thing is to be aware, be vigilant,' said Mr Woodcock. 'If something untoward happens, go to the police.'

'Scammers are clever people, entrepreneurial people. The number one rule is don't send any money. Not for anything. If you are using a dating website, use the designated area to chat. Never agree to leave that safe area and start emailing someone direct. Protect yourself, and come to us if you think you've been scammed. It's what we're there for.'

** If you think you've been a victim of fraud, contact Action Fraud (www.actionfraud.org.uk, 0300 123 2040) for information on victim support. There is also information about how to protect yourself against becoming a victim.*

The conman: I did it for four years and made £50,000

Reformed scammer Abayomi Aje admits having made more than £50,000 from cheating unsuspecting Western women.

The 24-year-old now runs a legitimate internet marketing business in Nigeria but has revealed how the scammers operate.

He said: 'I was a scammer for close to four years and made well over £50,000. I have heard guys making as much as a quarter of a million pounds.'



Guilt trip: Reformed scammer Abayomi Aje now regrets conning women out of thousands of pounds

According to Aje, each operator juggles a number of accounts and uses popular dating websites. Often the cover story involves a fake photograph of an American or British soldier and a stolen credit card. Almost all fraudsters are men.

Aje said: 'Each person has as many as six women at a time. We would search through dating websites such as Yahoo! personals, match.com and singlesnet.com and create an account, usually with stolen credit cards.'

'The woman is, in most cases, desperate to get a man in her life. For those who are being a little difficult, you send a gift on a weekend with some nicely worded card. Once the victim has fallen in love, the next thing is to tell her you are going on a short business trip to any part of the world. You call the victim and be romantic with her on the phone. Then, after some days, you ask her for money giving her some sob story, like you were robbed or forgot your money.'

'She will either agree to send the money or, if she is really gullible, she will clear fake cheques or money orders for you. She may also be asked to receive wire transfers into her bank account.'

Aje says he 'deeply regretted' being involved in the scams and that most people involved had been desperate. 'Most are from poor homes,' he says.

'I wanted to go to London Metropolitan University. I am sorry about everything that happened. I was a young boy who was misled by my peer group and under pressure from wanting to go to school at all costs.'

The victim: My U.S. sergeant sent me teddies and balloons

Rebecca, a single mother from Leicester, decided to fight back after she became the target of an online dating con.

'She set up a Facebook group called 'Stop the US Army Dating Scam' in order to expose fraudsters romancing British women. 'I was amazed to see hundreds of women had been conned. Some sold their cars and remortgaged their homes,' she said.

Last year Rebecca (not her real name) joined a dating agency and was contacted by an East African, masquerading as a US Army sergeant in Afghanistan. He bombarded her with emails, poems, flowers, balloons and teddy bears.

When he asked her for £450 to buy phone cards so that he could call her, Rebecca refused.

Then he said he would like to visit her but would need financial help to get a 'transit grant' from the Army.

'He emailed me lots of very official-looking paperwork and I even had a call from someone who said he was his lieutenant confirming that he would not be allowed to leave his post without some financial guarantee that he would return,' she told the BBC.

She asked her father to send the money to the man's bank.

'He then told me that I was entitled to his lifetime benefit which was worth \$1.42 million, but in order to release it I would need to pay £6,000.

'I realised something was very wrong.'

When she checked his details with the U.S. Army, she was told that the identity of a serving U.S. soldier had been stolen.

'With hindsight I can see that there were lots of things that didn't add up and I feel very foolish now.'

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Pretend you are a Yorkshire man like me and dont send/ donate to ANYONE. The definition of a Yorkshire man? Like a scotsman but with the generosity removed.

- hagar, blackpool uk, 06/2/2011 05:45

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As the saying goes, a fool and their money are soon parted. Con men can only exist where there are stupid people who cannot think rationally with commonsense. There many of them so con men will continue to exist. It is not possible to protect people from their

own inadequacies. Left wing socialists have been trying for years to achieve this with a plethora of regulations that have all but paralysed the country by bringing down the strong to protect the weak and foolish. There will always be predators and prey - that is nature.

- Joe, Chiang Mai Thailand, 06/2/2011 05:43

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This type of Nigerian fraud has been going on for more than 15 years now. And it was there long before the internet. I know because my partner was taken for 4K. We tried to make awareness of it by contacting papers and anyone who would listen, but for some reason, there was a feeling that reporting it would be non-PC. If more public knowledge had been available to us, in news articles and TV programs, these scams would have never been able to accumulate takings of 80 million a year. Lives have continued to be ruined and for what?

- Lauren, Australia, 06/2/2011 04:43

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What gets me about this article is the smile on Mr Abayomi Aje's face. Sitting at a computer all day trying to scam money off people is about as low as you can go.

- Steve G, Dublin Ireland, 06/2/2011 04:39

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Perhaps there should be a warning on all these dating sites. Something similar to the cigarette packet. Just a few details of the scams such as be very suspicious when asked for money and help with excuses to get out of paying it over. A decent man would never ask!

- Demented ferrett, Sandwell Valley, 06/2/2011 04:06

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I met my wife in Ukraine six years ago on the Net, I never sent her money by wire, instead I traveled to see her, I am still in Ukraine. and happily married. NEVER EVER SEND MONEY!!!!!!

- Steve, Southampton UK, 06/2/2011 03:30

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