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The long and dangerous road to slavery

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Traffickers are luring Nigerian women to Italy and entrapping more and more in the sex trade

The unmarked flat in a grey cement building on the edge of an Italian hillside town is deliberately anonymous and decorated with donated Ikea furniture. Dora is perched on an armchair inside, her voice cracking with emotion as she tells how she came to this shelter for abuse victims. Earlier this year, in her native Nigeria, she swore an oath that led her to be trafficked to Europe as a sex slave. “I thought that when I came here they would look for a job for me but I didn’t know it was prostitution,” she says.

Dora, 19, had hoped to escape destitution on the outskirts of Benin City, in southern Nigeria, where she was born. She took on a €30,000 debt with what turned out to be a criminal network in exchange for passage to Italy and employment once she arrived. The deal — encouraged by her family — was sealed in a traditional and traumatic religious ceremony. A juju priest forced her to drink a strong alcoholic beverage laced with kola nut, strip partially naked and hand over her underwear, before warning her to obey every order she was given. “The man told us that if we don’t pay the amount, the curse is going to kill us,” she says of the shaman who presided over the ritual. “And if we run away, the curse is going to kill us.”

Slender and petite, with deep, dark eyes, Dora, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is wearing a light brown jacket, blue jeans and flip-flops. During a two-and-a-half-hour interview, she occasionally bites her nails and fidgets with her long, highlighted braids — perhaps a sign of the anxiety that still lingers in her.

This juju ceremony was just the beginning of a five-month, 2,500-mile-plus trip across Africa in minivans, motorcycles and pick-up trucks that brought Dora to Libya’s Mediterranean coast. There, she joined the ranks of more than 160,000 other migrants who have made a risky boat

crossing to Sicily since the beginning of the year, among them an increasing number of trafficked young women headed for prostitution.

It has been nearly three decades since Nigerian girls and women began appearing in noticeable numbers at night on Italian streets. But in 2015, the Italian-Nigerian sex trade connection has experienced a new boom. The vast movement of refugees and migrants seeking safe harbour in the west is being exploited by ruthless human smugglers who see an opportunity to bolster their trade.

Of the almost 900,000 migrants who landed in Europe after travelling across the Mediterranean this year, about one-fifth have come through Italy. Of those, almost 5,000 were Nigerian women, a fourfold increase over last year. The International Organisation for Migration states that more than half are being trafficked for prostitution. “In the past we never saw these kinds of numbers,” says Simona Moscarelli, a migration lawyer for IOM based in Rome. “Libya has become a logistical hub and the traffickers have become very well organised along the route and at getting the women on board the boats. The conditions of physical enslavement are horrible and have gotten worse.”

Animation

Dora’s journey – one of thousands by trafficked women each year

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Moscarelli says.

In the past, many of the Nigerian women had a more straightforward journey to their new lives in Europe. Traffickers arranged fake documents and the women and girls boarded flights from Murtala Muhammed airport in Lagos to Fiumicino airport in Rome and London's Heathrow. According to those familiar with the trade, immigration officials on both sides sometimes looked the other way.

But the civil war and chaos in Libya opened up the opportunity for a new land-and-sea route. This entails much lower costs, since no forged passports are required to cross porous borders — a few bribes may suffice — and there is no need for expensive plane tickets. However, it is also much more perilous, and many women have ended up risking — or even losing — their lives.

Dora is one of many who have followed this new path. Along the way, she nearly starved to death in the desert and had all her money stolen. "People tried to rape us many times," she says. In the war-torn Libyan capital of Tripoli, she was held by a Nigerian man who frequently became drunk and violent. One night he threw her food away, kicked her in the stomach and pushed her to the floor. "He beat me with a belt, he beat me like a goat," she says. "He said we were not behaving properly — and we should not think we can behave like this with our clients in Italy."

Dora remembers asking: "What do you mean clients?", only to hear the response: "Don't you know that when you get to Italy you'll be working as prostitutes?" A few weeks later, she set sail for European shores from a beach in the Libyan coastal city of Sabratah, on an overcrowded rubber vessel that nearly capsized. "When I saw the dinghy I shuddered, I trembled, and then I started to pray."

future at home in Africa's biggest economy and most populous nation, where only a tiny elite has benefited from the wealth of the country's vast oil exports.

Myria Vassiliadou, the EU's anti-trafficking co-ordinator, believes Nigerians in Italy are among the "most vulnerable" victims of such modern slavery. She fears that their plight is being "rendered invisible" in the current debate over migration and "the influx of everybody who is coming to Europe at the moment". She adds: "The nature of the crime is such that these people are hidden."

For this year's seasonal appeal, the Financial Times is working in partnership with Stop the Traffik, an organisation that raises awareness about human trafficking. This trade is on the rise in many countries, as criminal networks modernise and adapt to the vast numbers of vulnerable people on the move. Their exploitation — whether for forced labour, adoption or organ use — occurs on every continent and uses more than 500 routes, according to the United Nations. The International Labour Organisation estimates there are almost 21 million victims of forced labour worldwide, of which 4.5 million are subject to forced sexual exploitation.

As Dora's story shows, there is a ready market for such victims in rich, industrialised countries, including across the EU. But the problem is particularly acute in Italy. The country accounts for the most verified cases of trafficking in the 28-country bloc due to a noxious combination of its geographic position in the southern Mediterranean, the power of domestic organised crime in poor regions where the state is weak, and a persistently high demand for sexual services.

The small city of Cuneo is nestled in a corner of northwestern Italy known for its lush valleys, white truffles and full-bodied red wines. But Rose, a 22-year-old Nigerian prostitute waiting for clients across from a petrol station on a recent chilly Monday evening, has seen nothing of the good life.

She arrived in Italy in 2013 and will not say how much money she still owes her traffickers, or how long she expects to keep doing the job. According to a Save the Children report released in August, it can take between three to seven years for a Nigerian prostitute to repay her debts, often working every night — and sometimes during the day as well. "The women are also forced to pay their own utility bills and even pay 'rent' for the piece of sidewalk they use," Save the Children said.

Sex workers are paid as little as €20 for each service and are often beaten by their madams if they do not return with enough cash. If they get pregnant, they are frequently forced to undergo unsafe abortions. "I think I was born in the wrong place," Rose says, referring to

Nigeria. “Maybe God will help me soon.”

That night, a group of Catholic volunteers from the Pope John XXIII Community offer iced tea and croissants to her and other prostitutes in the area. They try to convince Rose to run away from the traffickers and come to one of their safe houses. But Rose, who has a seven-year old son back home in Nigeria, refuses. “I am already here, to change is dangerous,” she says. “I have to pay my debts and I have to take care of myself and my family.”

The charity has had some success. Earlier this year, it was able to take in Mary, a 13-year old girl who arrived in Italy this August. She had been sold to the traffickers by her brother, who subjected her to a typical juju ritual, which included drawing her blood and removing some of her pubic hair. On her journey, she was raped and forced into prostitution for two months in Libya before spending seven days on the Mediterranean bound for Italy.

Mary found safety after she collapsed at 3am in front of the Cuneo train station on her second night in the job. She was taken to hospital. Katiuscia Vitaggio, who has helped Nigerian victims in Italy for years, saw her there: “Her condition was terrible when I found her. It was nine in the morning and the heat was sweltering. This little girl was on a stretcher in the corner of a dark room, hidden under a heavy wool blanket,” she says.

Now Mary is in a shelter waiting for a permanent assignment to a foster family. Last month, as she sat on a couch in the home’s office wearing a hooded grey sweatshirt that concealed her short hair, she lowered her head into her hands, avoiding eye contact. She would smile later over dinner but would only briefly answer a few questions — such as whether her father knew what had been in store for her (“no”) – before asking to leave the room. “Hers is an immense tragedy. It’s the cruelty of it: how can a mother abandon her

daughter and a brother sell his 12-year-old sister?" says Vitaggio.

Dora, Rose and Mary do not come from just anywhere: they are all from Benin City. Some 6,000km from Rome, this southern Nigerian city has quietly emerged as one of the main trafficking hubs on the African continent.

With a population of 1 million, Benin City bears no obvious links to Europe. But most residents know someone who has left home "for a job opportunity" there — often code for a dangerous future in prostitution. Local myth has it that this city's outsized role in Europe's illicit sex industry has its roots in tomato harvesting. In the 1980s, men from Benin City working on Italian farms discovered a "side hustle" when it became apparent that some locals had a taste for the Nigerian women who sometimes accompanied the labourers.

"The men would come back [from Italy] and take a relation, friends or even sisters [back]," says Sister Bibiana Emenaha. "People saw it as a lucrative way of making money. I think that's why it became so rampant in this place." Often, this involved the complicity of family members. "You see a mother trafficking her daughter, a brother trafficking his cousin, his sister trafficking her cousin, because they don't see it as anything bad. They see it as, 'I'm helping to take you overseas, to Italy.' That's how prostitution came in."


Sister Bibiana Emenaha

The straight-talking 57-year-old nun was sent to Benin City earlier this year by her Catholic order, the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. She is in charge of running a shelter for trafficked girls and women who have returned to Nigeria and are trying to begin the transition back to a semblance of their past lives. "It's a very strong network and before you counteract it and fight it, you have to come up with another, stronger network," Sister Bibiana says. "Human beings are not meant for business [sex work], because we are made in the image and likeness of God, Therefore our dignity is more than that."

Given the harsh reality of life in impoverished Benin City, it is not difficult to see how easily its women and girls might be tempted to put that dignity at risk. Schoolchildren skip along rain-rutted roads after a day in an overcrowded classroom. As they grow older, most of these students will reach the same roadblock. Many families cannot afford to pay the fees for their children to sit the exams that are a graduation requirement. Out of uniform and

without prospects of an office job, teenagers are often forced to join their elders in the yam fields outside the city. The luckier ones might get part-time work at a relative's clothing boutique or at a cafeteria-style restaurant.

But if there is one thing Benin City's youth generally have, it's time. Time to sit in a plastic chair outside a friend's hair salon, to loiter in the shopping mall's lobby. To watch music videos that show a shiny western world far from their own and to imagine life there. Satellite TV and cheap smartphones make it easier than ever before to form a picture of a "glamorous" existence in Europe, says Roland Nwoha, who runs Idia Renaissance, another local charity helping trafficking victims. "They see changes there and they are not corresponding to changes here."

Benin City may be a key conduit for the African-European sex trade but the problems visible here are common throughout Nigeria. This resource-rich nation is often described as full of potential that remains unfulfilled for various reasons including pervasive corruption. In a traffic jam on a humid afternoon last month, Sister Bibiana rails against the local government for the lousy state of basic services in the city. But she reserves particular scorn for the traffickers. "They are just banking on people's ignorance and poverty," she says.

Irene, now back in Benin City, was one of the women trafficked to Italy by plane as the trade began to develop more than a decade ago. The daughter of farmers, then in her early twenties, she was approached by a family friend who said he had a sister "over there" and that the two could arrange her journey for an unspecified price. Irene had long dropped out of school and had no job prospects. She figured she might be able to help her family by working abroad. The friend told her, "It's a white man's land over there, it's better than Nigeria," she recalls.

A few months and a long-haul flight later, Irene was working the streets of Brescia, a northern Italian city near Verona. The trafficker's "sister" turned out to be a madam who effectively held Irene and four other women hostage in an apartment. From the day she arrived and for every night following for the next year, Irene was forced "to go to the main road" — a Nigerian pidgin term for prostitution.

"Men are very stupid," Irene says from the shelter run by Sister Bibiana, her hair pulled back in a bun and covered with a black wool beret. "They have a lovely woman at home but they still come to that dirty road to pick a girl. They are crazy. Some have fiancées. They will still come to the main road to pick a girl. Disastrous. They love cheating."

Irene handed over the money to her female pimp on a daily basis, and was only allowed to keep very small sums for approved purchases such as skin cream or hair products. She was not told how much money she was meant to

Irene spent nearly 12 years in Italy

pay in total to service her trafficking debt and was unable to send money home. “You are just like a slave, no movement, not even a phone call,” she says. Her madam, who lived with her Italian husband and their child in a nearby flat, would often drive past the road at night to make sure the women were on the street working.

Irene escaped during a police raid on the flat where she was living. She badly injured her back and was taken in by the Catholic charity Caritas, where she spent a few months recovering from her injury. She did not return to Benin City until more than 10 years later, after having four children with a Nigerian man who could not support her through the sporadic wages he earned from farm work.

Now 36, Irene begins to cry when she talks about the father of her children who abandoned her. “When you defile everything, there is no value again, it is lost, do you understand me? When you get a serious man and he sees how your body is defiled, it’s painful.”

In theory, it should not be difficult for a Nigerian sex slave to escape her traffickers once on European soil. From the moment they arrive at their first Italian port to their long days and nights on the streets, they are frequently approached by aid workers and volunteers who try to persuade them to flee, and police officers who check their legal status. In some cases, even repentant clients might try to help them escape. And yet, it remains exceedingly rare for a Nigerian woman to turn on her traffickers — a key reason why the network is so difficult to crack.

The psychological pressure linked to the power of juju oaths such as those taken by Dora and Mary is often overwhelming. “It has a huge impact, and it’s not easy as a European coming by and saying ‘Come on, don’t believe it, it’s not true’, says Elisa Massariolo, a consultant for the city of Venice who works with trafficking victims.

The close presence and attention of the madam, a key figure in the criminal trafficking network, is also a major constraint. She collects the money and controls the daily actions of the victims. “The madams put fear in them and threaten their lives,” says one worker for Save the Children who is in daily contact with Nigerian prostitutes in Rome.

More broadly, the victims are at the mercy of Nigerian gangs that have grown increasingly ruthless and sophisticated over the years. Some Italian prosecutors have traced their roots to Nigerian criminal groups from university fraternities who have been in conflict with each other since the 1970s. A 2014 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

said two of these groups — Eiye and Aye — have been active in Italy since at least 2008 and described them as highly organised and involved in sex trafficking and drugs.

They also have support on the ground in Italy. Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, a Sicilian judge in Rome who is the UN's global special rapporteur on trafficking in persons, says "some kind of consent" for this scale of Nigerian criminality must have come from organised crime at home. "There has been a sort of division of labour. Our traditional mafias don't have a great vocation for exploiting prostitution. In Sicily, not at all: Cosa Nostra has never done this because it clashes with its traditionalist cultural codes designed to keep families together. But this doesn't mean it couldn't make money by letting others do it," she says.

There have been signs that Italian authorities are starting to get a grip on the problem. In late October and early November, Italian police arrested at least eight Nigerians — including one alleged madam — in two separate crackdowns in Milan and Bari. They were held on suspicion of human trafficking, aiding and abetting prostitution, and illegal immigration. Meanwhile, authorities in Barcelona arrested 21 Nigerians — including six women — for sexual exploitation in mid-November, offering further evidence that the trade is spreading well beyond Italy, especially to France, Germany, Spain and Austria, according to IOM. In the UK, Nigerians already account for more victims of trafficking than nationals from any other country except Albania, according to the National Crime Agency.

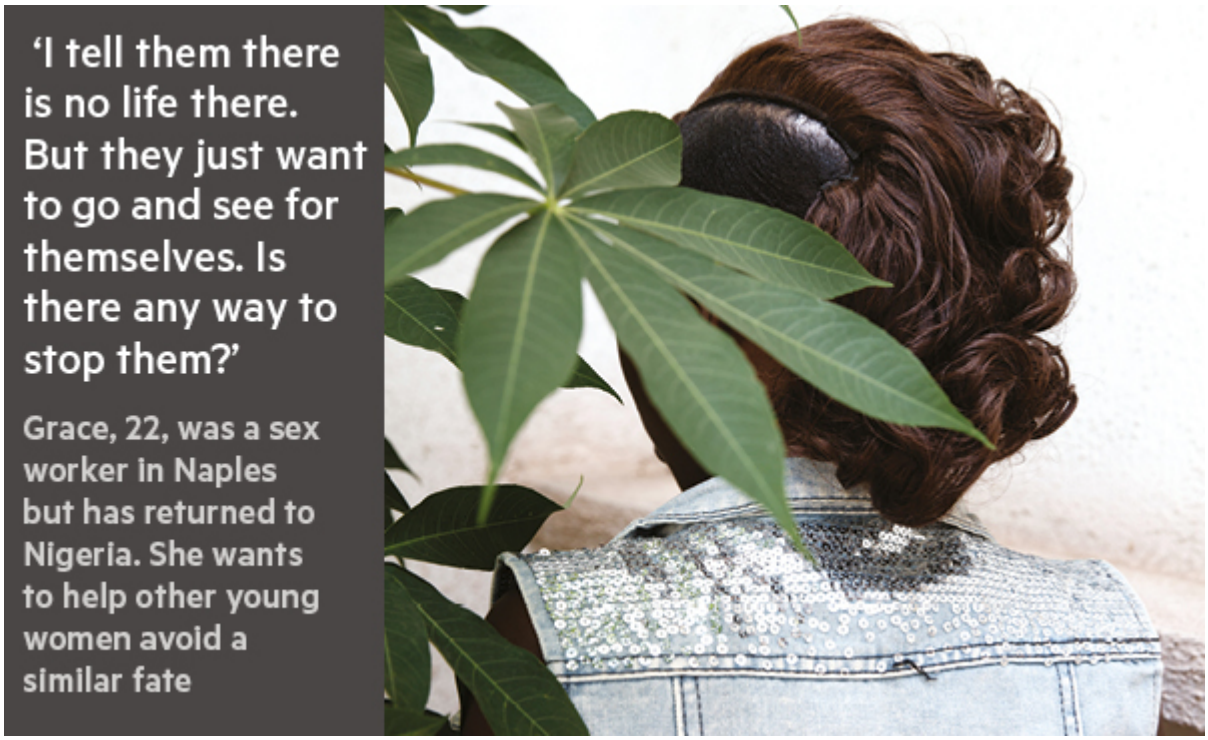
As for Nigeria's anti-trafficking agency, it has arrested more than 100 traffickers since it was established in 2003. But victims and locals quietly complain that the agency does not go after who they see as the key player on the Nigerian side of the trade: the juju priests.

For those Nigerian women who do escape, the road to recovery can be difficult. Italian law provides for immediate protection — and a permit to live in the country — for any sex trafficking victim who presses charges against members of the organisation. They are taken to shelters where, for a time, they are not allowed to use social media or access a telephone — except to contact family members. Within about two years, they are expected to be well on their way to learning Italian, integrating into society and finding a job.

Massariolo says some women have found positions in hotels because they speak English but the growing number of illiterate Nigerian victims is making this transition difficult, especially when combined with xenophobia. "I can't hide that the climate is not very good in Italy with regard to foreigners — so it is very difficult even for those who have good competencies," she says. "They don't take them in restaurants even if the kitchen is hidden, they don't want them and that's tough."

Given these struggles, some throw in the towel and return to life on the streets at the whim of the traffickers. Others return to Nigeria if it is safe for them to do so. IOM says that this year, 230-240 "returnees" have come back through their assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme; the overall number in the country is higher.

Grace, 22, who spent three weeks as a sex worker in Naples, is one of those who made it back. She lives with her family now, doing the same work that she did before she travelled to Europe. Her goal is to start her own small tailoring business so that she can support herself and eventually, she hopes, get married and "settle down". Wearing a sleeveless bleached jean jacket studded with plastic jewels, she speaks quietly of her days on the streets, where she slept with between two and 10 customers per night and was once held up at gunpoint by a man who forced her to exit his car after sex without paying her. Her goal now is to stop other young women in Benin City from suffering the same fate. "I tell them there is no life there," she says. "But they just want to go and see for themselves."



She is most concerned about the girls and young women opting to go through Libya. "Is there any way to stop them?" she wonders aloud. "They are endangering their lives for nothing." Grace left Italy six months ago. "At least now, I'm myself. When I was there, I was not myself. I didn't feel comfortable doing something I don't like doing, having a lifestyle imposed that was not mine. I was there living someone else's life, not my life."

As for Dora, after she realised that she was headed for prostitution, she began to plot an escape. Her determination was reinforced by a conversation with a boy she met in Sabratah, after the madam had failed to send money for her food. "He told me that in my place he would run away, because the madam was already behaving so badly," she says. Moreover, the boy made her realise that her €30,000 debt was the equivalent of 6m Nigerian naira — at least double what she had imagined. "I thought it would be 1m or 2m — and he said, 'You know how much you are going to pay? 6m. I opened my mouth like this," she says, mimicking a gasp.

Chance saved Dora from the fate of many thousands of other trafficking victims once she arrived in Sicily. She fainted at the port and was taken to the hospital for 11 days of

intravenous fluids. When she was released, the group of Nigerians she had travelled with was gone and she was free to tell her story to the police and to IOM staff, who had already noticed that she was crying out for assistance. “I will never forget her eyes, I could tell she was praying for someone to help her,” says one IOM worker.

Dora spends her days mustering the courage to walk outdoors and explore her new neighbourhood despite fears that the Nigerian gang that trafficked her could still try to hunt her down. She is beginning to learn Italian, and dreams of becoming an actress. But for now, she is simply happy to be free. “My God,” she says, “is bigger than the juju.”

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To find out more about the FT’s Seasonal Appeal partner, visit Stop the Traffik.

All names have been changed to protect identities. James Politi is the FT’s Rome bureau chief; Maggie Fick is west Africa correspondent.

Photographs by Charlie Bibby and Malin Fezehai