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# Reducing the Damage: Dilemmas of Anti-Trafficking Efforts among Nigerian Prostitutes in Palermo

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**Abstract:** Over the past 10 years, trafficked Nigerian women have become synonymous with street prostitution in Palermo, Italy. In this article, I attempt to assess a project that offers medical care, free condoms, advice on safe practices and other forms of assistance to Nigerian prostitutes. This assessment reveals the strengths and weaknesses of Italy's innovative anti-trafficking initiatives. The program reduces many of the dangers involved in street prostitution, but debt bondage to traffickers, family obligations and threats of supernatural retribution stymie efforts to separate women from their exploiters and render prosecution of criminals difficult. Those who do complete the rehabilitation program face a difficult integration into Italian society.

**Keywords:** anti-trafficking, prostitution, Nigerians, Palermo, Italy

**Résumé :** Au cours des 10 dernières années, il est devenu impossible de parler du trafic des femmes nigérianes sans parler de prostitution dans les rues de Palerme en Italie. Dans cet article, je tente d'évaluer un projet qui propose des soins médicaux, des préservatifs gratuits, des conseils sur les rapports sexuels protégés et d'autres formes de soutiens aux prostituées nigérianes. Cette évaluation révèle les forces et les faiblesses des initiatives innovatrices de l'Italie en matière de lutte contre le trafic. Le programme contribue à réduire les nombreux dangers inhérents à la prostitution de rue; cependant, les liens d'endettement vis-à-vis des trafiquants, les obligations familiales et les menaces de châtiments surnaturels font souvent aboutir à une impasse les tentatives de séparer les femmes de leurs exploiters, tout en rendant difficile l'engagement de poursuites judiciaires contre les criminels. Quant à celles qui parviennent à terminer le programme de réhabilitation, elles s'intègrent difficilement dans la société italienne.

**Mots-clés :** lutte contre le trafic, prostitution, Nigérianes, Palerme, Italie

## Introduction

Sicily, long a labour exporter par excellence, has in the course of the past few decades become an immigrant destination (Booth and Cole 1999; Cole 1997). In the 1970s, Tunisian men arrived to toil in the fields and on fishing boats of western Sicily while women from the Philippines, Mauritius and Cape Verde moved to Palermo and other cities to work as maids. With time, people from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas swelled the foreign population.<sup>1</sup> Amid this diversity of origins, virtually all immigrants in this southern Italian region are incorporated in the lowest tiers of segmented, gendered labour markets, performing the dead-end, dirty and demeaning jobs which Sicilians refuse. In Palermo, the island's capital and largest city, most immigrants work in domestic service, but a very visible and recently arrived minority of foreign women, almost all from Nigeria, sells sex on the street.

Also setting these women apart from other foreigners is their status as trafficked persons. Trafficking denotes the transportation of persons and the use of intimidation, violence and debt bondage to exploit their labour (ICMPD 1999; OSCE 1999). Most Nigerian prostitutes in Palermo are, or have been, beholden to loosely structured, co-national criminal networks.<sup>2</sup> Exploiting corruption and poverty at home and possessing a firm understanding of illicit markets, Nigerian gangs have exported thousands of young women to the booming sex markets of Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and other European Union states. Faced with minimal opportunities at home and lacking the resources to emigrate legally, young women (and in many cases their families) have entered into a pact with traffickers, agreeing to pay for passage and a job in Europe. While most women understand the nature of their future employment abroad, in Europe they encounter unanticipated and brutal exploitation at the hands of their co-national female exploiter, the "madam," and her male associates. To the frustration of those involved in counter-

trafficking efforts, most women remain on the street to repay an enormous debt for fear that traffickers will visit bodily and spiritual harm on them and their families back home. The debt paid, some women flee the sex trade, and some operate as independent prostitutes, while others join forces with former exploiters, becoming madams in their turn.

The presence of Nigerian prostitutes has greatly expanded and altered the market for sex in Palermo. As recently as the late 1980s, street prostitution was scarcely visible in Palermo. In the seedier parts of the old city, a small number of aging career sex workers could be found. Transient native drug addicts, though younger and willing to perform for less, might well carry the HIV virus or other STDs. In the mid 1980s, North Africans arrived, followed by Albanians. The Nigerians arrived in the early 1990s and soon dominated the street trade. By the late 1990s, clients purchased sex quite openly day and night in the old city and in Favorita Park. The Nigerian population, which may have reached over 300 in 1999, declined as the police began in earnest the periodic sweeps and investigations that continue today, when there are an estimated 50-100 women.<sup>3</sup> The continued popularity of Nigerians among clients is a function of cost. Nigerians consistently offer themselves at prices well below those charged by others; in 2004, for example, Nigerians charged about 20-25 Euros per encounter, Italians 50, and transsexuals 100 (about US\$120). Recent arrivals from Nigeria are more likely to accede to clients' demands for unprotected sex. Racial stereotypes also figure in the popularity of the Nigerians as Sicilian customers hanker after the supposedly "hot" African woman.

The institutional response, tepid at first, gained momentum as the involvement of criminal interests became evident and as the phenomenon became all-too-visible. The two national police forces, the Carabinieri (part of the Ministry of Defence) and the Polizia dello Stato (part of the Ministry of the Interior) made sweeps, conducted investigations, and in 2001 the Polizia established an office dedicated to foreign criminality and prostitution. A number of projects, affiliated variously with churches, non-governmental organizations, and government initiatives have sought to assist the Nigerian women. Some deal exclusively with trafficking and street prostitution while others incorporate them into a larger agenda. For some, women need to be liberated from the sinful bondage of prostitution, while others object to the coercion and violence inherent in trafficking but uphold a woman's right to sell sex in accordance with Italian law.<sup>4</sup> Some participate in street teams, others run residential homes for women who have left the streets, and still oth-

ers attempt to generate interest in the subject among the authorities and the public.

This article explores the activities, successes and limitations of one of the better supported anti-trafficking projects in Palermo. Arranging for medical care, offering condoms and advice, and simply being a reliable and non-judgmental presence, project personnel help reduce the many risks faced by street prostitutes. The effort has not, however, succeeded in convincing women to leave their exploiters; debt peonage, networks and threats of spiritual reprisal ensure that virtually all women stay on the streets long enough to pay off traffickers. Those who do enrol in the program once they have regained their freedom experience a difficult adjustment, and not a few continue to work the streets as independent prostitutes, risking deportation. An accounting of the project indicates the strengths and weaknesses of Italy's innovative counter-trafficking initiatives. It also calls into question the distinction common to virtually all anti-trafficking efforts between "forced" prostitution, epitomized by trafficking and equated with a modern form of slavery, and "voluntary" prostitution.<sup>5</sup> The Nigerian women described below, like most sex workers everywhere, whether trafficked or not, enter the trade for a combination of reasons, with material need and family obligation being prominent. Any comprehensive anti-trafficking effort must therefore command significant resources and be grounded in a realistic appraisal of the circumstances of the women involved.

Given the nature of the subject under discussion, a few words are in order regarding this study's methods, sources and limitations. This effort forms part of a broader, collaborative project concerning various forms of "dirty work" performed by immigrant workers in rural and urban Sicily.<sup>6</sup> Conducting research on farm labourers and maids who may reside with their employers and who often lack permits poses formidable challenges, but these difficulties pale in comparison to those confronting the ethnographer hoping to investigate trafficking and street prostitution. We elected to forego attempting to contact active prostitutes, for several reasons. The criminals who control the trade and monitor the women are best avoided; trafficked women have good reason to conceal parts of their stories; finally, respectful of the hard won trust social workers had cultivated with the women, we did not ask to join them on their nightly rounds. We did speak with a handful of former prostitutes. At times they were forthcoming, at others hesitant to go beyond generalities.<sup>7</sup> The descriptions offered in this paper therefore rely heavily on conversations (1998-2004) with those whose work brings them into close contact with prosti-

tutes and trafficking issues; these include immigrants and Sicilians working on street teams, legal consultants, representatives of cultural associations and investigators for the Carabinieri and Polizia. The descriptions offered in this paper therefore are based on insights procured over several years from a variety of perspectives. Finally, a sense of context has been gleaned from published sources on the sex industry and trafficking.<sup>8</sup>

## Concepts and Contexts

The Palermo case is best understood in the context of broader trends. Incorporating new markets and technologies, the commercial sex industry has grown exponentially over the past 15 years. The heterosexual men who make up the vast majority of consumers in the West spend billions of dollars annually on erotic dancing, telephone sex, massage parlours, pornography and prostitution (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Weitzer 2000). Patterns of law enforcement, population mobility and consumer preference (among other factors) shape regional profiles in this global market.

The recent proliferation of commercial sex in Europe owes much to the presence of foreign women (Brussa 1998; Wijers 1998). Freed from traditional constraints (and protections) by the solvents of economic and social dislocation at home and the promise of employment abroad, women are mobile as never before (Castles and Miller 1998; Phizacklea 2003). This movement is obvious in Italy, where street prostitution is the most common form of commercial sex and where mass immigration dates to the late 1980s (King and Andall 1999). Foreign women, mostly from Nigeria, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, now account for half of all sex workers and nearly all those who engage in street prostitution, the most visible and dangerous form of sex work (Covre with Paradiso 2000). In the course of the 1990s, whole districts and thoroughfares became open-air sex markets in cities, along trucking routes, and near military bases and tourist enclaves. By the end of the decade journalists offered lurid accounts of foreign women held in captivity, drugged and beaten into a living hell of sexual slavery (e.g., Lombezzi 1998). Police, whose occasional actions had simply scattered prostitutes and their clients in the past, sought traffickers and began deporting prostitutes for unauthorized entry and residence. Advocates of sex workers and scholars confirmed the existence of trafficking and urged police to focus on the exploiters rather than the exploited. Distancing themselves from the sensationalistic accounts of journalists, they noted the variety present in the sector and pointed to the fluidity of trafficker-victim relationships over time and across nationalities

(see Ambrosini 2002; Campani 2001; Carchedi et al. 2000; Covre with Paradiso 2000; Leonini 1999). At about the same time similar concerns were being voiced across Europe by scholars and by international organizations (see ICMPD 1999; IOM 1995; OSCE 1999), and by 2002 the European Commission announced an anti-trafficking campaign.

Italy has been at the forefront of such efforts. Under the provisions of Section 18 of the 1998 immigration law, victims of trafficking qualify for a series of supports and services.<sup>9</sup> Once they enrol in a program, they are eligible for a renewable short-term residency permit, enter a rehabilitation program, and may later register with the state employment agency. Section 18 provides two avenues to legal status. In the judicial path, a woman collaborates with the authorities, providing evidence and testimony against her exploiters; she qualifies for police protection in a manner similar to those turning state's evidence against the mafia. Most women, fearing reprisals, pursue the second path of social protection, electing simply to declare themselves victims, renounce the activity of prostitution (a requirement for the judicial option as well) and enter programs run by accredited local associations depending in part or whole on government funding. From 1999 when the program became active until 2002, about 3000 former sex workers, including some 1300 Nigerians alone, enrolled in such programs, with the vast majority opting for the social path (Albano 2002). The Department of Equal Opportunity has also raised public awareness of trafficking; a national hotline, established in 2000, is serviced by dozens of local social protection projects, including one in Palermo.

## On the Streets of Palermo

There is certainly much need for such measures in Palermo. According to social workers and police in Palermo and published accounts,<sup>10</sup> once a woman enters into a pact with traffickers, she is handed over to Nigerian male criminals. These "trolleys" furnish a small group of recruits with purchased or forged documents and transport<sup>11</sup> them to Europe, where they deliver them for a reported US\$12 000-14 000 each to the co-national madams who have commissioned the shipment. These madams, themselves former prostitutes, take their charge's passport, establish the debt owed (typically US\$40 000-50 000), and inform her that prostitution is the means by which she will honour her debt. The madam uses the woman's earnings to pay expenses, takes a share for herself and allots a portion to the woman. She remits much of the money to Nigeria though the exact division of spoils remains a mystery.

According to social workers and former prostitutes, virtually every facet of the trafficked woman's life is dictated by the madam and her associates. The madam receives the new arrival and tells her that she will meet her obligations by earnings derived from street prostitution. She outfits the novice, instructs her in the basics of the business and introduces her to the group of women with whom she will work and live. Fearful or recalcitrant recruits are cajoled, threatened with violence and supernatural harm and beaten. In addition to the now enormous debt, the woman must pay dearly for lodging, sundry expenses, the "joint" or place of work on the sidewalk and whatever fines the madam chooses to levy for bad behaviour. The madam selects the work place in the city itself, and periodically sends one or two women to provincial centers. Drawing on a loose network of colleagues, the madam moves women from city to city every month or so. This gives clients the variety they crave, keeps the women from growing familiar with their surroundings, impedes police investigation, and discourages the inevitable, troublesome attachments cultivated by some clients.

The typical prostitute's life is characterized by danger and degradation punctuated by moments of achievement. Given the premium paid for unprotected sex and the pressure to purchase their freedom, prostitutes always run the risk of STDs, and daily sexual relations with up to a dozen men can cause pain and discomfort. Some clients verbally abuse the women, some assault them while attempting to steal their services or earnings. With little or no previous experience in sex work, the women may be slow to develop the professional stance crucial to managing clients and minimizing risks. Like street prostitutes everywhere, Nigerians in Palermo frequently seek solace or escape in alcohol, drugs and money.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, poor and ambitious young women enjoy having real money pass through their hands and gain satisfaction in sending cash home. The attentions of clients, including presents of jewellery and extra cash, bring material rewards and can enable women, often abused as African "whores," to dominate Italian men through demands and commands.

## Working with Prostitutes

Given the realities of the women's lives, anti-trafficking efforts in Palermo face serious challenges. As noted above, in recent years a number of diverse entities have taken up the cause in one way or another. The Project (a pseudonym), established in 2001 and authorized under Section 18, is one of the city's better funded and most comprehensive initiatives. The Project offers daily assistance to pros-

titutes as well as a program for women who wish to leave the street and their exploiters. The effort is run under the auspices of a nation-wide association concerned with marginalized populations like drug addicts, battered women and AIDS patients. While Project personnel recognize the existence of different forms of sex work among foreigners and Italians and offer assistance to all who request it, their focus is squarely upon Nigerian prostitutes. The Project supports two street teams, each composed of a psychologist, a social worker and a cultural mediator. The mediators, a man and a woman, are both West Africans and long-time residents of the Sicilian capital. In conception and execution the project has benefited from programs developed by NGOs elsewhere, notably TAMPEP.<sup>13</sup>

Project personnel—who may work on the street or in the office or both—arrange for medical attention and accompany women on routine and emergency visits to the hospital and doctors' offices. They hand out free condoms and air horns, and urge the women to adopt safe practices such as avoiding drunken clients, working in groups, insisting on condom use and the like. In these ways the teams establish the context for another goal, that of "pulling" the women from the streets. Team members describe the rehabilitation program authorized under Section 18 and tell the women about a special office set up for the purpose.

The realities of trafficking and the volatile behaviour of the prostitutes make these tasks extremely difficult. Mediators describe the women as very aggressive, at least initially. They shout, taunt and even strike at their would-be helpers. When it suits them, they speak insistently in Pidgin English, pretending they cannot understand a word the team utters in Italian, English or French. Nor do they hide their suspicions. More than once they have rifled through the project vehicle, searching for surveillance equipment (there was none). The women often put the teams to tests even as they come to depend on them. The female mediator described women who touch and rub up against her, saying they have AIDS. Under these conditions, cultivating trust requires patience and tact. Little by little the women come to appreciate the teams as reliable and non-judgmental sources of help and company. The most outrageous lies cease and a conversation, tentative to be sure, begins. At the hospital, team members learn the real, as opposed to the professional names, of the women but preserve the fiction of the pseudonym by feigning inattention.

In its first three years of operation, the Project managed to convince only a few prostitutes<sup>14</sup> to flee their traffickers. The effort's success instead appears to rest in the

daily concrete assistance it offers and in the behavioural change it effects in women. Team members claim that condom use is very common if not the rule on the street now, and they report an extremely low rate of HIV/AIDS. In these ways, by learning how to identify perils and avoid or minimize them, sex workers gain a measure of control over their situation and secure benefits to their physical and mental well-being. Such lessons can have important long-term effects because experienced workers may in turn instruct new recruits, and because after repayment many women remain in Italy, supplementing their income with independent sex work.

## Forms of Control

The same profile of limited success is experienced by anti-trafficking initiatives elsewhere in Palermo and across Italy.<sup>15</sup> Discussions in Palermo and the literature suggest that the Nigerian system, specifically the powerful forms of control employed by traffickers, account for these patterns. Highlighted here are debt peonage and threat of violence, family obligations and supernatural sanctions.

To reiterate, a woman's debt obligation commences when she (or her family) enters into an agreement with a trafficker in Nigeria (called the "sponsor"), pledging to pay for safe passage to Europe from the future earnings of the job she will receive there. The enormous initial debt is augmented by occasional penalties for insubordination or late payment and by inflated deductions for room and board and other expenses. The madam berates unruly women, reminding them of the pact they have entered, and may beat them herself or call in Nigerian male "hit-men." For her family back in Nigeria, a woman's failure to uphold the agreement in Italy can result in threats, beatings, and destruction of property. Owing to endemic corruption in Nigeria, families have little chance of resisting the well-funded and well-connected criminal interests involved in trafficking.

Trafficked women do gain more autonomy over time. While the new recruit is kept under close surveillance, the woman who has regularly paid down the debt for a time is granted more freedom. She may send (more) money to her parents and mail letters home with photographs showing her in beautiful clothes posing next to symbols of European wealth, and she may communicate more freely with Italian clients, friends, and social workers. The introduction of the cellular telephone, which enables madams to keep track of women from afar, also has granted the prostitutes unprecedented liberty of movement and communication. Madams in recent years have physically distanced themselves from the women they exploit. In the past, they typically resided with or

near the women, demanded frequent instalments of the debt, and generally exercised direct control. Police raids and a series of arrests, starting in the late 1990s, however, have made such hands-on management very risky. Madams now reside far from their stable of women, delegating daily affairs to senior prostitutes or "sisters" while money is transferred electronically or picked up by male couriers. Despite these changes in daily operations, the woman who runs away risks violence to herself and her loved ones in Nigeria. Considering that enrolment in a Section 18 program offers merely the promise of a short-term permit (in all likelihood opening up only the possibility for documented low-wage employment), it is understandable that very few trafficked women flee their traffickers and that those who do enrol in Section 18 programs decline to cooperate with the police. As one prostitute bluntly said to a Project social worker, "I'll leave the street as soon as you offer me as much as I'm making right now."

Family and network cement the trafficking relationship in several ways. Prostitution abroad offers poor and ambitious young women the possibility to provide for themselves and their families in a way they could not if they remained at home. As a prostitute expressed it to a member of the Project, "I'm doing this so my daughter won't have to." Friends and family members often act as recruiters, touting the benefits of work in Europe and even arranging for potential recruits to meet with traffickers ("sponsors"). Given obligations to family, concerns for physical safety, and ambitions to accumulate significant resources, most Nigerians remain on the street long enough to repay the debt (reportedly 1.5-3 years), if not longer.

The role of family and network cannot be understood outside the context of gender discrimination and endemic economic problems in Nigeria. In response to a crisis in the early 1980s brought on by the end of the country's oil boom (and exacerbated by endemic corruption), Nigeria agreed to a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986. In accepting the loan package, Nigeria adopted a series of neo-liberal measures proposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, including cutting governmental expenditures, privatization, devaluation of the Naira, freezing wages and lifting of price controls. In the eight or so years in which these measures were in effect, unemployment figures rose, social services withered, living standards fell and the numbers of the very poor surged. According to the report commissioned by UNICRI (the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute), from the late 1980s emigration, crime, and trafficking for the purposes of sexual

exploitation have flourished in Edo State, the area from which most trafficked women come (Okojie 2003).<sup>16</sup> Young women in particular have faced tremendous obstacles in this environment. While their brothers remain in school, girls' educations come second to care-taking roles within large, often polygynous households. On the labour market, women's employment and earning potential are constrained by gender discrimination and limited educational credentials. Because women bear primary responsibility for children, they have suffered more than men from the decline in social services and economic opportunity; this is especially the case for the poorer women who are most likely to bear children at a young age. Finally, animism and polytheism glorify male ancestors, bolstering the patriarchal system.

Lack of education and the common view that daughters are servants of family interests have worked to channel girls, especially poorer ones, into prostitution, both at home and abroad, from the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup> The possibility of sex work abroad is common knowledge in Benin City. In a survey of almost 1500 young women there, one-third reporting being approached with offers of a sojourn outside the country, almost half knew someone who had gone abroad for prostitution, and about the same figure agreed that there were positive benefits to be gained by women engaged in trafficking (Okonofua et al. 2004:1321-1322). Parents, who would have repudiated prostitute daughters in the recent past, have come to tolerate it as a welcome source of income in uncertain times. As a former prostitute in Palermo put it, no one in Nigeria "asks questions when you are doing well." Given the reality that the surest way for a poor Nigerian to get to Europe and the riches it represents is through resort to traffickers, the sponsor is viewed as a potential benefactor rather than as a criminal.<sup>18</sup> In itself, material deprivation does not suffice to account for trafficking; after all, most areas in Nigeria are poor but trafficking is centred in Benin City. The explanation lies instead in the powerful conjunction of need, aspiration for the visible material benefits of the trade, criminal expertise, and the networks whose cumulative effect makes sex work in Europe a very real option for young women.

In addition to debt bondage and family obligations, religion acts to keep trafficked women on the streets of Palermo. The contract signed, the sponsor in Nigeria arranges for the woman to swear a sacred oath before a traditional shrine or celebrant in which she pledges, on pain of supernatural retribution, to honour her debt and to keep secret the identities and methods of her traffickers. The ritual involves a woman's bodily substances—pubic hair, nail clippings, even blood—that are retained to

ensure compliance. In Italy, madams routinely threaten recalcitrant women (and their families) with a spiritual reprisal. They may remind them of the oath taken at home, and some madams tend shrines in their apartments and conduct rites themselves.

Various terms are used to refer to animistic religious practices common to West Africa. According to published sources, social workers, scholars and police investigators refer to "voodoo," a term also employed by some women. The women themselves tend also refer to the "sacred oath," as do some observers. With regard to the location and execution of the rites, there appears to be some variation, with rites being administered both in Italy and Nigeria by madams and by traditional priests (or individuals claiming such status). According to Prina (2003:26), rites were administered in Italy through the early 1990s but are now first conducted in Nigeria then repeated in Italy. Observers agree that the rites reinforce the subjugation of the women to traffickers. While some Western observers maintain that the women are spellbound by African magic, investigators and scholars have come to appreciate the complexity of the phenomenon. Prina (2003:28) notes that women feel as bound by taking an oath before family and community as they do by any supernatural obligation. According to Van Dijk (2001), rituals conducted in Nigeria, while binding women to a trafficker, also promise to enable their journey; women use "voodoo" to denote later rituals used in Europe with an eye to exploit and scare them.

In Palermo too variation exists in the use of terms and in religious practice. Police and social workers agree that madams routinely make reference to or re-enact the oaths, and that this supernatural threat is an important part of the subjugation of trafficked women. Difference of opinion does exist regarding the nature and efficacy of the rites. The Project's male cultural mediator, in a manner similar to Van Dijk, distinguishes between true and false rites, the former being celebrated by authentic priests with the intent to do good and the latter being used by unscrupulous impersonators to scare young women into compliance. When the mediator assures them that they can face no spiritual harm from specious rites, they protest, saying, "But you're African, you have to believe us!" He attributes this response to ignorance, but it is also conceivable that such utterances are intended to cultivate the image of an all-powerful control from which they are unable to escape. (The strategic role of the claim of total victimhood is taken up below.) Another indication that religion is more complex than imagined by most observers comes from a former prostitute. According to her, women commonly possess amulets and other items



thought to confer benefit or protection, suggesting again an ambiguous relation of the women to religion.

In sum, Nigerian prostitutes struggle with the combined pressures of repaying an enormous debt to violent criminals with powerful transnational connections, family obligations, and fear of religious sanction—all in a foreign country whose language and ways they little understand. These conditions account for the low incidence of women leaving their madams and their reluctance to aid police investigations (even after their debts are discharged). The alternating aggressive and needy behaviour with which they confront street teams likewise stems from these terrible pressures. Under these conditions, Project personnel, while not quite abandoning the hope of assisting women in fleeing their traffickers, realize that the surest benefit they can bring involves the daily contact and medical and other assistance. In 2004, an immigrant cultural mediator described his changing understanding of the Project's role. In the first years, he thought his efforts might well incur the wrath of madams and their associates, but it was a risk he was willing to accept in light of the human tragedy unfolding before him. Now he realizes that the women will not flee their exploiters until the Project can offer substantial resources; in the meantime, traffickers tolerate the Project as its services insure the health (and therefore profitability) of their victims. As another Project worker put it, "our task is to reduce the damage [associated with a phenomenon we cannot control]."

### **After the Debt**

Once she has repaid the debt and is free of systematic exploitation, the Nigerian woman confronts the challenges of getting by with limited competence in Italian, few marketable skills, and a chequered past. (Very few consider returning to Nigeria.) For most, this means low pay and long hours as undocumented house cleaners and care givers to the infirm and elderly. Convinced of the moral imperative and health benefits of a new life, a woman may persevere, holding down several jobs. A religious awakening may also firm her resolve. The church, usually a Protestant denomination, offers an explanation for past errors, a design for a better future, and possibly a supportive community—an important resource for someone who may have lost her place in a family by virtue of retiring from a lucrative business. Or, unaccustomed to the long hours of domestic work and frustrated by low pay, she may return to the street. Through occasional sex work she can meet expenses, purchase the goods to which she has become accustomed, and perhaps send money home to Nigeria. A veteran of the streets, she insists on con-

dom use and monitors her health. Her own master, she follows her own schedule, declines obnoxious clients, and retains her own earnings, although she may well have to render a fee for her place on the sidewalk. If she is more ambitious, she may work full-time or invest her earnings in new recruits, becoming a madam herself.

Because most Nigerians hold expired or forged papers, the quest for legal status looms regardless of the path chosen. Faking domestic employment and taking advantage of the occasional amnesty offered by the Italian government is one option. Rehabilitation programs authorized under Section 18 offer another. As noted above, programs grant trafficking victims a series of protections and possibilities for a future outside of sex work. Of the two ways of entering the program—denouncing the exploiters and aiding a police inquiry or simply reporting the fact of being trafficked and enrolling with an association—most choose the second option, to the consternation of Italian police.<sup>19</sup> Nigerian women, fearing reprisals, favour the social path to the permit and usually enter programs upon or near completion of their debt. For them, Section 18 has become another means to legal status. Once a woman has entered such a program, she is expected to renounce prostitution, complete a rehabilitation program (often including a stay at a residential centre), and undertake job training. Once she has fulfilled these obligations and held a job for a period, her temporary permit may be replaced with a regular one. These encounters bring Project personnel into frequent, often demanding contact with Nigerians.

There exists some variation among Project personnel with regard to the nature of trafficking and the legitimacy of prostitution, of course, but experience on the street and repeated encounters in the office with Nigerians engender recognition of the complexities and ambiguities of the situation. A female Italian social worker, for example, described how she viewed the women as total victims of sexual slavery when she began at the Project. Now she understands that most were not duped into prostitution (though they were surprised by brutality of their exploitation in Italy) and that they regard the Section 18 program as a convenient means to legal status. Like workers at other counter-trafficking efforts in the city, she complains that the women routinely alter the details of their stories, miss appointments, refuse to answer questions about their trafficking experiences, and do not disguise their view of Project personnel as irritating, bureaucratic obstacles standing in the way of a permit. Some continue to engage in sex work, despite having pledged to stop (a requirement for enrolment), occasioning angry calls to the Project by the police.

The relationship between Project personnel and the women is characterized by tension and accommodation, two instances of which are noted here. Nigerian women all offer the same story, that they are misled by offers of a good job in Europe and subsequently coerced into prostitution. With time Project workers come to realize (as research in Nigeria also has shown) that most women choose to enter pacts with traffickers, albeit in the context of widespread gender and class inequalities. The women's nearly identical stories should therefore be viewed more as ritual assertions of innocence than as statements of fact. In other words, the women seek to enhance their eligibility for Section 18 programs by engaging in "ethnic reputation manipulation" (Bovenkerk, Siegal, and Zaitich 2003), implying or claiming to be completely victimized by traffickers wielding awesome powers, including supernatural ones.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, as noted above it is not uncommon for women enrolled in the program to return to the street. Project workers are frustrated by this pattern; by selling sex on the street, the women are breaking their word and exposing themselves to health risks and deportation, should the police catch them. At the same time, they acknowledge that Section 18 programs provide so little in the way of job security and income that such an outcome is all but inevitable. They also appreciate the difficulties the women experience as they attempt to make a living in the low paying and dead-end jobs that are offered in the program and that await the women in the future. Viewing the women as scared, in desperate need, and manipulative by turns, they continue to offer advice and assistance, hoping to reduce the damage once more.

## Conclusion

Section 18 certainly represents an important advance over the former practice of deporting foreign prostitutes lacking legal status. As the Palermo case shows, the program treats the women as victims of trafficking rather than as illegal aliens, and offers a range of supports as well as the possibility of legal status. As an anti-trafficking measure, however, Section 18 has yielded modest gains in the judicial arena owing to the preference of Nigerians for the social protection route and their reluctance to testify against their exploiters. For their part, social workers and legal consultants complain that lack of funding hampers the program. Job training and subsidies are crucial to attract participants and to help those enrolled make the difficult adjustments of the first two years. Given its small Nigerian community and the prevalence of informal employment, Palermo would appear an unfavourable location for the integration of graduates of the Section 18 program. Nor are these challenges confined to the Sicilian

capital. As studies elsewhere in Italy (e.g., Abbatecola 2002; Maluccelli 2002) suggest, securing and maintaining steady legal employment remains the biggest problems for Section 18 participants. The prospects of Nigerians appear especially dim as they confront a gendered, segmented labour market with few skills and seek to assume a place in a society in which black African women are associated with prostitution.

Furthermore, current conditions in Nigeria do not present much cause for optimism. In a context of thorough-going gender discrimination, the disintegration of civil society, economic uncertainty, and well trodden pathways to Europe, numbers of young women and their families continue to convince themselves that the imagined benefits of a European sojourn outweigh the rumoured risks of entering into a pact with powerful sponsors. Barring a significant economic upsurge in Nigeria together with corresponding opportunities for women, many poor young women will continue to offer themselves up to traffickers. The success of traffickers rests on the disposition of efficient mechanisms for indebteding and controlling vulnerable women, the ability to operate with seeming impunity in Nigeria, and a keen understanding of the Italian (and European Union) system. Indeed, in the face of increased police scrutiny and the growth of larger, vertically integrated crime syndicates among Russian and Albanian traffickers, the Nigerian system has remained stable and profitable. Barring a sea change in Nigerian law enforcement and economic conditions, the Italian police will be limited to making business more difficult for traffickers.<sup>21</sup>

The Palermo materials certainly show that criminals direct the long-term sexual exploitation of young conational victims. While the powerful role of women and the use of supernatural sanctions distinguish Nigerian traffickers, like their Russian and Albanian and other peers they prey on the vulnerability of young women and utilize intimidation, violence, and debt peonage in pursuit of profit. Yet the presence of trafficked women on the streets of Palermo or Rome or any other city involves far more than organized criminality, far more than an aberration from the normal course of events.

The recent, rapid growth of a commercial sex industry of global scope—of which trafficking is but an awful part—is a clear manifestation of the seemingly inexorable push toward the commodification of human relations. The impact of development schemes and spreading capitalist relations has been especially severe on women and girls, as a host of studies attest. For young women in countries characterized by corruption and declining opportunities, stripping, erotic dancing, pornography or prostitution abroad promise money, autonomy and adventure in



exchange for what appears to be a short-term risk. Exploitative family relations and the presence of networks facilitate the entry of women into the sex trade, over time making the practice seem commonplace. Confronted with the high costs and legal obstacles of entry and residence in the European Union (or another destination country), prospective sex workers may turn for assistance to individuals and organizations poised to exploit this vulnerability. As Marjan Wijers has remarked on the basis of over a decade of work on behalf of trafficked women in the Netherlands, trafficked women are not:

weak, stupid or passive victims. On the contrary, a great many end up in this position because they do not want to accept the limitations of the situation, because they are enterprising, courageous and willing to take initiatives to improve their living conditions and those of their families. But somewhere in the process they get trapped. [1998:77]

The prosecution of criminals is a necessary part of any anti-trafficking effort. But unless such efforts are based on an appreciation of the potent blend of ambition, obligation, coercion, and fear under which trafficked sex workers operate, and until they can command significant resources, like the Project in Palermo they will be confined to limiting the damage done.

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## Notes

- 1 The number of officially resident foreigners in Sicily was 49 579 in 2002 (Caritas di Roma 2003:493). As of early 2003, officials in Palermo estimated 5000-7000 unregistered foreigners and counted 16 593 registered foreigners, up from 15 288 in 2000.

- 2 This description is based on conversations in Palermo and on published sources, including Campani (2000); Abbatecola (2002); Transcrime (2002); Okojie (2003); and Prina (2003).
- 3 These figures are based on estimates given by police and various associations.
- 4 The 1958 "Merlin Law" abolished state regulated brothels and eliminated the mandatory registration system (Gibson 1993, 1999). The current law permits the private practice of prostitution but forbids solicitation and prostitution in public places; it also criminalizes any person who incites, facilitates or profits from the prostitution of another. While the activity is not illegal, neither is it recognized, leaving prostitutes with no workplace protections. Because soliciting is illegal, police may, at their discretion, level "administrative" sanctions against sex workers. The inclusive definition of aiding and abetting a prostitute essentially criminalizes any relationship with a prostitute, from renting or sharing an apartment to fetching a packet of condoms. In this way the law severely constrains a prostitute's ability to enjoy anything approaching normal social relations (Gibson 1999:214-216).
- 5 As Jo Doezeema (1998) has pointed out, the forced-voluntary prostitution dichotomy implies that only abnormal women would choose to sell sex. The commonsensical categories thus impede the recognition of the sex work as a form of labour deserving rights, dignity and legal protections. This point is very much worth considering as fewer than ten percent of the foreign prostitutes in Italy are trafficked (Covre with Paradiso 2000).
- 6 The project, conducted with Sally Booth, concerns immigrant workers in rural and urban Sicily, with a focus on greenhouse agriculture, domestic service, and street prostitution. The research has been described in several publications (e.g., Booth and Cole 1999; Cole and Booth In press).
- 7 Other authors have faced similar problems. Okojie (2003:29), for example, describes how formerly trafficked women repatriated to Nigeria often responded to researchers by demanding money in exchange for information, refusing to provide details of their experiences, and even denying having been involved in trafficking.
- 8 Anthropologists and other social scientists interested in Europe have displayed little curiosity about the proliferation of commercial sex, most of it quite visible, in their field sites. With few exceptions (e.g., Gülçür and İlkcaracın 2002; Wallman 2001), current information and analysis of the subject comes from international organizations such as TAM-PEP (Transnational AIDS/STD Prevention Among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe [see Brussa 1998]) or national ones such as The Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes in Pordenone, Italy. Investigative branches of the Italian police (e.g., DIA 2000, 2003a, 2003b) and studies conducted or commissioned by study centres (e.g., Transcrime 2002) and offices of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Institute (e.g., Okojie 2003; Prina 2003) describe the organization of trafficking by criminal organizations and efforts at law enforcement.
- 9 Section 18 and other aspects of the Italian system are described by Albano (2002) and Di Cortemiglia (2003).
- 10 See note 2.

- 11 In the early years of the trade women were flown directly from Lagos to Rome. In the wake of the scandal at the Italian Embassy in Lagos, where officials were caught selling visas, traffickers have adopted ever more circuitous air routes into Europe. They have also developed land routes. This middle passage through Africa carries its own perils, including border checks, violence and prostitution (Prina 2003).
- 12 Examples can be found in O'Connell Davidson (1998), Lever and Dolnick (2000) and O'Neill and Baberet (2000).
- 13 TAMPEP (Transnational AIDS/STD Prevention among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe) was founded in 1993 by organizations in the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy (Brussa 1998) to address the challenges presented by foreign sex workers. TAMPEP offices monitor the industry, cultivate ties to local health authorities, provide a range of legal, medical, and practical services, and make available information about STDs written in the workers' own languages. TAMPEP has also developed techniques for reaching the target audience. Cultural mediators, for example, are trained professionals who share the ethnic or national background of the target population. Mediators seek to communicate across linguistic and cultural divides, promoting safe sex practices and regular medical attention. Peer educators are practicing sex workers who serve as group leaders, imparting knowledge and influencing behaviour. (For current initiatives, see also [www.tampep.com](http://www.tampep.com).)
- 14 Team members gave figures ranging from none to a few while the director claimed a higher figure. He failed to mention that his figure included women who had been transferred as a safety precaution to Palermo from areas in northern Italy.
- 15 Personnel working at another association in Palermo offering virtually the same services report similar successes and frustrations. Wallman (2001) describes how an effort in Turin has succeeded in helping sex workers gain a measure of control over their lives by identifying and managing risks.
- 16 According to all sources, Edo State and more specifically Benin City stand at the centre of the trafficking enterprise. According to Okojie (2003), women from the area predominated among the first generation of prostitutes in Italy; over time, these women have become madams, in turn recruiting and controlling other women. Because most hail from the Bini (Edo-speaking) ethnic group, this population is most closely affiliated with the trade. Women from other areas in Nigeria and other ethnic groups locally have also entered the trade; their identity is not so easily noted, however, because they bear forged or purchased documents attesting to Benin City origins and because some claim Edo ethnicity. In sum, the Bini appear to play a dominant role in the trade.
- 17 Bamgbose (2002) describes prostitution as a thriving business in Nigerian cities and notes that adolescent females predominate; parents, once horrified at the thought of a daughter as prostitute, have come to accept it as a means of generating income. Asowa-Omorodion (2000) reports on prostitution in Benin City in the mid-1990s. Okojie (2003) notes that virtually every Bini family in Benin City has someone involved in some facet of trafficking and that the trade is tolerated and even a source of pride. Outside the realm of prostitution per se, exchanging sex for favours is far from unknown in Benin City. Omorodion (1993) reports that female traders routinely engage in extra-marital affairs, at least partly motivated by pursuit of diverse gifts; and Temin et al. (1999) report that teenagers are sexually active and that economic motivations figure prominently in sexual decisions of teenage girls.
- 18 It is true that some women, particularly in the early 1990s, may have been duped into the trade. But most, especially from the mid 1990s when the reality of the much touted "good job" abroad was known, knew they would be selling sex in Europe; what they could not anticipate was the cruelty of the system.
- 19 Police in Palermo describe having Nigerian women on the brink of providing testimony only to watch them decline at the last minute. Yet they have succeeded in indicting several madams and their associates (they are currently fugitives), in part on the basis of testimony given by victims of trafficking. In the case of applications for Section 18 protection through the social path, police use their discretionary power, interviewing all applicants in an attempt to elicit information regarding traffickers.
- 20 With regard to the case of Nigerian prostitutes in the Netherlands, the authors suggest that by promoting a view of the women as completely controlled by rites—"voodooization"—authorities downplayed the manifest economic and social motivations of the women and inadvertently constructed a compelling narrative that women and their advocates could utilize in asylum requests (Bovenkerk, Siegal, and Zaitich 2003:32-33).
- 21 Despite a 2000 agreement between Italy and Nigeria and despite the recent introduction of anti-trafficking (and anti-prostitution) laws in Edo State, very little headway has been made against trafficking. In Nigeria, no one had been convicted of trafficking as of 2003; and Nigerian women repatriated by Italian authorities routinely disappeared within hours of arrival from the reception center in Lagos, only to seek out their traffickers in an attempt to return to Italy (Okojie 2003).

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