

BACKGROUND ON TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

Hundreds of Nigerian women and girls have been lured into prostitution in Europe and the Middle East, where they are vulnerable to abuse and violence. The following pages profile those who are campaigning to put an end to this insidious trade.

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Anti-trafficking poster designed by schoolchildren in Benin City

The work begins in the villages of Edo and Delta States, which produce almost all of the girls who are trafficked from Nigeria. Here, professional women are talking to schoolgirls, teachers, parents, and traditional chiefs. Their message is that trafficking is dangerous and demeaning. It also undermines traditional African values. Also in Edo, a small group of brave Catholic sisters is helping girls who manage to escape from the clutches of traffickers. The sisters in turn receive support from lawyers who provide free legal aid and from the wife of the governor of Edo State who provides political backing.

In the largest city in Nigeria, Lagos, are advocates like the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON) which take the message to the international community. Finally, in Europe, a growing number of civil society groups are working to rescue young Nigerian prostitutes on the streets and offering them a chance to return to Nigeria.

Like many grassroots campaigns, this coalition has a long way to go. In Nigeria it has to battle the many pressures-poverty, disinformation, even family connivance-that are forcing young women into trafficking. Outside Nigeria, the coalition has to persuade other governments-particularly Italy-to provide more protection for the women, to prosecute the pimps and traffickers and to make the way for more legal migration.

These efforts are of great interest to the Advocacy Project. In June 2000, the Project sent a team to Nigeria to work with WOCON. This mission produced a series of On the Record and put together a small packet of information support for WOCON. The series was reprinted in a leading Nigerian newspaper.

The following pages examine several different facets of trafficking, and the campaign that has emerged in response. For the moment, the focus of the pages is mainly on Nigeria. We hope to enlarge them to include the European dimension of trafficking in the future.

** The girls names used in these pages are fictitious.* The Advocacy Project (AP) seeks to empower its partners by encouraging information production. AP is crediting the contents of this section to the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON).

Berta's Story

Much of the information about trafficking in Nigeria has come from a small group of young women, who have managed to evade the clutches of the traffickers. The Advocacy Project was able to meet three of them during a mission to Nigeria, with the help of our local partner, the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON). We will call them Berta, Sonia and Rachel.



Sonia and Berta escape the traffickers

Berta comes from the small town of Sapele in the Delta State where she lives with her sister. Life is difficult in Sapele, she says. Anyone making a monthly income of 5,000 Naira (\$50) is considered wealthy.

Berta is a hairdresser by trade but has yet to finish her apprenticeship. That will take money, so she was interested when a passing acquaintance named Onome approached her and asked if she would like to work with his sister, who owned a hairdressing shop in Germany. He promised that Berta would earn enough money to buy her apprenticeship (known as "freedom").

Berta accepted the offer. She traveled to Lagos, and was then driven to the Ghanaian capital of Accra. Here she met her trafficker, a "Mr Shanti," who flew with her to Abidjan and then to Paris. From Paris, they continued on to Milan. Only then did Berta realize she was in Italy, not Germany.

From Milan, they went by train to Florence, where Onome's sister met them. In the parlance of trafficking she is a "Madam"-a former prostitute who had paid off her own debt to the traffickers and graduated to a pimp.

Berta's Madam was tough. She told Berta that she was expected to work as a prostitute on the streets. She gave Berta skimpy clothes-hotpants and a revealing brassiere-and told her to get to work. Berta refused. The stand-off began. It might have been funny had it not been so frightening. Here was this 23-year-old woman, alone in Europe for the first time without papers, fighting jetlag, without even proper clothes. No one had told her to dress for a European winter.

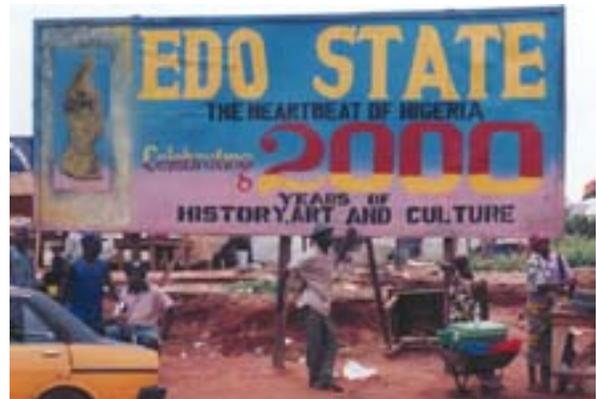
She gave Berta skimpy clothes - hotpants and a revealing brassiere - and told her to get to work. Berta refused. The stand-off began.

For eight days, Onome's sister tried to force Berta into prostitution, and for eight days Berta stubbornly refused. Then another girl who was living in the house (selling T-shirts, not her body) told Berta of a group in Florence that might help. She took Berta to the address and then left her.

Free from the Madam, Berta stayed for a month with her good Samaritans and then returned to Lagos with a ticket paid for the International Organization of Migration (IOM). Berta is one of the lucky ones. She was able to break free. Most do not.

In Edo State

Three hours drive from Lagos, Benin City, the bustling capital of Edo State proclaims itself as the "heartbeat of Nigeria." Billboards in the city center proudly celebrate 2,000 years of history and culture. The astounding growth of prostitution tells a different story. Edo is only one of 36 Nigerian states, but it has produced over 80% of the women trafficked to Europe, becoming the prostitution center of Africa.



At the entrance to Benin City

Trafficking prostitutes began in the late 1980s, when Italy was importing immigrant laborers to feed a booming informal economy. Nigerian women began travelling to the central Italian region of Campania to pick tomatoes. Gradually, they were attracted to the large cities of Rome, Naples, and Florence, where they found a high demand for their charms. (So high, in fact, that on one occasion Italian prostitutes publicly protested against the encroachment on their turf by Nigerians.)

A decade of trade has produced solidly entrenched interests in Nigeria and Italy that will not easily be dislodged. Every morning, relatives flock to the post office to send off parcels to Italy. The Benin office of Western Union (where remittances arrive from Europe) is said to be the company's busiest in Nigeria. Some of the largest houses in Benin were built on the proceeds of trafficking-and everyone knows them. Few recent movies have been as popular as "Glamour Girls 2," which portrayed the sex trade to Europe in lurid and sensational terms.

An astonishing variety of small enterprises now depends on trafficking in Benin City: phony

lawyers who set up "contracts" between traffickers and girls; self-styled evangelists who pray for the girls from charismatic churches; traditional doctors who use voodoo to hold the girls to their promise; and customs and immigration officials who take bribes to look the other way.

All receive a cut. All have a vested interest in the continuation of trafficking.

A State of Mind



The first front in the war against trafficking is psychological. Many of those trafficked are lured into the trade by false promises, like Berta. They would not have left Nigeria if they knew what awaited them. Many more go of their own free will, in spite of the lurid stories. Not much can be done to deter them, short of jail.

Some are caught in the middle. They are gullible and insecure. This makes them extremely vulnerable to trafficking and also hard to reach.

This emerged clearly when the Advocacy Project met with Sonia, a young woman who was managed to escape from her traffickers in Turin, Italy, and returned to Nigeria. She is now in the care of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Benin City, a Catholic order.

Sonia can recall her ordeal in detail. The problem is that many details do not add up. The sisters would like to believe that she never engaged in prostitution in Italy (as she claims). But they fear she may have tasted life in the fast lane and wants more. If so, she would not be the first.

What we saw in Sonia was a very disturbed young woman. One moment she would act like a normal teenager, swaying to the music of a CD-player with her eyes shut and a sweet smile on her face. The next moment she would be off in a dark brooding world all of her own.

Whatever the truth of her story, Sonia illustrates the fragile emotional state of the girls who escape trafficking. She is also a warning to any would-be researcher. So few Nigerian victims have come forward to tell their story-and the traffickers are so intimidating-that those who escape, like Berta and Sonia, are likely to be the main source of information for some time to come.

But great care needs to be taken when gathering the facts so as not to revive the trauma. Questions have to be put with tact and sensitivity. This is best done one on one, and in the presence of someone who has gained the trust of the young woman. It is not a job for outsiders who are strangers to the culture.



Sonia in a world of her own

Pressure Of Poverty



Learning to weave at the Uzomi compound

Poverty is rife in areas like Edo State after years of economic sanctions and military rule. This is exploited by the traffickers. A young prostitute can earn more in six months of working the streets in Italy than she would make in ten years from toiling on a farm in Nigeria-and with much less effort.

"Most (Nigerians) can barely afford one meal a day," says Sister Cecilia, from the Catholic order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The order has taken upon itself to care for young women like Berta and Sonia who escape from traffickers in Benin City.

The order has also established a training center for young women in the town of Uzomi, two hours from Benin. Here about 30 women weave cloth, make clothes, and bake bread, under the supervision of nuns.

The workers are all chosen from poor families in the area and can earn up to an average of 5,000 Naira (\$50) a month.

Seventy women have passed through the compound since it opened in 1984 and have gone on to open their own small businesses. Most of the food and material they produce is used by the nuns or sent to local schools, and the compound makes a profit of 150,000 Naira (\$1,500) a year, which is reinvested in the operation. It is one small way of addressing the poverty that lies at the heart of trafficking.

A Woman's Issue

Many Nigerian feminists look on trafficking as an example of a new generation of violations specifically aimed at women. But they also admit that it poses a dilemma for those who campaign for women's rights.

Even the strongest critics of trafficking agree that most of the girls-perhaps as many as 70%-go to Europe go of their own free will and are well aware of the consequences. Some feminists feel that these women should be free to choose, even if they choose a degrading profession like prostitution.

In the other corner, a growing number of Nigerian women's groups argue that the risk to society from trafficking is so great that the personal wishes of the girls must take second place behind the overriding need to stamp the trade. Besides, they say, choosing to enter forced prostitution is hardly exercising one's right to chose.



For Berta empowerment meant escape from trafficking

"If our women were empowered, they would not let themselves be trafficked," argued Jane Edeki of AWEG.

Jane and others argue that trafficking has become a mortal danger to the next generation of Nigerian women, because of the high incidence of HIV-AIDS infection among those who are deported back to Nigeria. It is, says Jane, "far more dangerous than female genital mutilation. Edo State is facing a catastrophe."

Other activists are concerned that this could go too far and result in a rush to outlaw prostitution. This would result in a new form of coercion, directed against women.

Part of the problem is that current laws in Nigeria on prostitution are ambiguous. The 1904 Criminal Code, which operates in the south of the country (including Edo State) prohibits the trafficking of women and makes it an offence to live off the earnings of prostitution. But this provision only applies to male offenders and so excludes the Madams and female pimps. Added to this, the laws are rarely enforced.

This may now change. Mrs. Eki Igbemidion, the Governor's wife, is leading an effort to get a tough new law drafted that would make prostitution a criminal offense and also punish recruiters, traffickers, and pimps. But the bill never made it past the first reading after being rejected by the traditional chiefs of Benin City. Most likely, too many of the chiefs were making money from prostitution. Some powerful women—also involved—were even reported to have invoked curses against the bill's sponsors.

This sort of opposition is about grubby self-interest, not the woman's right to choose. As a result, it has stiffened the resolve of the governor's wife and also forced many activists to swallow their reservations.

Grace Osakue, a renowned feminist who coordinates the Nigerian branch of the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (IRRRAG) and is known as a defender of women's rights. Nonetheless she called for tougher penalties against prostitution in a recent interview.

Family, School and Culture

African families are often portrayed as large, loving, and extended groups that support members who lapse or need help. This is not the picture that emerges from trafficking. Some Nigerian girls have even been "traded" to traffickers by their own parents—sometimes without their knowledge.

Often the first contact comes from a school friend, who is recruited by the traffickers to gain the

Grace Osakue, IRRRAG, 3-13-00, The News, Nigeria

Q: Do you see light at the end of the tunnel to fight this shameful trend?

A: Yes. There is some light, but it will all depend on the will of those in power. Government should be ready to enforce existing legislation while the penal code which already criminalised prostitution must be reviewed to make penalties more severe. Traffickers as well as sponsors or agents need to be brought to book to serve as deterrent to others.

confidence of the victim. The fact that recruiters are starting to move into schools horrifies but does not surprise educators. The quality of education in Nigeria fell sharply during the years of military rule, and teachers find it difficult to keep girl students from dropping out.

Education is also expensive for poor families. They have to buy pencils, uniforms, sandals, and books. Prostitution can seem very attractive. The insidious appeal of travel to Europe only makes it harder.

The African Women Empowerment Group (AWEG) brings together a group of professional women in Benin City. Together, they are emerging as an effective force against trafficking and taking the fight into schools and even families.

AWEG came into existence in March 1995 and made its mark a year later when it organized a meeting for 5,000 women. Its aim is to help women acquire the skills they need to develop, personally and professionally, and open up opportunities through education and literacy.



Jane Edeki (left) and Esther Onosode of AWEG

This applies to trafficking. "If women were empowered, they would not allow themselves to be trafficked," says Jane Edeki, a senior official at the State Ministry of Education and AWEG member.

AWEG has 20 members in Benin City. Most are middle class-some would say privileged-in a country of extreme poverty. But they are making inroads into the ignorance and superstition that have held women back and made them vulnerable to trafficking.

For groups like AWEG inveigling superstitious girls into the practice of trafficking fits the pattern. It is another example of societal violence against women, masquerading as "tradition."

"When a man dies, it is assumed he was killed by his wife," says Esther Onosode, of AWEG. "In order to prove her innocence, the widow is made to drink the water that was used to wash the corpse, complete with chemicals. If she dies, she was guilty."

Widows are also made to sleep next to the corpse of their dead husband for several days, sit on the ground for a week, and eat from an unwashed plate with her left hand.

"We appealed to their sense of fairness, and made it clear we were not trying to kill traditional practices,"

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Esther Onosode

AWEG's goal is to show that these practices discredit and undermine traditional African values. Jane herself underwent a mild form of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) when she had her first child, but she has

managed to discourage her younger sisters and her own children. In her family at least, the cycle has broken.

AWEG and its partners recently chalked up their biggest success by getting FGM banned in Edo State, which is one of only two Nigerian states to outlaw the practice.

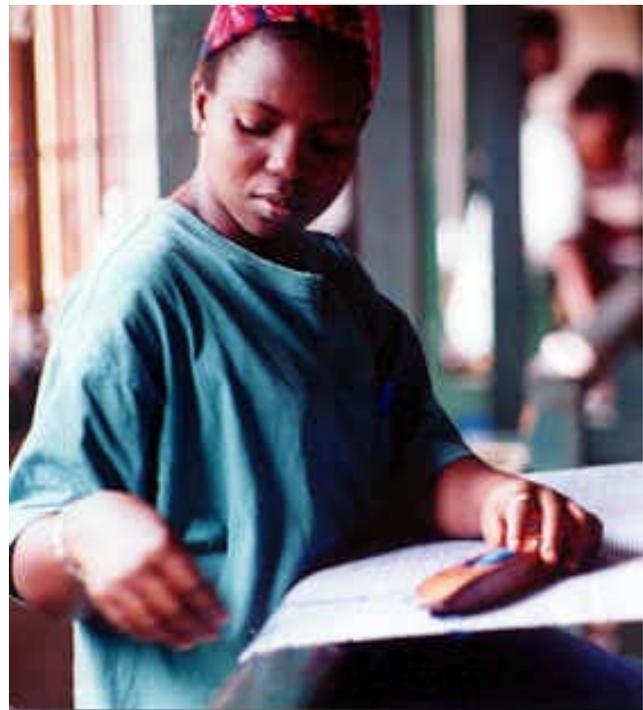
They feel they can have the same success with trafficking. They met with the Oba of Benin (paramount chief) and asked him to invite all the chiefs to meet with them in local government offices throughout the state.

"We appealed to their sense of fairness, and made it clear we were not trying to kill traditional practices," says Esther Onosode, another member of AWEG. Surprisingly, men have proved more receptive than women. Perhaps it is because so many women were themselves forced to undergo prostitution before they make a profit, but women are proving to be powerful, well-organized advocates.

AWEG is a network within a network. When Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi of WOCON was looking for speakers from Benin State for a seminar on trafficking last December, she turned to AWEG. Outside Nigeria, AWEG is affiliated to six women's groups in other African countries-Lesotho, Harare, Botswana, Ghana, Sudan, and Kenya.

These are women with a cause, who are ready to dig into their own pockets. AWEG's 20 members have come up with enough money to run a small office at the YWCA in Benin City. They came up with as much as 50,000 Naira (\$500) to start one imaginative project known as School-Age Democracy in Nigeria (SADIN), under which they helped students to hold mock elections in 20 schools. They have also brought elected women to Edo State to talk to the electorate. Getting more women elected is an important goal.

Everything that AWEG has learned is now being thrown into the fight against trafficking. They have held three packed meetings at the city cultural complex and are also planning a mass education campaign for August, 2000.



Aware that schools are the next battle-ground, AWEG has identified ten researchers (all volunteers) who will spend two weeks in ten schools getting to know the counselors and hopefully through them identifying the student recruiters. AWEG hopes that this will open the way to a campaign of intense education into the evils of trafficking.

Sisters of Mercy

The involvement of traditional religion on the side of traffickers shows how deeply trafficking has wormed its way into village society. This is being challenged by the Catholic Church.

When traffickers draw up a contract, they often call on a traditional priest to give approval. This is usually done at a traditional "shrine." The priest takes something deeply personal from the girl. It might be hair from her head, some pubic hair, a nail clipping, or some underwear. This trophy is wrapped up with a flourish, and the priest leaves no doubt that it will be used to control the victim from a distance.

This use of voodoo is a way of keeping the girl in bondage because it plays on her deepest superstitions. One campaigner described these priests as "greedy charlatans who deserve to be behind bars."

But it takes courage to stand up and say such things in Benin City, where the traditional and modern coexist uneasily. A thoroughly modern lawyer takes care when driving past the intersection between the Apakpava Road and the South Circular in Benin City. There has been a series of deadly accidents at this corner, he says. Locals are convinced that this is related to the presence of Benin's largest "shrine" at the corner. Traditional culture is enjoying something of a revival-and exploiting the fact that it predated colonialism.



Religion holds sway in Benin City

But the Catholic Church is also strong-and it too has thrown its weight into the fight against trafficking. A small group of Catholic sisters in Benin City and Lagos have taken it upon themselves to care for women like Sonia, Berta, and Rachel who escape the clutches of the traffickers. They are on the front line in the campaign against trafficking in Nigeria.

The sisters have long been working in the villages around Benin City, and they have an intimate knowledge of village society. Their first experience of trafficking came as a shock, when a young woman whose family they were helping suddenly left for Germany. The girl had signed a contract with the traffickers before leaving Nigeria, and they were furious when she slipped out of their clutches. The woman had escaped, whereupon the traffickers sent "enforcers" to demand \$36,000 from her siblings in Benin City. Although she had been tricked into virtual slavery, her brothers were now facing time in prison for having "broken" the contract.

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Sister Blandina

Sister Blandina, from the medical mission of Mary, who works in Benin City, came to the rescue. Blandina made four attempts to talk personally to the governor of Edo State, but without success. In desperation, she appealed to the Benin police chief, who agreed to help. She also enlisted the help of a local voluntary association of lawyers.

It was a frightening introduction to the world of trafficking for Blandina, and she was an obvious choice to join the small organization to help trafficking victims that was established in February 1999 by the Conference of Religions in Nigeria. It was named the Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women.

The local bishop provided two rooms at the cathedral in Benin City. The sisters turned this into an office and small vocational center. Three sisters work in the Committee under the direction of Sister Cecilia, who is the Superior General of the Sacred Heart Sisters in Benin City. They have no budget from the Church. They fund the work themselves.

Their contact in Lagos is Sister Regina Oke, a sister of St. Michael the Archangel. Sister Regina is also the focal point in Lagos for Nigerian girls who are helped to return home by the Catholic Church in Italy. She meets them on arrival, puts them up at a religious hostel in Lagos, and sends them back to Benin City where they are picked up by Sister Cecilia, Sister Blandina, and the others.

These sisters are well suited to take on the traffickers in the villages because they are themselves so well integrated into village life. This allows them to follow up cases. They do it patiently and without any expectations. Their only reward, says Regina, will be to defeat trafficking.



Sister Regina

Of course, they see it in moral and religious terms. To them trafficking is evil and prostitution is a sin. Pressed on the point, they argue that trafficking must be seen in moral terms to be defeated. Some feminists might be worried by this. Indeed, on many issues of importance to women, the Catholic Church and the women's movement have not always been on the same side. But on this issue, here in Nigeria, the two are in the same corner. One does not have to be religious to agree with Sister Blandina that trafficking is an evil, like slavery or torture.

Above all, the sisters are driven by a deep sense of humanity and sympathy for the victims. Sister Blandina is convinced that most of those who go to Italy do so through fear and coercion. Even those who volunteer, she feels, must be feeling pressure.



The sisters philosophy: invest in women

"Imagine what it must be like at that age in a foreign country, far from home, not speaking the language, with no documents. They're young and terrified."

It adds to their credibility that Blandina and the others have no wish to be publicly praised. By carefully limiting their own role in the coalition, the sisters also encourage others to work with them, which is the surely the essence of good networking. In Lagos, Sister Regina has developed a close relationship with WOCON, with Caritas, and with several journalists. In Benin City, her colleagues have developed a fruitful partnership with a group of Christian lawyers, who give them free legal advice. They are also starting to get inquiries directly from religious organizations in Europe that are coming upon abused Nigerian women.

The one thing the sisters don't have is money. Until now, they have paid for everything out of their personal allowances, which is clearly unsustainable.

They have been asked by their friends in Italy to take on more girls who want to return, and they would like to open a center where the returning girls can receive medical assistance and counseling before returning to their homes. But for now all such plans are on hold.

The sisters are clearly an excellent investment for any donor that sincerely cares about trafficking. The smallest grant would go a long way in their shrewd but compassionate hands.

Calling The Law

Once a girl is hooked by a trafficker, a "contract" is drawn up under which she agrees to pay a sum of money in exchange for the chance to travel abroad. The sums involved can amount to thousands of U.S. dollars. Many times the contracts are drawn up by phony lawyers. They rarely mention the real destination, just in case a girl is courageous enough to charge for breach of contract.

It is just one of many ways in which traffickers break the law. Many of the Nigerian girls enter Europe on forged passports. As a result, forgery flourishes in Benin City. Indeed, the skill of the forgers has astounded Western diplomats. The Italian embassy has hired a firm in Benin City to

investigate. It has reportedly found whole "factories" of forged documents.

The traffickers often use enforcers to ensure that their victims honor their contract-no matter how phony it might have been. In one recent example, recounted earlier, a young woman agreed to pay her traffickers \$36,000 before she left Benin City. When she did not return the traffickers sent thugs to collect their debt from her family.

The police seemed more interested in prosecuting the girl's family than the traffickers, and the Catholic sisters intervened on behalf of the family. Eventually they persuaded the Police Chief of Benin City that a travesty of justice was about to occur.

At this point, Eric Okojie, a lawyer in Benin City, took over the negotiations on behalf of the sisters. Eric struck a deal under which the traffickers would appear in Lagos to present their case. He hoped that this would flush them out and might even lead to an unprecedented counter-suit. But they called his bluff and never showed up.

At least Eric had shown that lawyers can be on the right side when it comes to trafficking. Eric Okojie is a model citizen. Two years ago, he linked up with his law partner Victor Ehizogwie to found the Association of Catholic Lawyers, a voluntary group in Benin City. The Association now gives free legal advice to deserving causes like the campaign against trafficking. The idea is to give something back to the community, says Victor.

The Christian lawyers are also trying to ease some of the pressure on the poor of Benin City, who are rarely able to afford lawyers. This renders them vulnerable to a legal system that has been frighteningly indifferent to due process. Suspected criminals often languish for months-even years-in jail before even coming to trial because their files get lost with the police. Family members lose track of their relatives. Very few can afford bail.

In spite of their commitment to the campaign against trafficking, Victor and Eric are under no illusions about the legal challenge that lies ahead. The main obstacle to prosecuting traffickers is the reluctance of victims to come forward. It would take months, if not longer, for a case to be heard, says Victor. During this time, the victim would be at considerable risk.

One of the girls who has managed to return to Nigeria has laid down a clear marker in her village by registering with a lawyer in the event that she is intimidated. But neither Eric nor Victor expect her to press charges against the locals who lured her into the trafficking in the first place, even though she knows their names and where they live.

The Governor's Wife

Mrs. Eki Igbinedion, wife of the governor of Edo State, has a reputation for being regal and aloof. But she came down from her private quarters late at night to receive joint delegation from the Advocacy Project and Women's Consortium of Nigeria. It was proof of her deep commitment to the



campaign against trafficking. Some call it an obsession. A few call it good politics.

During her husband's first year in office, Mrs. Igbinedion established herself as the point person on trafficking in his administration and also showed herself to be a thoroughly modern political wife.

Friends and colleagues say that it began under embarrassing circumstances. She was invited to a meeting of governors' wives by the First Lady of Nigeria and was deeply ashamed when Edo State was derisively described as Nigeria's capital of prostitution.

This turned her into a tireless campaigner. She has created a new nongovernmental organization, Idia Renaissance, aimed at reviving the cultural life of Edo State, and has given so many lectures and interviews that they fill a book. When a new film "Izozo" came out that portrayed trafficking in lurid terms, she attended the launch and had the film translated into all the major dialects of the state. She has sponsored three public education meetings.

This has brought plenty of attention. In November 1999, she was visiting a market when a young man pressed a note into her hand, giving the time and address of a upcoming clandestine meeting that was to organize the trafficking of several girls, including the young man's sister who was about to be sent abroad against her will. The governor's wife alerted the police, who raided the meeting and arrested the gang of traffickers. Unfortunately, they could not make the charge stick, and the traffickers were released. This failure has turned Mrs. Igbinedion into an ardent advocate for toughening the law and making prostitution a crime.

Some criticize her for grandstanding. Nigeria, they say, has a long tradition of first ladies in Nigeria who latch onto the latest fashionable cause and then lose interest. Trafficking is certainly à la mode: the wife of the Federal Vice President, Aminu Titi Abubakar, has also created her own nongovernmental organization, the Women Trafficking and Child Labor Eradication Foundation.

There are two problems with these initiatives, say the critics. First, they rarely last. Second, they tend to snuff out the kind of patient, bottom-up efforts needed to eradicate practices that are deeply embedded in a society. There is no room for anyone else when the governor's wife is on stage.

This is not what you hear in Edo State. Here the governor's wife is seen as providing groups like AWEG with political cover and occasionally even protection. This is crucial because the interests that support trafficking are so deeply embedded.

And even those who dislike her imperious approach have to admit that the governor's wife has plenty of courage. Her campaign against trafficking has not been universally popular. Women have stripped themselves in her presence, abused her, and even spat at her in public to show their hostility. It takes guts to oppose the traffickers. If popularity is what she seeks, this is hardly the best cause.

On the Streets of Italy

Rachel is another young woman who managed to escape from traffickers and agreed to meet with The Advocacy Project. Hers is a shocking story, full of violence and abuse.

Rachel was living in Benin City with her sister when she was approached by a man who asked if she would like to go abroad and earn money. After a long and roundabout route she arrived in Rome, where she met her pimp, named "Madam Agnes." She was shocked to learn that she was expected to earn \$50,000 dollars from prostitution, or be denounced to the police as an illegal immigrant. At the going rate that would have meant sex with several partners a day for three years.

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Rachel tried to escape, but to no avail. After three weeks on the streets, a client drove her to the patch of empty ground. After having sex with Rachel in his car, he told her to hand over all of her earnings from the day. She kept her earnings in a sock and gave him an empty purse. He started to curse and hit her, whereupon she managed to open the door and start running. He started the car

and drove it right at her, knocking her down. Luckily he then drove off. Luckily, because as she knows only too well, she could have been killed.

Covered in blood and crying, Rachel then walked back to the corner where she worked. In retrospect, it seems amazing that she returned. It shows how totally cowed she had been by her experience and by the fearsome Madam Agnes.

Rachel was rescued by a group of modern Samaritans from the Catholic group Caritas, who patrol the streets of Rome every Wednesday in an attempt to check up on the prostitutes. They quickly realized that Rachel was sick and asked her to go to a hospital with them.

At first Rachel refused: "I thought I would not be able to afford treatment." They insisted gently and told her that the treatment would be free. Even ensconced in a hospital bed, Rachel was reluctant to sleep, afraid of how Madam would react. The staff carried out medical tests, which presumably included a test for sexually transmitted diseases and even HIV-AIDS.

Rachel's five days in the hospital finally broke the grip of Madam Agnes. The Caritas group asked if Rachel wanted to return to Nigeria and offered to help. She was taken to a convent in Rome, where she stayed for several days with two other girls. She then went to the Nigerian embassy in Rome and to the office of the International Organization of Migration, to collect the necessary documents and ticket.

As it happens, the head of the order of sisters that was receiving girls back in Benin City, Sister Cecilia, was visiting Italy for a conference. Sister Cecilia was happy to bring Rachel back home with her. Rachel stayed briefly in Lagos, before returning to her village, Ogwe, for an emotional reunion with her family, says Cecilia.

In one final act of pure malice, Madam Agnes had phoned Rachel's family after she had escaped and told them that she had been killed. When Rachel returned home, alive and well, they were overjoyed. They were also bitterly angry-so angry, in fact, that they went in person to confront the brother of Agnes. He was living in Benin City and had arranged for the departure of their child two months earlier.

Rachel's story rings true to most Nigerians, who now understand that life on the streets of Italy for a Nigerian prostitute is fraught with abuse and danger. The wife of the Governor of Edo State recently announced that 116 prostitutes were reported killed in Italy between 1994 and 1998.

Publicizing the risk to prostitutes may discourage new recruits, but it also highlights the indifference of the Italian authorities. On paper at least, Italian law attempts to prohibit trafficking and other forms of abuses, without punishing the prostitutes. In practice, it appears to leave young women like Rachel, who are forced into prostitution, utterly defenseless. As of June 2000, only one suspected Italian trafficker had been arrested, and that happened in Nigeria. There is very little protection for girls like Rachel, except that offered by charities.

Deportation Backfires

From a [Human Rights Watch](#) report on trafficking

Not only have anti-prostitution immigration laws been largely useless in curbing the trafficking of women and girls, but they have been enforced in ways that compound the harm to the trafficking victims. The wrongful application of these statutes has been an important means by which traffickers and pimps intimidate and control women and girls, and in some cases a way by which corrupt officials profit from their plight.

The discriminatory and arbitrary arrest of trafficking victims violates women's rights to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex and to the equal protection of the law.

Italy's answer to growing prostitution has been deportation. In the span of a year between 1999 and 2000, more than 500 Nigerian prostitutes were rounded up and deported back to Nigeria at very short notice.

The policy of deportation plays into the hands of the pimps and traffickers, who use it to denounce veteran prostitutes that are close to paying off their debt to the Italian police. (With the veterans deported, they can secure new, younger victims.)

It also adds to the stress of the women (many of whom are infected with the HIV-AIDS virus) and makes their reintegration in Nigeria much harder. This in turn adds to the burden on the financially strapped Nigerian authorities.

The first mass deportation of Nigerian women from Italy in March 1999 came as a nasty surprise to the Nigerian authorities. Not only were they completely unprepared for the sudden influx, they were also deeply angered by the fact that each woman was escorted back by two Italian policemen. The implication that the girls were somehow dangerous was deeply resented.

Nonetheless, the treatment of the returnees on their return home to Nigeria is also deeply intimidating. When the girls leave the plane at Lagos airport, they are gathered together and roughly questioned by immigration police, who check the travel documents that were issued to

them by the Nigerian embassy officials in Italy. Using whatever pressure they see fit, the police also try to identify their families.

After the airport, the girls are driven in convoy to the headquarters of the Federal Police in the Alagbon district of Lagos. During the first deportations in 1999, this process was also rough and unfriendly. The first batch of 64 girls spent several weeks at Alagbon under a detaining order. Here they were screened for medical diseases and interviewed in detail.

Mrs. Abimbola Ojomo, the Assistant Inspector General (AIG) of the Nigerian federal police, said that although these girls have not committed an offence under Nigeria law, their detention is justified as a potential threat to public health and safety. In addition, she said, her staff were completely unprepared for the mass arrival. "We needed the time to get organized and create a procedure."

Mrs. Ojomo expressed some sympathy for the girls. But at the same time, the government took a policy decision to make an example out of the girls and exhibit them to the press in an attempt to generate some bad publicity around trafficking.

The girls were addressed by Oba (paramount ruler) of Edo State, who sent messages of reprimand to their parents and families. They were paraded before local journalists, who interviewed them and broadcast the results on television. The girls were furious, and in a spirited show of defiance they howled down the journalists. All agree that the event was a complete disaster.

According to one prominent advocate in Benin City, the girls are medically screened in Lagos, whether they like it or not-and the results are then sent back to Edo State. Once their stay in Lagos is finished, they are then taken to the governor's house in Benin City, Edo State, where they are again paraded in front of the press then screened a second time. This includes another medical test, which is deemed necessary, said one expert, "because parents often won't believe the first result."

The results are supposed to be confidential, but the statistics are available. We were told that the rate of HIV infection among the returning girls is in excess of 50 percent.

"Parents were happy to live off the proceeds without coming clean about where the money came from. It is time for them to face the consequences."

This entire process contains enough coercion to alarm any human rights activist, but there is such a siege mentality in Edo State about trafficking that even feminists feel it is justified. Esther Onosode of AWEG feels the families that support this trafficking must be shamed-just as they were allowed to flaunt the wealth that it brought in yesteryear.

The few Western diplomats with an interest in trafficking seem genuinely appalled at the severe treatment meted out to the girls on their return to Nigeria, but they are embarrassed into silence by the fact that their own governments seem only interested in deportation. This is particularly true of Italy, whose authorities seem supremely indifferent to the pressures and problems caused

by the deportations back in Nigeria.

The selfishness of the Italians infuriates senior Nigerian officials. In one discussion with WOCON and the Advocacy Project, Assistant Inspector General Ojomo said that Nigerian prostitutes are performing an important social service in Italy by helping to keep Italian marriages together and taking some of the pressure off overworked and unstable Italian men. Their reward was to be unceremoniously deported. "Our girls are not sleeping with themselves. Europe cannot deport our girls with levity."

Mrs. Ojomo also pointed out that the Italians fail to even provide advance notice of not more than a day-even though the girls are detained for several days before being put on a plane.

"If we knew in advance, we'd be able to make some preparations," says Mrs. Ojomo. "With numbers like these, our detention facility is swamped. We don't even have the budget to feed them properly."

The Re-admission Agreement

There is growing agreement among campaigners in Nigeria that if European governments are to continue deporting prostitutes, they must do more to humanize the process and help Nigeria-and the girls. This applies particularly to Italy.

Early in 1999, in an important development, the Nigerian and Italian governments negotiated a "Re-admission Agreement" under which the two governments would cooperate to ease the reentry of illegal immigrants deported back to Nigeria. As of June 2000, the agreement has been drafted but not yet signed. It opens the way for accelerated deportations by Italy, and in return commits Italy to funding reintegration projects in Nigeria. Importantly, it also calls for an increase in legal migration from Nigeria to Italy-for example, in cases of family unification.

On paper, an orderly migration agreement of this kind would seem to make a lot of sense, particularly if it resulted in a shift away from law enforcement toward more of an emphasis on social support and protection. Even when it comes to law enforcement, said Mrs. Ojomo from the Nigerian federal police, the Italian government could make it easier for Nigerian police to cope with the trafficking by giving them the chance to visit Italy and meet some Nigerian girls on the streets. They could also benefit from technical training.

But as with all attempts to manage migration, detention, and deterrence are likely to prove more popular than protection and social programs. For the Re-admission Agreement to succeed, all of its components would have to come together at the same time.

This seems unlikely without more political will and urgency at both ends of the trade, and however humane the impulse, it may continue to be drowned out by the need to expose trafficking. As for "legal immigration," the forgers of Benin City are already cranking out birth certificates. This will make it harder to control immigration.

The lack of will is most apparent in the inability of both governments to prosecute the traffickers.

This is obviously extremely difficult given the level of intimidation, but one test case needs to come to the courts, otherwise the traffickers will start to feel immune from punishment.

The tide may be starting to turn in Nigeria. On September 22, 1999, an Italian national named Mauro Trocchi was arrested with his Nigerian wife and a 60-year-old Nigerian madam named Titilayo Ojo. The charge was issued by an Italian judge in the Italian city of Modena who was investigating racketeering. One Nigerian girl who was called as a witness was able to describe Trocchi's house in a Lagos suburb, and Trocchi was arrested with the help of Interpol.

It was an important example of what is possible through international cooperation, and some hope that the Trocchi case will shatter the aura of invincibility that surrounds trafficking and protects those involved.

But the case also illustrates the power and wealth that supports trafficking. When we last heard of him, Trocchi was free on bail. He had turned down an offer of help from the Italian embassy, preferring to entrust himself to unseen benefactors. One official at the embassy said that Trocchi's bail was "fantastically large" and clearly beyond the means of a "poor specimen" like Trocchi.

Going International: WOCON



**Olabisi Olateru-
Olagbegi**

Her great-grandfather was a king (paramount chief, also known as Oba) in Oshun state. Her husband is a king in Ondo state. Their authority is vested in her, indiscernible to outsiders but evident to Nigerians. This, and her connections, gives her extraordinary access to senior government officials.

Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi is the perfect partner for the more reticent activists like the Catholic sisters of Benin City, who are happy to work in the shadows. They shun publicity; she loves it. She is also ready to take risks. She was one of those who protested the illegal execution of Ken Sarowiwa by the military government of the late President "Sonny" Abacha. She also led a march on the Belgian embassy in October 1998 after a young Nigerian woman, Semira Adamu, was suffocated to death by a Belgian policeman during her deportation from Brussels.

Bisi needs all of her resolve in the fight against trafficking. She had a taste of the risks recently when she went to Lagos airport to meet two girls who returned from Europe. They found the traffickers also waiting for the girls. Bisi and Sister Regina confronted the traffickers and rescued the girls. But the traffickers followed them back to Lagos.

This was unnerving, but such things come with the territory. The fight against trafficking is not for the faint of heart.

Respect for law runs deep in Bisi's family. Her father was a high court judge in Lagos. She herself graduated from law school in Lagos and was called to the bar in 1976. She is currently in a private practice that pays the bills for her human rights work and the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), which she founded in 1994.

She first became engaged in human rights through law in 1977, when she helped to uncover a major discrepancy in the Nigerian tax code under which male heads of households, but not women, were allowed to benefit from a tax exemption. Together with other women lawyers, Bisi started writing letters to tax officials and MPs. They got the code changed.

She joined the Nigerian branch of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in the early 1980s. FIDA campaigned for Nigerian ratification of CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

It was fitting that her organization in Nigeria emerged from Bisi's international networking. She was a founding member of the Nigerian branch of the Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), a regional grouping established in 1990 in Zimbabwe to build on the achievements of the U.N. Decade on Women. As the Nigerian coordinator of WILDAF for the last three years, she has used the organization to develop women's civil society.



Bosse of WOCON: the poster against trafficking was designed by WOCON

Membership in FIDA and WILDAF has given Bisi a reputation in the African women's movement, and she was able to extend this to the United Nations in June 1998 at the plenipotentiary conference in Rome to create an international criminal court. Bisi was a prominent member of the NGO women's caucus, which succeeded in getting a gender perspective into the statute of the new court. (It was here that she met the Advocacy Project.)

Fighting trafficking is the perfect vehicle for a person of Bisi's talents, and the network she has created. It is a key issue in one of Africa's key countries at a key time in the struggle for women's rights. And Bisi is just the right person to put it on the international agenda. It challenges her as a woman, a mother, a lawyer, and an advocate.

The lawyer in Bisi objects to any contract that relies on duress. Bonded labor is, to her, one of the ultimate abuses. In spite of this, she does not feel that laws are necessarily the best or only solution. She is particularly wary about calling for prosecution to be declared a crime. As well as being unenforceable, she feels that this would criminalize the victim, force the practice underground, and-like abortion-

increase the risk of abuse.

"If you want to use your body there should be laws to protect you from abuse. It's the harassment and slave-like conditions that need to be criminalized."

Bisi the mother has four children, two of them girls in their early twenties, and she cannot imagine what it must be like to learn that a daughter has been sucked into prostitution in a far-off country. "I would die. I would feel so empty and sad." The threat from HIV-AIDS adds a new and ominous dimension. It is every parent's worst nightmare to watch helplessly as a child engages in destructive behavior. Prostitution is as risky as it can get.

WOCON took up the issue of trafficking in 1997 at the request of the U.N.'s rapporteur on violence against women. Bisi and Grace Osakwe jointly authored a report on trafficking, which revealed the practice to be far more widespread than they had previously thought.

WOCON's members met and decided to launch a campaign. "There was a lot we did not understand," recalls Bisi. Like a growing number of Nigerian campaigners, Bisi took it on herself to visit some of the women while she was in Rome for the conference on a criminal court. "You could tell the ones who were abused," she says. "They looked so shifty. It was very strange."

In WOCON, Bisi has fashioned a vehicle for her own unique brand of advocacy. In its own way, WOCON is also a perfect example of women's civil society in countries that are emerging from a prolonged crisis. Its equivalent is to be found in Kosovo, Cambodia, Guatemala, and Bosnia.

Like AWEG and IRRRAG, WOCON illustrates the flexibility of women's civil society and the effortless way it coalesces around a cause. Last year it might have been elections. This year it could be trafficking.

WOCON has a core group of (25) individual members who each contribute 500 Naira (\$5) a year. Eleven women's organizations are affiliated. But WOCON's real strength lies in its extended family of friends, colleagues, and partners, who drift in and out depending on the issue. They are formidably determined, and in this they reflect the outsized personality of WOCON's founder.

Bisi's great success lies in having persuaded others to buy into her vision. Once they have set their sights on something, they can put up with astonishing amounts of incompetence and discomfort. Press statements get printed in the middle of an electricity blackout, speeches get written, conferences get launched. In 1999 WOCON completed five quite complicated and demanding projects for five distinct (and demanding) donors.



**Toyin, a lawyer
working with WOCON**

In our view, Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi and WOCON are at their strongest when advocating. They

showed it again in the summer of 2000, when Bisi flew to New York to attend the Beijing Plus Five conference. The meeting was called to review progress on implementing the agenda on women adopted five years earlier at Beijing, and Bisi plunged into a series of briefings and meetings. Many feel she helped to toughen the language on trafficking that emerged in the eventual conference document.

Following this, she visited Washington and met with members of the U.S. Congress and White House Task Force on Trafficking. Once again, her formidable powers of persuasion were on display.

With a Little Help From Their Friends

International lobbying finds Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi at her best. It also points to WOCON's niche in the informal Nigerian coalition that has emerged to fight trafficking. Other members of the coalition-AWEG, the Catholic Church, the lawyers, even the press-are also taking on tasks to which they are suited, such as the rehabilitation of girls. WOCON's main function is to get out the message.



Hands on: Sieglinda Friedman, from The Advocacy Project, works with Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi of WOCON on a new video camera. The camera was delivered to WOCON by the Project on behalf of Fluidarity, an association that helps community advocates with their technical needs

This division of labor makes sense and plays to the strengths of these partners-all of whom need each other. It requires discipline on their part not to "poach" projects from each other when they spot an issue that might appeal to potential funders.

The question is whether donors will also show discipline by judiciously supporting this coalition, or whether they will respond as donors usually do-by forcing each small group to scramble for funds and then making heavy reporting demands.

The coalition certainly cannot exist without external funding. Volunteerism is great, but it will not pay for the rehabilitation of damaged girls like Berta, or a press campaign, or the protection of witnesses, or an email campaign, or the price of a plane ticket to Rome to coordinate with international NGO partners.

Working on a shoe-string budget definitely puts advocates like WOCON at a disadvantage when they are up against something as organized and well funded as human trafficking. In some countries they might turn to the private sector, but not in Nigeria.

This leaves the ball very much in the hands of foreign governments. Are they sufficiently interested to respond? One would hope so. The U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has declared trafficking the fastest growing international crime. The Government of Italy has committed itself to assisting the reintegration of deported prostitutes into Nigeria. International agencies have passed resolutions and created task forces.

In fact, the rhetoric has been deafening. Yet if Western governments are sincere about putting an end to trafficking they will have to invest in civil society in Nigeria on civil society's own terms. WOCON, AWEG, and the sisters in Benin City are starting to have an impact, but they need the right kind of support and encouragement from friends abroad. This is the next great challenge in the growing international campaign against trafficking. We at the Advocacy Project hope to monitor it carefully in the months ahead.



Italy and Nigeria Connect: TAMPEP

Rosanna Paradiso - Building A Bridge Between Civil Society in Nigeria and Italy

Rosanna Paradiso, from the Italian city of Turin, has laid the foundation for an innovative international network of Nigerian and Italian NGOs that will join forces to campaign against the trafficking of Nigerian women to Italy. The initiative is known as "Turnaround," and it seeks to warn Nigerian women of the risk they face before they are tricked into prostitution.

Rosanna heads the Turin branch of TAMPEP, the Transnational AIDS/SIDA Prevention Among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe Project.



Rosanna Paradiso: Turning Around Trafficking

TAMPEP-Turin has come face to face with trafficking on the street outside its own office. Hundreds of Nigerian women are engaged in the sex trade in Turin. Rosanna's team tries to persuade them to denounce their traffickers and escape from the trade.

This is done by a team of "cultural mediators," who include former prostitutes. The TAMPEP mediators get to know the women on the streets, and provide them with information about their rights, safe sex and hygiene. (One of Italy's foremost cartoonists, Davide Toffolo, has designed an extremely explicit manual for prostitutes, entitled 'Augusta's Way.' It is extremely popular and widely used.)

If she shows any interest in escaping from her traffickers, the Nigerian is encouraged to come to the TAMPEP office, where the full range of options are explained.

Under a 1998 Italian law, prostitutes are granted a residency permit and a new identity if they

agree to denounce their traffickers. Turin's regional and city governments take the problem more seriously than other cities, but even in Turin it is slow going. According to Rosanna, 34 women agreed to denounce their traffickers in 2000, but only one prosecution took place. It is also difficult to find work for the women who decide to take the plunge.

Given these difficulties, TAMPEP-Turin is now trying to go back to the source of the problem, in Nigeria. Rosanna Paradiso and her colleagues hope to launch an extensive program of information in the villages of Edo State, which will inform Nigerian women about the risks of trafficking in Nigeria. This information campaign would use the media (particularly radio) and hopefully coopt traditional rulers (Oba). Back in Italy, TAMPEP will also inform the Italian public about the abuse and violence that is directed against the Nigerian women on the streets of Italy.

The name of this exciting and innovative project is "Turnaround." In September 2001, Rosanna took a TAMPEP-Turin delegation to Nigeria to establish contact with civil leaders, and spread the word about the Turnaround project. The Advocacy Project helped to put the mission in contact with Olabisi Olateru-Olagbegi, who heads WOCON.

Hopefully, this first contact will blossom into a full-blown partnership between civil society in both countries. This would hold out the best - perhaps the only - hope of combating the trafficking, which is of course international in scope. Working at both ends of the trade would make it easier to share experience, lobby governments, and generate funding.

If successful, Turnaround would also be able to count on support from many other actors, including the International Organization of Migration (IOM). IOM's Italian office also sent a mission to Nigeria this summer to work out the details of establishing a safe house for Nigerian women who are deported from Italy and sent home. IOM has received funding for its work in Nigeria from the emergency aid budget of the Italian government.

Drawing on the success of international campaigns such as ECPAT (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking), Turnaround also hopes to persuade airline companies that operate on routes between Nigeria and Europe to air videos on the dangers of trafficking.

The Advocacy Project Coordinator visited TAMPEP-Turin in June 2001 and got a first-hand look at some of the impressive work being done by Rosanna and her team. AP has made a commitment to helping Turnaround to develop a website, contact donors, and strengthen the ties between Italian and Nigerian civil society.

For more information on Turnaround, contact Rosanna Paradiso: tampep.italia@libero.it or turnaroundproject@hotmail.com.