



On the Record: Girls for Sale

Issue 4: On the Streets of Europe

Contents

- **The Story of Rachel**
- **Italy's Shame**
- **Deportation**
- **Softening the Blow: The Re-Admission Agreement**
- **Nigerian Dilemma**

The Story of Rachel

The story of Rachel is really the story of two women. One is Rachel herself -- young, naive, and terribly vulnerable. The other is a pimp named Madam Agnes who lives in Rome. Agnes is a woman of cruelty and cunning. As we talked to Rachel, she began to emerge in sharper outline even that Akinlami and the traffickers profiled in the last issue of this series.

Rachel was living in Benin City with her sister last October when she was approached by a man who sold her the usual story and asked if she would like to go abroad and earn money. He then took her to meet a native doctor in Benin City.

Rachel was not asked to sign a contract -- that would come later. Nor did she tell her parents, who lived in the town of Ogwa near Benin City. Why? Because she was told not to. The traffickers knew they might prevent her from traveling.

Rachel then traveled by bus to Lagos. She spent the night at a trailer park along the road and paid for her own food. In Lagos she met up with her courier. From Lagos, she took the familiar route to Ghana, where she stayed for three months passing the time. There were about 20 other girls from Nigeria.

Rachel's stay in Ghana was irritating because she had thought that she would be earning money, but it was also not particularly stressful. She met her trafficker -- a man named Loa, who found her a passport. She was also introduced to her Madam named Agnes, who phoned from Italy with reassuring words. Rachel was going to Italy, she said, 'but would be able to do whatever work she wanted.' It later turned out that Agnes' brother was the native doctor she had met in Benin City. Rachel was also given clothes and luggage in Ghana.

On December 10 last year, Loa and Rachel left Ghana by plane for Milan. Rachel had been instructed to tell the immigration authorities that she was going to buy cosmetics. She says that she was questioned on arrival in Milan, but only briefly. She was taken by train to Milan. Even at this stage, she says, she was not worried.

From Milan, Loa and Rachel took the train to Rome. They arrived at a house in the suburb of Tiburtino, where she finally met Madam Agnes. 'She welcomed me and told me that they did prostitution. I said no. I was shocked. She said that was the only work they did. I said I can not do this kind of work.'

Rachel's protest was brushed aside and she unable to resist the strong-willed Agnes. The pressure was simply too much. She was put with a group of five other Nigerian girls and told to go and work the streets with them.

All this happened within a day of arriving. Madam Agnes forced Rachel to learn how to move her body in a suggestive manner to attract customers. She handed out condoms and gave Rachel clothes to change into. She also told Rachel the terms of her engagement: Rachel would be expected to pay Agnes 90 million lire (\$50,000), at the rate of 300,000 lire a day. She would also have to pay 50,000 lire a month for her room and board, and 200,000 lire to rent the corner where she would wait for customers.

The following day, tired and frightened, Rachel went to work. Together with the other girls she took two buses to the street corner. Here she attracted her first client who paid her 'trenta (30,000 lire) to do the business.' That, it appears, was the going rate. It meant that Rachel would have to have sex with at least ten partners a day, in order to make her daily repayment to Madam Agnes.

It was six o'clock in the morning when Rachel returned to the house with the other girls, with only 30,000 lire in her purse. Madam Agnes hit her hard and told her to do better. Rachel says that she was crying a lot by now, from exhaustion as well as fear. The girls were given only two hours to wash and get ready, before being hustled out to work by Madam Agnes.

The other girls had been told to watch Rachel -- whether for her safety or as a precaution is not clear. They became quite friendly, she says. In spite of the dire conditions, the other five did not seem to be there against their will. Customers would drive off to a patch of open ground where they did the business in a car. If the girls needed to sleep during their 22-hour working day, they slept here on open ground.

It is not hard to imagine how Rachel felt by now. 'There was no one to help me,' she says. Madam Agnes told her that she would never again return to Nigeria and that if she tried she would be killed. She was not allowed to telephone her parents back in Ogwe.

During the 25 days she spent on the streets of Rome, Rachel never made more than 150,000 lire in any one day. This meant she 'did business' with five clients, but she still only managed to take in half the daily amount demanded by Madam Agnes. This Madam was relentless and also violent. She hit Rachel repeatedly and tore one of her earrings out, ripping her earlobe.

Rachel made so little money during one stretch that she was driven out of the house for three days. She had no idea where to go, but at least she was temporarily free from the pressure and the surveillance. She had enough wit, and cash, to buy a telephone card and she used this to phone her sister in Nigeria. 'I told her where I was and what was happening, We were both

crying. I was trapped and desperate.'

When she returned to the house, Madam Agnes told her that she would pay an extra million lire for having phoned home.

Rachel's release came on January 5, in a terrifying manner. Her last client was an 'oyibo' (which means 'white man' -- she remembers no names.) They drove to the patch of empty ground, just off a road. She then had a nasty surprise. After having sex with Rachel in his car, her client 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 crazily 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 -- but it shows how totally cowed Rachel was by her experience and also destitute of ideas. She had been completely cowed 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 are known to the sisters of Benin City by their names, which we will not divulge - and they are among the few heroes in this story. 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 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 disease and even HIV-AIDS. (The results are known in Benin City, but not by us.)

Rachel's five days in 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.

Both the embassy and IOM get very high marks from campaigners against trafficking. The Nigerian minister at the embassy in Italy, a Mr. Pindar, is clearly indefatigable. He has been a source of support and provided invaluable information to groups in Nigeria such as WOCON working with the girls once they return. He has time for all visitors, and he does his best to give some advance warning when girls are due to be deported from Italy. Teresa, from the IOM office in Rome, is also well known in Nigeria for the way she has helped the girls to return.

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. She 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 escaped and told the family she had been killed. When Rachel returned home, alive and well, they were overjoyed --they were also bitterly angry because they had gone in person to confront the brother of Agnes who was living in Benin City and had arranged for the departure of their child two months earlier.

Italy's Shame

Rachel's story would ring true to most Nigerians, who are coming to understand that life on the streets of Italy for a Nigerian prostitute is fraught with abuse and danger. Earlier this year, the wife of the governor of Edo State announced that 116 prostitutes were reported killed in Italy between 1994 and 1998, and that the authorities in Italy had received reports of 332 cases of foreign prostitutes being mistreated.

In one case that received publicity in Nigeria, three prostitutes were reportedly burned to death when their brothel caught fire. The three women were unable to escape, because they had been chained to their beds by Madams.

Publicizing such risks 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. It skirts around the moral and legal issues surrounding prostitution itself.

Under a 1958 law (known as the Merlin Law), prostitution was decriminalized as long as it was practiced privately. But the law also prohibits prostitution in brothels and also makes it a criminal offense to exploit prostitutes or lead women into prostitution. A foreigner who brings a migrant woman into Italy for purposes of prostitution can be jailed for seven years.

On March 27, 1998, the Italian government passed a new immigration law (#40), which proscribed penalties of up to 15 years imprisonment for anyone who traffics, controls, or exploits immigrants. Under the law, victims of trafficking can receive social support whether or not they denounce the traffickers, and they have the right to remain in Italy on a work or study visas, or return home. The law also provides for emergency health assistance, maternity protection, and preventive health measures against infectious diseases even if they are not legal residents.

On March 9, 1999, the Italian cabinet modified the law on slavery, so as to give victims of trafficking an incentive to denounce their tormentors. Under the new provision, victims who denounce their abusers and testify against them will be given the same scale and kind of protection given those who speak out against the Mafia. The funds will come from local government. The government will also provide shelter and assistance.

On paper, these measures make a lot of sense. In practice, however, the policy is vague and the implementation clearly lacks conviction. The result is that young women like Rachel are left entirely defenseless.

According to TAMPEP, one of the foremost nongovernmental organizations working on the issue, there are two divergent trends. On the one hand, there is a growing tendency to shift responsibility to the client and organizer rather than the prostitute, and to see prostitutes as 'victims.' Three women ministers in the government are trying to ensure that prostitutes are allowed to benefit from social and medical protection. Pulling in the other direction are those who want to 'rid the streets of prostitutes,' and crack down on what they see as an illicit and immoral trade.

What is endangering the girls more -- the ambiguity that surrounds the law, or the indifference of the Italian authorities? From Nigeria it is impossible to tell. But one thing is certain -- listening to Rachel tell her story makes it very difficult to view prostitution in a benign light and even less as the exercise of a woman's right to choose her profession. Tolerance toward prostitution, combined with a lack of will by the Italian police to root out trafficking, has helped to create the conditions of slavery in which Rachel was forced to work.

Even though Rachel was supplied with condoms, several girls have reported that they are paid more for unprotected sex -- and of course, their Madams do not object because they collect more. For all intents and purposes, the girls live out in the open where they are at the mercy of drug addicts, thieves, and murderers. So devalued have they become, both as people and commodities, that they sell their bodies for as little as \$6.

If the Italian police were seriously looking for a target, they could start with Madams like Agnes. Most Madams started as prostitutes themselves. Once they have paid off their debt, they then become greedy. Agnes told her girls that she had been a prostitute for five years. Another powerful Nigerian Madam is clearly at work in Duisberg, Germany, where Pat has been arrested and jailed. According to the report reaching Benin City, Pat's Madam denounced her to the German police as an illegal immigrant, after Pat refused to prostitute herself.

Back in Nigeria, the tide is turning against Madams. Titilayo Ojo, a 60-year-old Madam, had the misfortune to be arrested on September 22, 1999, in the company of Mauro Trocchio and his wife. On November 27, another female sponsor named Pat Evbuomwan was arrested together with three male colleagues while they were trying to smuggle 11 girls out of Nigeria into Mali. She claimed to be working in Italy, where she said she was 'caring for the elderly.'

At least in Nigeria, the days of innocence appear to be over for Madams like Pat and Titilayo. Campaigners like WOCON and Reverend Sisters like Blandina, Regina, Cecilia, and Florence are quietly resolved that eventually they will all see the inside of a courtroom. The real question is whether they will receive support from wealthy European countries like Italy, where girls like Rachel are forced to do business.

Deportation

The world was first alerted to the way Europe deports Nigerian women on September 22, 1998, when 20-year-old Semira Adamu tried to resist deportation from Brussels. Semira Adamu had asked for asylum in Belgium on the grounds that she was being forced to marry a 65-year-old

man with three other wives.

Belgian immigration officials had to pose as priests to get her story, but even this did not persuade them to give her asylum. When she tried to resist, the police tried to restrain her with a pillow. In full view of other passengers, she was smothered to death.

One Italian diplomat in Lagos said that ever since this shocking incident, it has been 'extremely difficult' to deport Nigerian women from Italy against their will. In spite of this, the last year has seen a wave of mass deportations that have treated the Nigerian prostitutes like criminals in Italy and also put incredible strain on them back in Nigeria.

Ironically, the policy of mass deportations was launched last year by a center-left government in Italy. The first mass deportation occurred on March 16 last year when 64 Nigerian women were sent back in a chartered plane, accompanied by two Italian policemen to each prostitute. According to the Italian consulate in Lagos, there were five flights in 1999, each carrying an average of about 100 girls, and two more this year. The last flight brought back 77 girls from Italy, and 17 from Saudi Arabia. Parallel to this, a steady stream of prostitutes returns voluntarily by scheduled flight.

Any foreigner in Italy -- prostitute or otherwise -- is liable for arrest if found without papers. According to Italian diplomats, they are then put in a retention center for a maximum of 15 days before being released or deported. One diplomat said that first offenders will often be given one warning, but that if they are picked up again they are usually deported. Once a sufficient number have been detained, a plane is chartered and the girls are sent back to Nigeria.

As noted earlier, on paper at least Italian law purports to favor the victims of trafficking. But everyone agrees that the dice are heavily loaded against them from the start. They stand little chance of resisting deportation. One diplomat put it like this: 'All illegal immigrants in Italy are liable to deportation, but it only happens to these prostitutes. Why is this? Because they speak no English, do not know their rights, and are 'non-socials.' Everyone else knows that the first thing to do is ask for a lawyer.'

He might have added that this is part of the deliberate strategy of Madams like Agnes, because it helps to keep girls like Rachel in a state of slavery. It is no secret that Madams routinely denounce their own prostitutes to the Italian authorities once the girls are close to paying off their debt. With these veterans out of the way, the Madams are free to ensnare new, younger, victims from Nigeria. The policy of deportations merely plays into their hands.

The first mass deportation last March came as a nasty surprise to the Nigerian authorities, who were completely unprepared for the sudden influx. They were also deeply angered by the ratio of Italian police to Nigerian girls. 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 and 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 last year, this 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 needed some time to get organized and work out a procedure when the first plane-load of deportees suddenly landed last March.

But while this suggests some sympathy for the girls, the government took a policy decision to make an example out of them, in order to generate some bad publicity around trafficking.

The girls met with the Oba (paramount ruler) of Benin (Edo State) who addressed the girls and sent a reprimand to their parents and families. They were then paraded before local journalists. The exchange was broadcast on television. According to one onlooker, the girls were furious. 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 Alagbon is finished, the girls are then taken to the governor's house in Benin City, Edo State, where they are again paraded in front of the press and handed to security for a second round of screening. This includes another medical test, which is necessary '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.

This entire process contains enough coercion to alarm any human rights activist, but such is the siege mentality in Edo State that even feminists feel it is justified. Esther Onosode of AWEG insists that it is needed to shame the families that support this trafficking -- just as they were allowed to flaunt the wealth that it brought in the past. 'Parents were happy to live off the proceeds without coming clean about where the money came from,' says Esther. 'It is time for them to face the consequences.'

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.

Maurizio Bungaro, the Italian Deputy Ambassador to Nigeria, was present at Lagos airport when two planes arrived last year. He said that on one occasion the girls were collected in a mass in the departure hall and allowed to mingle with normal passengers, who jostled and jeered them while journalists watched. When Bungaro attempted to intervene he was bluntly told to mind his own business. 'You washed your hands of these girls in Italy, now your work is over.' It was, says Bungaro, understandable but very harsh indeed.

The indifference 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 more than a day -- even though the girls are detained for several days before being put on a plane. All of the legwork prior to a deportation is done by the Nigerian consult in Rome, who has to chase from Rome to Milan where the flights leave and provide travel documents for the girls.

'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 criticism was accepted by Maurizio Bungaro, who usually hears of a deportation in a phone call from his Nigerian counterpart. 'The Italian Interior Ministry can move slowly,' he says.

Softening the Blow: 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 last year, 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. 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 to more of an emphasis on social support and protection. Even when it comes to law enforcement, said Mrs. Ojomo, 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, as well as with 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 certainly make it harder to ensure that any immigration remains legal.

The one shining exception, again, is the growing involvement of civil society in both countries. This will be examined in greater detail in the next issue, but it holds out the greatest hope for a more humane and sensible policy.

Nigerian Dilemma

There has been a sea change in public opinion towards trafficking in Nigeria. Until relatively recently, many inhabitants of Benin City were proud of their strange export. This was free enterprise. Many even took satisfaction from the fact that Italian men seemed to like Nigerian girls. In an odd way, they were getting back at colonialism.

But among the politicians and professional women of Edo, pride is giving way to shame and alarm. Prostitution has wormed its way deep into society here. Schoolgirls lounge outside hotels at night, or spend the weekend in the large trailer park on the road to Lagos. Catholic sisters were astonished when a confirmation class was recently asked to write an essay - and two of the students chose prostitution.

Mrs. Eki Igbiniedion, the Edo State governor's wife, turned into a fervent campaigner against trafficking after she attended a conference of first ladies at the home of the President's Wife. She was mortified to hear her colleagues from other states describe Edo as the prostitution capital of Nigeria.

Esther Onosode, who is the financial secretary of the African Women Empowerment Group (AWEG), an organization of professional women in Benin City, thinks 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, she says, 'far more dangerous than female genital mutilation. Edo State is facing a catastrophe.'

As the pendulum of opinion in Edo State swings from complacency to alarm, no one is quite sure where it will come to rest or what may be lost in the process. One casualty seems likely to be freedom of choice.

Even the strongest critics of trafficking, like Esther Onosode, agree that most of the girls -- perhaps as many as 70 percent -- go to Europe of their own free will and are well aware of the consequences. Like others, she remembers the pandemonium that broke out last March after the 64 deportees were paraded in front of newsmen at the police headquarters in Lagos. Instead of showing remorse and contrition, they began to shout insults and abuse the authorities. For one witness, it was a striking demonstration of their determination to return to the trade and not be bullied into submission. One of the seven girls in the care of the Catholic Church, Daphne, has been deported three times and is still desperate to return to Italy.

This creates a dilemma for feminists in Nigeria. Some would say that a woman should be free to choose, even if she chooses a degrading profession like prostitution. Others would argue that the risk to society is so great that the personal wishes of the girls must take second place behind the overriding need to stamp out trafficking -- and with it prostitution.

Leading members of AWEG, an important lobby group on women's issues in Benin City, are pressing for the laws against prostitution to be toughened. 'If our women were empowered, they would not let themselves be trafficked,' argued Jane Edeki, a senior official in the State Education Ministry and member of AWEG. But other activists are concerned that this could go too far and result in a different kind of coercion 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 like the woman who traded Berta. Added to this, the laws are rarely applied. There is also little stomach for prosecutions.

According to newspaper reports, no one has been prosecuted for trafficking in Edo State, although several people have reportedly been arrested in the last few days. One of them is a musician and chief from Benin City who was using his professional contacts to obtain visas for girls who are trafficked. He was arrested outside an embassy in Lagos with twelve passports.

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. She pressed her husband to introduce a bill last December, after a trafficking gang was raided in Benin City just as it was about to export 11 girls to Europe.

The bill never made it past the first reading after being rejected by the traditional chiefs of Benin City. The sponsor of the bill explained rather lamely that it was seen as 'too much like' an existing provision, but newspapers offered a more likely explanation: 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 the woman's right to choose, nonetheless called for tougher penalties against prostitution in a recent interview.

One thing is sure. Nigeria -- and Edo State -- should not have to wrestle with the dilemma alone. The growing clamor over prostitution in Edo State, as well as the obvious risk to personal freedoms, is yet another reason for Italy to assume its obligations and engage a program of assistance for Nigeria.