

## ITALIAN GROUP USES 'STREET UNITS' TO PROTECT VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

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AdvocacyNet

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Washington, DC: Jessica, a young Nigerian girl, had no idea what lay ahead when she enrolled in a program to study in Italy. When she arrived in Turin after a long and grueling journey, the man who had accompanied her took her passport and sold her into prostitution. For many months Jessica 'serviced' as many as twelve customers each day, and was beaten if she protested.

Now 17 years old, Jessica has a serious infection from a sexually transmitted disease, and may be HIV-positive. She is one of thousands of Nigerians who have been trafficked to Italy in recent years. She is also one of 1,575 trafficking victims who have received assistance from the Transnational AIDS Prevention Among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe Project (TAMPEP), a partner of The Advocacy Project. Of the thousands of women TAMPEP has helped, 888 have been Nigerian.

TAMPEP's approach holds important lessons for other countries, including the United States, that are struggling to break up trafficking rings and assist victims. It may also explain why Italian authorities are able to reach more victims of trafficking than any other country in Europe. In 2004, 1,940 trafficked women entered social protection programs in Italy - more than half the 3,000 who are thought to enter the country each year.

TAMPEP's approach is to send out *unita di strada* (street units) that include 'cultural mediators' from the same background as the trafficked women and girls. The units seek out likely victims of trafficking, like Jessica, and offer them health education and testing. Once inside the privacy of a health clinic, social workers set out the woman's rights and options.

Victims of trafficking are often unwilling to volunteer information because they fear arrest. Under Italian law, illegal immigrants cannot apply for legal status and are liable for deportation. But Article 18 of the Consolidation Act on Immigration (1999) offers a special residence permit and access to social services to trafficking victims who make a statement to the police. The law does not, however, require them to cooperate in a criminal investigation or publicly denounce their traffickers.

Carol Smolenski, the executive director of ECPAT-USA, an anti-trafficking organization based in Brooklyn and a leading American advocate against trafficking, praised the combination of a sensible law and TAMPEP's innovative approach. Using cultural mediators rather than law enforcement officers would encourage victims to cooperate, she said.

'People in a traumatized state feel most comfortable with someone from their own country, who speaks their own language. These women might not even know where they are. They might be afraid that the police are corrupt.'

Like Italy, the United States also seeks to assist victims and prosecute traffickers under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000). The law was initially hailed by advocates because it allows trafficking victims to apply for temporary 'T visas' and receive the same services provided to refugees. Eventually, victims can apply for residence. But the US law also assumes that victims will seek out social services - and that those who don't will be identified by law enforcement officials.

Human rights advocates see this as unrealistic. 'Many victims are afraid of the police, and are not likely to reveal themselves,' said Carol Smolenski. 'They are scared of everyone and everything.' In addition, she said, most police officers are not trained to recognize a victim.

According to the US Government, between 14,500 and 17,000 people are trafficked to the United States each year. But during 2004, only 169 victims were declared eligible for services and just 136 T visas were approved.

The experience of Italy and the United States suggests that securing the cooperation of victims is more likely to lead to the prosecution of their traffickers. Between 2002 and 2003, the Italian authorities arrested 537 suspected traffickers and convicted 41. The US Department of Justice prosecuted 59 traffickers for sexual exploitation in 2004.

Unlike Italian law, US law opens up the possibility that the women will be called to testify in court and Ms Smolenski feels this may discourage them from cooperating. 'If they're afraid they might have to testify, they won't want to give any information,' she says.

The Advocacy Project has worked at both ends of the trade in women from Nigeria to Italy for six years. AP interns worked this summer with the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON) - an ECPAT consortium member and with TAMPEP. AP hopes to help WOCON and TAMPEP promote their work in American schools and inner-city areas.

- See [TAMPEP](#), [WOCON](#), and [ECPAT-USA](#) for more information.
- If you suspect that someone you know might be a victim of trafficking, or want to report a trafficking crime, please call the Department of Justice toll-free hotline at 1-888-429-7581.