



On the Record: Girls for Sale

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From the AP Editorial Desk - The Scandal of Trafficking From Nigeria

This new series of *On the Record* is about the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe.

In its course, readers will meet a young woman who was duped into traveling to Italy. Within a day of arriving in Rome, she was told that she would have to earn 9 million lire (about \$50,000) from prostitution to purchase her freedom and was forced out onto the streets to work. At 30,000 lire a time -- the going rate on her corner in the Tiburtino district of Rome -- that would have meant sex with three thousand partners. After twenty-five days and scores of partners, she managed to escape and make her way home to Nigeria.

This young woman's experience is the closest thing to outright slavery encountered by The Advocacy Project in the two years that we have been working on human rights.

How can such an abuse flourish in Europe in the twenty-first century? How can women be so gullible as to get trapped by it? Is it possible (or even appropriate) to discourage those who knowingly enter the trade? How can the Italian government allow such a sordid business in its fabulous tourist sites? What has happened to law enforcement?

Questions like these have finally begun to capture the attention of policy makers at the highest level. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recently described the trafficking in women as the "fastest-growing international criminal enterprise." Women's groups are mobilizing against the practice. Without a doubt, it will be vigorously condemned at the Beijing Plus 5 review conference starting today in New York.

Up to now, most research on trafficking has focused on Asia and Eastern Europe. Only recently has it become clear that other parts of the world are also exporting women -- including Africa.

Within Africa, Nigeria is far and away the largest single source. No one knows exactly how many women leave for Europe each year, but well over 500 Nigerian girls were deported back from Italy alone last year. As many as 80 percent of the girls who are trafficked from Nigeria are thought to come from two states, Edo and Delta. How and why this happens is the subject of this new series of *On the Record*.

The origins of the series lay in a request to The Advocacy Project from the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), a prominent Nigerian nongovernmental group that has been campaigning against the trafficking of women from Nigeria since 1997.

A team from The Advocacy Project spent two weeks in Nigeria with WOCON between April 27

and May 11, 2000. Together, the two groups decided that the best way to help WOCON would be to support its campaign against trafficking. Both groups developed a package of support for WOCON that includes this new series of 'On the Record.' It is intended for use by WOCON at the Beijing Plus 5 meeting, and in its future advocacy.

The series is not intended to be a definitive study. Instead, it attempts to sketch out the issues and identify future ideas for research by WOCON and others. Furthermore, the series will only examine trafficking through the eyes of Nigerian women who were coerced into the trade, instead of going voluntarily. This is an important distinction (even if the notion of 'voluntariness' is relative in the kind of conditions endured by these girls). The fact is that out of the hundreds of young women deported back to Nigeria every year, many cannot wait to return to Europe.

But many are also trafficked against their will and sold into slavery. This is where the abuse is greatest and the need for intervention most urgent.

Right now, in Nigeria, most of the information on trafficking comes from seven young women who were trafficked to Europe and have managed to break away from the stranglehold of debt and intimidation, with help from the Catholic Church and the International Organization of Migration (IOM). Three of them, who we will call Berta, Sonia, and Rachel, were interviewed by the Advocacy Project and WOCON in Nigeria for this series.

Reference will also be made to the cases of Abby, Daphne, and Pat. Although not interviewed directly for the series, they are well known to their rescuers and dramatically illustrative of the problem.

Collecting this material has reminded us that the subject is exceptionally delicate and that anyone researching trafficking needs to exercise unusual tact at all times.

They will quickly understand that trafficking is not the straightforward human rights violation it so often appears to be. Of course there is abuse involved, but it is not always easy to separate this abuse from the social and cultural context in which it flourishes. Even women's groups agree that this context must be respected, and that riding roughshod over local customs will backfire.

It is also easy to forget that the victims of trafficking are people, not statistics, and that they have suffered an immense hurt. Only two of the seven young women whose stories form the basis for this series are living openly. All the rest are in hiding, fearing for their lives. And of the two, only one is confident and strong enough to tell her story without embellishment.

For obvious reasons, the identity of these witnesses has been withheld in this series. As with any victim of sexual abuse, it is important that would-be well-wishers do not deepen the wound by insensitive portrayals and the way they tell the story.

The series will focus mainly on the Nigerian end of the trade. It will attempt to find out what makes these girls leave, what happens to them on return, and who is doing what to help in Nigeria itself. Later this year, if time and resources permit, we hope to look at Europe.

This is not to imply a lack of interest in the international dimension. The trafficking of Nigerian women shames the international community. It shames the government of Ghana many of the passports used in trafficking are apparently being forged in Accra.

It particularly shames the Government of Italy. Nigerian prostitutes are so commonplace in Italy that one prominent Nigerian businesswoman told a meeting in Lagos recently that any black woman in Italy risks having her breasts and buttocks fondled on the streets. Many of the Nigerian prostitutes put up with abuse and degrading conditions. Yet the preferred response of the Italian government has been to arrest and deport them.

This response -- so typical of "Fortress Europe" -- completely ignores the wretched circumstances in which the women are forced to work and makes their rehabilitation in Nigeria infinitely more difficult. Hundreds of Nigerian women and girls have been expelled from Italy over the last year -- and dumped back in Nigeria to be exposed to shame and humiliation. Only one Italian trafficker has been arrested and prosecuted, but in Nigeria not Italy. This is totally irresponsible.

In spite of everything, the situation is not totally hopeless. Until recently the route to Italy was paved with gold. Prostitutes who made it to Italy (known as "Italios") were lionized in Nigeria because they had broken free from poverty and risen above the grubby everyday lives of most Nigerians.

This is now changing in both Nigeria and Europe. In Nigeria, the efforts of campaigners like WOCON and the Catholic Church are beginning to pay off. Prostitution is starting to attract some stigma and shame. Several people have been arrested in recent days in connection with three trafficking rings: one of those arrested is a traditional chief and musician from Benin City who was apparently using the excuse of his music to obtain visas for trafficked girls.

Political leaders in Nigeria are speaking out and challenging the vested interests behind trafficking -- setting an example for Europe to follow. In Europe, nongovernmental groups are intensifying their efforts to rescue and counsel the girls they find on the streets.

As the campaign against trafficking intensifies, it raises new dilemmas for Nigeria and for advocates of women's rights. For example, it has sparked an intense debate over whether prostitution should be outlawed. But at least the tide is turning. Trafficking from Nigeria is no longer cost-free.

As the nature of trafficking becomes clearer, so do the possible points of intervention, and in the months ahead The Advocacy Project will work with WOCON and other campaigners to meet some clear goals. At a minimum, these goals should include:

- More protection for Nigerian prostitutes in Italy, even if they are "illegal immigrants" and more understanding of the pressure placed on them by traffickers;
- Development assistance from European governments -- particularly Italy -- to assist the Nigerian authorities to reintegrate the girls back into Edo State;

- Cooperation between Italian and Nigerian social services to assist the girls and help the Nigerian authorities better understand what they put up with in both countries (this could extend to cooperation between law enforcement officials from the two countries);
- Appropriate financial and technical support for advocates from civil society like WOCON who are campaigning against trafficking;
- Support for research that is sensitive, tactful, and coordinated by Nigerians; and
- Human rights monitoring in Nigeria of the deportation, and screening, of girls expelled from Europe.

This series of *On the Record* is part of a larger package of support for WOCON that will be more fully described in the fifth issue. The series will be reprinted in hard copy, for use by WOCON at Beijing Plus 5. Following the conference, The Advocacy Project and WOCON will then decide jointly whether to move to a second phase and take the campaign to Europe.

If we do go ahead, there will be no shortage of brave partners to work with in Europe. Some will be referred to in the pages that follow -- but without going into the sort of detail that would do justice to their efforts. Like their fellow campaigners in Nigeria, they are a reminder that it often takes an unacceptable abuse to bring out the best in civil society.