



On the Record: Girls for Sale

Issue 3: The Rescuers

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Sensitive Subject

We met Sonia and Berta at the office of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Benin City. Sonia is one of only four girls that have been rescued from the traffickers and are now under the watchful eye of the sisters. As the youngest and most vulnerable, she is particularly precious to them.

At the same time, there are also things about Sonia that make the sisters anxious on her behalf. Most of all they don't know whether to believe her. This undermines their confidence in her. It also makes them determined to ensure that Sonia does not slip from their grasp. This angel must not be allowed to fall.

Sonia had returned from Italy with Berta shortly before we met them, and while the two are not close friends they have become used to meeting visitors together. At first, Sonia seemed the more self-possessed of the two. She came in wearing designer jeans and lipstick, with her hat set at a jaunty angle. She volunteered to speak first. But her voice soon began to quaver, and she burst into tears after telling her story. Berta, in contrast, seemed serious and very much in control of herself. We gained confidence in Berta as she told her story. With Sonia, we grew more unsure.

Of all the girls, Sonia has provided the most detailed account of the traffickers. She stayed with two of them in Lagos and remembers where they lived. She says that she was taken to the Italian embassy in Abuja, to get an Italian visa in her fake passport. She says that she and the trafficker were arrested trying to leave Lagos and briefly detained, before one of the traffickers bribed emigration officials. She ended up in Turin, Italy, where she stayed for three weeks before escaping. She insists that she resisted the threats of her Madam and never went with a client.

What Sonia remembers most about Turin was the cold: she had only packed two shirts, thinking she was going to Spain. Her Madam sent her out to buy clothes at the market, where she spotted a friend from Benin City who took her to the house of Caritas, the Catholic charity that assists prostitutes. Her friend rang the bell and then fled. Sonia was taken in, cared for, and then returned to Lagos with a ticket provided by the International Organization of Migration (IOM).

The drama surrounding Sonia's return to Nigeria makes one want to believe her. When Berta and Sonia returned at the airport, they were met by Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi of the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON) and Sister Regina from the Sacred Hearts in Lagos. But the traffickers had been tipped off, and they had sent a couple to try and snare the two girls. Bisi and Regina were tipped off by a friend at emigration, and they confronted the traffickers. The traffickers backed off but followed the car back to Lagos.

Sonia was so panicked by this that she disappeared for several days. The sisters thought she was dead. She turned up in Benin City several days later, only to be greeted with coldness by her father who lets her sleep at home, but without feeding or even talking to her.

Sonia's is a terrible story, packed with details that could help to better understand the traffickers and even put them behind bars. The problem is that many of the details do not add up. The Italians, for example, flatly denied that any visas are given out from Abuja.

The main question for the sisters is whether Sonia resisted her Madam in Turin, or whether she engaged in prostitution. It is not what she says, but the way she acts. Her clothes and her behavior are not normal for Nigerian girls of her age, say the sisters. They recall the way she shocked them on the night she returned in Lagos, by coming down to dinner at the convent naked from the waist down. She gave them three separate addresses in Benin City, as if wanting to throw them off the track. After returning home, she went back to one of the recruiters in Benin and asked him to give her money. He jeered at her. If she brought him two more girls, he said, he might consider it.

The sisters fear that this is the behavior of someone who has tasted the thrill of 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 the information provided by this small handful of escapees is virtually all there is.

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, in the presence of someone who has gained the trust of the young woman. It is not a job for outsiders who are strange to the culture.

We found this to be particularly important with Rachel, who was forced to do business with scores of sex partners in Rome and was almost killed by one of them. We talked to Rachel in the confines of a convent, far from Benin City. Here she is allowed to wander around and be normal again, watching people make bread and weave cloth. The sisters do not often expose her to

visitors, and we felt privileged to meet her.

But our interview was a sobering experience. Rachel tightened up as she told her story, against the background hum of a large fan. At the end she put her head in her hands and started to weep quietly.

Sisters of Mercy

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 came to it suddenly and unexpectedly. Two years ago, several of the sisters in Benin City started helping a local family who had fallen on hard times. It was a simple act of charity. The mother was dead and the father was a gambler, and the task of looking after the children had fallen to the oldest daughter, Abby.

The sisters poured affection and money (from their own meager allowances) into the family, and they were astonished to learn that Abby had left for Germany. At the time it never occurred to them that she might have been sucked into prostitution. "We were so naïve," recalls Sister Blandina, who took a special interest in the family.

A full year was to pass before Blandina and her colleagues discovered the truth about Abby in a shocking manner. As recounted earlier in this series, Abby had agreed to pay the huge sum of \$36,000 to the traffickers. When she escaped from their clutches in Italy, the traffickers sent their enforcers -- some "area boys" -- to collect the money from Abby's family in Benin City.

Once again Blandina and the sisters came to the rescue. Harassed by the traffickers, Abby's siblings were facing a prison term in Lagos. 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. A local lawyer also took up the case, and finally, the traffickers backed off.

It was a frightening introduction to the world of trafficking for Blandina, and she was an obvious choice when the heads of the Conference of Religious Women in Nigeria -- the sisters' superiors -- decided in February 1999 to establish a small organization to support victims of trafficking. It is called the Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women. Shortly afterwards, the first planeload of deported women arrived back from Italy with 64 Nigerian prostitutes accompanied by 120 Italian policemen. Trafficking -- and prostitution -- was suddenly all over the news. The sisters were at the center of a high-profile issue.

The local bishop provided two rooms at the cathedral in Benin City where the sisters have set up an office and small vocational center. In all, three sisters work in the Committee under the direction of Sister Cecilia, who heads the Order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Benin City. They have no budget; all the funds come from their personal allowances.

Their contact in Lagos is a small, vivacious nun called Sister Regina Oke. Early last year Sister Regina was in her office at the Central Catholic Secretariat in Lagos when she received a visit from two Italian priests. Nigerian girls were starting to escape from the traffickers in Italy and seek protection from charities like Caritas. The priests wanted to know if the church in Nigeria could help them reintegrate once they returned home.

Regina agreed, and ever since, she has been 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 Blandina and the others. When we visited, four girls were in Edo State; another three (who had returned with Caritas) were in hiding in Lagos.

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

Of course, they see it in moral and religious terms. To them, prostitution is a sin, and traffickers are evil. Their victims are to be saved. Pressed on the point, they argue that trafficking must be seen in moral terms to be defeated.

Some feminists would be worried by this. Indeed, on many issues of importance to women, the Catholic Church and 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.

In fact, these sisters come across as quintessential feminists -- as tough-minded women with a job to do. The head of their Order in Edo State, Sister Cecilia, is a lawyer by training who also manages the Order's flourishing business center in the town of Uzomi, two hours from Benin. Here a workforce of about 30 women weaves cloth, makes clothes, and bakes bread, under the supervision of nuns. The workers are all chosen from poor families in the area and can earn up 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 is used by the nuns, and the compound makes a profit of 150,000 Naira a year.

These sisters are thorough, as well as practical. When Sister Cecilia went to Rome earlier in the year for a conference, she visited several girls on the streets and went to talk to the Nigerian embassy in Rome. Cecilia brought back Rachel with her.

Back in Lagos, Sister Regina has also spent many hours with girls after their return and put up with much personal abuse in the process. One of the three women in hiding in Lagos, Daphne, has been to Italy three times and desperately wants to return. Caritas only persuaded her to return to Nigeria by promising to set her up with a new life, and the burden of providing this has fallen to Regina. It has not been easy. Daphne has cursed her in public. She has also tried to wriggle out of the agreement under which the Church pays for a new home and business on condition that Daphne remains in Nigeria for two years.

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. "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."

Blandina is very convincing on this, and one reason is that she's not trying to convince. Whatever their religious convictions, the sisters are surely right to see trafficking in moral terms. Trafficking belongs with all the major human rights abuses like slavery, torture, and genocide.

It adds to their credibility that the sisters have a clear sense of their own limitations. They detest publicity and have no wish to be praised or lauded in print. Cecilia politely declined to be photographed. (Blandina and Regina only accepted because they thought we would be offended by a refusal.)

They are perfectly content to toil in anonymity and leave the advocacy to partners like Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi of WOCON. They admire Bisi and her ability to generate publicity. They also admire the governor's wife, who has put trafficking on the political agenda, but they have no wish to emulate them.

It might be difficult for these sisters to stay in the shadows if trafficking continues to dominate public life in Benin City. You do not petition the governor four times (as Blandina did on behalf of Abby) and fail to get noticed. Trafficking is forcing the sisters to come out of their shell and -- perhaps -- lose a little of their innocence. They have even started to use email.

But by carefully limiting their own role in the campaign, 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 even 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. (See the next story.)

They are also starting to get inquiries directly from Europe. Blandina was surprised to receive a series of phone calls and emails from a sister in Duisberg, Germany, about the case of Pat, who has been jailed by the German authorities. Blandina was able to trace Pat's father, Sunday O, and keep him informed.

The one thing the sisters don't have -- and desperately need -- 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.

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The Lawyers

The sisters of Benin City get help from the Association of Catholic Lawyers, a voluntary group in Benin City that started two years and now gives free legal advice to deserving causes like the campaign against trafficking.

The driving force behind the association comes from two law partners, Victor Ehizogwie and Eric Okojie. The idea is to give something back to the community, says Victor. Too often, he says, lawyers are on the wrong side when it comes to trafficking. Many of the contracts between traffickers and the women are witnessed by fake lawyers.

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.

The association started with 60 volunteer lawyers, although only about ten are currently active. Most of the work falls on the shoulders of Eric and Victor, who also teach underprivileged children. They take it on themselves to visit prisoners, inform their families, and even raise bail.

Democracy has brought some accountability to the Benin City legal system, with the appointment of a new chief judge -- a woman -- who has personally visited all the courts in the region and inspected prisoner files. Those who have not been charged are ordered released. Not only has this reduced overcrowding in the jails, says Victor, it has also helped to restore confidence in a legal system, which had badly eroded during the era of military rule.

By providing legal advice to the campaign against trafficking, Victor and Eric have boosted the morale of the sisters and also helped them out of some difficult moments. When thugs started to menace the family of Abby, demanding money, it was Eric who took on the case and confronted the traffickers in the Lagos courts.

One of the girls who returned from Italy, Rachel, comes from the village of Ogwa, which is also Victor's home village. When Sister Cecilia returned from Italy with Rachel earlier in the year, she asked Victor's father -- a local chief -- to inform Rachel's parents. He happily complied, even though it provoked some grumbling from people in the village who might have been sympathetic to the traffickers.

In spite of their support for the sisters and their commitment to the campaign, 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, Berta, 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 any charges any time soon.

The Professionals

The African Women Empowerment Group (AWEG) brings together a group of professional women in Benin City. Together, they are emerging as a fierce and effective force against trafficking.

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

As noted earlier in this series, women are particularly vulnerable to the kind of voodoo that masquerades under the guise of "traditional culture." Female genital mutilation (FGM) is practiced on baby girls in the villages of Edo State, and widows are subjected to grisly rituals to see whether they have killed their husbands. The use of voodoo to lure girls into prostitution and then keep them enslaved fits the pattern of societal violence against women.

AWEG's goal, says Esther, is to show that these practices discredit and undermine traditional African values. Jane Edeki agrees. Jane herself underwent a mild form of FGM 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.

The campaigners have started to meet regularly with traditional priests. 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.

Surprisingly, men have proved more receptive than women. Some AWEG members feel that this is because so many women were themselves forced to undergo prostitution before they make a profit and so have a vested interest in trafficking, but women are proving to be powerful, well-organized opponents.

AWEG is a coalition within a coalition. 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 --

Botswana, Ghana, Harare, Kenya, Lesotho, and Sudan.

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 supplied 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 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. They rely heavily on the governor's wife, who has turned trafficking into her own personal crusade.

These professional women offer no apologies for their tough stand on prostitution. This puts them sharply at odds with other members of the Nigerian women's movement, who feel that outlawing prostitution will punish the victims but not their clients. To talk to AWEG is to get a very different opinion. To Jane and Esther, the very life of Edo State is threatened.

As professional educators, Jane and Esther are particularly concerned that traffickers are recruiting in schools. They feel that the traffickers are helped by the poor quality of education, which suffered greatly from a lack of investment under military rulers. It also has to do with the fact that parents do not invest in the education of their daughters.

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

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The Politician'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 our delegation. 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 has established herself as the point person on trafficking in his administration and also shown 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, named "Idia Renaissance," aimed at reviving the cultural life of Edo State, and has given enough lectures and interviews to 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 of the major dialects of the state. She has sponsored three public education meetings.

This has brought much attention to the issue. Last November, she was visiting a market when a young man pressed a note into her hand, giving the time and address of a clandestine meeting about trafficking. One of those present girls was 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. Unfortunately, they could not make the charge stick, and the traffickers were released. This has turned Mrs Igbimedion 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 a la mode: the wife of the Federal Vice President, Aminu Titi Abubakar, has also created her own nongovernmental organization, called 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 that are needed to eradicate practices deeply embedded in a society. There is no room for anyone else when the governor's wife is on stage.

However, this is not what you hear in Edo State. There the governors' 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.

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