

# INVESTIGATION: Inside Nigeria's Ruthless Human Trafficking Mafia

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*Six out of 10 people who are trafficked to the West are Nigerians. PREMIUM TIMES investigative reporter, Tobore Ovuorie, was motivated by years of research into the plight of trafficked women in the country, as well as the loss of a friend, to go undercover in a multi-billion dollar criminal enterprise. She emerged, bruised and beaten but thankfully alive, after witnessing orgies, big money deals in jute bags, police-supervised pickpocketing, beatings and even murder. This is her story.*

We are 10 at the boot camp: Adesuwa, Isoken, Lizzy, Mairo, Adamu, Ini, Tessy, Omai, Sammy and I. We have travelled together in a 14 seater bus from Lagos, hoping to arrive in Italy soon. We are eager to get to the 'next level' as it is called: from local prostitution to hopefully earning big bucks abroad. But first, it turns out, we have to pass through 'training' in this massive secluded compound guarded by armed military men, far from any other human being, somewhere in the thick bushes outside Ikorodu, a suburb of Lagos. Our trafficker, Mama Caro, welcomes us in flawless English, telling us how lucky and special we are; then she ushers us to a room where we are to sleep on the floor without any dinner.

I had not expected this. We had exercised, through a risk analysis role play, in advance: my paper [PREMIUM TIMES](#), and our partners on the project, a colleague—Reece Adanwenon—in the Republic of Benin, and ZAM Chronicle in Amsterdam. We had put in place contacts, emergency phone numbers, safe houses, emergency money accounts. We had made transport and extraction arrangements. Ms. Reece is waiting in Cotonou, 100 kilometers to the West in neighbouring Benin, to pick me up from an agreed meeting place. But we hadn't foreseen that there was to be another stop first: this isolated, guarded camp in the middle of nowhere. It dawns on me that we could be in big trouble.

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## Risk analysis and preparation

It had all started in Abuja, with me deciding to expose the human traffic syndicates that caused the death, through Aids, of my friend Ifuoke and countless others. As a health journalist, I had interviewed several returnees from sex traffic who had not only been encouraged to have unprotected sex, but who had also been denied health care or even to return home when they fell ill. They were now suffering from Aids, anal gonorrhoea, bowel ruptures and incontinence. In the case of some of them, who hailed from conservative religious backgrounds, doctors in their home towns had

denied them any treatment because they had been 'bad'. I was also aware that powerful politicians and government and army officials, who outwardly professed religious purity, were servicing and protecting the traffickers. I wanted to break through the hypocrisy and official propaganda and show how, every day, criminals in Nigeria are helped by the powerful to enslave my fellow young citizens. My PREMIUM TIMES colleagues had done undercover work before; they had warned me of the risks, but had agreed to support me in my decision to go through with it. With my colleagues, and with the help of ZAM Chronicle, we then started in earnest.

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### Oghogho

I had advertised my wish to get to know a 'madam' whilst walking the streets of Lagos, dressed as a call girl. It worked. I had met Oghogho Irhiogbe, an accomplished, well-groomed graduate in her thirties (though she claimed to be only 26), and a wealthy human trafficker of note. My lucky hunch to tell her that my name was 'Oghogho' too had immediately warmed her to me. She told me I looked like her kid sister and from then on treated me like a favourite.

“Don't worry about crossing borders and getting caught,” she had told me. “Immigration, customs, police, army and even foreign embassies are part of our network. You only run into trouble with them if you fail to be obedient to us.” I already knew this to be true. Two of the trafficked sex workers I had interviewed had tried to find help at Nigerian embassies in Madrid and Moscow, only to realise that the very embassy officials from whom they had sought deportation had immediately informed their pimps. They had eventually made it back to Nigeria only after they had developed visible diseases, such as AIDS-related Kaposi sarcoma.

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Oghogho Irhiogbe had been luckier. She owned four luxury cars, two houses in Edo State, and was busy completing the building of a third house near the Warri airport in Delta State. Others I had met through my initial 'call girl' exploits were clearly on their way to riches, too. Priye was set to go back to the Netherlands, where she worked before, to become a 'madam'. Ivie and Precious were quite happy to go back to Italy. Precious had already made enough money to start building her own house in Enugu, halfway between Abuja and Port Harcourt.

### Forza Speciale

It is on the windy Sunday evening of October 6 that I make my first contact with the outer ring of this mafia. A big party with VIPs is on the cards; the kind of party an ordinary girl, or rather 'product', as we are called by traffickers, is not usually invited to. But I am currently on a fortune ride: Oghogho's favourite. Additionally, I have been classified as 'Special Forces', or 'Forza Speciale' as my new contacts say, borrowing the Italian term. It's a rule of thumb, I understand, that a syndicate subjects girls to classification through a check on their nude bodies and I, too – in the company



thick bushes, almost a forest. We stop at a compound guarded by armed military men. As my fellow 'products' wake up, it is clear that they think we are still in Lagos.

### New names and indenture

The next day starts with strip tease and lap dance training after breakfast, and thereafter poise and etiquette. Five other girls have arrived in the meantime. They are all graduates, leaving for Italy fully aware of what they are to do there. "If I get caught by local police, I will just tell them I was trafficked against my will," one of them, Gbemi, says light-heartedly. "I don't think oyinbo (white man) will believe Mama C if she says that I am there voluntarily."

I receive a crash course in pedicure and manicure because I am so bad at pickpocketing. "You'll be utilizing these skills at my wellness centre in Italy," Mama C says, after scolding me for being lazy and testing her patience. "You will be working on only men whilst wearing sexy dresses. That will enable you to attract customers."

"Mama C makes us sign a statement that we have willingly embarked on the journey"

Later, Mama C makes everyone sign a statement that they have willingly embarked on the journey and that they are to return certain sums as professional fees to her. No girl is given a copy of what she has signed and the amount varies inexplicably: while Isoken signs up for a debt of US \$100,000, I will have only US \$70,000 to pay. We are told that we will receive new passports with false names and even false nationalities in Cotonou. I am to become a Kenyan, Mairo South African, and so on. "I have boys in the Benin immigration office," boasts Mama C.

### Horror

A just-arrived traditional 'doctor' then puts us through rites that involve checking the horoscope of each girl as well as collecting some of her blood, fingernails, hair and pubic hair. He then picks out four of us as 'problematic' and says we will bring 'bad luck'. Either he is really clairvoyant or he is a professional security operative who has run background checks on us, because he is right about at least three of the four. Two of us have had unfortunate earlier experiences involving deportation back to Nigeria and are possibly known to the authorities in Europe. I am number three.

What happens next is like a horror movie.

As we 'unlucky' four, are standing aside, Mama C talks with five well-dressed, classy, influential-looking visitors. The issue is a 'package' that Mama C has promised them and that she hasn't been able to deliver. The woman points at me, but Mama C refuses and for unexplained reasons Adesuwa and Omai are selected. We all witness, screaming and trying to hide in corners, as they are grabbed and beheaded with machetes in front of us. The 'package' that the visitors have come for turns out to be a collection of body parts. The mafia that holds us is into organ traffic, too.

"We all witness Adesuwa and Omai being beheaded in front of us. The 'package' that the visitors have come for turns out to be a collection of body parts. "

With all of us trembling and crying, I and the other three ‘unsuitable’ ones are herded into a separate room. Mama C comes later to take me to yet another room for questioning. Angry beyond measure, she whips me all night, telling me to yield information on the ‘forces’ protecting me. “You are going nowhere,” she keeps shouting. “I have invested too much in you!”

### Clearing the ‘spirit’

The next morning Mama C eats her breakfast while I starve: I have last eaten the previous morning. When she finished, and whilst the ‘approved products’ leave for Cotonou, Benin, to commence their journey to Italy, Mama C takes us four ‘unsuitables’ to visit three new, different ‘doctors’: one in the Agege neighbourhood of Lagos, the second in rural Sango Ota village and the third in remote Abeokuta in Ogun State. She clearly believes in traditional ‘medicine’ and is desperate to find a treatment for the ‘demons’ we are said to carry.

The first two ‘doctors’ agree with the first one that I am bad news, but the third, after roughly cutting off most of my hair, declares me free from the ‘spirit’. The ‘evil spirits’ in the other three girls, meanwhile, have been ‘beaten out of them’ with dry whips. Back at the camp the first ‘doctor’ rages at Mama C for approving me, insisting that the ‘doctor’ who ‘freed me from the spirit’ is a fraud. “This girl will bring about your downfall! You will end up in jail!” I am all the more convinced that he possesses not supernatural powers, but certain information. The syndicates are well-connected and someone may have told him that I am not who I say I am. The ‘doctor’ keeps repeating that ‘forces’ are protecting me. But Mama C insists that she is not to lose her investment.

“The ‘doctor’ keeps repeating that ‘forces’ are protecting me. But Mama C insists that she is not to lose her investment.”

Meanwhile, new ‘products’ have arrived to pass through the rites that night. The whole camp is again in the grip of fear as chilling screams indicate that some of the new arrivals – two girls and a young man, I learned later – are also murdered.

“Oghogho, I wonder what actually brought you here. I never expected a girl like you to venture into this,” says one of Mama C’s errand boys, as he enters the room I had again been locked in later that night with a plate of food. He seems well disposed to me. “You found and returned my Blackberry that I lost during one of the pickpocketing training sessions,” he explains. I had not realised the escort whose phone I found had been this boy; then, he had worn a cap pressed deep into his eyes. “Other girls would just have kept my phone,” he says. “You don’t belong here. I keep wondering what level of poverty has made you endanger yourself. You don’t deserve this.”

The plate of food is all I need to get my strength back. We are to travel the following morning.

### Escape

As we are about to leave, I lose my phone to the army officer. Searching all of us, he has taken Isoken’s phone already and she has pointed at me to divert attention from herself, saying I had a phone too. He takes mine at gunpoint. I can only thank the

heavens that it is dead. I had been upset because it didn't charge the previous night, but the fact that it won't switch on is my second lucky break: it has a lot of pictures and conversations I have recorded in the camp. The disadvantage of losing my phone is that I can't contact our colleague Reece, who is to help me once I get to Cotonou. I also can't communicate with my editors back in Nigeria.

All along the road leading up to the border, police and customs officers wave and greet Madam Eno and our head of operations, Mr James. Nigerian Immigrations and Customs officers also greet us warmly at the border post itself, whilst enquiring if there is anything in it for them today.

“Welcome, Madam! How have sales been?”

Eno: “Not much.”

“But your batch was allowed entry yesterday, so why claim you haven't been making sales?”

Eno: “We are not the owner of yesterday's batch of girls. We own these ones in this bus.”

“Haaa! You want to play a smart one? Not to worry, your boss will sort all this out with us.”

The officers then wave the minibus through without any form of documentation.

The original plan was for me to go with the transport as far as Cotonou, the capital of our neighbouring country Benin. But I don't want to stretch it any longer. The border is usually very crowded and I plan to escape as soon as we are there. It works. Just after the Seme border post, in front of a crowded, muddy market, I run. Merging with the crowd, I take my top off – I have another top under it – and cover my head with a scarf. The army officer is following me, looking for me. I dive into a store and lose him.

“Just after the Seme border post, in front of a crowded, muddy market, I ran.”

I travel the twenty kilometres from the border motor park to Cotonou by minibus taxi. Colleague Reece – alerted by a phone call the driver helps make to her to ensure that she will be there to pay him – will wait for me there. Upon arrival, I see a woman I recognise from her Facebook photo. “Reece?” “Tobore!” She cries and holds out her arms to catch me. “I am safe.”