

The slaves on our streets

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BRUSSELS - There are roads in Europe where African slaves are forced to wander, day and night, under scorching sun and pouring rain.

In Italy alone, 20 000 or more Nigerian women and girls are thought to work as prostitutes. According to Europol, organised crime groups from Nigeria have crossed national borders to become among the most active human traffickers in the EU.

(Photo: Ira Gelb)

They must wear as little clothing as possible, to look appealing to potential buyers despite their plight. Their bodies often bear scars from the voodoo initiation rites locking them down in invisible chains. Entire villages in Nigeria have been emptied of women.

It can take two years of travel to reach Europe, says a social worker at the Italian NGO On the Road:

"The girls are forced to walk through the desert. Those who survive the desert can take the boat from Tunisia. And those who survive that journey will arrive in Italy."

Stripped of their human value, they become commodities, wrapped in cheap, shiny attire like pieces of candy, strewn along the road to be picked up and used by white men for the price of a fast-food meal. The going rate for Nigerian girls in Italy is as little as €10-15 per "service."

Lilian Solomon from Nigeria was suffering from the final stages of cancer when she was forced to walk the Bonifica, a road on the border between the two East Italian coastal regions Abruzzo and Marche. Driving along the Bonifica with On the Road's outreach workers, it is possible to see an ethnic division between the prostitutes.

The Eastern European girls are heartbreakingly young and pretty. They are able to charge the most and have a steady stream of expensive family cars pulling up. They never crack a smile.

Black women are worth the least.

They're positioned outside the factories and can rarely afford to turn down a blue-collar client, even if dirty or drunk.

It is strange observing them through the windscreen like animals in a zoo, but social workers say contact with outsiders will endanger the (constantly surveilled) girls' lives.

We drive past a pregnant young woman from Romania, her protruding belly enhanced by tight clothing. The

customers don't mind that she's pregnant? On the contrary, says On the Road's Alexandra, who's been taking this particular girl to her medical check-ups:

"They want to try something different. It's exciting."

Kajsa Wahlberg, Swedish National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking, reveals that pregnant women were highly sought after in Sweden a year or so ago:

"The women made sure to get pregnant and were able to charge triple the amount. In the end, they would give birth to their babies and place them in orphanages."

The Nigerian pimps keeping track on their compatriots are almost exclusively female and called 'madames'. They're central characters in Pentecostal congregations across Europe, not seldom with priests on their payrolls. The madames are also great networkers, buying and selling women amongst each other. Just as victims of childhood sexual abuse can turn into adult perpetrators, so many madames are former victims of sexual exploitation.

Says one former trafficking victim:

"When you get too old for prostitution, you've been with them for so long that you can't suddenly go to the police and tell your story. If you collect other girls for them, they set you free."

Apart from background stories of abuse, experience of how the trafficking game works and an ability to gain the trust of same-sex victims are key facilitating factors. Yet society's expectations of a criminal - shady-looking, always a man - means female crooks can go unnoticed even by experts.

On the Road is one of several associations we visit who have accidentally taken a madame posing as victim under their wings.

But some female traffickers do get their just punishments, and perhaps none so dramatically as those caught in Operation Sahel.

The backdrop to the operation, started in 2007 in L'Aquila, reads like a dark fairytale.

A head madame in Nigeria picked out young country girls for her accomplices, three Nigerian sisters in Italy. The sisters ordered for all virgins to be forcefully deflowered before setting foot in Italy.

Once trapped, they were shown no mercy. They had to work through fevers and menstruation, says one source with insight into the investigation. They slept no more than two hours per night. The beatings from the madames would be severe if they failed to bring home at least €200-300 each every day:

"One madame was particularly evil. There was a girl with a nasty scar on her cheek,

where the madame had bitten off a big chunk of flesh ... It was as if they were being held captive by the devil."

Bright young Lilian Solomon was the most beautiful of them all, continues our source:

"In another life, she could have become anything she wanted."

But all she wanted at that time, when she turned up at On the Road's doorstep, was for the incessant pain in her limbs to go away.

Regional police's anti-trafficking team got word of the criminal network and went after it with furious energy, stopping only temporarily when the disastrous earthquake hit L'Aquila in 2009. Phones were wiretapped, key locations put under 24 hour surveillance. In a massive raid stretching from Italy into Austria, cars and helicopters swooped on their prey.

Operation Sahel could have ended as just another ambitious anti-trafficking operation hitting the legal ceiling, resulting in mild penalties or no convictions at all. But the traffickers met their match in Carla Quinto: A young, unassuming lawyer for the NGO Be Free.

Sitting down with her at the International Women's House in Rome, she explains how she trawled Italian law books until she happened upon a dormant article that she used to seize the traffickers' possessions.

Usually, criminals' cars, houses and so on are handed over to the state. But here was a paragraph saying that this should only be the case if the victims aren't needy.

Carla had struck gold.

Seventeen Nigerian girls, unarguably in need of money after having had their lives stolen, were awarded record-high damages of 350,000 euros each. Their traffickers, led by the madames, were sentenced to up to 18 years in prison at the 2012 trial.

The case was formally closed in January 2014. Most of the former victims are now living happily in Italy, having gotten married one after the other.

But not Lilian Solomon.

Despite everyone knowing by then that she was succumbing to cancer, a policewoman refused to grant Lilian her final wish, a residence permit. Lilian passed away ten days later, on 1 October, 2011.

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