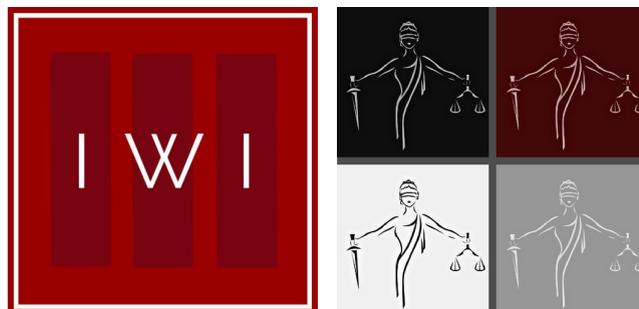




## **The Trafficking of Nigerian Women and Girls into Prostitution: A Case Study of Italy**

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# **The Trafficking of Nigerian Women and Girls into Prostitution: A Case Study of Italy**

## **Abstract**

In 2017, the number of Nigerian women who arrived in Italy from Libya almost doubled. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 80 per cent of the 11,009 Nigerian women who registered in Italy that year were the victims of trafficking.<sup>1</sup> In 2015 this figure stood at 5,600 women and in 2014, 1,450.<sup>2</sup> The IOM estimates 71 per cent of all migrants embarking on the journey to the Mediterranean become victims of trafficking. Pivotaly, there are increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors making these perilous journeys and who end up on the streets. This situation raises the alarm that vast numbers of children are at risk of forced prostitution. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Nigerian traffickers are exploiting the migration crisis in Europe to bring young girls to Libya and then across the Mediterranean to Italy.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on the plight of Nigerian women and girls who are trafficked to Italy for sexual exploitation and forced into prostitution. My research details how they are recruited and the vulnerabilities traffickers prey on, as well as outlining the abuse the exploiters inflict while journeying to Italy. The paper concludes with the procedures in place to protect and assist women and girls to escape the cycle of abuse and exploitation experienced upon arrival in their destination country.

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<sup>1</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Human Trafficking through the Central Mediterranean Route: Data, Stories and Information Collected by IOM* (2017) International Organization for Migration Coordination Office for the Mediterranean < [http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport\\_Trafficking.pdf](http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport_Trafficking.pdf) > accessed 13 April 2018

<sup>2</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Report on Victims of Trafficking in Mixed Migration Flows Arriving in Italy by Sea April 2014 - October 2015* (2015) International Organization for Migration < [http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/IOM\\_Report\\_on\\_victims\\_of\\_trafficking\\_2015\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/IOM_Report_on_victims_of_trafficking_2015_ENG.pdf) > accessed 13 April 2018

<sup>3</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'Migrants' Smuggling' (2018) < <https://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/smuggling-of-migrants.html> > accessed 13 April 2018

## 1. Introduction

More than 12,000 Nigerian women and girls arrived in Italy having travelled by sea in 2016 and 2017,<sup>4</sup> a number six times higher than in the previous two years. According to data provided by the IOM, four out of five of these women find themselves working as prostitutes. Trafficking in human beings, managed by Nigerian organised criminal organisations, is one of the biggest challenges facing police forces across Europe, as reported by the European police agency (Europol).<sup>5</sup> The IOM has registered increasing barbarism in the methods of subjection and a rise in the number of abuse victims. Many women recruited in Nigeria and bound for a life of sexual exploitation abroad have much lower levels of freedom than victims have had in the past and have a greater feeling of terror towards their traffickers.

After years of fluctuation in the numbers of arriving Nigerian women by sea, 2014 saw a noticeable and unusual increase, with 1,454 women entering Italy compared to the 433 arrivals in 2013. In 2015 an additional increase in the migration flow of persons coming from Nigeria was registered, with a total number of 19,576 disembarking in Italy, of which 901 were unaccompanied minors.<sup>6</sup> On their own or under the control of mysterious husbands, boyfriends, putative sisters or other exploiters, the so-called *madam*, the migrants arrive in increasingly inconspicuous groups, confirming the suspicion that the path of irregular migration to the Mediterranean is now also an important route for human trafficking.

In fact, the traffickers seem to benefit from the situations of instability and corruption in the origin countries of the migrants and the transit countries crossed by the migrants. Trafficking is also prevalent within foreign criminal organisations (including Nigerian) present in Italy and in other

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<sup>4</sup> Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs- Dipartimento per le Libertá Civili e l'Immigrazione, *Cruscotto Statistico aggiornato al 31 dicembre 2017* (2017) <[http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_31-12-2017.pdf](http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2017.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018

<sup>5</sup> Europol, *Trafficked by voodoo threats: one of the largest operations in Europe rescues 39 Nigerian women* (2018) <<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/trafficked-voodoo-threats-one-of-largest-operations-in-europe-rescue-s-39-nigerian-women>> accessed 13 April 2018

<sup>6</sup> Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs, Dipartimento per le Libertá Civili e l'Immigrazione, *Cruscotto Statistico aggiornato al 31 ottobre 2015* (2015) <<http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica>> accessed 13 April 2018.

many countries of the European Union, who have established strong partnerships with local criminal groups, for which they also perform other kinds of trafficking, such as narcotics.

## **2. Minors: Poverty & Vulnerabilities**

The girls bound for such sexual exploitation derive from the impoverished areas of Nigeria, especially the villages around Benin City, and particularly from poor families. They are often orphans or raised by relatives away from their families. According to Nigerian traditions and cultures, many responsibilities are expected of the first-born child, including the moral obligation to sustain their parents and younger siblings.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, it is increasingly common for girls to be “sold” to traffickers by their families, who see a possibility of social and economic redemption or in some cases of mere survival. Recently, the IOM registered a significant increase in trafficking of minors: girls are easily manipulated, and are increasingly younger and inexperienced, often unable to ask for help to escape exploitation and violence.<sup>8</sup>

## **3. The Process of Recruitment in Nigeria**

Nigerian girls are generally recruited in their village or city of origin. Typically, the process begins with the offer of a job in Europe; most of the time this offer is made by people these girls and women know and trust. Generally, women are told that they will work in Italy as domestic helpers or engaged in other lawful activities (as a hairdresser, shop assistant, waitress, etc.).<sup>9</sup> Some are aware that they will have to prostitute themselves, but they have no idea of the level of exploitation to which they will be subjected, and they rely on traffickers with a mixed feeling of both fear and

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<sup>7</sup> Landinfo, Country of Origin Information Centre, *Trafficking in Women – Fact-finding trip to Nigeria (Abuja, Lagos and Benin City) 12-26 March* (2006) < [https://landinfo.no/asset/224/1/224\\_1.pdf](https://landinfo.no/asset/224/1/224_1.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>8</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Human Trafficking through the central Mediterranean route: data, stories and information collected by IOM* (2017) International Organization for Migration Coordination Office for the Mediterranean, Italy <[http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport\\_Trafficking.pdf](http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport_Trafficking.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), ‘Human Trafficking in Nigeria: Root Causes and Recommendations’ Policy Paper No. 14.2 (E) (2006) <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147844e.pdf>> accessed 13 April 2018.

gratitude. In the state of Edo, a hub of human trafficking in southern Nigeria, many girls voluntarily begin their journey into prostitution.<sup>10</sup>

Before organising the trip through contacts in Libya, traffickers require the girls to sign a contract to finance their trip, imposing debts that fluctuate between €20,000 –€50,000 and that must be returned once they arrive at their destination, often after many years.<sup>11</sup> After signing the contract, most of the girls are subjected to a *voodoo* ritual that includes the sacrifice of animals and the removal of nails, hair and the underwear of victims. In some cases, this ritual is performed in temples, which supposedly renders the bond more symbolic and powerful. *Juju*, the ritual, is one of the vital ingredients of coercion which holds thousands of Nigerian women and girls in Europe. This ritual instills terror into the victims- convincing them that they or their loved ones could fall ill or die if they disobey the traffickers, inform the police or fail to settle their debts. Fearing that the spell of *juju* can turn against them, many Nigerian parents become accomplices, insisting that their daughters obey their traffickers. These methods of further coercion and exploitation have emerged from the documents of the cases of victims in Italian courts.<sup>12</sup> After this procedure has been completed, the girls and their exploiters leave for Europe, following routes through Niger and Libya.

#### 4. In Transit: Mapping the Journey

Often the youngest of the girls are accompanied during the journey by accomplices of the exploiters. The journey almost always starts from Benin City (Edo state), where organisational infrastructures which facilitate the work of traffickers exist (transportation, production of false documentation, etc.).<sup>13</sup> At this stage of the journey, the girls usually meet the “connection men”,

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<sup>10</sup> Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, ‘Cycle of exploitation turns Nigerian sex slaves in Italy into traffickers’, *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, (Edo, 8 November 2016) <http://news.trust.org/item/20161108000327-qfsaw/> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), ‘Trafficking of Nigerian Girls in Italy. The data, the Stories, the Social Services’ (2010) <[http://www.unicri.it/services/library\\_documentation/publications/unicri\\_series/trafficking\\_nigeria-italy.pdf](http://www.unicri.it/services/library_documentation/publications/unicri_series/trafficking_nigeria-italy.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>12</sup> European Asylum Support Office (EASO), *EASO Informazioni sui paesi di origine: Nigeria. La tratta di donne a fini sessuali* (2015) <[https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1305206/1226\\_1457689194\\_bz0415678itn.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1305206/1226_1457689194_bz0415678itn.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>13</sup> European Asylum Support Office EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information report on Nigeria – Sex Trafficking of women* (2015) <<https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/BZ0415678ENN.pdf>> accessed 13 April 2018.

who are a key figure in the trafficking process. They are the representatives of the criminal organisations who “take care of” the women and girls until they arrive in Libya, or often until they arrive in Italy. These connection men instruct the women and girls in every detail on their journey.

The most common route taken by traffickers covers the villages/cities of Kano, Ziden, Agadez, Gatron, Sabah, Brach, Tripoli or Zuwarah and has a duration ranging from two weeks to a month. Often it is during this time that many of these trafficked women begin to understand that the situation differs from the one they had been presented with back home. At the border with Libya, their sexual services are offered as goods to the militias who control the borders. Once in Libya, for some women and girls, this exploitation begins under the control of escorts and other accomplices, such as drivers, brothel managers, etc. The stay in Libya, especially in recent times, represents one of the most difficult parts of the journey: carried and held at the “connection houses”, waiting for their departure for Europe, women and girls usually face sexual violence and torture.<sup>14</sup> These traumatic experiences are orchestrated or tolerated by the exploiters, with the purpose of weakening the resistance of the victims in order to “bend them psychologically and physically”<sup>15</sup> toward normalising a long period of exploitation.

However, not all girls and women destined for prostitution in Europe suffer this type of treatment. Generally, the higher the debt imposed the more power the criminal organisation has, and the more dangerous the journey is for victims. In this sense, the duration of the stay in transit countries can represent an indicator of trafficking: the longer the period spent in Libya, the greater the possibility that the person has already been exploited in that country and is a victim of trafficking.

Lastly, the IOM has registered an increase in the numbers of trafficked pregnant women and girls. This phenomenon is due to the fact that traffickers are informed of the favourable treatment that pregnant women and girls receive in some European countries; moreover, the vulnerability of girls

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<sup>14</sup> Molly O'Toole, 'Nigerians return from slavery in Libya to thriving sex-trafficking industry back', *The Washington Post* (Benin City, 23 January 2018)  
<[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/nigerians-return-from-slavery-in-libya-to-thriving-sex-trafficking-industry-back-home/2018/01/19/b4bcffa0-e4d4-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.982d4335306f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/nigerians-return-from-slavery-in-libya-to-thriving-sex-trafficking-industry-back-home/2018/01/19/b4bcffa0-e4d4-11e7-927a-e72eac1e73b6_story.html?utm_term=.982d4335306f)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

and the presence of a child often helps the case in applying for legal residency in many of the destination countries.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Arrival in Italy

Upon arrival in Italy, Nigerian girls start or continue (in case their exploitation has already started in Libya) to be forced into prostitution or begging. The final destinations in Italy for such trafficked girls are mostly medium and large Italian cities (Parma, Turin, Rome, Naples, Palermo, Catania, Messina, Bari), but recently it seems that many of the girls are reaching the neighbouring countries of France, Spain, Austria and Germany, a sign that intra-European trafficking is also growing.<sup>17</sup>

Once they have landed in the destination country, the girls are tutored to say that they are adults in order to avoid ending up in protected centres for minors. The “connection men” usually give them a phone number to call once they arrive at the reception centre. In some cases, on the other hand, the women are told to call a contact in Libya or Nigeria who will provide them with the number of an Italian contact. The number is the last link in the trafficking chain, the one that will physically take her to the *madam*, the adult Nigerian who will force them on to the streets.

According to the UNODC, the *madams* represent half of Nigeria’s human traffickers and are often former victims who have transitioned into acting as mediators. Many of these traffickers are convinced that they are helping victims and do not do any harm, and often refer to themselves under the definition of “sponsor”.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, several Italian NGOs who assist victims of trafficking reveal that the rise of Nigerian girls is indicative of the growing power of women traffickers and the dense network of interests and connections between Nigeria, Libya and Italy.<sup>19</sup> The investigations of the judiciary and the operations of law enforcement agencies confirm this.

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<sup>16</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2017), *Human Trafficking through the central Mediterranean route: data, stories and information collected by IOM, International Organization for Migration - Coordination Office for the Mediterranean, Italy* <[http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport\\_Trafficking.pdf](http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport_Trafficking.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, *Public theme report: Human Trafficking of Nigerian Women to Europe* (2015) <[https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/60332\\_Suuntaus\\_NigSuuntaus\\_HumanTraffickingfromNigeriaFINAL200415.pdf/8f310379-7101-447b-826c-5d34a12ab8ab](https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/60332_Suuntaus_NigSuuntaus_HumanTraffickingfromNigeriaFINAL200415.pdf/8f310379-7101-447b-826c-5d34a12ab8ab)> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> PIAM Onlus (2014) <<http://www.piamonlus.org/la-tratta>> accessed 13 April 2018.

Over the last two years, many young girls reached Europe in a relatively short period of time, often arriving in less than a month. This data shows that the mafia who control the traffic of girls has the means and power to corrupt the tribes and militias encountered along the journey and to bribe all those who control borders. The circulation of vast amounts of money between all those involved in the trafficking chains at all its stages cannot be overestimated.

## 5.1 Assisting Victims

According to the IOM, a list of indicators is commonly used during the initial reception stage of trafficked Nigerian women and girls arriving in the destination countries: they might have psychological problems (anxiety, low self-esteem, depression) or behavioural (aggression, mistrust and silence towards the operators); frequent departures from the reception centres (authorised or not); involvement in activities such as prostitution or begging. From the data, we can evidence that most victims of trafficking are not willing, at this early stage to reveal their experiences or access protection programs.<sup>20</sup>

During this first reception stage of women and girls, upon arrival, the main obstacle is the small amount of time available and the limited number of specialised staff. For this reason, it is often difficult to establish a relationship of trust with the victims. Often the landing area is not a suitable place to provide specialised and private counselling services and sometimes migrants are transferred to reception centres in various areas of Italy without granting them the time or the possibility of having an in-depth interaction with them.

In addition, a feeling of gratitude towards the traffickers is also prevalent amongst the victims: women usually look to their exploiters as individuals who have allowed them to arrive in Europe and they see exploitation itself as a price to pay. This feeling of gratitude must be contextualised with respect to the conditions of the victim's life in the country of origin, in this instance Nigeria, and the degree of understanding as to what has happened to them. Very often the affected girls have

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<sup>20</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Human Trafficking through the central Mediterranean route: data, stories and information collected by IOM* (2017) International Organization for Migration - Coordination Office for the Mediterranean <[http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport\\_Trafficking.pdf](http://www.italy.iom.int/sites/default/files/news-documents/IOMReport_Trafficking.pdf)> accessed 13 April 2018.

a concept of “normality” that is very different from most European citizens: violence, abuse, exploitation is not always perceived with the same gravity and alarm. Furthermore, many women have the tendency to misunderstand the size of the debt or have, especially those who are less-educated, overestimated their earning potential.<sup>21</sup> Many of these women are also under the misapprehension that they can keep a portion of their earnings for themselves, unaware that they must also pay the rent and bills of the place where they are housed, a circumstance that further lengthens the time required for debt repayment.

Although in Nigeria prostitution is condemned, Nigerians have great respect for those who have achieved success and wealth regardless of the way in which it is procured. A woman victim of trafficking who manages to send money home still enjoys a good consideration and when she returns to her country of origin, she will not necessarily have to hide how she earned the money if her work has guaranteed the well-being of her family.

Another obstacle to proper assistance is the fear of violating the *voodoo* ritual. This further element of subjection concerns subjects of all ages and of all levels of education. The *juju* remains a procedure much practiced, a rite of initiation which the victim undertakes, through an oath sealed in front of a shaman, not to reveal the names of the traffickers and other details useful for identifying the exploiters. If violated, victims believe they will face huge misfortunes for both themselves and their families. *Voodoo* also represents a guarantee of loyalty and above all silence, even after the migrants discover the deception and methods of exploitation

In the case of a victim willing to denounce her exploiters soon after her arrival in Italy, she is assisted by local authorities, as well as the IOM, and introduced to a protection path provided for by the Law on Immigration (1998).<sup>22</sup> In some circumstances, women are hosted in structures belonging to the National Anti-Trafficking Network.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Events of 2016* (2016)

<<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/nigeria>> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Italian Parliament, *Law 286, Testo unico delle disposizioni concernenti la disciplina dell'immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero* in Italian immigration Law, Art 18 (1998)

<<http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/98286dl.htm>> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Department for Equal Opportunities of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Office for General and International Affairs and Interventions in the Social Field

<[https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/national-rapporteurs/italy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/national-rapporteurs/italy_en)> accessed 13 April 2018.

## 5.2 Victims of Trafficking & the Italian Asylum System

In recent years, most Nigerian women who have arrived in Italy have entered the system of international protection provided for by Italian legislation on asylum.<sup>24</sup> There are many commissions that can suspend the subject's hearing and ask the IOM to conduct an additional interview with the subject to verify that the asylum seeker does not have to benefit from the forms of protection provided for in Art. 18 of the Immigration Act.<sup>25</sup> Following the interview, the IOM sends a report to the Commission within which, in addition to summarising what emerged during the interview, they also make a recommendation on the victim's status of trafficking and whether the asylum seeker is vulnerable or not.

If the subject satisfies the elements that qualify her as a victim of trafficking, the National Anti-Trafficking Network can be activated, as well as the arrangements for the transfer to a safe facility for vulnerable people.<sup>26</sup> Asylum seekers, if the prerequisites are met, often do not renounce to the request of international protection, since their presence in a protected facility does not exclude the finalising of the asylum procedure.

Despite the current legislation providing possible protection for all victims of trafficking regardless of whether they have denounced their exploiters or not (on the contrary, it clarifies that the migrants are entitled to a period of reflection),<sup>27</sup> there is the need to uniformly apply the anti-trafficking legislation, guaranteeing the protection of those who cannot report their exploiters. The guarantee of a period of reflection can as well create the necessary conditions for the victim to collaborate with the investigative bodies at a later stage.

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<sup>24</sup> Italian Parliament, *Legislative Decree n. 25, Attuazione della direttiva 2005/85/CE recante norme minime per le procedure applicate negli Stati membri ai fini del riconoscimento e della revoca dello status di rifugiato*, Art 28 (1-bis) (2008) <<http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/08025dl.htm>> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Italian Parliament, *Legislative Decree n. 142, Attuazione della direttiva 2013/33/UE recante norme relative all'accoglienza dei richiedenti protezione internazionale, nonché della direttiva 2013/32/UE, recante procedure comuni ai fini del riconoscimento e della revoca dello status di protezione internazionale*, Art 17 (2015) <<http://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legislativo:2015-08-18:142>> accessed 13 April 2018.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

## **6. Conclusion: A Call for Intervention**

Through this research report, I have offered a fragment of the whole picture, which must be integrated with the experiences gained by organisations and associations who deal with the identification and provision of assistance to victims in Italy. However, several recommendations can be offered:

- (1) A change in the cultural approach to the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings is required, with a need for experimenting with interventions which include “end users” and raising awareness of the exploitative nature of sexual services amongst those who provide the demand.
- (2) There is an urgency to adopt the proposed Italian National Trafficking Plan for the protection of victims, including legal and psychological assistance.
- (3) Strengthen the capacity of identifying victims of trafficking as soon as they arrive in Italy in order to provide immediate protection.

In conclusion, Italian legislation is certainly one of the most advanced in Europe with regard to the formal protection of victims of trafficking, something which is worthy of reflection and commendation. However, as increasing numbers of women and girls find themselves subjected to exploitation on their journeys from Nigeria to Italy, and we witness increased demand in destination countries and increasingly coercive forms of recruitment in origin countries, Italy must pave the way in enacting progressive and innovative legislation and policies to further protect vulnerable women and girls.

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# GLOBAL LEGAL REVIEW

WHERE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT & LAW MEET