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Social-Climbing Projects of Families in the Context of Human Trafficking from Nigeria to France

Élodie Apard, Precious Diagboya, and Vanessa Simoni

Abstract

Most African women involved in prostitution in major European cities today come from Edo State in Nigeria, where human trafficking has become an economic model. Despite moral judgment and the stigmatisation of sex workers in Nigeria, sending a woman to Europe represents an opportunity that many families decide to take as they rely on the potential financial benefits that would allow collective social climbing. This article analyses migration for prostitution purposes as a family project, helping to shed light on the role of parents in the mechanisms that make possible and even reinforce the sexual exploitation of women in Europe.

Keywords: Nigeria, France, prostitution, social climbing, human trafficking

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Introduction[1]

Over the last two decades, trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation from Nigeria to Europe has attracted institutional and academic attention, as well as

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media interest, mainly due to the topic's 'emotional power'.[2] Empirical research documents victims' vulnerability,[3] the specific conditions of their migration to Europe,[4] the political economy of trafficking,[5] as well as the challenges of 'reintegrating' victims.[6] However, few studies have focused on the family dimension of this type of mobility, despite the fact that families play a central role throughout the process. Firstly, the decision to leave or to send someone abroad can be made either collectively by family members, or individually by women/girls who want to achieve a better life and escape social constraints or intra-familial violence. Secondly, trafficking develops through the family networks of *Madams*, the women who organise the transport, reception, and exploitation of women/girls in Europe, and who were themselves previously involved in prostitution.[7] The trajectories of *Madams* set examples of social and financial success and are closely linked to the relationships they maintain with members of their families in Nigeria, but also with the parents of the women/girls they exploit. Furthermore, the control and pressure exerted by traffickers in Europe rests largely on the families back home, who may participate in the coercive practices developed by the *Madams*.

Most African women forced into prostitution in Europe come from Edo State, Southern Nigeria.[8] In this region, families' enrichment through migration to

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2 M Jakšić, 'État de littérature. Déconstruire pour dénoncer : La traite des êtres humains en débat', *Critique internationale*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2011, pp. 169–182, https://doi.org/10.3917/crii.053.0169.

3 E Paasche, M-L Skilbrei, and S Plambech, 'Vulnerable Here or There? Examining the vulnerability of victims of human trafficking before and after return', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 34–51, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218103.

4 J Carling, *Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe*, IOM Migration Research Series 23, IOM, Geneva, 2006, p. 76.

5 S Plambech, 'Sex, Deportation and Rescue: Economies of Migration among Nigerian Sex Workers', *Feminist Economics*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2017, pp. 134–159, https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2016.1181272.

6 P De Montvalon, 'Sous condition "d'émancipation active": Le droit d'asile des prostituées nigérianes victimes de traite des êtres humains', *Droit et société*, vol. 99, no. 2, 2018, pp. 375–392, https://doi.org/10.58079/utbf; S Taliani, 'Coercion, fetishes and suffering in the daily lives of young Nigerian women in Italy', *Africa*, vol. 82, issue 4, 2012, pp. 579–608, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972012000514; D Brennan and S Plambech, 'Moving Forward—Life after Trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 1–12, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218101.

7 We will use the words 'prostitution' and 'prostitutes' by default in this article; they may carry negative connotations (such as *ashawo*, their equivalent in Nigerian Pidgin) but none of the Nigerian women we encountered in France or Nigeria used the terms 'sex work' or 'sex worker'.

8 Edo State's capital is Benin City, the former capital of the Benin Kingdom. The communities in this region belong mainly to the Edo group, but also include Esan, Isoko, and Urhobo.

Europe is one of the only available means of upward social mobility. The women's geographical mobility is supposed to ensure their families' social mobility, but is in fact subject to the particularly restrictive conditions set by criminal networks in charge of trafficking (forced silence, coercion, physical and psychological violence, etc.). These particular migratory experiences, lived by both the women and their families, have profound effects on family structure and social organisation, both in Edo State and within Nigerian communities in Europe.

The role of mothers is central here, since several 'levels of motherhood' are revealed in the relationships of power, obedience, and domination that characterise trafficking. The recognition and power conferred by motherhood, seen as a form of 'motherhood supremacy', offer a particularly relevant framework for this work.[9] It is, indeed, within the lineages of transmission and power between *Madams*, aunts, mothers, and daughters, that families' projects of social climbing develop.

The aim of this article is therefore to shed light on the place of family ties in human trafficking and, in particular, relationships between daughters and mothers—whether biological or symbolic—in order to determine the extent to which these family dynamics help maintain or even reinforce the mechanisms that enable the sexual exploitation of Nigerian women in Europe.

Methodology

This article is based on several types of primary and secondary sources. First, a Franco-Nigerian research team collected empirical data during fieldwork in Benin City, Edo State's Capital, from April 2017 to January 2020. This included observation sessions in Temples where oaths are sealed, interviews with priests in charge of enforcing these oaths, interviews with deported trafficking victims, and interviews with presidents and members of Benin City's Women's Clubs.[10] Part of the Nigerian team also worked in France, in collaboration with the Community Health Association Le Bus des Femmes, which works with sex workers and

[9] O Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015.

[10] The research team in Nigeria, supervised by Élodie Apard, comprised five Nigerian researchers: Cynthia Olufade, Precious Diagboya, Prof Sam O. Smah, Omoregie Pat Iziengbe, and Osahon Victor Aiguobarueghian as well as a Franco-Italian researcher—Sara Panata. From her work in three major Temples in Benin City (Ayelala Uniben, Oluku, and Arosunoba), Diagboya has drawn up 16 observation reports and 8 interviews with the Priests and Chief Priests of these Temples. In Benin City, Olufade carried out 21 interviews with returnees, 3 interviews with Chief Priests, and 2 interviews with an intermediary responsible for organising the journey to Europe and accompanying the women on part of the journey. Also in Benin City, Panata interviewed 5 Club presidents and members.

persons forced into prostitution in Paris. Researchers carried out several observation sessions on sex work sites and had numerous informal discussions with social workers, cultural mediators, and victims of trafficking in Paris.[11]

Personal experiences and professional duties play an important role in the supplementation of the interviews and observation conducted in the field, since one the authors has been in charge of social, administrative, and legal follow-ups of about 500 Nigerian women or girls victims of trafficking in France. Therefore, this work also relies on the compilation of medico-social individual files of women accompanied by Le Bus des Femmes who entered Europe during the 2015–2018 period, i.e. around 450 Nigerian women a year (including around a hundred minors aged between 12 and 17, taken into care by the Child Welfare Service), monitored as part of legal or asylum proceedings.[12]

In addition, a mission was organised to Benin City in September 2018, notably to the Oba Palace,[13] followed by a final series of interviews between September and December 2019.[14] Finally, a second corpus of sources consists of the testimonies of former trafficking victims, collected and published by Le Bus des Femmes in their *Victoria Voice* booklet series.[15]

Data were discussed and analysed collectively, following an interdisciplinary approach and combining the perspectives of all researchers, as well as those of field actors, while reflecting on our respective positions as researchers and practitioners. In both the transcribed interviews and published sources, all names used are pseudonyms.

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11 Precious Diagboya, Cynthia Olufade, and Élodie Apard, together with Nigerian women working for the association, conducted observations in Bois de Vincennes and Château Rouge neighbourhoods.

12 Vanessa Simoni was the *ad hoc* administrator for around a hundred underaged Nigerian victims of trafficking accompanied by Le Bus des Femmes between 2016 and 2019.

13 The Oba of Benin, Ewuare II, granted an audience to Élodie Apard, Vanessa Simoni, and Cynthia Olufade, who passed on messages from victims of trafficking in France.

14 Diagboya interviewed intermediaries (recruiters, travel agencies) and returnees in Benin City. Apard, Simoni, and Diagboya visited the Bakhita women's shelter in Lagos, where deported victims of trafficking are accommodated.

15 The *Victoria Voice* collection includes three books bringing together testimonies, statistics, and recommendations written by trafficked Nigerian women between 2016 and 2018, under the direction of Vanessa Simoni and as part of Le Bus des Femmes. Three issues were published: *Trust* in March 2017; *Minors* in September 2017, and *Madams* in September 2018.

Families' Social Ambitions and Madams' Business Strategies

While criminal networks facilitating trafficking to Europe have been particularly active in Edo State over the past twenty years,[16] the phenomenon of sexual exploitation is not confined to this region or to this period. The organised transfer of women and girls from south-eastern Nigeria, forced into sex work in Lagos or even Ghana, was noted by colonial officials in the early 1940s.[17] However, from the end of the 1980s, trafficking began to evolve towards Europe, in the wake of other criminal activities, a severely deteriorated economic situation, and widespread corruption.[18] As an indirect effect of these crises, the feminisation of responsibilities led women to develop individual and collective survival strategies.[19] While men also resort to migration in response to these crises, transnational prostitution becomes a 'possible trajectory of emancipation'[20] for women. These economic factors are compounded by gendered forms of social and family violence (excision, forced marriage, obligations, and taboos), against which the Nigerian state offers no effective protection.

Two decades of trafficking and its financial spin-offs have profoundly transformed the economic and social landscape of the Edo area. In Benin City, while services facilitating migration are offered everywhere (language courses, money transfers, travel agencies, intermediaries for visa applications, etc.), numerous anti-trafficking NGOs are competing for European subsidies.[21] Many of the women/girls trafficked to Europe come from poor, densely populated neighbourhoods in central Benin City, where most families receive financial support from a daughter, mother, aunt, or cousin in Europe.[22] The European sex trade and related activities

16 The reason for the establishment of trafficking networks in Edo State has yet to be determined. Long-standing trade links with Italy and the need for labour, particularly in the agricultural sector in the early 1980s, could be explanatory factors, but historical work on the first generations of Nigerian women prostitutes in Europe would help clarify the conditions under which this traffic emerged.

17 L Fourchard, 'Prêt sur gage et traite des femmes au Nigéria, fin XIX-Années 1950', in B Lavaud-Legendre (ed.), *Prostitution Nigériane: Entre rêves de migration et réalités de la traite*, Karthala, Paris, 2013, pp. 15–32.

18 On the evolution of criminal practices in Nigeria, see S Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime,* Hurst & Company, London, 2016.

19 A Adjamagbo and A-E Calvès, 'L'émancipation féminine sous contrainte', *Autrepart*, vol. 61, issue 2, 2012, pp. 3–21, https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.061.0003.

20 *Ibid*., p. 5.

21 Plambech.

22 See O P Iziengbe, *The Economy of International Prostitution in Benin and the Role of the 'Purray Boys'*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, no. 56, 2017.

have given rise to a new economic model, now dominant in Edo society, whose viability depends as much on the failure of the state as on the ability of families to fit into it, reproducing the dynamics of domination and exploitation that enable this type of trafficking.

In such a context, and despite the stigma attached to sex work in Nigeria, sending a daughter to Europe remains an option, and one that many families—not just the poorest—choose. The middle classes, who also struggle to meet their basic needs, draw their hopes of upward social mobility from the local success stories of the *Madams* and their families.

Success Stories and Migratory Imaginaries

Social, economic, and political factors nurture migration aspirations, and the choice of prostitution in Europe is not solely motivated by financial considerations. Of course, families can imagine themselves benefiting from the money generated by sex work in Europe or from their daughter's investments back home (such as building a house or buying a store). However, sending a child to Europe also brings other benefits, such as the acquisition of a new social status and the appropriation of the symbols of success conveyed by the collective imaginary.

In Edo State, the role model is the *Madam*, a term that refers as much to a function—pimping—as to an image: that of a former sex worker who managed to become wealthy by exploiting other women. In Benin City, *Madams* have a monopoly on the local means of enrichment: foreign connections and control of women who work for them in Europe. The fortunes made by some *Madams* have impacted the urban landscape of Benin City, where they invested trafficking money in real estate projects (more or less luxurious residences) and commercial projects (hotels, shopping complexes) that have become concrete symbols of their successful migration. The wealthiest belong to the first generation of women who left Nigeria for Europe in the early 1980s and who, having settled mainly in Italy, were nicknamed *Italos* on their return.[23] In Benin City, the *Italos* hold particularly prominent positions in the state's social, economic, and political life. As a young woman explained, whom researchers met in the Siluko Road neighbourhood, *Italos* are influential:

> *When I was a child, the role models I remember best are three Italo Madams from our neighbourhood: 'Madam Italy', 'Londonier', and 'Mama Ebo'. These three women had money and influence; they could control important people in society. In fact, going abroad for them was like going to their backyard. The way they spent money, the number of cars and houses they*

[23] *Ibid.*

> *had, the way they dressed... everything about them was showing wealth; and indeed, they'd had it all by going abroad. Who wouldn't want to be like them?*[24]

The *Madams* have also developed specific forms of sociability through the creation of Women's Clubs. Membership of these Clubs is highly selective, based on personal criteria (i.e. being a mother, having at least one child living in Europe) but mainly on significant financial commitments, as members have to pay multiple fees, including very high monthly contributions.[25] In Benin City, as in Europe, Clubs enable *Madams* to publicly display their success and wealth. Belonging to one of these Clubs guarantees public recognition of upward social mobility, which is showcased at weddings and other ceremonies attended by Club members, as well as at *Hostings* organised by the members themselves. At these parties, members wear the same outfit, the same type of jewellery, perform group dances and indulge in 'money spraying'.[26] People attending these *Hostings* testify about the way Madams display their wealth, such as an interview participant from the Akenzua Road area, who stated:

> *When Madams arrive at 'meetings'* [*Hostings*/events], *they are the leaders, the bosses. …. Guys and girls are there to show off. Maybe their sister has sent them a phone from abroad, maybe even an iPhone. If you don't have anyone outside Nigeria, you're worthless, you're nothing.*[27]

The possession of expensive smartphones is an important symbol of belonging to the privileged social class embodied by the Clubs, as images of success are largely constructed and disseminated on social media, renewing migratory imaginaries shaped by the *Madam* model.[28] Symbols of success also translate into families' behaviour, as demonstrated by one interviewee:

> *Going abroad can change a family's destiny. I know a family who could barely feed themselves before, they were so poor that they wore rags. Then their daughter went to Europe and things changed for them. Now, when*

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24 Interview with Bridget conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Benin City.

25 Monthly dues vary and can reach several hundred euros. Some one-off dues can reach thousands of euros, and members who fail to pay are excluded from the Club. See S Panata, *United We (Net)work: An Online and Offline Analysis of Nigerian Women's Clubs*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series no. 77, 2019.

26 The practice of showering guests with banknotes, preferably in foreign currencies such as dollars or euros. For the exercise to be successful, the floor must be littered with banknotes by the end of the party.

27 Interview with F., conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Benin City.

28 Panata.

> *they cook, they even throw food away. They've gone from tenants to landlords, and their mother wears 'Hollandies'* [expensive Dutch loincloths] *to cook.*[29]

Examples of social success linked to migration, whether real or imagined, have permeated the collective unconscious so deeply that families with no members abroad perceive themselves (and are perceived) as deprived of any enrichment or social advancement opportunities. Adding to the frustration of families excluded from this system is the desire of many women and girls to progress in their lives, leading them to see sex work as a possible temporary activity, a transitional phase on the road to success. Once in Europe, they choose pseudonyms, 'street names', that often reflect the way they see themselves in the future: 'Achiever', 'Princess', 'Success'… Before their arrival in Europe, women are unaware of the conditions of exploitation, constraint, and violence that limit the realisation of these individual and collective ambitions; the migration project therefore develops in a context where desires for adventures abroad, fantasies of success, and social and family pressure combine to facilitate the trafficking process.

The 'Sacrificial' Logic within Families

Having made migration particularly attractive, *Italos* quickly became 'sponsors', encouraging women and girls to try their luck in Europe, persuading parents of the profitability of such a project, and 'sponsoring' their daughters by covering all the costs associated with their trip. Examples of families benefiting from their daughters' activities in Europe reinforce the *Madams*' arguments and make it easier for parents to support or encourage their daughters' migration to Europe, some even developing proactive attitudes, as the testimony of a Nigerian woman interviewed in Paris demonstrates:

> *My cousin, who had only been abroad for two years, started sending money home, and her mother began building a property for her. When my mother heard about this, she wanted me to go and join my cousin and insisted that I get in touch with her.*[30]

Once the decision to migrate is taken, relations are formalised between the woman/girl, her parents, and the *Madam* who will be funding her trip. The two families often already know each other, and sometimes they are related. Our

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29 Interview with M., conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Benin City.

30 Interview conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Paris. See C Olufade, *Sustenance of Sex Trafficking in Edo State: The Combined Effect of Oath Taking, Transnational Silence and Migration Imaginaries on Trafficked Women*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series no. 56, 2019, p. 17.

informal discussions with Nigerian women in France during fieldwork demonstrated that while in many cases the nature of the work in Europe is known, the working conditions are not. The risks of the journey, at sea or in the desert, are more or less clearly perceived, but do not prevent the decision to commit oneself—or one's daughter—to a project which, if successful, will offer better living conditions to those left behind.

In the Edo context, the eldest daughter is usually sent first. What can be analysed as the 'sacrifice' of the eldest daughter is sometimes the result of a parental choice and imposed on the women/girls, and sometimes it is self-imposed; but often, it is the result of persuasion by relatives or peer-pressure, combined with the eldest daughter's responsibility to her mother and siblings, and the family's economic difficulties. This is explained by victims of trafficking who participated in the *Victoria Voice* project, as well as a woman interviewed in Paris:

> *Most girls* [in Europe] *are the eldest in their family. The eldest girls have to help. Like us. We send money to our families to pay school fees* [of the younger ones]. *Their situation in Nigeria is very difficult, because it's only the rich who can get work.... When you send 200 euros to Nigeria, that's a lot of money.*[31]

> *I'm my mother's first child. She knew I was leaving. I had to make the decision to leave home and go to Europe. Poverty in the family was too hard, everyone expected me to do something.*[32]

This sacrifice imperative develops mainly within the mother–daughter relationship. Indeed, while relatives are generally involved in the emigration decision process (fathers, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.), the mother generally plays the driving role with her eldest daughter.[33] This situation correlates with the fact that many Edo women/girls exploited in Europe come from single-parent families.[34] Often working in the informal sector, such as roadside hawking, these mothers involve their eldest daughters in such work from an early age, so the survival of the whole household quickly revolves around the mother–daughter relationship. Young girls who grow up witnessing their mothers' permanent struggle with poverty also

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31 Testimonies of Ese and Achiever, *Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 33.

32 Interview conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Paris. See Olufade, p. 18.

33 In a sample of 45 Nigerian minors interviewed, almost half explained that a member of their family had decided (or participated in the decision) that they would leave Nigeria. For half of them, it was their parent(s), and more often their mother (*Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 34).

34 Out of a sample of 45 Nigerian minors taken into care by the Aide Sociale à l'Enfance de Paris, two-thirds came from single-parent families (*Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 34).

face the moral judgment of a society where single mothers are stigmatised. Eldest daughters must overcome financial difficulties and a lack of social status by contributing to the enrichment of their mother and siblings, either through a 'good marriage' or by going abroad.

If not the mother, then other women in the family play a decisive role in the migration project. For example, B. testified against her paternal aunt at the Paris criminal court in 2019. In her testimony, B. explained that she grew up in a Bini village in Edo State with her mother and stepfather, but when she was a teenager her stepfather demanded that she move to her father's house, whom she had never met.[35] It was at her father's house that the migration plan to Europe was made, but it was her aunt, based in Paris, who organised it. The aunt took in her fifteen-year-old niece along with other young girls and forced them into prostitution, as part of a 35,000 euro debt bondage for each of them.[36]

Arriving in Europe: Family pressure, moral obligation, and coercion

Generally, on arrival in Europe, women/girls are immediately placed under the authority of their *Madam* or someone 'monitoring' them on her behalf. The *Madam* quickly becomes an authority figure, both maternal and tyrannical, as an extension of the original mother–daughter relationship. However, the bond that forms before departure largely determines this relationship, as the women/girls are led through a ritual to swear an oath of allegiance to their *Madam*. During this ceremony, they pledge to follow her orders and repay a debt ranging from 30,000 to 70,000 euros without ever telling anyone.[37] If the commitment is made to the *Madam*, the biological mother is often present as a witness, while the Priest in charge of the ceremony is the agreements' guarantor.

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35 Preliminary discussion before the court hearing, held at Le Bus des Femmes in Paris in October 2019.

36 Testimony gathered from the victim during the preparation of the case file. The paternal aunt, convicted of trafficking minors under the age of 15 (the youngest was 11), was sentenced to 12 years in prison by the Paris Criminal Court in December 2019.

37 The oath taking ceremony takes place in a temple, either in the bush or in town, but always under the authority of a Priest in charge of organising the ritual, sealing the oath, and ensuring that the commitment made is respected. See V Simoni, '"I Swear an Oath": Serments d'allégeances, coercitions et stratégies migratoires chez les femmes nigérianes de Benin City', in Lavaud-Legendre, pp. 33–60; Olufade; P Diagboya, *Oath Taking in Edo: Usages and Misappropriations of the Native Justice System*, IFRA-Nigeria Working papers Series no. 55, 2019.

Once in Europe, the women/girls obey their biological mother, but more importantly, they obey the woman who facilitated their emigration, who becomes a surrogate mother. *Madams* are called *Mama* or *Iye* ('mother' in Bini, the language spoken by Edo people) by the women/girls and are also given the title of *Iye onisan* ('mother of the buttocks'), which symbolises both filiation and appropriation of their body. The term gives authority and expresses control over the women's/girls' genitals, the 'tools' of their labour and sources of enrichment for their *Madams*.[38] But the expression also illustrates the 'elaboration of a fictional kinship' which 'establishes a highly asymmetric relation of descent/dependence'.[39]

The Priest (also known as the Native Doctor or Juju Priest) is responsible for monitoring and supervising the agreement sealed through the ritual, but this role is often extended to the parents of the departing girl, as well as to the members of the *Madam*'s family, who can then take over in Benin City the settlement of any disputes arising in Europe. In addition to the woman/girl and the *Madam*, the members of their respective families are also involved in the process, since they benefit directly from it.

Faced with the realities of trafficking in Europe and the need to repay thousands of euros to their *Madam*, most Nigerian women develop opposition strategies. Some are unaware that they have to sell sex in Europe and try to oppose it as soon as they arrive. Others rebel in reaction to the conditions under which they must work (environment, pace, insecurity) and live (cost, control, violence). The sex work context has particularly deteriorated in France since the implementation, in the 2000s, of harsh laws further criminalising sex work and pushing sex workers to remote and thus potentially unsafe areas. This worsened even more during the so-called 'migration crisis' between 2015 and 2017, which led to market saturation and a price drop of paid sex, making it difficult for Nigerian women to earn the sums needed to repay their debts,[40] on the basis of remitting around 1,000 euros

[38] Similarly, the title 'Iye Eki' (mother of the market) is given to the chiefs in charge of the markets (organising and regulating them, and collecting taxes from traders), and the title 'Iya Egbe' (mother of the meeting) is given to those in charge of the hostings, who are responsible for welcoming guests and making sure that contributions are paid. In the Yoruba and Edo context, the term *Iya/Iye* (mother) refers not only to maternity but also to various forms of power, social recognition, and status. See O Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997.

[39] S Taliani, 'Du dilemme des filles et de leurs réserves de vie: La crise sorcellaire dans la migration nigériane', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, issue 231–232, 2018, pp. 737–761, https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.22438.

[40] On average, Nigerian women who come to Europe by land via Libya pay 30–35,000 euro, and those who arrive by air pay 50–70,000 euro.

every 10 days[41] from sexual services that cost between 10 and 50 euros.

When women attempt to renegotiate, the *Madams* and their entourage implement various coercive strategies with the aim of reaffirming, and then perpetuating, the debt bondage guaranteed by the initial contract. But the women's/girls' families also play a fundamental role in the implementation of these coercive logics, as is described in more detail in the next section.

Parents Associated with the Use of Violence

When Nigerian women/girls arrive in Europe, *Madams* often contact their parents in Nigeria, both to inform them of their daughter's arrival and to reaffirm the terms of the agreement. Men working within these networks may also act as interlocutors with the families. Often brothers, partners of *Madams*, recruiters, Priests or intermediaries, they operate in Europe and Nigeria at different levels, depending on their functions and their criminal affiliations, ranging from occasional opportunistic intervention to structured action, notably within Cults.[42]

As parents are often involved in the initial agreement, this reminder of each party's commitments is a mere formality. However, some parents were unaware of their daughters' migration plans, either because they had already severed ties with them or because daughters avoided telling family members as they did not want to be deterred. In such cases, Nigerian pimps in Europe try to locate the family in Benin and contact them to secure additional guarantees of cooperation. This is demonstrated by the case of P., a young Esan girl[43] who had been living in Benin City for two years after fleeing her village to avoid marriage and excision:

> *When I arrived in Paris, she* [the Madam] *asked me to call my mother. I called my friend with whom I lived in Benin and asked her to go to my village to find my mother. My Madam paid for her transport to the village and for her phone credits. When she found my mother, she called back my Madam who explained to my mother what was happening to me now. She*

41 To this must be added accommodation and food costs.

42 The Cults are secret societies inherited from student confraternities which, since the late 1980s, have been active far beyond university campuses. Their activities are similar to those of 'classic' criminal gangs (drug and arms trafficking, targeted assassinations, control of prostitution), but they have retained an important spiritual dimension. See Y Lebeau, 'Permissivité et violence sur les campus nigérians: Quelques lectures du phénomène des "secret cults"', *Politique africaine*, vol. 76, issue 4, 1999, p. 173–180, https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.076.0173.

43 One of the main sociolinguistic groups of the Edo State.

> *was surprised and started to cry. I told her not to worry, that this woman wouldn't hurt me, that she just wanted her money.*[44]

Long-distance communications between parents and pimps are designed to establish and reinforce the relationship of authority and the submission to the contract, for both parents and children, but also to remind everyone of the risks in case of non-payment. In this context, the parents' role is very clear: they must ensure that their daughters pay.

When they fail to pay back the sums demanded by their traffickers or when they try to cancel or renegotiate the agreement made in Nigeria, the women are reminded of their obligations by the threat or use of physical or psychological violence. If the *Madams* and their entourage observe a refusal or a drop in performance, they systematically resort to threatening the families in Nigeria. This can involve planning an assassination using the services of the Cults[45] or harassing family members via the *Ayelala* Temples[46] that summon parents, threaten them with reprisals, and force them to pay the sums demanded if their daughter is unable to do so, as Leo explains:

> *The Madams can control the girls by telling them, 'If you don't pay me my money, I'll kill your parents. All your parents will pay me back my money, otherwise you will all die.'*[47]

Parents are told to remind their daughters of their obligations. An escalation of verbal and physical violence against them generally occurs if they do not accept to submit and call their daughter to order. From our fieldwork and observations, when parents accept such orders and participate in the exercise of violence against their daughters, they do so for several reasons: on the one hand, compliance with the contract is the only way to ensure the continuity of the migration project from which they hope to benefit; on the other, they know that the threats are

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44 Testimony of P., collected at Le Bus des Femmes, January 2020.

45 The role of the Cults in human trafficking began to be taken into account in France after the trial of the Authentic Sisters, which revealed the close links between *Madams* and Cultists. See S O Smah, *Contemporary Nigerian Cultist Groups: Demystifying the Invisibilities*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series no. 76, 2019.

46 The *Ayelala* Temples, dedicated to the deity of the same name, are part of the legal-religious institutions of the Edo region, operating alongside the state judicial system (police and courts), which is considered to be inefficient due to corruption, slow proceedings, etc. While the Temples serve as places of worship, celebrating the deities of the Edo and Yoruba pantheons and performing divination, protection, and healing functions, as well as judicial functions, the *Ayelala* Temples specialise in settling disputes between people who have entered into an agreement via an oath. See Diagboya.

47 Testimony of Léo, *Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 27.

real, and that their lives are potentially in danger.[48] They therefore instruct their daughters to obey and pay the demanded money, sometimes going as far as giving the traffickers their daughter's new address or phone number. Parents are thus involved in the exercise of coercion, whether they consider it legitimate or not, and whether they do it out of choice, spite, or fear.

However, if families encourage their daughters to pay the debts, it is also because they themselves are part of social rationales of submission. Benefiting from a high social status in Benin City, *Madams* have the upper hand over biological mothers, who obey them directly or indirectly through their family members. Then, biological mothers of women/girls exploited in Europe also owe respect and submission to the *Madams*, who are their social elders, whatever their age.

These power relationships take place in a context where relations between rich and poor are superimposed on rigid and hierarchical authority relations between parents and children. So, if parents are invited to call their daughter to order from a distance, it is also to remind them that the power imbalance in Nigeria is an issue of social and economic inequality. The use of physical or verbal violence becomes unnecessary, since this class relationship embodies a pre-existing form of social violence that reminds individuals of their roles and duties. In Europe, as in Nigeria, parents are mere subordinates to the authority wielded by the *Madams* and their families, whose power is exercised equally over the women/girls and their parents. When families in Nigeria are victims of reprisals, it symbolises their own failure: unable or unwilling to exercise their parental authority, they call into question pre-established hierarchies, validated by a moral agreement and a spiritual commitment.[49]

Our field work suggests that by accepting these logics of domination, the families of Edo State are seeking to preserve their security in a context where violence is exercised with impunity. They are also motivated by fear of downgrading. In a system where rubbing shoulders with wealthy, influential families gives access to economic opportunities, they need to ensure their upward mobility, and sometimes their very survival. This desire for social advancement and better living conditions is a major factor in the pressure that Edo families exert over their daughters in Europe. They wish to develop ties with the city's dominant families and hope to get richer when their daughters have paid off their debts and begun sending remittances. Maintaining their authority over their daughters ensures that they will do so. Maintaining relationships of authority and submission is therefore largely guaranteed by maintaining a class relationship where rich and poor, parents and children, keep their position, as illustrated by Ese:

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48 See Diagboya.

49 See Simoni.

> *The girls call their mothers in Nigeria to tell them that the work they're doing is not good, that they want to go back home. The parents tell them to stay and keep working. The Madams call the families in Nigeria to tell them that the girls are not working well and that they have no money. The families then tell the girls that they must work harder, otherwise their Madam will call the police and they will send them back to Nigeria and the families will have no more money. Some parents know what they're doing, others don't. The girls have to send money home. The girls have to send money back to their families to help them live, buy food, send the younger ones to school... The eldest daughters have to work and send money back to the family back home in Nigeria, who lives in poverty.*[50]

The sacrificial approach initially adopted serves a dual interest: that of the parents, who plan their social advancement through the benefices of their daughters' prostitution, and that of the *Madams*, who, by exploiting other women, preserve the status and power they acquired in Europe but that they leverage in Nigeria.

Family Pressure and Avoidance Strategies

The pressure from parents on Nigerian women/girls exploited in Europe can be huge. While some have their family relationships screened by their traffickers—particularly in the early stages of their life in Europe—many are in daily contact, by phone, with their parents, and their mothers in particular.

Many women/girls question their situation and the sacrificial model that characterised their original project. But in a context where pressure, threats, and economic difficulties add up, not all families react in the same way to their daughters' distress. Some mothers cry on the phone, advising their daughters to stop street work and return home, while others encourage them to stay, work harder to pay off their debts quickly, and send them money, while downplaying the difficulties they face. In conversations, these directives translate into sentences like 'Make you dey strong', 'Na you we dey depend on!', 'Ashawo no dey kill na!'[51] This pressure is a source of great moral suffering for many victims, even if this suffering is difficult to communicate to parents in Nigeria. Women/girls share a number of reasons for their difficulty in expressing themselves, including their families' lack of knowledge about the reality of their lives in Europe, the pimps' prohibition on telling the truth, the fear of hurting their feelings and tarnishing

[50] Testimony of Ese, *Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 34.

[51] 'Be strong', 'We all depend on you!', 'Prostitution doesn't kill, come on!' Sentences reported by former victims, as well as by the nuns in charge of the COSUDOW shelter in Benin City and the Bakhita shelter in Lagos.

the family's reputation, and sometimes the cruel disinterest of some parents, who refuse to know:

> *She* [my mother] *doesn't understand how things are here, that it's not easy and all that.... I never told her I was a prostitute. She didn't even know I was going to leave Nigeria until she realised I was gone.... When you're here, they* [family members] *really think everything's going well for you. Before, I was very angry. I explained it to them. I didn't explain exactly how it was, because I don't want to hurt them.*[52]

Shame can be a major obstacle to intergenerational dialogue: the shame of saying you are a prostitute (for those who think that their parents do not know), but above all the shame of not being able to meet parental expectations, to pay debt, to cope with the job, or being too weak to make your sacrifice a tool for collective success. For most women/girls, these inabilities are synonymous with failure and frustration, associated with a feeling of uselessness. They feel they can no longer be the instrument of the family's enrichment, and some develop serious depressive symptoms:

> *I told* [my mother] *I was working on the street, and she cried [...]. They* [my family] *were really sad, they didn't know it was like that. They asked me to forgive them. I told them there was no problem. So far, I haven't told them that they* [the traffickers] *were beating me. [...] I used to have dreams at night, even when I was in the shelter, things would come into my head, I wanted to throw myself out of the window and die.*[53]

These multiple pressures and constraints lead Nigerian women to develop avoidance strategies. Some try to legitimise their inability to work through illness and pregnancy which can help them to gain their mother's support. Younger women, particularly minors placed under the protection of France's child welfare system, may invoke schooling as an excuse. However, these 'excuses' are not always enough for parents under pressure, and some decide to put the family at a distance: they space out their calls home or—although rarely—cut off contact completely. These avoidance strategies are part of an estrangement that adds to the geographical distance. This double distance often favours greater freedom for women/girls in Europe, who then move away not only from debt bondage but also from the rigid social rules of Edo society.

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52 *Victoria Voice*, no. 1, March 2017, p. 37.

53 *Ibid.*

Avoidance Strategies in France, Social Pressures and Inequalities in Nigeria

Family pressure associated with criminal violence, problems of intergenerational dialogue, and avoidance strategies developed by women/girls have consequences on their ability to achieve their own upward social mobility in Europe outside the trafficking networks. Those who choose to leave the exploitation system are victims of ostracism and isolation, which, in an already very difficult context, makes them even more vulnerable and susceptible to the influence of pimps, relatives, and other members of the Nigerian community. Families in Nigeria who get involved in resolving conflicts between their daughters and the *Madams* also face major social constraints that limit their capacity for action and prevent legal proceedings before public courts.

Generational Renewal and Heightened Competition

Avoidance strategies put in place by women/girls in the face of family coercion are difficult to maintain over the long term, notably because of the place given to rebels within the Nigerian community in Europe. Nigerian women/girls who oppose the pressure of the debt bondage system are often devalued, even ostracised, by their peers, who tend to maintain the value of sacrifice. For example, some explain that they are subjected to denigration and pressure from other Nigerian women, who refer to them as 'useless' and urge them to return to prostitution to help their parents in Nigeria:

> *One day, I asked a girl in my shelter to lend me her phone so I could call my mother in Nigeria. I called my mother and she told me to go back to work on the street. When I refused, my mother threatened me. My mother asked me to leave the shelter, saying that there was no food at home in Nigeria and that my Madam's family was harassing them, so they needed money, saying that if I didn't leave the shelter, the oath I took would kill me. So I called my friends who still work on the street and they asked me what I was doing in the shelter since there was no money there. They told me I could go back to the street, where there was plenty of money. That's why, after a month in the shelter, I ran away and decided to go back to work on the street.*[54]

These rationales contribute to the development of complex forms of collective control, which have become stronger over time. This phenomenon has led to the recomposition of family and hierarchical logics outside Nigeria, between women of the same family. Some, considered by their parents to be incapable of

[54] Testimonial collected at the headquarters of Le Bus des Femmes, September 2018.

fulfilling their family duties, have witnessed the arrival of their younger sisters in Europe. The youngest daughters then take over the collective migration project in replacement of their elders, which introduces competitive strategies often established by the mothers. For their families in Nigeria, the arrival of younger daughters in Europe operates a shift in the relationship of authority and in the sibling hierarchy.

Furthermore, Nigerian women find it difficult to create social and family ties outside their community, notably because of the stigma attached to sex work. On the one hand, they are very poorly regarded by other West African nationals, and on the other, they are afraid of getting involved with French people, not knowing how to explain the circumstances of their arrival in France. It is therefore commonly accepted among Edo women that it is easier to have Nigerian friends and partners—who already know the reasons and conditions for their presence in Europe—than to socialise outside their community. These difficulties cause the community to turn on itself as women struggle to integrate into French society, learn the language, and get out of very precarious economic situations. As a participant in the *Victoria Voice* project explained, the *Madams* often ensure that the women/girls remain isolated, to better control them:

> *When I arrived in France, my Madam allowed me to make friends, but I didn't know it was a plan she'd hatched with the other girls. I told the girls everything I was doing and asked them to help me send money home. But they reported everything to my Madam. This created a lot of problems for me, which even affected my family. She demanded that I pay double [the] debt. It really hurt, and now I prefer to stay on my own and not have any friends.*[55]

Women who oppose exploitation and try to escape the trafficking system therefore find it hard to organise themselves in Europe in order to nurture a collective counter-discourse challenging that of the *Madams*. While the French judicial system partly responds to their need for justice by condemning their traffickers, parental responsibility for the forced departure of women/girls is not taken into consideration in Benin City, feeding anger and feelings of impunity among the victims:

> *Last month, I wrote a letter to our Oba, the ruler of the Benin Kingdom. I wrote that parents who forced their daughters to go to Europe to work as prostitutes should be killed.*[56]

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55 *Victoria Voice*, no. 1, March 2017, p. 34.

56 Testimony collected at the headquarters of Le Bus des Femmes from a girl who took part in writing letters addressed to the Oba of Benin City in September 2018.

Such impunity not only enables the sacrificial logic to continue but also to be reproduced in Europe, where it is now increasingly common to see women placed in debt bondage by a female relative— aunt, cousin, or sister—who has arrived in Europe before them. It is in fact a survival reflex, both individual and collective, combined with the need to maintain a place in the community or within the family, that pushes some women to become pimps,[57] as explained by Faith:

> *Where does frustration come from? From your family at home. They call you and say, 'Auntie, I've got this problem'. And you can't do anything for them. … So sometimes I just want to call my mom and say, 'Mom, send me a girl you know, let me bring a girl here because I can't take it anymore, it's too hard'*.[58]

Many Nigerian women cannot meet the needs or expectations of their families. They do not always manage to send them money before they finish paying off their debts. Some send money in secret, which is punishable by violence, either against themselves or their parents. Then, when they have finished paying off their debt or decided to stop submitting to their traffickers, most women end up in abject poverty. Most of them want to stop engaging in prostitution, out of weariness, fear of police, or a desire to have children. However, for some, becoming a *Madam* appears to be the logical next step in their journey.[59] The numerous social constraints and migration restrictions in France reduce their employment opportunities, leaving the exploitation of other women as the only other option of earning money.

But in Nigeria, the success of a few projects creates a deceptive glow that masks the misery of all the others. Moreover, some of these successes are short-lived: many of Benin City's new houses, hotels, and restaurants built with trafficking money remain empty and fall into disuse for lack of maintenance, while some construction sites are abandoned before work is completed—all signs of the sudden interruption in money transfers.

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57 See also M Rizzotti, 'Chasing Geographical and Social Mobility: The Motivations of Nigerian Madams to Enter Indentured Relationships', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 18, 2022, pp. 49–66, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222184.

58 Testimony of Faith, *Victoria Voice*, no. 3, September 2018, p. 29.

59 Rizzotti.

The Edo Native Justice System and the Limits of Collective Social Mobility

Translating spatial mobility into upward social mobility is considered obvious in the Edo region, as in other parts of the world. However, in the context of human trafficking, the migration project is a risky gamble; seen as a long-term family investment, it is sometimes synonymous with collective failure:

> *My cousin was trafficked to Europe in 2012, but when she arrived she couldn't stand the work, so she fled and refused to contact anyone in her family. Then her Madam's family started harassing her parents back home to pay off the debt. Her parents sold land and even used their house as collateral to take out a loan and pay the traffickers. A few years later, the house was seized and the family had to move into a rented apartment.*[60]

Examples of families ruined after the refusal or the inability of their daughters to pay reinforce the logic of exploitation. If families are obliged to repay part of the debt, it is the result of persuasion, pressure, and threats exerted by the *Madams* and their relatives, with the complicity of some Temples. As places of worship, but also of sealing agreements and dispute settlements, Temples are at the centre of a local justice system, perverted by the financial power of trafficking networks.

In Edo State, two justice systems coexist: the first one, inherited from British colonial times, is based on police forces, public courts, and lawyers. The second one predates colonisation and comprises a multitude of Temples dedicated to deities from the Edo and Yoruba pantheons, such as *Olokun*, *Eziza*, *Osun*, and *Esu*, who are frequently called upon for their powers of divination, protection, or blessing.[61] Temples are also used for oaths of allegiance and debt collection, as well as in commercial affairs and land disputes, and have been associated with sexual exploitation since the rise of trafficking. Today, they play an essential role in the pressure tactics used by traffickers to force girls to honour their contracts: spiritual threats are made by the Priests against the women/girls or their families.[62] The way in which Temples settle disputes arising from trafficking cases in Europe also illustrates the place occupied by *Madams* and their families in Edo society. It notably appeared during an observation conducted at Arohosunoba Temple:

> *A trafficker's representative summoned the parents of a girl trafficked to Europe because of her inability to pay the debt: the mother* [a woman of about 40]*, in tears, declares that her child cannot stay any longer in*

60 Interview with M., October 2019.

61 Diagboya, p. 4.

62 *Ibid.* See also Olufade.

> *Europe because she's unwell, bedridden, and can't go out, work and earn money. In tears, she asks, 'How can a sick child work and pay off a debt?' The Temple's personnel and other officials present shout and reject her arguments. The mother is then accused of receiving money from her daughter and not wanting to repay. The trafficker's representatives say that this is a lie, that the child is not sick, that she ran away and is now working elsewhere. The mother continues to cry and insists that her daughter is really ill and that she wants her child to return to Nigeria. The case is dismissed and the mother is advised to pay her daughter's debt rather than risk losing her child.*
>
> *A man in his fifties, walking with a limp, comes to beg the Temple's staff on behalf of his child, explaining that his child has no money to pay the trafficker at the moment. But the man is insulted, humiliated, and driven out of the Temple, chanting 'Owan nor ga toe ogeo oo odekun gbe'* ['Whoever is guilty of lying in the temple will be killed by the Temple deities']. *He is told that he can't come and beg the Temple without bringing money, that his child probably sends him money but he refuses to pay the traffickers.*[63]

In almost all trafficking-related debt collection cases observed in several Temples in Benin City between 2017 and 2019, the staff (Chief Priests, Priests, and assistants) ruled in favour of the traffickers, whose financial power is the main factor that ensures their stranglehold on this legal-religious system. Indeed, the Temples' capacity to operate relies on contributions of devotees, as well as an automatic deduction of 10% from the sums collected as part of debt recovery.[64] The financial stability of the Temples therefore depends to a large extent on the creditors' ability to make their debtors pay. This system, which is supposed to guarantee compliance with contracts, actually accentuates the balance of power against the exploited women/girls, since the two winning parties are the *Madams* and the Temples' staff. During observations in the Temples, cases involving debts to be repaid systematically took precedence over other cases.[65]

While this religious justice system had been infiltrated by human traffickers for years, a particularly striking event occurred on 9 March 2018. The Oba of Benin, heir monarch to the throne of the Benin Kingdom,[66] supreme religious authority

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63 Observation report by Precious Diagboya at Arohosunoba Temple on 1 September 2018.

64 Diagboya, p. 15.

65 *Ibid.*

66 State founded in the thirteenth century and dominated by the Edo people, prosperous until the eighteenth century. See S Aderinto (ed.), *African Kingdoms: An Encyclopedia of Empires and Civilizations*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2017, p. 29.

for the entire Edo people, made a public announcement declaring oaths sealed for human trafficking purposes to be null and void, and forbade Chief Priests to administer such oaths in the future. Those who would disregard the ban would be killed by the palace deities.[67] This decision had a real impact on Temple activities, particularly on oath of allegiance ceremonies, as well as on trafficking revenues. The declaration triggered various reactions: from the euphoria of trafficking victims, who saw the end of their ordeal, to the despair of *Madams*.[68]

However, sexual exploitation has not stopped. The disappearance of spiritual threats is relative and violence persists. It has even given way to a more systematic use of intimidation measures involving families. While Temples and Priests can no longer officially administer oaths to women and girls for the purpose of trafficking, they nevertheless continue to issue summonses to the parents of those already in France, and to settle debt-related disputes. Moreover, rituals continue to be organised outside the Oba's territory and notably on the migratory route, according to the National Agency to Combat Trafficking in Persons in the Republic of Niger.[69]

The social and financial advantage of the *Madams* and their families over exploited women/girls and their parents is thus validated by the Edo legal-religious system, generally preferred to official forms of justice, deemed inefficient and corrupt. The hierarchical structure of the trafficking networks, which also characterises contemporary Edo society, can also be found in the Temples, whose staff recognise that the success model embodied by the *Madams* is an essential factor in their upward social mobility. Thanks to their fruitful 'collaboration' with the Temples, trafficking networks have strengthened their local roots and legitimacy. The enhancement of their position also strengthens the power of domination and coercion of the *Madams*, who use the strength of these beliefs and the fear they instigate to their advantage.

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67 Diagboya, p. 17.

68 On social networks, trafficked girls expressed their gratitude to the Oba and *Madams* expressed their distress. In addition, during a mission organised in Benin City in September 2018, Élodie Apard, Vanessa Simoni, and Cynthia Olufade were received by the Oba of Benin and handed to him written and filmed testimonies from victims of trafficking living in France.

69 Interview with Judge Moussa Mahamadou, member of Agence nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes (ANLTP), Niamey, Niger, February 2020.

Conclusion

While some *Madams* have succeeded in making a fortune, most Nigerian women victims of trafficking are now part of the poorest populations in France's major cities. Having children helps them to acquire the status of mothers and enjoy relative authority, thus renegotiating their role within the family. But when they are young or single, becoming mothers can also increase their financial difficulties and affect their social integration in Europe. The image of the Nigerian trafficking victim, like that of other women 'in need of protection', feeds on a certain idea of vulnerability;[70] in France in particular, this negative image worsens when the life project does not correspond to the integration model promoted by the State. Getting married, having children, and sending money to the family in Nigeria are markers of success for individual and collective family projects, but they can also generate tensions with the host country, which values education, professional integration, and gender equality. The tension between models of success and models of integration is even greater in the face of illegality, turning Nigerian women from 'victims to be protected' to 'foreigners to be monitored'.

Faced with the realities of trafficking and the difficulties of integration in Europe, many women fail to fulfil their parents' initial plans for social advancement. If they choose to become *Madams*, it is often because the parents in Nigeria refuse to give up the original project of enrichment. This pressure increases when families are already more or less integrated into transnational criminal networks. It is much more difficult to fight against the parents' desire for rapid social advancement when other family members, even distant ones, are ostentatiously making a living from this activity—in Europe or Nigeria. A participant in the *Victoria Voice* project used the example of a friend:

> *Her mother would tell her: 'You have to build a house, buy a car, a gas station. Don't worry, I'm here for you, nothing will happen to you.' She became a Madam to please her mother. Everything she does, she does for her mother. ... There are two classes. When you have girls* [working for you in Europe]*, you're a 'big woman', you have lots of money. ... The rich and the poor have nothing in common. ... If she changed her mind, she would become her mother's worst enemy. She can't make personal plans for her life, like getting married and having children: her mother doesn't want her to.*'[71]

[70] A George, 'Saving Nigerian Girls: A Critical Reflection on Girl-Saving Campaigns in the Colonial and Neoliberal Eras', *Meridians*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2018, pp. 309–324, https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-7176461.

[71] *Victoria Voice*, no. 3, September 2018, pp. 48–50.

Paradigm shifts will certainly come from the women themselves, as the sustainability of the trafficking systems is being questioned today in every Nigerian community in Europe, but especially within Edo women's groups, where the debate is becoming structured. Several trials in France, resulting in heavy sentences for traffickers, triggered collective mobilisation among victims, leading to a reinforced collective agency. Although Nigerian women in Europe are overwhelmed by social difficulties, they are organising and catching the attention of public authorities.[72] In France, the granting of refugee status to Nigerian women victims of human trafficking has marked the beginning of a certain politicisation of trafficking issues, with victims now being recognised as a social group.[73]

The criminal dimension of the Nigerian diaspora cannot erase the capacity of its members to produce and reproduce a cultural identity of their own, beyond the system of exploitation; however, to understand Nigerian migration as a 'total social fact',[74] it is necessary to measure the impact of trafficking on the evolution of family structure, notably through the observation of the trajectories of Nigerian children born in Europe. The way these children will read their family histories, their mothers' backgrounds, and the treatment they received in Europe will be decisive in the production of new models of success and viable alternatives to the reflexes of social reproduction. The transmission of family history and collective memory is a major challenge in terms of identity and social cohesion, which must also be taken into account by the host societies in which these children grow up. Whether their mothers were victims or perpetrators of trafficking, their future will be linked to the individual and collective handling of this painful memory.

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72 A sign of that dynamic is the creation, in 2020, of Mission d'intervention et de sensibilisation contre la traite des êtres humains (Mist Association; Mission of Intervention and Sensitisation against Human Trafficking) in Paris. See https://mist-association.org/en/about-us.

73 In France, women from Edo State are considered a 'social group'. See 'La CNDA précise la définition du groupe social des femmes nigérianes victimes d'un réseau transnational de traite des êtres humains à des fins d'exploitation sexuelle', Cour Nationale du Droit D'Asile, 12 April 2017, https://www.cnda.fr/decisions-de-justice/jurisprudence/decisions-jurisprudentielles/la-cnda-precise-la-definition-du-groupe-social-des-femmes-nigerianes-victimes-d-un-reseau-transnational-de-traite-des-etres-humains-a-des-fins-d-ex. Nonetheless, the majority of Nigerian women's asylum applications are denied.

74 Sayad's understanding of emigration/immigration as a 'total social fact' makes it possible to combine the social, economic, and political dimensions of Nigerian migration with the analysis of a transnational phenomenon such as trafficking, and to mobilise the sociology of family transmission developed in his work to study the evolution of this diaspora. See A Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité – 2. Les enfants illégitimes*, Raisons d'agir, Paris, 2006.

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