



PERCEPTIONS

Policy Brief

October 2022



Curbing Nigerian-Italian Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

Alagie Jinkang, University of Bologna

Executive Summary

Italy's illegal commercialised sex industry is estimated to be worth 90 million Euro and involves up to 9 million clients annually. The industry depends on migrants from Nigeria, Romania and Albania, many of whom are victims of human trafficking, abuse, exploitation, oppression, extreme educational and economic poverty, and non-integration in Italy. But despite legal and policy interventions, sexual exploitation of migrants is highly tolerated, goes largely unpunished and is increasingly threatening to migrant women's wellbeing throughout the peninsula, as in the case of migrant women from Nigeria. This brief focuses on the Nigerian-Italian HTSE for two main reasons: (a) Italy's proximity to the central Mediterranean route serving as key irregular route for migrant smugglers and human traffickers; (b) Italy's dysfunctional and emergencial asylum systems coupled with its insufficient, untimely and inefficient policy intervention on migrants' sexual exploitation, and; (c) perceptions and misinformation about Europe as source of economic and social opportunities and prestige, which all provide a fertile ground for mafia activities and organised crime to flourish. Therefore, coupled with PERCEPTIONS findings, this brief draws political attention to the intersections between irregular migration and asylum, mafia activities and organised crime, targeted deception and misinformation, abject poverty and traditional practices within the discourse of Nigerian-Italian HTSE.

Introduction

Italy's illegal commercialised sex industry is estimated to be worth of 90 million Euro and involve up to 9 million clients (Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG), 2017). As a highly tolerated phenomenon throughout the peninsula, the industry is composed of 36% Nigerians, 22% Romanians and 10% Albanians many of whom are victims of transnational human trafficking and live in extreme situations of poverty and increasing serious vulnerable conditions (APG, 2017; Becucci & Garosi, 2008; Carling, 2006; UNODC, 2020). Nigerian victims, women, teenage girls and children are injured, raped, murdered, traumatised and helplessly fight for their freedom in Italy; usually having no immediate place to seek redress or exit sexual exploitation. Many for the most part lack better alternatives not only in Italy but also in Nigeria. And despite the documentation of these gross human right violations, crimes associated with human trafficking for sexual exploitation (HTSE) in Italy often go unpunished (Antimafia National Office, 2017). Usually this is because it is difficult to prove without damning evidence and potential culprits are therefore not prosecuted or are prosecuted for other crimes. The phenomenon involves intermediaries at national and transnational levels such as human traffickers, mafia organisations, manager-criminals, pimps, the commercialised sex industry, unscrupulous male customers, corrupt law enforcement agencies, police brutality and/or government negligence. Consequently, choiceless and unprotected victims are continuously oppressed in the streets and indoors, before, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic calling for immediate and tangible political actions (UNODC, 2020a; 2020b Jinkang, 2020; 2021, 2022).

Stakeholders in Italy, including policymakers, law enforcement authorities, lawyers, intercultural mediators, and teachers, considered Nigerian victims of HTSE as living in limbo on the account of the increased failures, inconsistencies and inefficiency of the Italian and European immigration laws and protection systems since 2015 (Bermejo, et al. 2022; Jinkang 2022). Furthermore, these stakeholders consider that the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the oppression of many victims as they became more invisible and prone to infection. Therefore, the Nigerian-Italian HTSE should gain even more international attention to bring about realistic and instrumental policies for sustainable solutions in both Africa and Europe. Rightfully, human trafficking is stated in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT 2022-2025) as a priority in the fight against serious and organised crime.

Although there are rooms for the protocols' improvement (Shoaps, 2013; Grillone, 2019), this brief supports the call by the Palermo Protocol (2000) on intergovernmental attention and cooperation in addressing migration and preventing criminals from trafficking people; as well as the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16 and 17. Therefore, in order to draw evidenced-based policy recommendations, this brief delve

Key Issues:

- Italy's illegal commercialised sex industry depends on migrants and is estimated to be worth of 90 million Euro and involve up to 9 million clients.
- Despite gross human right violations, crimes associated with HTSE in Italy often go unpunished due to the difficulty to prove without damning evidence and potential culprits are therefore not prosecuted or are prosecuted for other crimes.
- Stakeholders considered Nigerian victims as living in limbo without real alternative not only in Italy but also in Nigeria.
- Stakeholders consider that the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the oppression of many victims as they became more invisible and prone to infection.
- This brief supports the call by the Palermo Protocol and SDGs for intergovernmental attention and cooperation in addressing HTSE.

with the question: What synergies exist between: (a) Italy's geographical proximity to the central Mediterranean route serving as a key irregular entry for human trafficking; (b) Italy's dysfunctional and emergencial asylum systems in conjunction with its insufficient, untimely and inefficient policy intervention on migrants' sexual exploitation and; (c) perceptions and misinformation about Europe as source of economic and social opportunities and prestige, which together provide a fertile ground for mafia activities and organised crime to flourish?

Context Setting: Nigerian-Italian organised crime syndicates and HTSE

Italy's geographical proximity to the Central Mediterranean route coupled with dysfunctional and emergencial asylum systems: As the country of first entrance in the Schengen zone through the central Mediterranean route from Libya, Italy is a transit and host country for a significant number of highly vulnerable trafficked Nigerian migrants. Due to their irregular entry, they are constrained by the Italian Legislative Decree No. 286/1998, and by the single asylum system of the Dublin regulation which obligates them to exhaust their asylum procedures there (Jinkang, 2020). Together, the two legislations put irregular migrants and asylum seekers in a situation of limbo where arriving migrants are obliged to wait in protracted detention. Furthermore, structural and institutional defaults within the Italian asylum system such as poor service delivery, lack of proper screening, difficult living conditions, excessively long asylum process, and absence of daily activities gradually expose many to exploitation. Many are pushed to work in the Italian commercialised sex industry usually finding themselves in the hands of ruthless "Madams" (exploiter-controller) who forced to apply for asylum. Gradually but surely, they are coerced into prostitution in the streets or directly from some hosting centres within the Mezzogiorno with many ending up in prisons or hospitals as alleged 'drug abusers', 'criminals' or with criminal records, becoming subjects of police attention allowing for their systemic and institutional marginalisation (Danna, 2002; Abbatecola, 2018; Grillone, 2019). Accordingly, we can observe migrants' multidimensional vulnerability when two or more conditions are at play and interact synergistically to produce worse conditions. This suggests that for both victims directly recruited from Nigeria and those recruited in Italy, policymakers need to understand the gradual development of multidimensional layers of vulnerability, not as a (permanent) status but potential condition, from a critical-victim-centred approach. This is why it is important for policymakers to focus on addressing long-standing upstream factors of migrant vulnerability (environmental, political, social, economic, legal and structural determinants of their wellbeing).

Accordingly, PERCEPTIONS fieldwork in Italy have identified human trafficking as a serious threat to migrant's wellbeing which provides huge revenues for perpetrators (Bermejo, et. al. 2022). Stakeholders in the support services see

- Italy is a transit and host country for a significant number of highly vulnerable trafficked Nigerian migrants.
- Structural and institutional defaults within the Italian asylum system such as poor service delivery, lack of proper screening, difficult living conditions, excessively long asylum process, and absence of daily activities expose many to exploitation.
- Multidimensional vulnerability arises when two or more conditions are at play and interact synergistically to produce worse conditions.
- Human trafficking is considered by stakeholders as a serious threat to migrant's wellbeing which provides huge revenues for traffickers.

Nigerian victims as caught up within the failing asylum system and elaborated bureaucratic walls of the Italian immigration institutions and the Dublin regulation. These victims are previously indebted to their traffickers, prosecuted by traditional rituals (“juju”, “Voodoo” etc) in Nigeria and under the increasing brutal control of their oppressors in Italy. Yet, while Nigerian-Italian HTSE is mostly approached from a penal perspective, practitioners suggest adopting mechanisms to reduce (potential) victims' multidimensional vulnerability. However, rather than being recognised as sexually exploited victims, Italian narratives from the right-wing often generally label them as ‘sex workers’, or ‘threats’. Consequently, many Italians do not perceive them as victims needing immediate and full protection of their human rights and freedom from oppression and exploitation. Therefore, as echoed in the *Survivors of Prostitution and Trafficking Manifesto*: “Women in prostitution dream of a life free from oppression, a life that is safe, and a life where we can participate as citizens, and where we can exercise our rights as human beings, not as “sex workers” (nomas, 2017).

Nigerian-Italian insufficient, untimely and inefficient policy intervention on migrants’ sexual exploitation providing a fertile ground for mafia activities and organised crime to flourish: From Nigeria and throughout the Italian peninsula, in order to avoid prosecution, Nigerian-Italian mafias and organised-crime syndicates such as the Black Axe and Eiye, in collaboration with the Sicilian mafia (“Cosa Nostra”), operate on a strong reciprocal and sophisticated relationship of “omertà” (codes of silence of the mafiosi). Their relationship is hardly administrable by less resourceful law enforcement agencies in both Nigeria and in Italy, particularly in the Benin state and Mezzogiorno (Cabras, 2017; Monzini, 2002; 2005; Grillone, 2019).

Operatively: (a) the Nigerian mafias and criminal organisations do the recruitment and transportation of potential migrants from Nigeria, involving local authorities such as traditional doctors, lawyers, pastors, parents and shopkeepers, and; (b) when they arrive in Sicily, the “Cosa Nostra” is responsible for the ‘protection’ of victims and organisation of their sexual activities within Sicilian territory (and by extension in Italy). In exchange, the Nigerian mafia and/or criminal organisations pay money (“pizzo”) to the Sicilian mafia for protection (Grillone, 2019). In addition to the role played by the criminal male controllers, key intermediaries such as the Nigerian “madam” (controller of the prostituted) migrants are usually previously traumatised victims of HTSE themselves (Ambrosini, 2002). Accordingly, PERCEPTIONS findings with practitioners and policymakers show Nigerian controllers brutally assign and closely monitor the activities of up to six people (women and girls) from Connection Houses (reference points of the controllers). These controllers also add to victims’ debt bondage already incurred from Nigeria (cost of journey and rituals) by imposing illegal fees associated with clothing, accommodation and food, thus adding to the victims’ vulnerability.

- Nigerian victims are indebted to their traffickers, prosecuted by traditional rituals and under the increasing brutal control of their oppressors in Italy.

- Nigerian-Italian insufficient, untimely and inefficient policy intervention on migrants’ sexual exploitation provides a fertile ground for mafia activities and organised crime to flourish.

- Nigerian-Italian mafia operates in a strong reciprocal relationship.

Furthermore, prosecution of culprits, administering prevention and protection of victims, remains largely very weak and seldom despite numerous interventions not least because both countries struggle with endemic corruption making it difficult to protect the human rights of (potential) victims (Corruption Perceptions Index, 2021). Usually issues with prosecuting human traffickers stem from issues related to transnational prosecution of cases and as such it is difficult to prosecute cases in Nigeria when the victim only realizes the deception (and exploitation only begins) in destination country. Therefore, the question arises: how can Nigeria prosecute when evidence is in Italy? Only through cooperation, developed border surveillance to detect human traffickers and sharing of data we can achieve efficient transnational prosecution. Putting the onus on fragile institutions such as Nigeria (when they have really focused on building their anti-trafficking institutions and migration management frameworks in the last years or “lack of interest” is not realistic.

Perceptions and misinformation about Europe as source of economic and social opportunities and prestige: Politically and socio-economically as a federal state enriched with some of the world’s most limited natural resources, Nigeria is nonetheless considered as one of the world’s “poorest” countries per capita and many youths migrate to Italy with the perception to find better. Benin city of Edo state, the origin of most Nigerian-Italian victims of HTSE, faces increased bad governance, broken infrastructure, food and political insecurity, unemployment, organised crime, and educational poverty. Consequently, many jobless and visionless youths particularly unschooled women, teenagers and minors easily fall victim to targeted deceptions and misinformation campaigns by the traditional healers, Nigerian mafia and human traffickers, who promise them of a ‘better life in Europe’. In the Edo state, traditional authorities with significant power such as native doctors (“babalawos”, traditional healers, witchdoctors) practice rituals (“Voodoo”) using the girls’ hair and nails to seal the pact and coerce their will (Grillone, 2019; Baarda, 2016). According to a report published by the Ministry of Interior (2016), most victims declared seeking employment in Europe as their main intention. This supports PERCEPTIONS findings with practitioners which consider that most migrants perceived Europe as providing economic and social opportunities otherwise unavailable to them in their countries of origin (Jinkang 2022). Accordingly, key factors that constitute Nigerian victims’ systemic vulnerability are highlighted by PERCEPTIONS stakeholders as: socio-economic precarity, irregular migratory status, poor asylum system, debt bondage, educational poverty, language and cultural barriers, deception, misinformation, disorientation and stigmatisation associated with returning to Nigeria as ‘unsuccessful’ or ‘poor’ (Bermejo, et. al. 2022). As can be observed throughout, oppressors capitalise on their victims’ choiceless situation of extreme need, ignorance and power imbalance and continue to exploit them. Meanwhile, both Nigeria and Italy are tackled with rising unemployment, organised crime and weakening institutions.

Furthermore, despite evidence from research and efforts by information awareness campaigns on the threats of HTSE, numerous inaccurate narratives

- Challenges in prosecuting human traffickers stem from issues related to transnational prosecution and it is difficult to prosecute cases in Nigeria when the victim only realises the deception or exploitation in destination country.
- Perceptions and misinformation about Europe as source of economic and social opportunities and prestige dominate the Nollywood industry and serve as a catalyst for HTSE.
- Key factors that constitute Nigerian victims’ systemic vulnerability are socio-economic precarity, irregular migratory status, poor asylum system, debt bondage, educational poverty, language and cultural barriers, deception, misinformation, disorientation and stigmatisation associated with returning to Nigeria as ‘unsuccessful’ or ‘poor’.

that portray Europe as a “promise land” dominates the Nollywood industry, making it a key source of misinformation about Europe among the youth. This was confirmed during PERCEPTIONS interviews with migrants from West Africa who mentioned Nollywood as a major source of misinformation about Europe (Bermejo, et. al. 2022). Practitioners mentioned migrants’ main information sources and channels are informal (family, friends, Facebook, WhatsApp, movies, etc,) resulting in increased risk of misinformation and migrants falling victims of human traffickers. Notwithstanding, practitioners stress that migrants are suspicious of formal channels of information (governments, NGOs, mass media, international organisations) as having an agenda against migration. Therefore, mismatches between reality versus popular narratives in Nollywood and social media’s imagery of Europe become clearer only when victims arrive in Italy – when it is already too late for the most part, to repair (Riachi & Javed, 2022).

Nigerian-Italian HTSE can therefore be seen as the synergy between weakening institutions, irregular migration, asylum, mafia activities, organised crime, deception, abject poverty and traditional practices that produce dynamics of extreme oppression, marginalisation and exploitation from Nigeria, Niger, Libya and in Italy. This discussion has so far showed that frameworks to combat HTSE in the Nigerian-Italian context lacks a holistic long-term systemic approach and has yet to bring efficient and reliable transnational cooperation and litigation that would result in prevention, persecution, protection and assistance. In fact, practitioners believe the phenomenon faces deep rooted structural challenges within the named legal traditions, border management systems, asylum and integration system, but is being since treated as an emergency. Meanwhile, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also easily fall into the trap of implementing separate and short-term actions aimed at addressing the phenomenon. While these integration and inclusion projects–programs are operating both in Italy and in Nigeria, thousands of highly vulnerable Nigerian migrants become (potential) victims.

- Mismatches between reality versus popular narratives in Nollywood and social media’s imagery of Europe become clearer only when victims arrive in Italy.
- Systematically Nigerian-Italian HTSE can be seen as the synergy between weakening institutions, irregular migration, asylum, mafia activities, organised crime, deception, abject poverty and traditional practices that produce dynamics of extreme oppression, marginalisation and exploitation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. To prevent HTSE, protect and assist its victims, and to prosecute human traffickers, a realistic and highly coordinated **transnational co-operation and agreements between Nigeria and Italy** and by extension between Africa and Europe, **must be fostered**. The priority is to address the multidimensional and structural vulnerability that expose migrants to sexual exploitation in these regions.

Recommendation 2. Policymakers need to **boost the Italian asylum system** and improve the Dublin Regulation to provide genuine support to (potential)

Key recommendations:

- There need to be efficient transnational co-operation and agreements between Nigeria and Italy.
- There needs for better screening at borders, during asylum processing,

victims of HTSE. There is need for better screening at borders and during asylum processing, better data collection, usage and sharing between Italy and Nigeria for identification, regularisation, sensitisation and acceleration of trafficked victims' autonomy via job opportunities, spaces for re-integration, long-term rehabilitation assistance, and group businesses for victims to live together and support each other in both Nigeria and Italy. Victims should be compensated, helped to exit the rackets and provided with counselling support to initiate trauma healing in safe spaces.

Recommendation 3. Policymakers should enhance **regular monitoring**, developed **surveillance systems** to detect potential victims, promote **transparent and accountable political and legal schemes**. There is need for increased sustained protection for victims (not temporary) willing to testify, safe housing, protection for their families, and avoid deportation which happens in a lot of cases on notions of safety/protection grounds.

Recommendation 4. Policymakers should design and promote **information-awareness campaigns** to consider the social-cultural practices in Nigeria to better inform (potential) migrants about the entire process of travelling via Central Mediterranean Route (i.e., recruitment agents, well organised pre-departure counselling specially for women and young girls). Potential migrants should also be informed about the entire asylum process in Italy as well as the risks of sexual exploitation, detention, deportation and the biopsychosocial implications of exploitation.

Recommendation 5. Policymakers need to **better involve NGOs, INGOs, and CSOs** as actors who have direct access to (potential) victims in asylum camps and detention centres. These actors should be trained to provide better protection services, mental health counselling services, childcare and healthcare services for those (potential) victims of HTSE who are with children or are unwell.

Recommendation 6. Policymakers need to **address corruption and HTSE jointly**; facilitate cross-border cooperation, better enforcement and increase the monitoring, and focus on combating corruption is necessary in order to effectively curb human trafficking.

better data collection, usage and sharing between Italy and Nigeria to detect cases.

- There is need to enhance regular monitoring, developed surveillance systems, transparent and accountable political and legal schemes.
- There is need for information-awareness campaigns to consider socio-cultural practices and to better inform potential migrants on the entire migration process and conditions in Italy.
- Better involvement of NGOs, INGOs, and CSOs as actors who have direct access to (potential) victims in asylum camps and detention centres.
- Corruption and human trafficking should be addressed together (not separately).

References

Literature

- Abbatecola, E. (2018). *Trans-migrazioni. Lavoro, sfruttamento e violenza di genere nei mercati globali del sesso*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier
- Ambrosini, M. (2002). *Comprate e vendute. Una ricerca su tratta e sfruttamento di donne straniere nel mercato della prostituzione*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Antimafia National Office. (2016). Annual Report. Ministry of Justice. Available <<http://www.avvisopubblico.it/home/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/RELAZIONE-DNA-1.7.2015-30.6.2016.pdf>>
- Baarda, C.S. (2016). Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation from Nigeria into Western Europe: The Role of Voodoo Rituals in the Functioning of a Criminal Network. *European Journal of Criminology*, 13(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370815617188>
- Becucci, S., & Garosi, E. (2008) *Corpi globali. La prostituzione in Italia*. Firenze: Florence University Press.
- Cabras, F. (2017). *La criminalità organizzata nigeriana in Italia. Peculiarità, sviluppi e “generi criminali.”* In N. dalla Chiesa (Ed.), *Mafia globale. Le organizzazioni criminali nel mondo* (pp. 99–128). Milano: Laurana.
- Carling, J. (2006). *Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe*. (IOM Migration Research Series no. 23). International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/mrs-no-23-migration-human-smuggling-and-trafficking-nigeria-europe>.
- Legislative Decree 25.7.1998, No. 286 on “Consolidated Act of Provisions concerning immigration and the condition of third country nationals. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/legislative-decree-2571998-no-286-consolidated-act-provisions-concerning_en
- Danna, D. (2002). *Lo sfruttamento della prostituzione*. In Hrsg. M. Barbagli & U. Gatti (Eds.), *La criminalità in Italia* (pp. 149–158). Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Grillone, C. (2019). *The New Gendered Plundering of Africa: Nigerian prostitution in Italy*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Jinkang, A. (2020). *Contemporary Slavery: The Exploitation of Migrants in Italian Agriculture*. [Doctoral dissertation], University of Palermo and University of Valencia. Retrieved from <https://roderic.uv.es/bitstream/handle/10550/75415/PHD%20THESIS%20ALAGIE%20JINKANG%2018-06-2020.pdf?sequence=1>.
- Jinkang, A. (2021). *Il Caporalato in Sicilia: (In)contro un nuovo schiavismo*. In S. Greco & G. Tumminelli, *Migrazioni in Sicilia 2020* (pp. 90-104). Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine.
- Jinkang, A. (2022). *Practitioners’ perceptions for improving migration management and services. PERCEPTIONS*. <https://www.perceptions.eu/practitioners-perceptions-for-improving-migration-management-and-services/>
- Jinkang, A. (2022). *Vulnerability and exploitation of migrant workers in Italian agriculture: PERCEPTIONS*. <https://www.perceptions.eu/vulnerability-and-exploitation-of-migrant-workers-in-italian-agriculture/>
- Monzini, P. (2002). *Il mercato delle donne. Prostituzione, tratta e sfruttamento*. Milano: Donzelli.

Monzini, P. (2005). *Sex Traffic: Prostitution, Crime and Exploitation*. London: Zed.

Riachi, C. & Javed, H. (2022). Mismatched: migrant housing. PERCEPTIONS: <https://www.perceptions.eu/mismatched-migrant-housing/>

Shoaps, L. (2013). Room for Improvement: Palermo Protocol and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. *Lewis & Clark Law Review*, 17, 931–972. <https://law.lclark.edu/live/files/15325-lcb173art6shoaps.pdf>.

UNODC (2020a). Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons. Preliminary Findings and Messaging Based on Rapid Stocktaking. (UNODC report). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/HTMSS Thematic Brief on COVID-19.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/HTMSS%20Thematic%20Brief%20on%20COVID-19.pdf)

UNODC (2020b). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020. (UNODC report). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/global-report.html>

Websites

www.perceptions.eu

project.perceptions.eu

www.europol.europa.eu

<http://nomas.org>

<https://www.apg23.org>

www.transparency.org

www.unodc.org

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<https://parlamento17.openpolis.it>

<http://www.camera.it>

www.senato.it

<http://news.apg23.org>

<http://www.unodc.org>

Deliverables

Bermejo, R., et al. (2022). Deliverable 3.7 Update on Multi-perspective Research Report. PERCEPTIONS H2020 Project No. 833870. Available at <https://project.perceptions.eu/deliverables>

Contact

Office@perceptions.eu

alagie.jinkang@unibo.it



Acknowledgement: This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 833870.

Disclaimer: The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the authors, and in no way represents the view of the European Commission or its services.