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Paris Diderot University

vfzamorano41@gmail.com

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF NIGERIAN VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING IN PARIS

ABSTRACT

Trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation of Nigerian women in France is a phenomenon addressed by the abolitionist movement and national security policies. Both currents have created the category of ideal victim, generating that many Nigerian women have been expelled from the country as illegal migrants or prostitutes guilty of pimping. In this way, this paper presents the difficulties that Nigerian women face and the strategies they develop to remain in France. At the same time, I present my results of an investigation into the racialization interactions and processes that occur within a social assistance association for Nigerian women in situations of sexual exploitation. In conclusion, Nigerian women are not defined based on their trajectories or the identities they build, but instead categories defined by the public policies of victims, pimps and illegal migrants are imposed.

Key words: prostitution, trafficking persons victims, migration, survival strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is considered one of the most violent phenomena in terms of crimes against humanity. Although today it is considered within several exploitation domains, in the beginning it was associated exclusively with capture, transfer and exploitation for sexual purposes. Trafficking in persons is part of the notion of slavery and the “white slave trade”. This term originated at the end of the 20th century and fits into the context of globalization. It is defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as: *the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation*.¹ Since the 1990s, we have known this phenomenon as characterized by the movement of women wishing to emigrate and who end up being exploited in host societies. Today, human trafficking is expressed in different contexts and forms, and one of the most characteristic in Europe is the sexual exploitation of Nigerian women.²

The trafficking of Nigerians in France is massive in scale and it has been increasing since the 1990s. Some research suggests that from 1980 to 2005, between 25,000 and 30,000 Nigerians arrived in Europe to be sexually exploited.³

This phenomenon is contextualized in the colonial era in Nigeria. Following the introduction of monetarization and other changes by the English colonists, the female work field has been reduced to informal sexual services. Many women in this context become involved in prostitution to become economically independent and flee arranged marriages. It is during this process that they are caught by trafficking networks and are exploited in Europe. In general, the trafficking networks consist of friends or relatives of the victims who convinced them to go to Europe to work in beauty salons or prostitute, but under good conditions. In exchange the women must pay a debt ranging from 35,000 to 50,000 euros. Once the women have accepted, they must submit to a juju ritual in which they commit themselves to pay the debts established by the network by delivering them used nails and blood. If women do not pay the debt, they will be persecuted by spirits who can lead them to madness or death.

The journey, not without dangers, is by land to Libya and requires, among other things, the participation of several actors to corrupt or avoid the police. Once they have crossed the sea to reach the Italian coast, women are sent to different places to prostitute themselves. This is where women realize what they are really going to do.

¹ *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2000, at <<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ProtocolonTrafficking.pdf>>, 12 November 2019.

² EASO. *Rapport d'information sur les pays d'origine (COI). Nigeria Traite des femmes à des fins sexuelle*, European Asylum Support Office, 2015.

³ B. Lavaud-Legendre, *Prostitution nigériane: Entre rêves de migration et réalités de la traite*, Paris 2013.

They are received by a pimp or a “maman” who is usually a former victim and a prostitute, who constantly controls them to pay the debt. Women can be exploited for years, and the most efficient methods of restraining them are related to the consequences of the magic of juju and the threat that the network poses to their families in Nigeria.

From the above, there are several difficulties that Nigerians have to face in the trafficking process, which is why very few manage to leave their exploitative contexts. However, once they escape, the obstacles do not diminish, as the process of social insertion in France is arduous and takes a long time. One of the main reasons has to do with the national security perspective of public policies. Women must not only face expulsion policies but also the criteria of police officers in situations of inspection. It is the police who decide, under their judgement, whether women are victims or illegal migrants. In this way, it is essential to show the political context in which women are inserted, and the interactions they maintain with the French authorities to show the challenges and strategies they use to stay in the country.

In this article, I intend to show first the representations of French policies and authorities that impede the migratory trajectory of women. Second, I will show how women interact with the authorities and how stigmas of race and gender can affect the process of social insertion. In both parts it tries to demonstrate the strategies that the women use to cope with these situations.

2. POLITICAL TREATMENT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION IN FRANCE

The main problems that emerge from the political treatment of human trafficking have to do with the ideological convictions that lead public policies. Both human trafficking and prostitution are tackled from the abolitionist and religious movements of the 1960s and 70s in France and the rest of Europe. In this way, prostitution was considered as violence of men towards women, and as a consequence of women having psychological problems or lacking education. Thus, the main treatment was based on psychological help and education on morals and good practices. Prostitution then came to be seen as a moral problem, and in that way, the public policies put in place to eradicate prostitution were more focused on making it disappear from the public space than on the social problems behind the actors involved.

The introduction of human trafficking into public policies in 2003 in France reinforced the image of victims of women who were prostitutes, especially those of migrant origin. The abolitionist movements of that period considered prostitution not only as a psychological problem but also as a social problem. In this sense, associations offering social assistance to those who were willing to leave prostitution emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s in France.

In this way, the policies implemented to address prostitution and human trafficking in France functioned as devices for the moralization of public space and the eradication

of illegal migration.⁴ The abolitionist movement, as the promoter of these measures, sought to remove women from prostitution and integrate them into French society through social workers. However, this idea clashes with the reality of a precarious and limited female market, especially for women without sufficient education, which is the case of most migrant prostitutes. On the other hand, prostitution offers high earnings that allow economic comfort and independence, something very difficult to achieve with only the social assistance offered by the government.

As mentioned earlier, the introduction in 2003 of national security policy in France generated a contradictory situation for migrant women inserted in prostitution. One of the policies introduced was the criminalization of passive soliciting,⁵ which aimed to discourage prostitution and at the same time give the opportunity to foreign victims to denounce the networks of pimping. However, as stated by Jakšić,⁶ the women who denounced were returned to their countries of origin before it could be determined whether they were real victims of trafficking.

The authorities considered that the eradication of the phenomenon was directly associated with a national security policy, thus, the control of illegal migration was key to detecting the crime. At the same time, the phenomenon has been perceived from two relevant subjects: on the one hand, a criminal network that profits from the sexual exploitation of the victims, and on the other the construction of a category of passive, naive, young victim.⁷

The foregoing has led to the creation of an ideal victim for judicial authorities, but at the same time, great distrust towards the victims has created. Thus, those victims who do not meet any of the requirements to enter the ideal category of victim, are quickly cataloged as illegal migrants or guilty of "soliciting". In this way, devices are inserted to differentiate "good" or "true" victims from "guilty" or "false" victims.⁸

The debate at the level of public policies in France on prostitution has not been precisely an aid to the situation of the victims. The reintroduction of the crime of passive soliciting in the French Criminal Code in 2003⁹ as a solution to procuring, has reinforced the situation of suspicion towards the victims. At the same time, it has imposed the obligation on victims to denounce their exploitative networks if they want to regulate their situation in France. The intention of these measures responds more to the control of prostitution than to the eradication of the phenomenon of trafficking.

All the above measures express not only the suspicions that the authorities have about the victims, but also the difficulties that the latter have in exiting trafficking networks and inserting themselves into French society.

⁴ L. Mathieu, "Le mouvement abolitionniste français dans l'après-guerre. Recompositions et reconversions de la croisade contre la prostitution réglementée", *Déviance et Société*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2016), pp. 79-100.

⁵ Idem, "Le mouvement abolitionniste français.."

⁶ M. Jakšić, "La souffrance faite cause. L'entrée de la traite des êtres humains dans l'arène publique", *Genre, sexualité et société*, vol. 9 (2013).

⁷ Idem, *La traite des êtres humains en France de la victime idéale à la victime coupable*, Paris 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

3. DIFFICULTIES IN MIGRATORY REGULARIZATION

Due to the suspicion displayed by the authorities, victims encounter many difficulties in daring to denounce their exploitative networks in order to regularize their immigration status. There is a type of visa that allows trafficked women to reside legally in French territory, but only if they denounce the exploiting networks. This is quite complex, because many trafficking networks threaten the victims and their families if they do not pay their debts. In the particular case of the Nigerian victims, this situation is extremely delicate since they are threatened by juju rituals that coerce their behavior even after they manage to escape.¹⁰ Even if the victims decide to denounce their pimps, this does not necessarily imply protection by the authorities.

On the other hand, the initiation of judicial investigation does not imply the automatic granting of residence visas to the victims (of a duration of six months). The police will always grant visas to the victims when the information given by the women is relevant for the judicial investigation.

It is not enough to leave the networks of exploitation; the victims must also show that they deserve to reside in France, so they must leave prostitution. In this sense, in the event that the police have managed to capture the pimps with the help of the victims, this is not enough to ensure legal status in France. The victims must also show that they have left prostitution and want to start a new life. Thus, prostitution is not seen by the authorities only as a form of exploitation, but also as a disturbance to public order.¹¹

Proof of exit from prostitution is legitimized through the social associations available to the victims. The victims must participate in the activities of the association and show that they do not go out at night to prostitute themselves. That is, they must show that they are a “good victim” and deserve residence in France. If this is achieved successfully, the associations are responsible for legitimizing the behavior of the victim before the authorities and helping them with their immigration regulation.

While getting out of a trafficking network is complex, getting out of prostitution does not pose fewer challenges. Although the victims want to enter different labor fields, it is not easy to achieve it if they have an irregular migratory status and do not have any knowledge of the language. Although several are inserted in social assistance programs, it is not enough to stay economically in the country while waiting for the regularization of migration.

On the other hand, different social stigmas associated with the Nigerian population in terms of race, class and gender restrict the labor insertion of this population to other labor domains other than the sexual market.¹² In this sense, even though the authorities

¹⁰ B. Lavaud-Legendre, *Prostitution nigériane...*

¹¹ M. Jakšić, *La traite des êtres humains...*

¹² C. Catarino, M. Morokvasic, “Femmes, genre, migration et mobilités”, *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2005), pp. 7-27.

prohibit victims from becoming prostitutes, it is the most important or the only economic support they have in order to remain in France. Even if they manage to regulate their immigration status, prostitution is the most effective means to survive economically in Paris. Prostitution does not necessarily mean exploitation for the victims; it can mean under certain circumstances a means of subsistence. Even if women have papers but precarious jobs, which are the most frequent cases, they may return to prostitution in situations of economic hardship.

Women become trapped in a paradox: they want to regularize their immigration status, but for that they must leave prostitution and live under very precarious conditions. Surviving and following the process of social insertion requires the participation of different actors, such as police officers, social workers and the Nigerian community. Women, through interactions with these actors, develop strategies that allow them to obtain permission to reside and work in France.

The main part of the insertion process is through an aid association. It is in this space that women must negotiate imaginaries to access social assistance, but they also face situations marked by power relationships to express their needs, aspirations, and projects. In this sense, the process of social inclusion requires women to apply a series of tools and skills to cope with their daily difficulties. My goal is to highlight, through participatory observation, the discourses and practices of women and social support staff in the context of their interactions within an association.

4. STUDY OF WOMEN'S STRATEGIES AND INTERACTIONS WITH THE AUTHORITIES IN THE MOUVEMENT DU NID ASSOCIATION

I conducted my research in the Mouvement du Nid organization in Paris. This association, of religious origin, was borne from the abolitionist movements of the 1970s in France. Militant in nature, it is composed mainly of volunteers dedicated to the task of propagating political speeches about prostitution as violence against women. Thus, the social assistance of prostitutes and victims of trafficking was only considered a few years ago, and today, there is only one social worker to assist the women who come to the institution. Due to the internal structure of the institution, a small number, between 15 and 20 women, receive social assistance, and the majority are victims of trafficking from Nigeria.

One of the main tasks of this association is providing orientation, negotiations, social interventions, craft workshops and French classes for women victims of human trafficking who wish to regularize their migratory status or access social benefits. The strategies used by the women were analyzed through participant observations that I established as a volunteer in the association. In the course of my research I helped them with different tasks to facilitate their social insertion.

In order to understand how women perceived their past and how the political image of abolitionist associations differed, I will introduce the concept of economic-sexual

exchanges.¹³ This concept allows us to understand the way in which women escape exploitation and how they relate the practice of prostitution with their process of social insertion.

4.1. Survival strategies for victims of trafficking in France

Survival strategies range from the positioning of women as submissive, to a paternalistic relationship when requesting socioeconomic assistance,¹⁴ to the establishment of economic-sexual relations¹⁵ that they establish to facilitate migratory regularization. Although it is not possible to analyze *in situ* the relationships established by women with people outside the institution, it was possible to characterize these relationships through their speech in meetings within the organization.

4.1.1. Visa application

There are a number of visas available for people who fit the profile of trafficking victims. The most specific is that of “victim of trafficking”, which lasts six months and can be renewed. However, as mentioned above, the most important requirement is to report the trafficking network, which can be very complex due to the threats posed. It does not contemplate protection and if the authorities consider that information provided by the victim is irrelevant, she may be expelled on the grounds of an irregular migratory situation. There is also a visa for those women who demonstrate having left prostitution. The proof of exit is made through organizations which can confirm that the women are taking French classes or participating in the workshops offered by the association and do not go out at night to prostitute themselves. Therefore, the granting of visas depends in large part on what the organizations say about the women.

The above conditions lead victims to tend to apply for political asylum and PACS visas (Solidarity Civil Pact).¹⁶ In the case of the refugee visa, many victims have the profile to apply for this visa due to violent circumstances in the country of origin and in the migratory trajectory. The PACS visa is requested by women who can prove that they live with a French couple or a person with a regular migratory situation for three years in France.

4.1.2. Appropriation of the category of victim

In order to fit in with the image of a good victim imposed by the French authority, women must employ strategies in the process of social accompaniment. Many of those

¹³ P. Tabet, *La grande arnaque : sexualité des femmes et échange économique-sexuel*, Paris 2016.

¹⁴ D. Fassin, “La supplique. Stratégies rhétoriques et constructions identitaires dans les demandes d’aide d’urgence”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 55, no. 5 (2000), pp. 955-981.

¹⁵ P. Tabet, *La grande arnaque...*

¹⁶ This visa is granted to couples between French and migrants who prove they have been living under the same roof for at least 3 years.

who have been in France for several years request help performing relatively simple administrative procedures, such as writing letters or even requesting accompaniment to places where they have already been.

On the other hand, women visit different associations and are in contact with several social workers at the same time. The interesting thing about this interaction is that the information they often give differing information to different organizations. They decide what to say and how to present themselves according to the type of organization they face. Thus, the victims change their roles according to the circumstances.

4.1.3. Difficulties regard to migration policies

Some women who intend to regulate their immigration status must perform fairly complex procedures that take a long time to develop. Regarding proof of identity, because some women (the majority) entered the country under false identities, they must ask the Nigerian embassy for new passports, which is expensive. On the other hand, there are situations in which women present false identities to the authorities to request visas, and this may result in expulsion from the country. Once the victims are expelled, they must disappear from the view of public institutions for at least one year to re-apply for the visa procedure.

Regardless of whether the victims have regular immigration status, they cannot access employment. In general, French citizenship is required in order to work in public establishments. The enforcement of this law may cause distrust in the authorities and, therefore, they request that victims with permanent residency undergo tests to prove that they do not engage in prostitution.

4.1.4. Economic-sexual relations

As mentioned above, victims of trafficking may leave the networks of exploitation, but this does not necessarily mean that they leave prostitution. Although prostitution does not constitute an ideal situation for any victim, they have no other alternative due to their immigration status. Involvement in prostitution can be intermittent, as there are some situations of economic precariousness that drive women to prostitute themselves. Thus, according to the perspective of the victims, prostitution (without coercion) is seen only as a means of economic solution in emergency situations. Some do so to avoid living on the streets, and others to help their families in their countries of origin.

However, the dimension of exchange of sexual services can be extended to other spheres. As mentioned above, there are certain visas that make it possible to regularize immigration through civil contracts with French or regular migrants. The women sometimes describe men based on the benefits they can obtain from their migratory situation. So, some women take advantage of their romantic relationships to regulate their immigration status, as men take advantage of the situation as well. Thus, some women can, in exchange for sexual, reproductive and domestic services, obtain their residence in France.

4.1.5. Parenthood and residence in France

As in the situation described above, the exchange of favors can take place within parent-child relations. For most women victims of trafficking, pregnancy is a very particular situation. In the first place, being a mother is a desired condition since it means an increase in social status in their country of origin. Second, pregnancy is one of the most important reasons why women get out of prostitution. Third, they consider that pregnancy can put them in an advantageous situation to regularize their migratory status and obtain greater social assistance.

Although pregnancy can help them become prioritized by social assistance, this does not necessarily mean an advantage over immigration policies. It is not an obligation today for the authorities to grant French citizenship to the children of migrants born in France. Parents must apply for visas for their children, but this situation can become even more complicated if the parents do not have a visa to reside in France. It is thus very important that at least one of the parents has regular immigration status.

Considering the above, most pregnant women in an irregular situation are paired with men who have a visa, and if they are single, they may end up paying for the adjudication of paternity in some cases. If the father of the future child has a regular status it is easier to obtain a visa for the child. At the same time, mothers can apply for civil contract visas in cases where they live as a couple for at least three years. In addition, it is possible to access a wide variety of social benefits if they have children, but the help goes directly to the person in charge of the child and in a regular migratory situation. In this sense, if the mother is in an irregular migratory situation then she cannot access social benefits, but the father can (if he has a residence visa).

On the other hand, many women, because they are considered illegal migrants, are afraid to recognize their children in front of the authorities since both mother and child could be deported. Thus, in many cases only the one who has the residence visa recognizes the child. At the same time, authorities grant benefits and rights only to those who have a regular immigration status. This situation generates relations of inequality and even submission of those in an irregular migratory situation. Thus, many women in irregular migratory situations depend on their partners both economically and in terms of migration. There are cases where women do not register as mothers of their own children for fear of being deported, and their partner exploits this to threaten them with deportation. This abuse of power can sometimes be expressed in economic manipulation, forcing the victims to return to prostitution. Thus, the migration policy can be easily manipulated to subject and harm victims of trafficking.

4.2. Interactions between women and aid staff in the Mouvement du Nid association

In the space of the Mouvement du Nid association, the imaginaries of the authorities, the staff of the association and Nigerian women are evident. It is in this context that definitions of identity are constantly negotiated through interactions between the women and support staff. This is the place where women decide what to say or hide to

define their identity and avoid stigmatization, and thus gain access to social rights. At the same time, it is a space in which women's behavior is defined in terms of their experiences and social relationships.

The political position of *Mouvement du Nid* on women does not necessarily have influence. In fact, we do not even know if women are still prostituting themselves or not. The social worker says there are other criteria that bring women closer to the association, for example, feeling welcomed or listened to is much more important. It often happens that a woman stops attending an association because she does not communicate well with the social worker or, on the contrary, she will recommend an association, as is the case with the beneficiaries of *Mouvement du Nid*, based on the relationship she establishes with the social worker. Moreover, the political discourse of associations is of little importance in the life of women, even though many of them are treated at the same time in by different associations with very different political perspectives on prostitution. Thus, the way in which the women view associations in Paris is very different from the way French society, or the associations themselves, look at each other, and this dynamic depends to a large extent on the image that the social worker projects.

In observing these interactions, I realized that the Nigerian community has a great influence over the women. It is in the context of street prostitution that women share information about access to social rights or the regularization of migration. Not all Nigerians who prostitute themselves in the street are exploited; some of them have been in the country legally for several years, and they therefore share information about associations, the type of assistance, and the strategies for obtaining documents. In this sense, the image of an association and the way in which women must approach it can be strongly influenced by the networks they establish on the streets. It happens that in the conversations they have with their friends in the street, many women recommend the institution and provide relevant information about access to social rights.

Although these networks may be beneficial, they sometimes establish power dynamics and social hierarchies in the context of street prostitution. For example, some women use the information they have about access to social rights as a form of status and subject other women to situations of vulnerability. Some women decide to use a false identity in the presence of the Nigerian community because their information could be used to be submitted again and exploited.

The strategies used by women to access migration regularization, such as in applying for a PACS visa, are influenced by different actors. It is possible even the pimps or the cops help them to exercise this type of strategy. As one Nigerian woman says, when she was in the middle of a police checkpoint, the policeman asked her, in relation to her situation of illegal migrant: "why don't you marry a white man instead?" In other words, the victims' behavior with respect to immigration policy is strongly influenced by interactions with associations, authorities and the Nigerian community.

While women may be open in certain aspects, they distrust other people especially when they talk about their past or present in prostitution. They do not even share this information with their partners, concealing the fact that they prostituted themselves mainly because they are ashamed of this aspect of their life (Nigerian, April 10, 2019,

Paris). While women's broader social relations are based on the experience of prostitution, in the most intimate circles, women hide this element from their partners.

All the interactions established by women on the street are not necessarily beneficial. On the basis of the foregoing, the power of information is very important in the interactions established by women, as it exacerbates the conditions of oppression to which they are subjected.

The most significant interactions established by Nigerian women in Europe concern their pimps, as it is they who ultimately determine the mode of integration that women would have. However, the most important effect has not as much to do with the social control as pimps have on the women in Europe, but with the networks of threats made against their families in Nigeria. In fact, some women are not afraid for themselves, as they think the pimp is more likely to harm their family in Nigeria (Nigeria, April 8, 2019, Mouvement du Nid, Paris).

In the refugee visa application process, applicants must prove their vulnerability through testimony. However, the police are aware that most of the women studied in this article give false testimony, so most of them are rejected. This happened in the case of one of the women helped by the association: informed by her pimp, she bought her testimony to apply for a refugee visa on the street (Nigeria, April 8, 2019, Mouvement du Nid, Paris). One of the most interesting elements of this story is that it was the pimp who helped her to regularize her immigrant status. Although this situation may be contradictory, it is not strange. Several women begin their migratory regularization process through their pimps. It is possible that pimps use this strategy to convince women that they have no bad intentions or that they even want to help them stay in France. It may happen that, knowing that the authorities will reject their demands, they encourage women to regularize themselves in order to keep them under exploitation. In addition, it seems that pimps are not afraid of prosecution by police because, although women denounce them, the victims do not have enough information for the police to dismantle the pimping networks.

As mentioned above, there are not enough staff to care for the large number of women. Most of the association's efforts concern the writing of e-mails and letters and administrative tasks. Since many women assisted by the association cannot read, write or use computers, the social worker and benefactors are dedicated to these tasks. Very simple procedures can take a long time. This is highly frustrating for the women because they know that they are not difficult procedures, but they do not feel able to do them alone (field diary, March 8, 2019, Mouvement du Nid, Paris).

In the process of interaction within the association, victims are aware of the stigma to which they are subjected, which is why they use resistance mechanisms to avoid being forwarded to certain social categories, especially when they feel that the volunteers of the institution see them as naive because they believe in African magic. A woman in this context said: *Here in Europe they do not know how strong the magic of juju can be in our lives.* At the same time, women use information control mechanisms to create an identity and an image different from that attributed to them. For example, many women do not say whether they are prostitutes or not, or whether they maintain ties with the trafficking network. While this may be a strategy to play the ideal victim in front of

the authorities, it also serves to resist the stigmatization of prostitutes, pimps, and even clandestine migrants.

On the other hand, for many women, their role as mother, wife and friends is much more important. An example of this is that when women have children, they increase their social status and their identity is defined as the role mother rather than woman. At the same time, the women refuse to be constantly perceived as voiceless victims and, although they are aware of the processes of domination to which they are subjected, they do not believe that their voice has less legitimacy than those who want to represent them politically. As an example of this, when a volunteer tried to organize women to demand more rights in the institution and positioned herself as the leader of the group, a woman responded: *we do not need you to speak for us* (field diary, March 8, 2019, Mouvement du Nid, Paris).

The spaces of interaction show that women use different roles depending on the context to present themselves to the association, the Nigerian community, and the authorities. This is why the definition of identity is not limited to a fixed position, but it is constantly being negotiated and constructed through social relations and the situations they face. On the other hand, the possibility of defining Nigerian women not from their past under exploitation or their present in prostitution, but from their own perspectives, generates a new angle of their trajectory of life. Considering the perspectives of women about their own lives enables them to analyse the complexity, fluidity and transitory nature of their social relationships.

Another interesting aspect has to do with the way women are discriminated against within the association for their religious beliefs. In one of the conversations about prostitution, one woman said that the trafficking in human beings no longer exists because of the King of Benin performed a religious ceremony in order to stop it. By virtue of this, the contractual prostitution ceremonies called “juju”¹⁷ lose their magical effects, which means that pimps and victims will die if they exchange money. The social worker replied that, despite the fate of the king of Benin, Nigerian women continued to come to Europe to prostitute themselves and that the Nigerian woman had finally recognized the reality shown by the social worker. Another woman commented at this time that, despite what one thinks in Europe, magic and witchcraft are very powerful in Africa and have a real effect on people’s lives (Diary, 26 February 2019, Mouvement du Nid, Paris). It is not that the perspective of the association’s staff is irrelevant, but it tends to dominate and invalidate experiences and ways of understanding the world of the women.

Communication between the women and the staff of the institution is never completely clear. Sometimes the social worker never knows if women are really out of prostitution, or how much help they receive from the state. The control of information exercised by women allows them to establish barriers and control the images that others have of them. This type of strategy develops mainly around the language: many women, although they live in Paris and speak French every day, ask if volunteers or social

¹⁷ A religious ceremony where victims must give blood, nails and pubic hair to commit to paying the debt to their pimps.

workers can accompany them in other associations, to get clothes and food, because they do not feel able to fend for themselves.

The establishment of these limits corresponds to forms of resistance to the attribution of social categories. That is, women prevent others from returning them to the stigma of prostitution.¹⁸

Although confrontation with the French authorities is a challenge, they consider this behavior “normal” in the interactions between nationals and foreigners. One of the women believes that the behavior of the police in France is neither discriminatory nor repressive compared to what is experienced in Nigeria.

Although women are discriminated against, they also reproduce racial categories within French society. In some conversations they express their preferences regarding the customers or men they prefer. In one of the conversations, women clearly expressed that the worst clients were “Arabs”, since they were very violent and paid very little. Second, there were those of African origin, and of these the Malians seemed the friendliest. Finally, the French seemed to be the best, since they paid more and were the least violent of all. These same categories applied to the choice of partner. The women expressed their desire to establish links with white French, since they could obtain their documents more quickly. However, they considered that the French were at the same time culturally very different, so there were certain disadvantages (Diary, 26 February 2019, Mouvement du Nid, Paris).

From the above, it can be seen how women are not only victims of social stigmas, but they also reproduce them in society. This behavior can be analyzed as part of the strategy to establish themselves in France, but at the same time as a way to avoid being constantly stigmatized. Thus, despite their exploited situation, it is important for them not to always be seen as victims, but as prostitutes who have the privilege of selecting their clients in some cases, which gives them superior status when compared to other types of prostitution.

The position women present is not obvious: as stated above, they are constantly changing their social codes and the way they present themselves to each other. They do not want to be stigmatized, but at the same time they want to receive the greatest amount of social rights, so they are often forced to play the victim. This constant transformation of characters allows this social subject to be analyzed from a more dynamic perspective, possibly under the category of actresses. However, it would be relevant that future research can consider the identities that women select and consider interesting to define their own trajectories.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this investigation is not to denounce or expose women in an irregular migratory situation before the authorities. On the contrary, it is to describe the level of restriction and violation that migratory policies in France impose on victims of

¹⁸ E. Goffman, *Stigmaté. Les usages sociaux des handicaps*, Paris 1975.

trafficking. In this sense, the visualization of the phenomenon of trafficking as a national security problem, and the distrust of the authorities towards the victims, together with all the requirements for obtaining migratory regularization reproduce the violation of the rights of the victims. Thus, there is a paradox in terms of the way in which migration policies have been carried out, leaving the victims with only one option: to remain in exploitation, under the indirect influence of the State.

On the other hand, it seems pertinent to highlight the strategies and tools used by trafficking victims to survive and remain on the European continent. In this way, the study of the relationships of economic-sexual exchanges established by victims of trafficking could question the category of prostitution formed in Western societies. At the same time, one could reflect on how this moralistic view restricts the victim's capacity for agency. While it is important to highlight the coercion and vulnerability that develops in human trafficking, describing prostitution only as violence against women makes it difficult to analyze the strategies of survival that women develop to face migration policies. In this sense, the study of the relationships and actions of victims of trafficking positions them as protagonists of their lives and migratory journeys. At the same time, it allows us to question and criticize the categories of 'irregular migrant' and 'prostitute'.

The poor relevance of the political discourse of associations in social support is not only due to a lack of interest on the part of women, but also to the priorities of associations in the field of prostitution. It seems that the main interest is in the political debate on the regularization of prostitution, but not necessarily in the social support of women. The omission of the life trajectory of women in France after exploitation reduces their identity to a past of prostitution. On the other hand, the exclusion of women from the debate on public migration policies triggers situations of discrimination. Thus, women sometimes perceive power relations, and put in place a dynamic of resistance and express their frustration at not being heard.

According to the results of my research, the omission of the voice of women from studies on the political construction of prostitution in France means that they are reduced to categories of 'victims' or 'actresses'. In other words, they are only identified as active or passive subjects around an episode of their life, and not as individuals embedded in a continuum of interactions that can respond to a wide range of behaviors depending on the context in which they occur.¹⁹

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Valeria ZAMORANO – anthropologist at the University of Chile and a MA student at Université Paris Diderot. Her master's thesis tackles the difficulties and strategies of social integration of Nigerian women victims of human trafficking in Paris.