

# A Researcher's Visit to Italy: Human trafficking and the Nigerian-Sicilian Mafias

**Mike Omilusi**

*Department of Political Science  
Ekiti State University, Nigeria*

## Abstract

*This essay interrogates the complex nexus between organized crime and migrants within host countries. It specifically focuses on the surge of irregular migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean to Italy and the emergence of Nigerian criminal gangs who have cemented an ignoble but enduring cord with the Sicilian notorious mafia. This network, which took on a life of its own, has changed the traditional map of organised crime on the Island, defying both regional and global measures. The essay expresses concern on how Sicily intends to stop being "the refugee camp of Europe" through increased repatriations in the face of the financial, logistical and humanitarian implications of such an undertaking.*

**Key Words:** *Trafficking, Mafia, Migrants, Organised Crime, Sicily*

## Résumé

*Cet essai examine le lien complexe entre le crime organisé et les migrants dans les pays hôtes. Il s'intéresse plus particulièrement à l'afflux d'immigrants clandestins traversant la Méditerranée centrale en direction de l'Italie et à l'émergence de gangs criminels nigériens qui ont cimenté un lien ignoble mais durable avec la mafia notoire de Sicile. Ce réseau, qui a pris son essor, a modifié la carte traditionnelle du crime organisé sur l'île, défiant toute mesure à la fois régionale et mondiale. L'essai exprime l'inquiétude de savoir comment la Sicile entend cesser d'être «le camp de réfugiés de l'Europe» en augmentant le nombre de rapatriements, compte tenu des implications financières, logistiques et humanitaires d'une telle entreprise.*

**Mots-clés:** *traite, mafia, migrants, crime organisé, Sicile*

## Introduction

My research adventure to the Sicilian Island of Italy substantially complements many of my peripatetic engagements in recent time. At the instance of a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Europe, I was one of the delegates of an Erasmus+ -sponsored project for a take-off *Training-of-Trainers*-workshop in Italy. One striking development on this island is the story of young Africans, who come in their thousands to seek greener pastures in climes regarded as more habitable, organised and developed than their own, and the interests of organised crime in the immigration business, particularly

how the Sicilian Mafia joins forces with the Nigerian criminal gangs to run drug and prostitution rackets. As a matter of fact, the much researched complex nexus between organized crime and migrants within host countries presents an interesting case study in this southern Italian Island.

## The Central Mediterranean Route

While some of these young Africans, who continually join the desperate, massive population movements to Europe, are successfully smuggled across coastal Islands- predominantly for forced labour, domestic servitude or sexual slavery- others are often rescued at sea by charities or coastguard vessels. By accepting to travel the perilous routes, they are ferried there through wooden boats, fishing vessels or decommissioned commercial vessels that make transborder transportation a hellish escapade. Today, Italy remains a primary country of arrival for thousands of migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe especially from the shores of the Libyan coast-line that serves as the major departure point. Based on one account, some 630,000 irregular migrants and refugees, united in their desire to escape from grinding poverty, conflict, personal rejection and uncertainty, landed Italy between 2011 and 2016<sup>1</sup>. In 2017, of more than 171,000 migrants, including refugees that arrived in Europe by sea, 75 percent of them landed in Italy<sup>2</sup>.

The other main route, from Turkey to Greece, was largely shut after more than one million people arrived in 2015. Actually, five out of the ten facilities ("Hotspots"<sup>3</sup>) set up at the EU's external border in Greece and Italy for the initial reception, identification and registration of asylum seekers and other migrants coming to the EU by sea, are in Italy (Lampedusa, Messina, Pozzallo, Taranto and Trapani). In the first half of 2018, about 40 percent of 30,300 migrants that made the life-threatening journey to Europe by sea landed in Italy, most of whom were Africans<sup>4</sup>. Though not a new phenomenon, the surge of irregular migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean, coupled with the emergence of Nigerian criminal gangs, have taken on a life of its own, changing the traditional map of organised crime, defying both regional and global measures. A brief interrogation of this phenomenon will feature in this essay.

- 1 EPSC Strategic Notes (2017) Irregular Migration via the Central Mediterranean, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2017/feb/eu-com-epsc-note-irregular-migration-central-med-2-2-17.pdf>
- 2 Sarah Martelli (2018) A Long Journey for a Chance at a Second Life, <https://www.unicef.org/innovation/stories/uReportonthemoveLongJourney>
- 3 Hotspots were designed to speed up the registration and "distribution" of migrants to other EU countries as part of a quota-based system, where each member state was meant to take a share of migrants. However, they have become synonymous, too, with claims of harassment and long processing times.
- 4 John Filitz (2018) Nigerian Women's Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration, <https://ocfresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>

## The trafficking-smuggling dichotomy

Let me quickly note that there is a sharp distinction between human trafficking and human smuggling which borders on consent or freedom of choice or movement. For instance, while human trafficking entails such individuals- men, women and children- for the purposes of forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation, human smuggling involves the provision of services to an individual who voluntarily seeks to gain illegal entry into a foreign country. Being a commercial transaction, individuals seeking to cross a border without papers exchange money for assistance in making the trip. In other words, while smuggling is transportation-based and involves crossing international borders (smugglers help people cross borders undetected in exchange for payment), trafficking is exploitation-based and thrives on force, fraud or coercion. Whereas trafficking involves the on-going exploitation of the victims in some manner to generate illicit profits for the traffickers, smuggling ends with the arrival of the migrants at their destination. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes:

Trafficking in persons is the acquisition of people by improper means such as force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them... Smuggling of migrants involves the procurement for financial or other material benefit of illegal entry of a person into a State of which that person is not a national or resident.

From all indications, human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises as more than 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders annually<sup>5</sup>. Suffice to say that it is possible for the illicit activity to start out as human smuggling but turn into human trafficking, particularly when “the individual is smuggled and then held and forced into the labour or sex trade”<sup>6</sup>. In either of the categories however, the two most frequently detected types of exploitation, which victims are subjected to, are sexual exploitation and forced labour-in agriculture, manufacturing, fishing, mining, and domestic service. The other emerging trend is organ removal. For trans-regional trafficking flows, it can be a complex web of activities-“recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons”-and involve many offenders. In other words, trafficking of this nature, which is my focus here, can be more easily sustained by large and well-organized criminal groups.

5 Nita Bhalla (2018) Africa's human trafficking is flourishing, and SA is on its route, *BusinessDay*, July 31

6 Bobby J. Guidroz (2017) The difference between human trafficking and smuggling, <https://eu.dailyworld.com/story/opinion/columnists/2017/09/06/difference-between-human-trafficking-and-smuggling/621095001/>

## Nigerian trafficked youth and propelling factors

Today, the flow of migrants across borders has increased. For many Nigerian youth whose unfulfilled existence, occasioned by long years of bad governance by clueless and kleptomaniac leaders, like their other African counterparts, the mere mention of means to vacate the country becomes an alluring offer. And the traffic merchants fill the vacuum. The description (unrealistic promises) of Europe and the Americas as lands of golden opportunities where *hard currencies* change one's miserable life is surely irresistible! As the army of jobless youths swells<sup>7</sup>, so also is the booming trafficking industry. For those who gave their consent to be smuggled or those tricked into modern slavery—the latest generation to buy into the illusion of a promised land— the story is a pathetic one. The least of all their worries however, is which academic concept better captures their status!

The truth is that the number of Nigerian young persons waiting in the Libyan slave camps with a determination to cross the Mediterranean Sea brings home the depressing reality of their home country. In many of the refugee camps I have visited, apart from war-driven nationals of Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia or Eritrea, Nigerians are always seen in large numbers. Even while many claim victims of *Boko Haram* insurgency in north-eastern region of the country, you hardly identify an indigenous/typical Hausa-Fulani man or woman from the region among them, suggesting that many are in search of an end to unfulfilled dreams rather than fleeing from terrorism. For those whose journey was facilitated by the Nigerian mafia, my informant said they arrived in Italy through better and faster ships having fraudulently procured travel documents for their passage into Europe by the agents.

The UN migration agency estimates that about 80 percent of Nigerian women who arrive in Italy, some without papers or passports, are destined for sexual exploitation<sup>8</sup> as they are recruited into Italy's notorious sex trade industry. For boys and young men, forced labour and organ harvesting are among the horrific abuses that await them. The women are charged substantial amount (to be paid in Europe) for the voyage which starts overland from Nigeria, often taking months to reach Libya<sup>9</sup>. More Nigerian migrants arrive in Italy than from any other country, usually recruited from rural, poorly educated and impoverished segments of Nigerian society. With the un-seaworthy boats, hundreds of people die or go missing while attempting the crossing to Europe. Yet,

---

7 The larger percentage of the Nigerian population is under 20 years old; thus, one of the countries with the youngest population in the world.

8 Emma Wallis (2019) Tricked, trafficked and sold: How criminal gangs are bringing Nigerian women to Italy, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/14725/tricked-trafficked-and-sold-how-criminal-gangs-are-bringing-nigerian-women-to-italy>

9 John Filitz (2018) Nigerian Women's Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration, <https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>

for the rest of the world, Merelli<sup>10</sup> posits that, “each tragedy has been an emergency: cause for shock, outrage, and eventually, amnesia”. In all, the victims’ vulnerability to exploitation remains a common factor in every form of modern slavery.

## **The Sicilian Mafia and Nigerian Criminal Gangs: The Unholy Alliance**

Given that the burgeoning migrant smuggling and human trafficking industries constitute a threat to national security- a reality that stares both developed and developing countries in the face- the web of criminal organisations around it becomes an institutional, humanitarian and academic concern. Organized crime- consists of practices ranging from drug and human trafficking to credit card fraud-is by its very nature a transnational phenomenon, thrives on networking and contends with many forces. For it to be sustained in the medium to long term, significant trafficking flows have to be supported by organised criminals.

The role of organized crime in the lives of trafficked migrants in both home and host countries is a complex one. One common denominator however, is that trafficking networks often overlap with organised crime networks who have figured out how to profit from human suffering and are in close relationship with each other. Because the trafficking process involves different stages but same pattern (people are abducted or recruited in the country of origin, transferred through transit regions and then exploited in the country of destination) it often relies on enablers- individuals and entities- that provide goods and services. In other words, there is an enormous diversity as to the different types of active participants in these markets and they include different nationals operating in their area of competence.

The crossing of borders may be done overtly or covertly, legally or illegally<sup>11</sup> and in a variety of ways- hidden in vehicles, by swimming or boating around the barricade, or by directly scaling the fence. There is a group that comprises customers or clients of trafficked persons; this is referred to as *primary demand*. Demand is a multi-faceted problem generated by different actors at different times during the trafficking process. For recruitment purposes, exploiters often use employment and travel agencies, or family and friendship connections. There is also a “passer”, particularly within the African region, who functions as an all-inclusive travel agent for migrants, providing for their food, transportation and sleeping arrangements at every point along their journey.<sup>12</sup>

10 Annalisa Merelli (2017) Rescuing refugees is a matter of common sense on the paradisiacal island of Lampedusa, Quartz Daily Brief, February 3

11 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2008) Human Trafficking: An Overview, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2008/HumanTrafficking-AnOverview.pdf>

12 Malia Politzer and Emily Kassie (2016) The 21st Century Gold Rush: How the refugee crisis is changing the world economy, <https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/the-21st-century-gold-rush-refugees/#/niger>

Taking into account that corruption is an essential weapon in the hands of the criminal gangs/mafia members, it is present at every stage of the trafficking process, beginning with a victim's recruitment and transport through to their exploitation<sup>13</sup>.

According to Maurizio Scalia, a prosecutor in the Sicilian capital, "behind the smugglers, there is a multibillion-dollar business – and that of course attracts the Mafia"<sup>14</sup>. In the case of Sicily, the Nigerian criminal gangs have established a strong presence in several Nigerian towns, and have formed alliances with the Sicilian Mafia, controlling an extensive network of prostitutes and ordering them "on demand"<sup>15</sup> from Nigeria. They have been so successful in mimicking the notorious families that Italian police started addressing them as 'mafia'. The high degree of collaboration between the Italian mafia and Nigerian criminal syndicates, in addition to the unprecedented upsurge of migrants across the existing camps in the country, have connived to overstretch the system and make it vulnerable to low level corruption and infiltration<sup>16</sup>. Today, each street is carefully cleaved between Mafia and Nigerian rule as they have adapted their tactics to capitalize on exploitive opportunities such as targeting asylum-seekers and new waves of refugees.

The word 'Mafia', for many people, is synonymous with Sicily where it refers to the private use of violence in public domains. The Sicilian Mafia is perhaps the most well-known organized crime group. Indeed, with associates holding significant roles in mainstream politics and business, the Sicilian Mafia is considered the most bourgeois of Italy's four main crime syndicates. Its capacity manifests in how it has grown to a worldwide level without losing its roots in Sicilian society. There are other criminal associations based in other regions of southern Italy, and all of them are sometimes called 'mafia': the Sacra Corona Unita, in Puglia (the heel of the Italian boot); the 'Ndrangheta, in Calabria (the toe); and the Camorra, in the city of Naples and its environs (located on the shin)<sup>17</sup>.

Similarly, a criminal gang and former Nigerian university campus confraternity, the Black Axe,<sup>18</sup> that slipped into Italy amongst earlier waves of migrants, has made a living in human trafficking, "creating an almost inescapable web into which many Nigerian

---

13 Transparency International (2011) Breaking the Chain: Corruption and Human Trafficking, [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/breaking\\_the\\_chain\\_corruption\\_and\\_human\\_trafficking](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/breaking_the_chain_corruption_and_human_trafficking)

14 Eric Reguly (2018) Refugee crisis a multibillion-dollar honeypot for Italian Mafia, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/refugee-crisis-a-multibillion-dollar-honeypot-for-italian-mafia/article27186445/>

15 Tom Esslemont (2016) As Nigerian sex trafficking rises, Italy tracks crime kingpins, Thomson Reuters Foundation news, November 9

16 In 2014, what came to be known as the "Mafia Capitale" investigation was initiated, exposing pervasive organized crime infiltration in the migrant reception system and leading to the conviction of 41 people, including former politicians and local officials.

17 John Dickie (2004) *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.

18 The Black Axe was founded in the late 1970s, as a confraternity at the University of Benin, in Nigeria. The group was quickly outlawed across the country for being too violent, too cult-like.

women migrants have become trapped”<sup>19</sup>. The gang, which also engages in fraudulent transfer of money between Europe and Nigeria, is vertically structured and based on strict rules. The Nigerian “Vikings” gang represents another organised criminal network with a fluid leadership structure after the Black Axe was relatively weakened. These Nigerian gangsters entered Italy illegally along with other Africans and later expanded as the number of migrants started increasing. After sometime, they started putting a proper structure in place to recruit migrants who have no official status in the country. As observed by an investigator, “Nigerian mafia is sometimes more violent than the mafia from Palermo”<sup>20</sup>.

The Sicilian mafia, now weakened by years of trials and arrests, offers these networks of Nigerians, protection and resources for drug dealing and prostitution. According to police data, 90 percent of prostitutes in Palermo- the Sicilian capital city and a transit migration area located at the core of the Central Mediterranean Route- come from Nigeria<sup>21</sup>. These well-organized and extremely violent Nigerian mafias, who have drastically increased with more influx of trafficked women, use violence and religious rites to coerce their victims into compliance in addition to being used as drug mules along with men. Apart from involving in drug and prostitution rackets, the Mafia is also fingered in possible control of the companies that provide catering, cleaning, clothing, medicine and other vital services to the refugee camps in Sicily.<sup>22</sup> In order to obtain government contracts that are tremendously rewarding, the mafia frequently threatens politicians in position of authority. Needless to say that migrant detention camps have long become a source of profit for numerous companies because public contracts are assigned in exchange for bribes and kickbacks. By implication, they have clandestine access to the management of the activities of the increasing number of these centres.

The Nigerian merchants harbour the prostitution network headed by women popularly known as “madam”. Each madam is in charge of two to three trafficked girls, who are referred to as “babies”. They have cemented an inglorious but enduring cord with notorious mafias not only in perpetuating this enterprise and other criminal activities but placing law enforcement agencies under pressure. In a region famous for Italy’s most storied mafia organization, UK’s Guardian posits that, “neighbourhoods under mafia control have changed profoundly in recent years due to the growing presence of foreigners, especially Nigerians coming on boats”<sup>23</sup>. According to Maxwell (not his real name), one of the civil society’s change agent in the Palermo city, the mafia has long infiltrated Italy’s asylum system, making their business a seemingly entrenched one.

---

19 Ron Mwanguhunga (2018) Nigerian Gangs, The Mafia, Human Trafficking And Italy, <https://www.openletr.co/find-your-truth/nigerian-gangs-the-mafia-human-trafficking-and-italy3182018>

20 Simon Osborne (2016) The Black Axe: Italy faces chilling new organised crime group more ruthless than the mafia, Express, November 21

21 Lorenzo Tondo (2016) Mafia at a crossroads as Nigerian gangsters hit Sicily’s shores, June 11

22 Eric Reguly op cit

23 Lorenzo Tondo (2016) Mafia at a crossroads as Nigerian gangsters hit Sicily’s shores, June 11

Even the public prosecutor in Palermo, Nino Di Matteo, is an endangered man who has had around-the-clock protection for the last 25 years because the notorious mafia continually wants him dead. Indeed, 42 officers work in shifts to provide his security in the city<sup>24</sup>.

## **Criminal networks, governments' intervention and the brick-walls**

Although governments and international organisations show much concern to issues of crime and migration, evidence from the literature reveals that mafia members who run sex rings on the Italian island, have established a hidden but lethal presence in Africa. Italy today, as affirmed by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, is a destination of more than 10,000 Nigerian prostitutes. An attempt was made in 2017 by the chief prosecutor of Catania- another Sicilian city- to ban aid groups from bringing refugees to Italian shores after rescuing them from the sea. But it remains a mere attempt as the magnitude of trafficking is steadily growing in the last decade while host countries are hamstrung by international conventions and bilateral agreements. According to the International Organisation for Migration, there has been an almost 600 per cent increase in the number of potential sex trafficking victims arriving in Italy by sea since 2014<sup>25</sup>. The system behind human trafficking appears extremely difficult to break through, according to Rosario Maida, head of the Criminal Investigation Department for Minors and Sexual Offenses in Palermo<sup>26</sup>- long the centre of wealth and power of the island.

With the establishment of refugee camps/reception centres in Sicily, many social challenges have also sprung up both for the local community and migrants. These centers were initially designed to hold people for a short time until they could be more fully integrated into the secondary welcome network. Sadly, while awaiting a status determination in many of these centres, social marginalisation, forced evictions, reduced access to healthcare, and physical violence become the lot of many migrants. Countries such as Britain, France and Germany have urged the EU to set up further centres in Italy and Greece to fingerprint migrants and help separate asylum-seekers fleeing war from those motivated by economic reasons.

At the Cara di Mineo which serves as a welcome centre for those requesting asylum, many migrants fall victim to Mafia exploitation. Cara di Mineo, about 70km from the coast in central Sicily, is one of the biggest migrant camps in Europe, and it has become a laboratory that breeds many potential miscreants. Migrants are usually told they will

24 Walter Mayr (2017) Paradise Looted: How Sicily Became Ungovernable, Spiegel Online, November 10

25 The Telegraph (2017) Nigerian girls as young as 13 increasingly trafficked to Italy to work as street prostitutes, September 14

26 Von Helen Hecker (2018) From Refugee to Sex Slave: How African women are propelled into prostitution, <https://www.deine-korrespondentin.de/from-refugee-to-sex-slave/>



be there for six months, but often stay longer owing to delays in the asylum procedure. Obviously a source of frustration, bewilderment and worry for many, they sometimes have to wait as long as eighteen months (appeal period inclusive) to find out whether they are to be granted asylum or instead be deported.

While waiting to obtain legal status, the criminal networks infiltrate the camp. Indeed, cases of violence, rape and even murders linked to the centre and its inhabitants have been reported by national newspapers in the past. The Cosa Nostra has not only found ways to benefit monetarily from the migrants, it has also integrated them into mafia-related criminal enterprises in Sicily. At the beginning of 2019, Italy's Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini announced that the reception centre would be closed by the end of the year after it was reported that a Nigerian crime gang was operating from the camp. Women often casually engage in sex work as they roam the countryside and its surrounding highways to earn some money, risking physical abuse and disease in the process. Other migrants and refugees, especially men with scant work opportunities, are often engaged in back-breaking labour as agricultural workers and are paid as little as €15 for a 12 to 18-hour day for hard labour in very poor conditions<sup>27</sup>.

The Nigerian gangs use the neighbourhood's historic but rundown houses to hold the women, and sometimes underage girls, whom they force to prostitute themselves on the city streets<sup>28</sup>, joining other Nigerians who now make up nearly half of the street prostitutes working in Italy. They operate in collaboration with other mafia groups both in Nigeria and in Libya. The Nigerian gangs often reach agreements with Sicilian criminal groups to "obtain protection or at least approval to carry out their exploitation in the form of prostitution"<sup>29</sup>. To keep them in work, the ladies are forced to pay off their 'debts' (often between \$30,000 and \$45,000) —being the cost of travel and accommodation in Europe. Thus, it is a prevailing eyesore as Nigerian teenagers and young women sell sex for motorists in Italy. As a matter of necessity or compulsion, they hand over the money to their female pimps on a daily basis.

Interestingly, for trafficked women and girls who want to escape life on the streets, the Italian government once tripled its funding from 8 million euros in 2015 to 22.5 million in 2017 to help them<sup>30</sup>. Also, Italian law provides for immediate protection—and a permit to live in the country—for any sex trafficking victim who presses charges against members of the criminal organisation. But for Bridget (a pseudonym), who I met at the Palermo train station, relocating to another region of the country may be an alternative. Like several others, she was duped into believing she would find good jobs in Europe. For three years, nothing meaningful came out of their existence as they got

27 Connie Agius (2015) How organised crime profits from Italy's immigration boom, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-06/agus-migrants-and-organised-crime/6829714>

28 Jelter Meers (2017) Italy: After Cosa Nostra, Nigerian Black Axe New Foe for Police, <https://www.occrp.org/en/27-ccwatch/cc-watch-briefs/8095-aly-after-cosa-nostra-nigerian-black-axe-new-foe-for-police>

29 Associated Press (2018) Italy stems immigration, short on aiding indebted sex slaves, March 7

30 Associated Press (2018) Italy stems immigration, short on aiding indebted sex slaves, March 7

confined in private homes owned by the *Nigerian madams*<sup>31</sup> and gangsters in Palermo. At 23, that is six years after she left Nigeria and less than three years she arrived in Palermo, it is obvious that her vulnerability to the traffickers' lies and blackmail could be partly premised on age. The girls often deny that they are minors having been told by the exploiters to avoid the children's protection system<sup>32</sup>. In the first nine months of 2018, it is reported that almost 20 percent of those who reached Europe by sea from Libya were children under the age of 18<sup>33</sup>. "I have to start working for myself now; my brother, I don't know", she parted with those words as she made her way to the arriving train. Bridget's experience encapsulates the suffering, dashed hopes and of many trafficked ladies roaming the streets of Italy for survival.

### **Curbing human trafficking with collective determination: Concluding Remarks**

Trafficking in persons- driven by the growing need for cheap and exploitable labour- is modern-day slavery that violates fundamental human rights enshrined in international law. Combating it requires that all hands must be on deck at different levels of bilateral or multilateral engagements. For the current study, the anti-human trafficking agreement between Nigeria and Italy, as an international collaboration to confront human trafficking for sexual exploitation, appears to have had a negligible impact. Given its rapid growth in recent years, trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation and forced labour particularly on the Africa-Italy axis has become a global threat. One can safely posit that such bilateral agreement needs to be strengthened. Though the development of coherent action to combat trafficking in human beings is a major breakthrough, it needs more commitment from the parties.

For the home country, Nigeria in this instance, serious attempt should be made to reduce vulnerabilities to trafficking through targeted public information campaigns and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including criminal justice experts, the private sector, civil society, local communities and concerned citizens. Awareness should be created around the increasing linkages between smugglers and traffickers, and the vulnerabilities of smuggled migrants to abuse and exploitation. The country should localise the anti-trafficking discourse in which measures to curb trafficking or to provide

31 Madams are older Nigerian women, sometimes former prostitutes themselves, who have climbed the organizational ranks

32 Save the Children, Italy (2017) *Young Invisible Enslaved: Children Victims Of Trafficking and Labour Exploitation*.

33 Human Rights Watch (2019) *No Escape from Hell: EU Policies Contribute to Abuse of Migrants in Libya*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/01/21/no-escape-hell/eu-policies-contribute-abuse-migrants-libya>. In 2016 there were 181,436 arrivals in Italy by sea. Of these there was an estimated 30,000 minors present in the mixed migration of those seeking refuge, work, futures, hope in Europe.

state support for victims are regularly taken to the grassroots. Nigeria should collaborate with other countries, particularly with a transit country like Libya<sup>34</sup> “where there are such inhumane, instrumental and cyclical forms of financial and venal extraction played out on young African’s lives”<sup>35</sup>, to develop appropriate mechanisms with a view to sharing cross-border intelligence and co-ordinating efforts to bust trafficking rings. More importantly, pro-poor policies-rooted in good governance-should be the focus of governments at all levels and develop measures that keep at-risk individuals safe from human trafficking. The country is resource and human capital-rich to make life more abundant for its citizens so that the desperate motive of seeking “good life” abroad will be drastically reduced. As rightly observed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime<sup>36</sup>:

While not to undermine the need for the international community to address the “demand” side of trafficking, these vulnerabilities hail the need for more opportunities for education, health, jobs and safe social mobility to be made available to people who may otherwise fall prey to the “supply” side of trafficking.

For country of destination, the issue of organized crime and forced migration must be re-examined. Suppressing the international activities of traffic in persons through enhanced and effective legal means to prosecute members of the criminal gangs will serve as a deterrent. Also, understanding the root causes in the context of origin countries as well as the pull factors attracting the traffickers in destination countries is a key to identify effective prevention strategies. Similarly, by pressuring governments in Africa and the Middle East to stem onward migration in exchange for aid, as one of the pillars of European Union’s current migration policy clearly indicates, may put the home countries in proactive mode. Nevertheless, the international responsibility to protect asylum seekers and refugees should be adhered to. Above all, concerned countries should genuinely key into the 3P paradigm of prosecution, protection, and prevention, adopted by the global anti-trafficking movement, with a view to strengthening existing strategies/policies.

The journey to Sicily was too painful and dangerous<sup>37</sup>- involving cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and other forms of indignities - for migrants to be considering self-return even after a seemingly futile adventure by many. The news from “home” is not cheering either as pressure from equally frustrated relatives mounts daily. They may have run from hardship, violence and war, but the dire situation most of these young Africans

34 For instance, Italy’s government is directly training and funding the Libyan coast guard, in parallel to the EU’s efforts.

35 European Stability Initiative, 28 April 2019, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

36 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2008) Human Trafficking: An Overview, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2008/HumanTrafficking-AnOverview.pdf>

37 Nicole Bonaccorso (2018) From Refugee to Commodity, <https://features.weather.com/exodus/chapter/from-refugee-to-commodity/>

find themselves, especially for the economic migrants, can be as hazardous as the one they escaped from. How Sicily intends to stop being “the refugee camp of Europe” through increased repatriations in the face of the financial, logistical and humanitarian implications of such an undertaking may be unrealisable for now! Indeed, for host countries contemplating deportation of the “undocumented migrants”, they are regularly advised not to politicise a humanitarian issue or take a risk at fomenting racism. For the mafia enterprise however, nothing has been better than thousands of migrants who have arrived in Sicily with too little to do in the last two decades; ironically the same period the Cosa Nostra mafia has been unprecedentedly squeezed by the security agencies.

## References

- Agius, Connie (2015) How organised crime profits from Italy’s immigration boom, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-06/agi-us-migrants-and-organised-crime/6829714>
- Associated Press (2018) Italy stems immigration, short on aiding indebted sex slaves, March 7
- Bhalla, Nita (2018) Africa’s human trafficking is flourishing, and SA is on its route, *BusinessDay*, July 31
- Bonaccorso, Nicole (2018) From Refugee to Commodity, <https://features.weather.com/exodus/chapter/from-refugee-to-commodity/>
- Dickie, John (2004) *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Emma Wallis (2019) Tricked, trafficked and sold: How criminal gangs are bringing Nigerian women to Italy, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/14725/tricked-trafficked-and-sold-how-criminal-gangs-are-bringing-nigerian-women-to-italy>
- EPSC Strategic Notes (2017) Irregular Migration via the Central Mediterranean, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2017/feb/eu-com-epsc-note-irregular-migration-central-med-2-2-17.pdf>
- Esslemont, Tom (2016) As Nigerian sex trafficking rises, Italy tracks crime kingpins, *Thomson Reuters Foundation news*, November 9
- Filitz, John (2018) Nigerian Women’s Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration, <https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>
- Filitz, John (2018) Nigerian Women’s Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration, <https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>
- Guidroz, Bobby J. (2017) The difference between human trafficking and smuggling, <https://eu.dailyworld.com/story/opinion/columnists/2017/09/06/difference-between-human-trafficking-and-smuggling/621095001/>

- Human Rights Watch (2019) No Escape from Hell: EU Policies Contribute to Abuse of Migrants in Libya, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/01/21/no-escape-hell/eu-policies-contribute-abuse-migrants-libya>
- Lorenzo, Tondo (2016) Mafia at a crossroads as Nigerian gangsters hit Sicily's shores, *The Guardian*, June 11
- Martelli, Sarah (2018) A Long Journey for a Chance at a Second Life, <https://www.unicef.org/innovation/stories/uReportonthemoveLongJourney>
- Meers, Jelter (2017) Italy: After Cosa Nostra, Nigerian Black Axe New Foe for Police, <https://www.occrp.org/en/27-ccwatch/cc-watch-briefs/8095-aly-after-cosa-nostra-nigerian-black-axe-new-foe-for-police>
- Merelli, Annalisa (2017) Rescuing refugees is a matter of common sense on the paradisiacal island of Lampedusa, *Quartz Daily Brief*, February 3
- Mwangaguhunga, Ron (2018) Nigerian Gangs, The Mafia, Human Trafficking And Italy, <https://www.openletr.co/find-your-truth/nigerian-gangs-the-mafia-human-trafficking-and-italy3182018>
- Osborne, Simon (2016) The Black Axe: Italy faces chilling new organised crime group more ruthless than the mafia, *Express*, November 21
- Politzer, Malia and Kassie, Emily (2016) The 21st Century Gold Rush: How the refugee crisis is changing the world economy, <https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/the-21st-century-gold-rush-refugees/#/niger>
- Reguly, Eric (2018) Refugee crisis a multibillion-dollar honeypot for Italian Mafia, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/refugee-crisis-a-multibillion-dollar-honeypot-for-italian-mafia/article27186445/>
- Save the Children, Italy (2017) Young Invisible Enslaved: Children Victims Of Trafficking and Labour Exploitation, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/young-invisible-enslaved-children-victims-trafficking-and-labour-exploitation-italy>
- The Telegraph (2017) Nigerian girls as young as 13 increasingly trafficked to Italy to work as street prostitutes, September 14
- Transparency International (2011) Breaking the Chain: Corruption and Human Trafficking, [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/breaking\\_the\\_chain\\_corruption\\_and\\_human\\_trafficking](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/breaking_the_chain_corruption_and_human_trafficking)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2008) Human Trafficking: An Overview, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2008/HumanTrafficking-AnOverview.pdf>
- Von, Helen Hecker (2018) From Refugee to Sex Slave: How African women are propelled into prostitution, <https://www.deine-korrespondentin.de/from-refugee-to-sex-slave/>
- Walter, Mayr (2017) Paradise Looted: How Sicily Became Ungovernable, Spiegel Online, November 10