

## **Libya: African Women in “chains”**

**African pimps recruit young women born in poor families from Sub Saharan Africa, promising a job in Italy. Despite the promises, girls will never go to Italy and will end their journey prostituting themselves to regain their freedom.**

African illegal residents walk around Medina square, in the heart of Tripoli, Libya’s capital. People coming from Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone live here, waiting for the departure to Italy across the sea.

At night time, they sleep in abandoned houses or inside cars. During the day, they approach other people, particularly the black ones. “May I do something for you? Are you interested in?” they ask in English or in Arabic.

The message is an allusion. They pretend to be “strikers”, but they are just intermediates looking for clients for prostitutes from Ghana and Nigeria, forced to live blocked in sordid houses.

Barely 10 minutes away from this squalid place, can visitor admire the landscape’s beauty: Mediterranean shores ships at the quay...but the alley stops at a crossroads.

R., a 22 Nigerian pimp, leads us towards a crumbling structure apparently abandoned. He reveals his identity and the doors open, showing a narrow corridor leading into a big room.

Six naked young women throw themselves on clients.

“Choose one of them. When you will be alone, she will abandon herself to you, if you give more money,” suggests our guide.

### ***Buying freedom***

Fatima leads us into a place she calls her sleeping room: a section of corridor separated by a slice of material. An old mattress works as the bed. In a big room without windows, four intermediates discuss with the cashier, waiting for the client at the exit.

Fatima asks for ten dinars, almost six euros. The cashier writes down the amount in his notebook, where he has registered the girls who are under his charge. He takes five dinars, and the other half will be credited to the girl, who will give it up to her madam, the woman who controls her.

The money collected is never refunded if you are no longer interested," Fatima warned, after finding my reluctance to take action. Handing her another 10 dinars, I told her in whispers that I am a journalist and I just want to know how she got there.

"We all here have been led by women who promise to carry us across the sea to Italy, she says. Meanwhile, we have to prostitute ourselves to repay what they have spent from Nigeria until here. Once in Italy, we will continue to do so before being finally free," she says.

These women work in girls' nations with recruiters, who identify the girls and condition them and their families psychologically. The most beautiful, chosen in poor families, are always the preys.

After the recruitment, they bring them to Libya, where they live in flats rented by their madam. Local police seem unaware of this traffic although in Libya prostitution is a crime. This fact that makes intermediate even more mistrustful.

### ***Dreaming about Europe***

While coming back, our guide does not hide his fears well. "I hope you won't take the police here. The youngest among the girls is my junior 'sister, and I am scared something could happen to her," he says.

She is 19 and in Nigeria worked as a hairdresser. She was deceived by a client, who came in her shop claiming she was the owner of a hairdresser shop in Italy.

"She left her job to follow this person that took her here. Today, she is closed in a room, forced to be a prostitute to repay 2,500 dollars this woman wants to let her go free."

R. admits he has found clients for her. "In less than ten days, she has already earned 200 dollars. She should be free within a few months, and I promise I will bring her back to Nigeria."

According to him, the girls in this group as others who work in close rooms in Libya have travelled far by road, crossing several borders. By selling their body, they gain freedom but they go on prostituting themselves with the hope of earning enough to cross the Mediterranean.

However, due to the increased controls along the coast, the number of African prostitutes is slowly declining. Some of them have gone back to their countries, but others have left Libya for other Western African nations.

According to our intermediate, last year, Libya was full of girls coming from all around Africa, but now only Nigerian women are still here. ☒

Approached at the market of Medina, three African women recognized by our guide pose as honest traders specializing in the import-export. "We are foreigners and know nothing of Libya", said in English, one of them.

Her comments, reported to our guide, make him smile bitterly: "If recruiting poor and naive girls from sub-Saharan Africa and forcing them into prostitution is a business, then they are right to stand as Import-export traders ..."

**By Charles Nforang**