Between “Victims” and “Criminals”: Rescue, Deportation, and Everyday Violence Among Nigerian Migrants

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This article is about the lives of Nigerian sex workers after deportation from Europe, as well as the institutions that intervene in their migration trajectories. In Europe, some of these women’s situations fit the legal definitions of trafficking, and they were categorized as “victims of human trafficking”; others were categorized as undocumented migrants—“criminals” guilty of violating immigration laws. Despite the growing political attention devoted to protecting victims of trafficking, I argue that in areas of Nigeria prone to economic insecurity and gender-based violence, the categories of “victim” and “criminal” collapse into, and begin to resemble, one another once on the ground. The need to identify and distinguish groups of migrants from one another illustrates the dilemmas that have arisen in the wake of increasingly restrictive European immigration policies. Furthermore, the return processes create a hierarchical structure in which the violence women experience in the sex industry in Europe is imagined to be worse than the everyday violence they experience at home.

In 1999, forty-seven women and seventeen men were deported from Germany and Italy to their native Nigeria on a chartered Alitalia flight under the escort of one hundred and twenty Italian police.¹ Upon arrival in Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, they were paraded before the press and broadcast on national television to thirty million Nigerian viewers. The Nigerian newspaper The Post Express wrote that, “The year 1999 may go down in history as the year the image of Nigeria received the worst bashing abroad following the alleged involvement of some of her female citizens in social crimes such as prostitution abroad.” Chief Samuel Obadiaru subsequently addressed the women through the press saying, “We feel ashamed over what is happening especially since you were deported following your ignorable roles in Italy. This situation is shameful and painful. This humiliation ought to have taught you some lesson” (Aligwo 1999).²

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This event marked one of the first times that the Nigerian public was made aware of the deportations of Nigerian sex workers from Europe. The display received a great deal of attention, and it is still prominent in public debates, even though hundreds of chartered airplanes departing from Europe have disembarked in Lagos with Nigerian deportees since 1999. There has been a significant change, however, in the public description of deported sex workers. These women are now also portrayed, both by Nigerian and European media as well as by politicians and anti-trafficking organizations, as “victims of trafficking” who should be rescued, rather than merely shameful “criminals” (Aliu 2012; BBC 2012; Olayinka 2012). The inclusion of the word victim reflects mounting international attention directed toward “sex trafficking in women” as a dangerous manifestation of global gender inequalities (Bernstein 2010). This has resulted in shifting legal frameworks in which the women identified as victims are now returned through humanitarian reintegration programs as opposed to merely punitive deportations.

Despite the vast public and political attention that has been devoted to human trafficking, studies of sex worker returnees are few. Perhaps this is because their stories after rescue are similar to the stories of so many other migrants and deportees who revolve around the challenges of their daily, mundane struggles to build a new life. It is an ongoing story, less finite and flashy than the story of their escape or rescue (Brennan 2005). Instead, scholarly and political debates have been preoccupied with distinguishing between and conceptualizing the “victims,” the “criminals,” and the gray zones within studies of migration, sex work, and human trafficking. Such debates have often taken their empirical point of departure from studies conducted while the migrants were still in Europe, analyzing the complex situations in which immigration authorities, the police, and social workers, within a few hours, days, or weeks, attempt to identify whether the migrant is a victim of trafficking and/or an undocumented migrant. As a crucial supplement to such analyses, this article is based on ethnographic fieldwork among migrants who, both as “victims” and “criminals,” have been returned “home” to Nigeria. It comparatively analyzes how the designations of “victims” and “criminals” affect the lives of Nigerian migrant sex workers in the long-term post-deportee context.

In Europe, some of the Nigerian women in this study had been involved in situations that fit the countries’ legal definitions of human trafficking and were thus categorized as “victims of human trafficking,” whereas others were categorized as “undocumented migrants,” because they lacked the required legal documents to reside or work in Europe. Engaging this distinction, the first part of the article analyzes the process of identifying “victims” from “criminals” within Europe and how this relates to the ethnographic context of Nigerian return migration.

I draw upon the narratives of two Nigerian women, Grace and Cynthia, who despite their shared experiences of sex work in Europe, were categorized, respectively, as a “victim of trafficking” and a “criminal” and both deported to
Nigeria. The two women lived and worked undocumented while in Europe, and both incurred heavy debts to finance their migration, which they sought to repay through sex work. In the second section of this article, I investigate the local meanings of these distinctions in the social fabric of everyday life in the Nigerian localities to which the women were returned.6

In the final section, I argue that while the identification of victims of trafficking is given high priority in scholarly and political debates, the categories of “victim” and “criminal” ultimately collapse into and begin to resemble one another once the women return home. This collapse is caused by the three interweaving dynamics of increased familial responsibilities, economic hardships, and everyday violence. In this article, I focus in particular on the last of these dynamics—the common and shared experiences of everyday violence—in the lives of both “victims” and “criminals” upon return.7 As a corollary to the collapse of categories, I argue that the deportations and the need to identify and distinguish groups of migrants from each other ultimately illustrate the dilemmas that have arisen as a result of increasingly restrictive European immigration policies.

**Humanitarian and Punitive Deportations**

The following analysis engages with debates within critical trafficking studies, deportation studies, and critical humanitarianism. These debates are relevant in a political environment in which most European countries have ambitious plans to rescue victims of trafficking, yet deport or return the women regardless of whether or not they are formally categorized as such. Thus, on the one hand, there is a humanitarian impulse to “rescue” victims of trafficking. On the other hand, however, there are enforced methods of surveillance, detention, and deportation deployed as part of a contemporary deportation regime (De Genova and Peutz 2010) in which deportation is used as an increasingly global mechanism of state control, and not merely an instrument of immigration policy (Kanstrom 2007; De Genova and Peutz 2010).8

Critical trafficking studies have elucidated how discourses on trafficking are embedded within complex discursive logics of both victimization and criminality (Andrijasevic 2010), which neatly attempt to separate innocent and exploited “victims” from “criminals” who are guilty of exploiting immigration laws.9 In this way, trafficking victims, described as vulnerable women and children forced from the safety of home into gross sexual exploitation, are distinguished from economic migrants who are understood to have willfully violated national borders for individual gain (Chapkis 2003). The effect of distinguishing is, however, that those who are not found worthy of compassion are not simply ignored, but condemned and criminalized because “they are perceived as having failed in some important moral way” (Ticktin 2011, 23). The response is deportation without any humanitarian assistance. Although most
scholars of trafficking agree that trafficking victims are, of course, also economic migrants, contemporary migration governance operates from an either/or perspective.

Analyses of the discursive logics of victimization and criminality illuminate the complex ways in which normative ideas of gender, sexuality, and victimhood subsume processes of distinguishing between “victims” and “criminals.” The anthropologist Miriam Ticktin argues that identification of suffering is a characteristic of contemporary humanitarian migration governance subsumed by ideas of “the morally legitimate suffering body” (Ticktin 2011, 3). The Nigerian migrant woman is presumed to embody morally legitimate suffering worthy of protection because of her job as a sex worker in Europe. Yet, as merely an “undocumented immigrant” she is morally illegitimate for protection. Such ambiguous perceptions and the politics of victimhood are crucial to our understanding of how humanitarianism is legitimized in EU member states that simultaneously seek to balance humanitarian aspirations and repressive sovereignty within the field of migration governance, ultimately bringing to the fore the ways in which the state identifies the bodies it wants to rescue, and those it does not.

As Nigeria is the main non-EU country of origin of identified and presumed victims of trafficking in the EU, and among the top five nationalities residing undocumented there, Nigerian migration allows us to explore the ways in which European migration governance distinguishes between “victims” and “criminals” (Bitoulas 2013; Eurostat 2013). Most Nigerian migrants applying for asylum state ethnic and religious persecution or human trafficking within the sex industry as their reason, yet their cases are almost always denied and the migrants receive an order of removal eventually leading to deportation (Eurostat 2013).

In the EU context, deportations and the return of trafficking victims are practiced primarily through two different return programs: the EU Joint Return Program (JRP) deports the “criminals,” while the Assisted Voluntary Return Program (AVR) returns the “victims.” If one is being returned through the AVR, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in cooperation with national institutions and/or NGOs arranges for the “victim” to receive a sum of money upon return, which they can use to reintegrate into their country of origin. Hence, the identified victims of human trafficking receive a humanitarian deportation where they get a resource package, and the “criminals” receive a punitive deportation with no resource package.

In the EU context, the numbers of migrants deported through JRP are far higher than the assisted voluntary returnees, and thus, the AVR is a humanitarian exception within the deportation regime. By definition, deportation is an unambiguous exercise which “entails the loss of any right to reside and a complete severing of the relationship between the state and the individual” (Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti 2011, 548). Yet, through the AVR programs, deportation becomes an ambiguous exercise, because the women are returned.
as “victims” and as such they are granted temporary rights and privileges by
the deporting state during the phase of reintegration.

Before analyzing how the designations of “victims” and “criminals” impact
the women upon return to Nigeria, it is useful to take a look at the red light
district in Copenhagen where Nigerian women migrate to work to explore how
these designations come to be constructed in a Danish context. Denmark is
not representative of all EU states as they have implemented immigration and
anti-trafficking laws differently. Yet, all EU states share the challenge of distin-
guishing between “victim” and “criminal” migrants.

Drawing the Line Between “Victims” and “Criminals”

A Danish policeman in civilian clothing is soliciting offers from a Nigerian
woman walking the streets in the red light district of Copenhagen. He makes
sure he gets the woman to mention the word sex and the price of the service.
After approximately an hour he, along with a few other policemen, have soli-
cited seven offers from a group of Nigerian women, and their chief inspector
decides they have enough evidence to begin a so-called sweeping-maneuver—a
raid meant to “sweep” sex workers, in this case primarily Nigerian women, off
the street. After dramatic scenes of policemen running after and detaining
the women, fifteen women are arrested, handcuffed, and brought to the police
station.

At the station, the women have their photographs and fingerprints taken
and the interrogations begin: “Where do you come from?” the female police
officer (PO) asks. “Nigeria,” the woman (W) replies. PO: “Where in Nigeria?”
them.” PO: “Was Spain the first European country you came to?” W: “Yes, that
is where I have been.” PO: “How did you get there ( . . .) did someone arrange
your trip or did you just do it all by yourself?” The Nigerian woman shakes her
head. The officer continues, “We know that there are people who earn money
on girls who are working on the streets.” The woman shakes her head again.
“No, you have made a mistake.” The officer raises her voice, “Damn it—it is
not written on a sign in the airport that you can go to Vesterbro [The Red
Light District in Copenhagen] and prostitute yourself. So I think it would be
nice if you just told me where you live and who is helping you here in
Denmark?” W: “Nobody helped me. If I work as a prostitute I do it for a
reason. I have family. I have younger ones that I take care of. So can I please
borrow the phone and call my younger ones, because they will be worried.
They can’t take care of themselves at home now.” The officer replies, “I know
you are not working as a prostitute because you want to—but because you
need to.” The woman shakes her head again and starts crying. The officer
serves her a cup of tea, hands her a tissue to wipe her tears and continues, “If
someone is controlling you here in Denmark and if someone is taking some of
your money, then we can help. We can protect you. But then you need to tell us the truth.” The woman continues crying. (Field notes, Copenhagen, March 2009).

The “sweeping-maneuvers” and interrogations have a double function; to identify and separate “victims” from “criminals”—the willful undocumented migrants—as well as to get the women to denounce their traffickers. Upon police interrogation, the women are offered the option of talking to a social worker employed by the governmental Danish Centre against Human Trafficking or to a government-approved NGO. The social worker’s job is to determine if the woman is, under the conscripts of Danish law, a “victim of human trafficking” and eligible for humanitarian assistance. The interview with the social worker resembles the police interrogation, and often the migrant women cannot tell the difference between them. The social workers’ identification interviews are based upon a range of predetermined questions. For instance, the woman is asked to explain her migration situation, her route to Europe, if she is in possession of her identification papers, if she has been involved in prostitution, and if s/he has been kidnapped/sold, deceived, or exploited (CMM 2011). On the basis of these information, the social worker has to check one of four boxes that declare that the migrant is trafficked, under suspicion of trafficking, under no suspicion of trafficking, or not trafficked. If the interviewee is identified as a victim of trafficking, she is offered an AVR and at a later stage asked to sign a Declaration of Voluntary Return in which she declares “that I wish to return to my country of origin on my own free will” (IOM 2010). Out of the fifteen Nigerian women I met that night, thirteen women were driven to the detention center to be deported and two of them were identified as victims and driven to a shelter.

During the interview processes, it becomes clear, even to the Nigerian woman, that she only deserves humanitarian assistance if she has been deceived, sold, and/or forced to sell sex. The woman’s explanation that she engages in prostitution to take care of her younger ones does not legitimize humanitarian assistance. The identification process mirrors and is justified by the belief that, within a continuum of abuse, not all migrants can be “deserving” victims. Furthermore, social workers and police officers often have to decide on the designation within a limited time frame, in the midst of multiple migrant statuses, experiences, and messy gray zones. The interviews provide detailed insight into how social workers and police officers assist the state in “drawing the line,” and in the process become border guards, as they identify a few legitimate victims and exclude the rest.

The women cannot obtain the resources that go with “victim” status unless they provide evidence that their migration project, to earn money abroad, has been co-opted for the benefit of someone else. This appropriation of one’s migration project is, I argue, a “trafficking narrative.” It is what transforms the women from “economic migrants who have willfully violated immigration laws” into “victims of trafficking.” In a bureaucratic context, the “trafficking
narrative” is interpreted by the social workers, police officers, and immigration officials who listen to the migrant’s story. Their interpretations have consequences for the Nigerian women and will determine if they are eligible for an AVR program or detention and deportation on the next plane to Nigeria.17

The women’s responses to these identification interviews were typically silence, crying, outspoken frustration, or rephrasing of the questions in an attempt to understand the process. When the women asked “Why do you ask me this question?” Or “What does that question have to do with me?” they were trying to figure out what kind of answers the social workers and the police were searching for. As one woman explained; “I did not know the consequences of telling the truth. Nor did I know the consequence of not telling the truth.” The atmosphere during these interview sessions was often intensely claustrophobic, spurred by the urgency of the moment and the complexity of the agendas at play. The police were searching for a potential crime, social workers were trying to identify a potential victim, and the women feared the consequences of their responses, and ultimately, deportation.

Finally, as the above discussion makes clear, humanitarian assistance comes with a condition, poignantly played out in the interrogation room in the formulation of the police woman; “We can only protect you—if you tell us the truth.” Through the identification process, undocumented migrants can become legal subjects of humanitarian care, yet always at a cost, what Foucault identified as the paradox of governmental recognition (Foucault 1978; invoked in Ticktin 2011). That is, being recognized by the state involves the production of a victim narrative (Giordano 2008) and the commitment to being reintegrated in Nigeria, otherwise the women are deported without assistance. Swapping the “truth” for a deportation, though humanitarian, was an act of reciprocity the women found incongruent with their immediate needs. Despite their complexities, such identification interviews are an everyday practice in EU states and determine whether migrants are deported as “criminals,” or returned to their countries of origin as “victims.” In the following sections, I explore how these two categories are given meaning in the social fabric of everyday life in the post-deportation context.

From Migration to Deportation

As the Nigerian woman in the interrogation room in Copenhagen explained, her journey originated in Benin City in Southern Nigeria, the city where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. Benin City, in popular language called Benin, has received significant attention in media, political, and popular discourse as the place from which Nigerian sex workers originate. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 85 percent of Nigerian women selling sex in Europe originated in or passed through Benin on their way to Europe (Carling 2005; IOM 2011). This reputation leads to derogatory descriptions of Benin
from more urban centers in Nigeria, in which the city itself and migrant sex workers are associated with immorality and national shame.

The connections to Europe are evident throughout Benin. There is a shop called “Little Italy Plaza,” and the town has its own “Hotel Torino” (Nigerian migrants working in Italy own both businesses). Benin has the largest concentration of property development in Nigeria through remittances that originate in Europe (Hernandez-Coss and Bun 2007), and the newly built houses, of which many are owned by Nigerian women in Italy, serve as billboards displaying the potential success and social mobility obtainable through migration. Several signs advertise courses in Spanish, Italian, French, and Swedish taught by return migrants to prepare prospective migrants for their upcoming journeys. Aspiring migrants depart on minibuses for Libya and Morocco, journeying on high-risk routes through the Sahara Desert, followed by potentially deadly sea journeys across the Mediterranean to Europe.

International donors and Nigerian government funding have financed locally televised anti-trafficking warnings and billboards. They warn potential women migrants in Benin against the dangers of being “lured into sex trafficking.” But when I talked to the women themselves they knew very well what kind of jobs awaited them in Europe, and a survey of 681 villagers living outside Benin showed that they all knew this too (IOM 2011).

Strict European border controls have made it increasingly expensive for undocumented immigrants to enter, requiring the women to become even more indebted to a criminal migration industry that can secure their passing. In 2012, the price for a plane ticket and a counterfeit visa and passport in Benin ranged from $6,500 to $12,000 and usually required the migrants to borrow the money or pawn ancestral land. Upon arrival, this amount often increased and in the most extreme cases migrants ended up owing $65,000. Hence, while the women trying their luck in Europe may not know all of the conditions and hazards of their job upon arrival, they do know that they will work under a “madam,” and they often explained that they would be prepared to accept two-three hard years to repay their debt. But then they hoped to have repaid their madams and work for themselves. Thus, rather than understanding the debt and migration as merely forced upon them by “traffickers,” the migration arrangements to Europe were seen as a joint effort between the women, their families, and the individuals who arranged their travels to Europe, or as many of my informants put it “na 50–50” meaning “its half-half.”

The migration debt puts the women in a state of indenture, and this, what I term, indentured sex work migration, leaves them vulnerable to violence and severe exploitation. It is this complex migration web of arrangements and motives that subsumes and complicates the process of separating “victims” from “criminals” at the police station in Copenhagen.

Furthermore, Benin is no longer just a place from which women depart—a city from which to launch migration strategies. It is also emerging as a city of deportation—a place where women arrive, disembarking as deportees from
Europe. Thus, Benin has become the final destination on the deportation route when the jointly EU-financed chartered planes head for Nigeria, collecting the deported migrants on the way through Europe. Arriving at the International Airport in Lagos, they disembark at an isolated cargo area, whereupon they pass through a large metal gate and disappear into the city. Left to fend for themselves they receive no assistance whatsoever when they arrive. Several of the deported women in this study scrambled around in the neighborhoods near the airport sleeping alone in the streets until they found a way to get back to Benin.

In the following section, we meet Grace and Cynthia, women who I followed for almost two years after they returned to Benin. Despite their shared experiences of indentured sex work in Europe, Grace was officially identified as a “victim” and returned from Italy through the AVR program. Cynthia by contrast was identified as a “criminal”—an undocumented immigrant—and deported without assistance from Denmark. The cases of Grace and Cynthia are not intended to be representative of all deported migrants; rather I focus on their narratives, because they help to elucidate the highly complex range of situations and relations affecting migrant women upon return.

Grace and Cynthia

I met Grace in 2011 at a Catholic NGO and shelter in Benin for women returned from Europe. When I arranged my meeting with the NGO, they asked if I wanted to interview some of the women they assisted. Grace showed up, as did two other women. It turned out that these kinds of arranged interviews with foreign, mostly European, visitors were common. The NGO called on the women approximately once a month to share their “trafficking narratives” with donors, diplomats, the media, and researchers like myself. For each interview, the women received approximately $15, and I, as well as other visitors, were expected to pay a similar sum to the NGO. The women told horrific stories of rape and deceit, and in many ways their stories were similar, involving all the “classical” traits of Nigerian trafficking narratives, including taking an oath before the witchdoctor before leaving for Europe, deception by a trafficker, and heavy debts. They praised the NGO for saving their lives and said that they did not know about trafficking before the NGO told them that they were victims of it.19 Compared with the police interviews in Copenhagen, in Benin telling visitors the “trafficking truth” appeared less risky to the women since they had already faced deportation, and they knew that they would receive a monetary stipend.

These sessions rarely allowed the women’s more complex stories of agency, livelihood strategies, and desires to emerge. More complex narratives developed outside the realm of the NGO, when I met the women more informally in their homes and had known them over a longer period of time. For
example, when I first met Grace at the NGO, she spoke Italian to me and to one of the women at the NGO whom had also been to Italy. I asked Grace if she missed anything in Italy. She missed pizza, ice cream, and coffee. I took my chance at meeting her outside the NGO by inviting her to a newly opened fast-food pizza place in Benin. That is where she started to tell me a more complex story of her life upon return that has unfolded over the two years we have been in contact.

Grace spent six years in Italy and is now in her mid-30s living on the outskirts of Benin. Before traveling, she was married and emphasized how she loved her Nigerian husband; but he left her for another woman and broke her heart. They had two children and after the divorce she worked at a restaurant to support them, but it was difficult to earn enough money. One day a local woman, a regular customer, told her that she could help Grace go to Italy. Grace offered her 20,000 Naira ($126) to pay for the ticket and counterfeit papers. The woman told her she could borrow the rest and pay back the money in installments when she arrived in Italy. “They told me I would get €800 ($1000) per month. I said fine, but how much is €800 in Naira? When they converted the €800 my eyes got big and I said I will go.” Grace left her children with her mother in Benin and spent three years paying back her debt on the streets of different Italian cities. After three years she ran away from her madam and started selling white sport socks on the street. Grace has a prominent scar on her nose, a permanent reminder of the day in Turin when five men raped her, while a member of what Grace identified as the Albanian mafia pushed a smoldering gun against the bridge of her nose. Grace was found in a field by a dog walker, more dead than alive. The rape prompted her contact with the Italian police, and she was later designated as a “victim of trafficking” by the Italian authorities, ultimately leading to her return to Nigeria.

Although Italy has a law permitting trafficking victims to receive temporary residence and a work permit, Grace’s application was, after two years of waiting in a detention center, rejected. At that moment she gave up. When she realized that she would not get the temporary residence permit she felt forced to accept the AVR program together with a promise by the authorities that she would receive a small amount of money to reestablish herself in Nigeria.

Grace’s story mirrors that of many returned women in Benin. She accepted the AVR program at a point where she had no other choices. Women agreeing to be returned when all other opportunities are exhausted is also common among repatriated Thai and Philippine women (Plambech and Lisborg 2009). Such findings have made scholars question the voluntary aspect of the AVR program, arguing that it should be termed “mandatory assisted return” rather than “voluntary” (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010).

Unlike Grace, Cynthia was designated a “criminal” by the Danish authorities and deported without humanitarian assistance. Yet when reading through the two women’s narratives, it is difficult to decipher the reasoning behind the
different designations as their experiences in Europe were remarkably similar. Rather, the different designations illuminate how designations at times are shaped by arbitrary encounters, and the unsystematic consequences of meeting a particular immigration official or social worker who might or might not take an interest in their cases.

Cynthia had been a sex worker in Spain and Italy, and ended up in Denmark. Cynthia’s first migration experience was to Italy five years earlier; her parents pawned their house in order to pay for her ticket and the counterfeit documents. After a year, she was deported back to Nigeria—with 200 Euros in her pocket. She came back to Benin where the madam agreed to lower Cynthia’s debt, and they mutually agreed on applying for a new visa. It took Cynthia and her madam two years to get a one-month tourist visa to Hungary from where she traveled onward to Spain. She was in Spain for six months, but Cynthia felt that: “Spain was like Africa,” it was not possible to earn the anticipated money and buy enough food. After a while her madam told her it would be better if she went to Denmark. She flew late at night to Copenhagen, since in Cynthia’s words there is only limited immigration control at night. She slept in the airport and took a bus to a provincial town from where she was driven to a brothel in the countryside where she would work along with a Kenyan woman. One day, in 2010, after two years in Denmark, the police banged on the door and asked to see her residence permit. Cynthia ran out the back door but was caught and placed in a detention center. Although Cynthia tried to remain in Denmark, seeking humanitarian asylum as a victim of trafficking, her asylum application was declined and the police came to the detention camp, took her to the airport, and placed her on an aircraft bound for Lagos.

**Violence in the Safety of Home**

When Grace arrived in Nigeria, she was received by Catholic nuns running an anti-trafficking shelter and subsequently stayed at her mother’s house with her two children in Benin. But being an adult woman with two children and traveling experience, she found the living situation awkward. Soon her mother and stepfather began asking for money. Now that the remittances from Italy had stopped, Grace had turned into a financial burden. Yet the family still had financial expectations of Grace, who was in a constant state of waiting for the reintegration money to arrive from Italy. The waiting time between arrival in Benin and when the money is transferred is a source of much frustration to the women and the Nigerian NGOs alike. The European institutions explain it in terms of bureaucratic delays, because the reintegration money has to pass through several institutions in Europe and Nigeria before it arrives in Benin. The Nigerian NGOs also note the EU government’s suspicion of corruption in Nigeria. The NGOs explained to me that once the women are removed from
EU territory, the NGOs are faced with several rounds of questioning about individual reintegration plans before the money is released—putting both the NGO and the women on hold. The waiting makes the women feel deceived by the humanitarian promises made to them, and since they do not have any other income, the long wait forces them to borrow money from friends and family (I was told by the women, but was not able to confirm it, that other returnees sold sex while waiting for the reintegration funds). The situation often worsened when the money finally came and the women realized that it would not be given to them; but instead, the NGO would go with them to buy equipment for their reintegration business. Thus, the women could not instantly repay their families and friends as they had promised, leading to conflicts in their social networks.

When Grace’s money finally came from Italy to the NGO after six months of waiting, the nuns went to the market with her and purchased some cooking pots, plastic chairs and food items so that she could open a food stall. She opened it at a tollgate on the outskirts of Benin where truck drivers and local sex workers were her customers. The business was doing well, but Grace felt she could not afford the required deposit of approximately $30 to open a bank account, nor did she trust the bank, so she kept most of the money she made on her.

One evening, after she had been in business for two months, armed robbers violently took the cooking pots, the food, and most of her money. When I met her again after the robbery, she had lost a lot of weight and told me that she was plagued by problems. Her motivation for accepting the AVR in Italy—the financial assistance—was lost in the robbery and the NGO could not obtain any more funds from the Italian donors. Grace did not want to return to Europe. She did not want to leave her children again. But she felt deceived by the organization in Europe that promised her assistance upon return, because they did not assist her after the robbery.

Grace was not the only one who experienced violence upon return. Other women in this study were victims of armed robberies, rapes, and/or physical violence upon arrival in Lagos, but primarily in Benin. Thus, the violence the women experienced did not always occur while they were selling sex in Europe, although several, like Grace, had experienced intense violence there too. When I asked the women to compare Europe to Nigeria, they would often tell me that it was safer to sell sex on the streets of Rome or Hamburg than it was to run a food stall in Benin. Indeed, in 2011, Edo State in which Benin is the state capital recorded the highest incidence of violent crime in its history (British Council 2012; CEDAW 2008; CLEEN 2012). Armed robberies, violent crime, and domestic violence were not particular to the deported women’s experiences—many other citizens suffered the same fate—although deportation did make them more vulnerable to violence.

Cynthia, Grace, and most of the other women live and have their small shops on the outskirts of Benin where the rent is much lower. These are also
the areas where there are no paved roads and only a few generators to provide electricity and light up the pitch-black night. Furthermore, people with little or no education, like Cynthia and Grace, are only allowed to open shops outside of the Government Reserved Areas that are protected by security guards, making them susceptible to crime.

The house Cynthia lives in is on a bumpy gravel road with scattered garbage and building materials on the outskirts of Benin. It is newly built and surrounded by other newly built houses financed by remittances from women abroad. Cynthia has rented one of three apartments in an orange painted house, fenced in by a high wall and barbed wire, owned by a Nigerian woman in Italy. The Danish state deported Cynthia to Nigeria with 520 kroner ($90,2012) in her hand—the only money of her own she had left. One of her “regulars” at the brothel where she worked in Denmark had fallen in love with her. Upon deportation, the Danish man visited Cynthia in Benin where she became pregnant and later gave birth to a boy. The Danish man, and now father of her child, also helped repay a part of Cynthia’s debt to her madam. Cynthia now lives with her little sister and a younger cousin who arrived at her doorstep hoping that Cynthia had access to resources in Europe because of her relation to the Danish man. Cynthia feels safer with the barbed wire and the high wall, because she has already experienced two armed robberies in the place she lived before. During the second robbery, the robber, a young man, took her baby in his arms and told Cynthia how sweet the baby was. Cynthia is afraid that the young man noticed that her son was of mixed race and fears that he could be kidnapped.22

The accounts of increased family responsibilities upon return and the armed robbers in Cynthia’s home noticing her “sweet” baby tells a larger story of the resources that the returned women have or are imagined to have, making them more vulnerable to robberies. This also applies to the reintegration shops that have opened in unprotected areas, where few others have the funds to open businesses. These examples remind us that a successful return might only be possible when basic security is guaranteed (Sørensen 2011).

As Cynthia’s living situation testifies, many of the deported women live in households mainly made up of women with their sisters, cousins, mothers, and children. A few live on their own, renting a room in run down two-floor concrete buildings. The places with the lowest rent do not have lockable doors, and these doors are too expensive for the women to buy. Hiring a private security night watch is also outside their reach, and sometimes the vigilante groups are, according to the women, also the armed robbers. Many nights are spent sleepless between 12 am and 4 am, due to the need to stay awake to protect against robbery. In these ways, violence—or the fear of violence—has come to permeate the everyday lives, narratives, and practices of the women.

The paradox is, however, that many of the men involved in these violent crimes are the friends, brothers, neighbors, or lovers of the women. The same unemployment and inequality that produce irregular migration journeys and
the selling of sex abroad also produce armed robbers and violent crime among groups of young men in Benin. Thus, the everyday violence the women experience upon return is a result of the economic precarity in Nigeria and Benin, where men (and a few women), fueled by frustration over unfulfilled expectations and unemployment, turn to violent crime as a livelihood strategy. While fear of violence and armed robberies has become a part of everyday popular language in Nigeria, the anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith (2007) found that most violent crime in the country does not target the elite, but rather affects more ordinary people. While the elite are able to protect themselves with high fences, razor wire, and personal armaments in gated communities, less fortunate people, such as deported women in Benin, are vulnerable.

In contrast, while some of the women were exposed to threats of violence in Europe if they did not keep up with debt installments, these threats rarely materialized into actual violence either in Europe or upon return. The fear that traffickers would wait for them at the airport upon their return to cash in on unpaid debts has often been used as a persuasive argument against repatriation, the logic being that the European countries might in fact return the women right back into the arms of their traffickers. Both Cynthia and Grace still owed money to their madams. Grace explained that the person to whom she owed money had not contacted her upon return, and she was not fearful because she knew that if those individuals came and made demands her neighbors would help her, and she would then go to the police. Cynthia still owed approximately $10,000 of which a portion was being paid by the Danish father of her child. The remaining debt was unsettled, but it did not cause problems for her. The women explained that because the traffickers had so many women going to Europe, they did not turn to violent means to collect the unpaid debt of the deported women.

Although at times the women’s state of indenture did not expire upon return, in these cases, as was the situation for Cynthia, the women and the individual to whom she was indebted made a mutual agreement that the woman would migrate again at a later stage (often after several years) and resume the debt installments. Such situations have been labeled “re-trafficking,” yet for the women such prolonged indenture carried the threat of potential exploitation and a return to the sex industry in Europe, while simultaneously carrying future opportunities to migrate again despite the deportation.

My research illustrates that the violence these women faced was, in several instances, but not exclusively, connected to their migration to Europe, not because of their debt, but because of the vulnerability produced by deportation, the money they were imagined to return with, or because they had access to reintegration funds. Whereas in Europe, the women were vulnerable to deportation, back in Benin the women were vulnerable because of deportation.

As the experiences of Cynthia and Grace make clear, violence, vulnerability, and victimhood are not exclusively connected to sex work and migration
abroad. Rather, violence and vulnerability are part of everyday life “at home” in Benin. The focus on extreme cases and the violence involved in trafficking “renders other forms of violence invisible or normal” (Baye and Heumann 2014, 84), excluding both the “victims” and the “criminals” from protection. It furthermore obscures the violence that migrants and deportees are subjected to by actors other than the traffickers who facilitate their migration. The violence the women were subjected to in Europe by the individuals to whom they owed money was typically restricted to a few specific—if at times dramatic—events, as well as occasional physical altercations or street disputes between the women and their madams. In contrast, the everyday forms of violence that they experienced in Benin were not isolated episodes related to selling sex, but were part of the daily tapestry of the women’s lives, regular and expected occurrences that transpired outside the state of indenture.

The AVR program is subtly subsumed by ideas of “home” as a safe place for returning women. “Home” is naturalized and therefore depoliticized as a site where harm and risk are part of women’s everyday lives (Sharma 2003). Yet, these environments of everyday violence did not differentiate between women designated “victim” or “criminal” prior to return. The idea of home as a space of safety is complicated further by the finding that three of the women left Nigeria for Europe in the first place because of unemployment, and as an escape from violence within their household in Benin.

The concept of “home” and “home country” represents a key juxtaposition for the two groups of women in the politics of migration governance. The “criminals” are perceived as having left their home in order to obtain upward-social mobility in Europe through violation of immigration law, whereas the “victims” are perceived as wanting to go back home, to be safe, after an involuntary migration journey. For the “victims,” home is a moral space of safety. For the “criminals,” home is not presumed to mean safety, but rather a punitive downward economic mobility. Thus to utilize the vocabulary of humanitarianism in the realm of return programs, “home” or “home country” mean something in particular in European immigration law discourse and the idea of home takes on two very different meanings for these two groups of women. Yet, once back home, the women experience very similar situations.

Women are regularly removed from violent situations in Europe, only to be put into violent situations back home in Nigeria, in the name of rescuing them from trafficking. This kind of thinking creates a hierarchical structure of sexualized violence in which the violence women experience in Europe in the sex industry is somehow imagined to be worse than the everyday violence experienced prior to migration, during their migratory journey and upon return to Nigeria. The women in my study experienced everything from being raped in front of the IOM in Lagos the day after being deported, to numerous armed and violent robberies in Nigeria, to being seriously ill, handcuffed, and deported after three years of detention in the United Kingdom.
The women understood many of these experiences, including the violence of their clients in Europe, as a continuum of violent experiences in their lives. Yet everyday violence and vulnerability in Benin does not grant the women any rights to protection or exception as does “trafficking,” because everyday violence is, apparently, not a morally legitimate way of suffering. Although, Cynthia, Grace, and the other deported women continuously reshaped, contested, and recovered from their experiences and life situations, they undeniably all lived lives where struggles and experiences of violence could be situated along a continuum. When comparing the experiences of the “victims” and the “criminals,” it becomes evident that the current “exceptionalist” approach to trafficking does not account for the continuum of violence and struggles experienced by both groups of women. Although reintegration programs are thought to offer a modicum of temporary protection on a transnational scale for a small group of undocumented migrants in the sex industry, the social reality of Benin does not distinguish among migrants or provide a protective space for selected groups. While the identified “victims” are received by NGOs and in the initial phase benefit from that, in the long-term the designations dissolve and collapse.

**Conclusion**

When I spoke to Grace two years after her deportation, the most significant benefit she could still get out of her victim status was the $15 she received for her interviews about her experiences. At the other end of the city, Cynthia hoped to travel to Europe again. She felt lonely and out of place in Benin. The expectations from her family overwhelmed her and bringing up a boy of mixed race as a single mother was not easy. She spoke with her sister about her experiences in Europe, and otherwise kept to herself. The Danish man, the father of her child, already had a family who knew nothing about Cynthia and the baby. He occasionally sent her a few hundred dollars and in this way the Danish man and the baby became Cynthia’s only claim to a distant sense of European belonging.

From the narratives of Grace and Cynthia, we learn about migrants who are not merely “victims” or “criminals,” but rather breadwinners faced with intense familial obligations, living in an area prone to violent crime. For all the women in this study, reuniting with estranged family members, opening a food stall or hair salon funded by reintegration money or establishing a new livelihood among disrupted social networks in a city of insecurity was in general a lonely and overwhelming endeavor. Thus, while this article has focused on everyday violence upon return, new familial responsibilities and economic hardships were also major factors interwoven in the social fabric of their lives, which together made the categories of “victims” and “criminals” difficult to distinguish.
Despite the great concern with victim identification within scholarly, public, and anti-trafficking debates, this juridical designation has little impact upon return to Nigeria, revealing a distance between the meaning of “home” and “safety” in European migration law discourse and its meaning in deportees’ lives. As I have shown, the distinction between “victims” and “criminals” dissolves in the process in which they are imagined to make the most sense—in and after the “rescue” and upon return to Nigeria. In this process, conflicting meanings of home and hierarchies of sexualized violence emerge as critical for understanding the logic and therefore the common failures of would-be humanitarian migration management within the field of anti-trafficking.

On a broader level, an analysis of deportation and rescue illustrates how contemporary migration policies become aligned with gendered moralities about sex work and human trafficking, as well as the migration management norms and aspirations of Europeans. By utilizing the rhetoric of rescue as a justification for distinguishing between “victims” and “criminals,” both European and Nigerian governments conveniently ignore any responsibility they might have for fostering the broader socioeconomic conditions that consistently feed migration, human trafficking, and deportation.

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Notes

1. While the costs incurred for this specific flight were unobtainable, the budget for Joint Return Operations to Nigeria from the EU was on average $427,000 per flight between 2010 and 2013 (FRONTEX 2013).

2. The late Chief Obadiaru was the representative of the Oba (the King) of Benin in Edo State, Nigeria.


5. I followed a core group of thirty Nigerian women deportees (twenty-nine of them were former sex workers in Europe, and one woman was deported from Libya), between the ages of nineteen and thirty five, and their families. Approximately half of the informants were categorized as victims of human trafficking, the other group were deported as “undocumented immigrants.” I met the women categorized as victims of trafficking through NGOs in Lagos and Benin and the deportees through personal networks in Benin. After a while word of mouth allowed me to include.
more women. The fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2012 in four periods in Denmark and Nigeria. The interviews were performed in English and Bini (assisted by my Nigerian research assistant).

6. All names of informants are pseudonyms.

7. For analyses of heightened familial responsibilities and increased economic hardships creating a collapse of the categories of “victims” and “criminals” upon return, see Plambech (2014).

8. I primarily use the terms “deportee” and “deportations,” because regardless of whether the women were returned through the Assisted Voluntary Return program or not, they termed the process deportation and understood themselves to be deportees.


10. Orders of removals do not always lead to a deportation in praxis, for instance, in EU states such as Spain and Portugal.

11. In the Joint Return Program, one of the EU Member States takes the initiative to organize a joint return flight to a specific destination country and charters a plane for that purpose (FRONTEX 2012).

12. Women returning to Nigeria receive $4,500 per woman as well as rent support, medical assistance, and a monthly allowance if they have children (2014 numbers provided by IOM, Denmark; personal conversation).

13. Approximately 250,000 migrants are subject to deportations through the JRP every year (FRONTEX 2012), whereas 25,000–30,000 migrants worldwide are returned through the AVR (IOM 2012).

14. During my fieldwork, I was invited by the Danish Anti-Trafficking Police Unit to observe their everyday workings.

15. Translated into English from the Danish phrase “fejebladsmanøvre” employed by the Danish police to describe raids in the red light district in Copenhagen.

16. “Younger ones” usually refers to all children in the household—siblings and the women’s own children.

17. If identified as a “victim of trafficking,” the migrant is awarded a 120-day temporary residence, legally a “deferred return” to Nigeria through the AVR program (Retsinformation 2013).

18. The women would usually term the individuals who arranged their travels to Europe as “sponsors,” “guides,” or “madams”. Only rarely did they use the term traffickers; this term was primarily used by the women enrolled in NGO programs.

19. These are the kind of interviews that most donors and journalists have access to and on which their narratives of trafficking in a Nigerian context are based.

20. Grace was unsure why her application was rejected, but it appears that the rejection was a combination of two factors: First, that the Italian police refuse to issue humanitarian permits (which are obtainable in Italy) after a year of investigation. Second, victims who have lived in Italy for four years are believed to have repaid their debt and so are not considered victims of trafficking but “voluntary sex workers” seeking to obtain a residence permit (Baye and Heumann 2014, 96).
21. Seventy percent of the women in a national crime and safety survey have experienced violence, and most of the violence experienced by women in Nigeria happened at home (British Council 2012; CLEEN 2012;). While the validity of some reports on crime in Nigeria might be questioned, none of the various reports question the increase in violent crime in Edo State.

22. According to the women’s explanations, light-skinned individuals are susceptible to kidnappings in Benin.

23. Benin City and Edo State are among some of the areas in Nigeria which in particular have seen a rapid increase in youth unemployment (IOM 2011; Mayaki 2007; SEEDS 2005).

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