

Sex trafficking in women in West and North Africa and towards Europe

June 2025

ANALYTICAL REPORT



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***** There are two versions of this report. A full version for law enforcement in INTERPOL member countries and a sanitized public version. This report is the public version. *****

Executive Summary

In West and North Africa, a variety of criminal actors, geographically scattered from origin to destination countries, benefit from the sex trafficking process. Available information suggests that transnational trafficking is controlled by networks of cells operating in synergy from origin to destination country. Traffickers tend to have the same nationality as their victims. In West Africa, a wide diversity of nationalities of offenders are represented and there is a relatively equal distribution of men and women among offenders. Women offenders, whose role has been expanded through the digitalization of the sex trafficking process, are sometimes depicted as heads of organized crime groups (OCGs). However, it is essential to nuance this representation. While some women do hold leadership positions, others are likely to be working under the control of male-dominated criminal networks.

European countries have requested the publication of most INTERPOL Notices and Diffusions targeting West and North African offenders involved in sex trafficking, with a majority of these targeting Nigerian nationals. This suggests strong linkages between OCGs from these countries, notably Nigeria, and sex trafficking in Europe. Information also suggests a possible recent decrease in activity of Nigerian OCGs involved in sex trafficking. However, this apparent decline may also be attributed to the crime becoming more clandestine, making it harder for law enforcement to detect.

In West Africa, it is likely that the majority of sex trafficking victims are from Nigeria and other West African countries. To a lesser extent, victims also come from Central Africa and Asia. Due to cultural taboos, informal resolution mechanisms, and underreporting, there are likely more victims of sex trafficking in West Africa. Information indicates that minor victims are trafficked alongside adult victims for sexual exploitation. The West and North Africa regions are characterized by a complex network of domestic, intra-regional and inter-regional flows. Most victims are exploited within their home country and domestic sex trafficking can be considered as a precursor to international sex trafficking. Domestically or internationally, the victims are transported from rural areas to wealthier urban areas or locations of relative economic prosperity such as mines, agricultural sites, and commercial centers.

Within West Africa, most countries are identified as either source, transit, or destination countries. Outgoing flows of victims from West Africa are primarily oriented towards North Africa. North and West African victims are also moved to Europe, transiting via countries such as Niger, Mali, Cabo Verde, Mauritania, Senegal, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco to reach Europe. Most West African victims of sexual exploitation identified in Europe are from Nigeria and reportedly transited via Niger and Libya to Italy. There is also a significant flow of victims from West Africa to the Middle East, or towards Central and South African regions.

The modus operandi for recruiting victims almost always involves false promises of a better life abroad disseminated online through mainstream social media platforms. Technology also facilitates the control and sexual exploitation of the victims.

Key Findings

The following are the key findings of this report resulting from an analysis of available data sources on trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation in West and North Africa:

- ❖ Sex trafficking in West and North Africa, as well as to Europe, is likely to persist due to the convergence of several enabling factors. These include:
 - Large populations of potential victims seeking better living conditions abroad
 - The increasing use of the Internet to recruit and exploit victims
 - A strong demand for sex services in African regions and abroad
 - Corruption that facilitates border crossing and exploitation
 - A diverse range of offenders, including officials, who potentially profit from the crime
 - Regional disparities in control policies
 - Displaced people due to regional instability, constitute a pool of potential victims.

Offenders

- ❖ Transnational sex trafficking flows are likely organized by networks of OCGs operating in synergy and upon opportunity. These complex decentralized networks of specialized, adaptive, and interactive cells, are respectively in charge of the recruitment, transport, and exploitation of victims.
- ❖ The activity and preeminence of Nigeria sex trafficking OCGs in Europe may be decreasing. Firstly, from 2021, the proportion of Nigerian nationals targeted through INTERPOL Notices and Diffusions, most of which were requested by European countries, significantly decreased. Secondly, some European countries noted a similar trend, with a sharp decrease in Nigerian nationals arrested between 2021 and 2023. Finally, this decrease is corroborated by information, which indicates a decrease in the number of Nigerian victims identified in some European countries over the same period.
- ❖ This possible decrease in sex trafficking activity involving Nigerian OCGs in Europe may be linked to restrictions limiting sex trafficking opportunities during the Covid period, stronger international enforcement thanks to cooperation and operations,

changes to cultural practices that aim to prevent reporting, and the decrease in migrants' arrival to Europe.

- ❖ However, the recorded decrease in sex trafficking figures may not be correlated to a decrease in sex trafficking activity. Indeed, the recorded decrease in sex trafficking figures may be due to a shift to online and towards more hidden private places for exploitation, making it harder to detect. In this case, it would mean that Nigerian OCGs managed to implement new strategies to avoid detection in some countries. They might also have re-orientated sex trafficking activities towards countries with less enforcement pressure in Europe or to other regions, such as North Africa or the Middle East, or shift to other criminal activities.

Flows of victims

- ❖ Domestic, intra-regional and inter-regional movements of victims within West and North Africa show flows from rural areas to economic hubs with a demand in sexual services (urban centers, mines, agriculture, and tourism zones). Sex trafficking victims, among them migrant women, also flow from West to North Africa and are subjected to exploitation both during transit and upon reaching their final destination.
- ❖ Available information suggests that West African victims, mainly from Nigeria, are moved to Europe, to be sexually exploited in France, Italy, Austria, Italy, Spain, and the UK. They reportedly mainly transit via Niger and Libya to Italy. However, transit through Mali, Cabo Verde, Mauritania, Senegal, Algeria, and Morocco to reach Europe is also reported.
- ❖ It is very likely that the Gulf region is now a significant destination for forced prostitution of victims from West Africa. Some West African victims are also exploited in Central African and Southern African Regions.

Modus operandi

- ❖ In West and North Africa, victims are mostly exploited in public places¹, but exploitation is likely to evolve towards private and hidden places, as seen in the sub-Saharan region and in Europe. Mixed exploitation, combining sexual exploitation with other forms of exploitation, such as forced labor, forced begging, forced criminality and organ removal, has been reported.
- ❖ Available information suggests that sex trafficking victims experience sexual violence and exploitation in their country of origin, while in transit, in "prostitution camps", and finally at their destinations, in European or Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. Sexual violence and exploitation during trafficking almost certainly

contribute to the psychological submission of victims, further facilitating their exploitation once in the countries of destination.

- ❖ Mainstream communication technologies and applications, which are used for the recruitment, transport, control, and sexual exploitation of victims, are critical assets for human traffickers as they reduce the need to rely on human resources and increase anonymity.
- ❖ Recruitment techniques continue to exploit the victim's desire for a better life and fraudulent opportunities to attain it. False proposals often involve promises of well-paid jobs abroad (in beauty parlors, shops and salons or as a waitress, model, nurse, teacher, hairdresser, nanny, and receptionist), fake study opportunities, and fake immigration opportunities (to Europe, MENA countries, or the Americas). Deceptive techniques, such as fraudulent marriage proposals, lure victims to voluntarily accept a deal or forcing migrant women into prostitution to allegedly repay fake debts.
- ❖ Intermediaries such as agencies, registered and unregistered agents, brokers, family members, and relatives are involved in the recruitment process. In West Africa, the recruitment process, which was traditionally carried out in person, has been increasingly moving online.
- ❖ Information highlighted that sex traffickers use different means to control the West African victims: psychological, physical, and sexual abuse are the most frequent means. They also use debt bondage, threats to the victims and to her family, restriction of movement, holding of documents and use of traditional religious practices.
- ❖ Illicit proceeds are moved internationally in cash, thanks to money mules, hawala agents, bank transfers, mobile money transfers, and money transfer services. The barter trade and investment in luxury goods or vehicles are used to launder the money.

List of Acronyms

CTDC	Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative
DCIM	Department for Combatting Irregular Migration
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EU-MS	EU Member State
IDP	Internally displaced person
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
IGCTR	INTERPOL Global Crime Trend Report
ISP	Internet service providers
IS	Islamic State
ISWA	Islamic State in West Africa
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin
MS	Member States
NCB	INTERPOL National Central Bureau
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSAG	Non-state Armed Group
OCG	Organized Crime Group
OIM	International Organization for Migration
NAPTIP	Nigerian National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
US DoS	United States Department of States
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNODC GloTIP	2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons
WAPCCO	West African Police Chiefs Committee

Introduction

West Africa is a heterogeneous region in terms of economic and social development, and stability. These imbalances provide a fertile ground for the development of organized criminal groups, which exploit vulnerabilities by developing a variety of lucrative criminal activities. Among them, trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a very profitable, and low-risk crime for criminals.

The 2022 INTERPOL Global Crime Trend Report (IGCTR) revealed that human trafficking in Africa was among the crime trends most frequently perceived as posing a “high” or “very high” threat by respondents to the IGCTR surveys from the African region. According to INTERPOL’s strategic analysis findings, human trafficking was still ranked as a “high” threat in Africa in 2024. Moreover, the 2022 UNODC Global report on trafficking in persons underlined that trafficking for sexual exploitation represents 41 per cent of the forms of exploitation of detected victims in West Africa.²

On the top of that, instability in some parts of West and North Africa fuels swiftly evolving situations, with internal and international movements of populations, among them women vulnerable to sex trafficking. Organized crime groups (OCGs) trafficking and exploiting these victims, based in West Africa and with connections in North Africa and Europe, and known to adapt quickly to new situations, have been probably adapting their methods to the evolving environment. This was illustrated by the ECOWAS Regional Network of National Focal Institutions Against Trafficking in Persons Plus recommendation to ECOWAS to address the growing cyber-related human trafficking trend observed in some parts of the Region.³

Therefore, the EU-funded ENACT Project has undertaken this assessment on trafficking in women within the West and North African regions, with a special focus on the use of new technologies and on the links with Europe, to better understand the recent evolution of the phenomenon and counter this crime with increased efficiency.

This report is divided into five main parts. The first part presents its scope and objectives as well as the methodology employed. The second part aims at explaining what is trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation and the differences and links with migrant smuggling. The third part is dedicated to the profiles and features of the various players active in the trafficking process, with a focus on a trend involving Nigerian OCGs in Europe. The fourth part of the report examines the domestic and regional flows, as well as profiles, of victims. The fifth part aims at describing the main modus operandi used in the trafficking process.

1. STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

1.1 Scope and objectives

The objective of this report is to provide an assessment of trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation in the Western and Northern African regions, over the period from 2021 to 2023. Particular attention is given to the links between these regions and Europe, as well as to the technological means used to facilitate this crime. The report aims to provide strategic intelligence on the trafficking flows, modus operandi, and on the organized criminal groups involved.

In this report, the Western African region, or West Africa, refers to the 16 countries of the West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO), which includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The Northern African region or North Africa refers to the following countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia.

The assessment is based on the analysis of available data and presents the current nature, scope, dynamics, and activities of organized crime linked to the trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation in the regions covered by the report. Where possible, it also provides an overview of the criminal groups active throughout the regions and the type of illegal enterprises in which they are engaged.

1.2 Methodology

This assessment follows an all-source intelligence analysis methodology. It is the result of integrating multiple data sources.

Open sources used in the framework of this report include news articles and reports from various private entities, international organizations and think tanks. Whenever identified, official statistics and data were used and given preference over other sources.

Information was aggregated to identify consistencies across all data, patterns and trends, and any identifiable convergences. The ENACT-INTERPOL team also consulted and cooperated with experts and analysts working in the INTERPOL Human Trafficking and Migrants Smuggling unit. Information provided was sanitized and incorporated into this report where relevant. A regional approach was retained when drafting this report. Therefore, when national examples are quoted, it is done for illustrative purposes, to put forward regional dynamics.

2. WHAT IS TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN FOR THE PURPOSE OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

2.1 International definition

An international definition of ‘trafficking in human beings’ exists and is defined in Article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Protocol against Trafficking in Persons).

“Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;”⁴

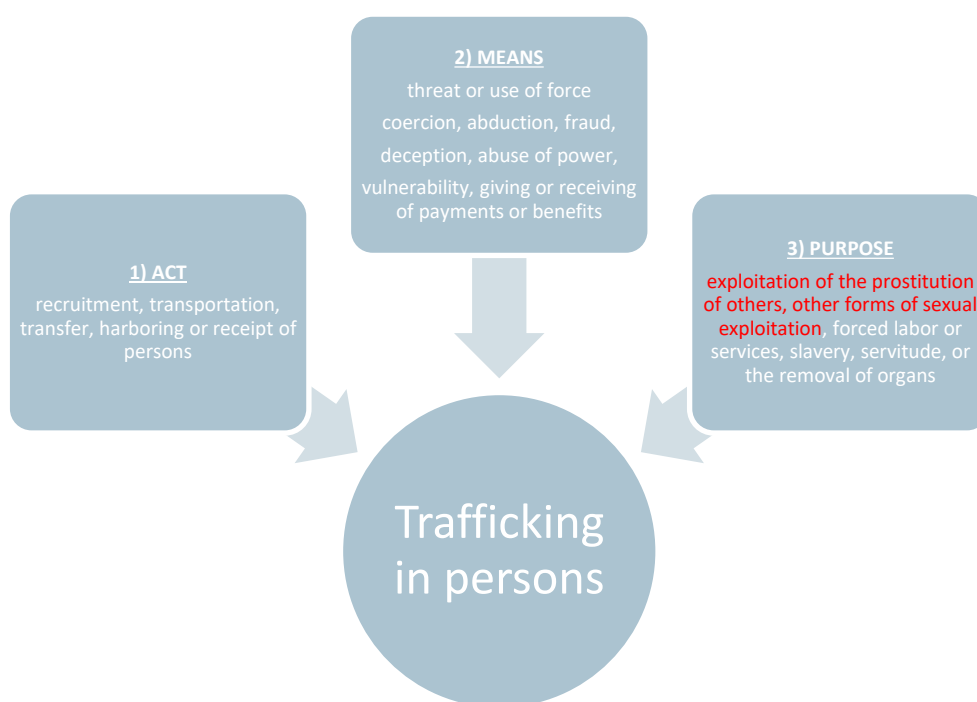


FIGURE 1: THE THREE ELEMENTS REQUIRED FOR AN ACT TO BE CONSIDERED TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS.

As shown in Figure 1, three elements must be present to qualify a crime as trafficking in human beings⁵: the act (e.g. recruitment, transportation, harbouring), the means (threat, coercion,

fraud, etc.), and the purpose, which are different forms of exploitation. In this report, regarding the element “purpose”, we will focus on the “exploitation of the prostitution of others” and the “other forms of sexual exploitation”, which constitute both violent and sexual crimes. According to the UNODC, sexual exploitation can be defined as “acts of abuse of a position of vulnerability, power or trust, or use of force or threat of force, for profiting financially, physically, socially or politically from the prostitution or sexual acts of a person.”⁶

Regarding the “other forms of sexual exploitation,” it implies the profiting from the unwanted sexual acts of a person, which falls within the definition of sexual violence: “[an] unwanted sexual act, attempts to obtain a sexual act, or contact or communication with unwanted sexual attention without valid consent or with consent as a result of intimidation, force, fraud, coercion, threat, deception, use of drugs or alcohol, or abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability.”⁷ It also includes rape, defined as “sexual penetration without valid consent or with consent as a result of intimidation, force, fraud, coercion, threat, deception, use of drugs or alcohol, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of benefits.”⁸

Finally, when possible, the report focuses on women victims, that is to say female victims over 18 years of age. However, the report also includes information about girl victims, i.e. under 18 years old. Indeed, in many cases, information provided shows that traffickers move and sexually exploit minors and adult victims together and does not permit to establish the proportion of minor or adult women victims in a determined group of victims.

2.2 Differences and links between human trafficking and migrant smuggling

While this report will focus on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and in particular on female victims, it is important to define and differentiate both human trafficking and migrant smuggling, as a porosity exists between these two crimes, which often overlap. According to INTERPOL, human trafficking and migrant smuggling occur when “organized criminal groups (OCGs) take advantage of the most vulnerable people for profit, with a complete disregard for human safety and dignity.”⁹ Both are “low-risk, high profit criminal businesses that employ increasingly sophisticated methods and technological means to expand their reach.”¹⁰

Human trafficking, as examined before, “occurs for specific purposes, such as sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, forced criminality, and organ removal among other forms of exploitation”.¹¹

Migrant smuggling occurs when OCGs “take advantage of people who want to leave their home countries to escape poverty, conflict, and crises or simply want to seek a better life.”¹² It is worth noting that “even if irregular migrants generally enter the journey voluntarily, they are often exposed to significant risks, including that of being trafficked, kidnapped or dying in transit to their destinations.”¹³

Both crimes have also been connected to other crimes, including illicit financial flows, corruption, document fraud, trafficking in illicit goods, cyber-enabled crime, and terrorism.¹⁴

A single OCG can be involved in both migrant smuggling and sex trafficking activities, or a synergic relationship can be established between criminal groups involved respectively in sex trafficking and migrant smuggling. Some human trafficking networks cooperate with migrant smuggling networks to move their victims more easily to the country of destination: Europol also described such a cooperation with smugglers, and even direct involvement in migrant smuggling operations.¹⁵ Migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings are sometimes interrelated crimes: “In cases of expensive smuggling fees, irregular migrants pay the debt accumulated with the criminal networks through exploitative working conditions. This method is more commonly used by highly organized criminal networks, as they have the connections or capabilities to profit from the irregular migrants’ debt bondage in transit or destination countries.”¹⁶ For example, in Niger, some migrant smugglers are also traffickers: they coerce women migrants who cannot pay for transport into sex trafficking.¹⁷

Some sex trafficking OCGs moving their victims to Europe can manage both migrant smuggling and sexual exploitation, and other may “outsource the movements of victims into and within the EU to migrant smugglers.”¹⁸

3. CRIMINAL ACTORS

Based on available information, the following are profiles of the main illegal actors operating at each stage of the illegal supply chain and, where possible, their links with counterparts within and beyond the region.

3.1 Profiles of the criminal actors

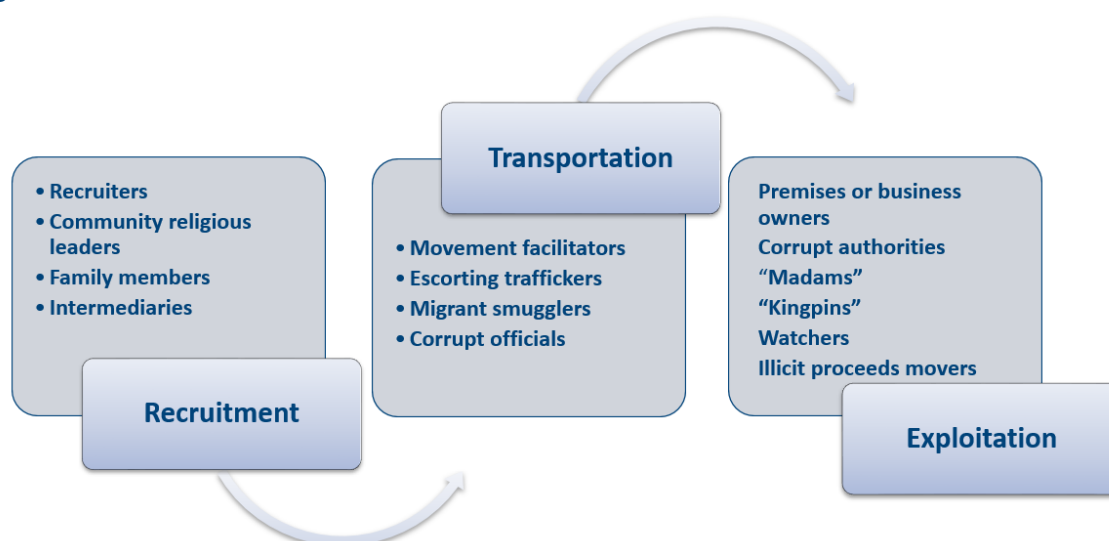


FIGURE 2: MAIN PROFILES OF CRIMINAL ACTORS INVOLVED IN SEX TRAFFICKING IN WEST AND NORTH AFRICA

The sex trafficking process is perpetuated by decentralized networks of specialized OCGs, made of criminal actors, traffickers, and accomplices. They are involved in different stages of the trafficking cycle, from recruitment in origin countries to exploitation in destination countries (Figure 2).

Recruitment phase

Recruiters, including women offenders, propose fraudulent opportunities of a better life within the country or abroad to victims.

Online recruiters are active on mainstream social networks and post fraudulent advertisements online for professional or study opportunities to lure the victims. They sometime also directly engage with the victims to propose fraudulent opportunities of a better life in cities or abroad.

Some Nigerian traditional religious leaders, named **Juju priests**, are paid to perform ceremonies where the victim takes the oath to obey the traffickers, to repay fraudulent debt, and not to report to law enforcement. The ceremonies are usually performed in Nigeria, but also in Libya and Europe. In some cases, the community religious leader is also in charge of contacting and threatening the victim.

Family members receive money from traffickers. Some family members encourage their relatives (daughter, sister) or trick them with deceptive arguments to enter exploitative schemes.

Fraudulent commercial intermediaries are based in cities, and brokers in the rural areas. They fraudulently recruit victims for fake well-paid jobs or studies abroad.

Transport phase:

Movement facilitators are deployed along trafficking routes to monitor the police and facilitate the passage of the victims, also using corruption.

Escorting traffickers, also called “Trolleys” or “coyotes” and physically control the victims while traveling towards the destination country.¹⁹

Logisticians manage the travel arrangements.

Traffickers use the services of **migrant smugglers** to move the victims. Some migrant smugglers are also traffickers, sexually exploiting female migrants, or selling them to sex traffickers.

Transporters sometimes exploit the female migrant sex trafficking.

“Madams” are usually not the real heads of the OCGs and are working for male heads of the OCG.

Some **corrupt immigration or airport officials** are reportedly based at borders and at airports and facilitate the passage of victims against bribes or imposed sexual acts.

Exploitation phase

Temporary concentration and place owners: the owners of these premises can be migrant smugglers, non-state armed groups, or traffickers. These places, also called “prostitution camps,” allow the gathering and the sexual exploitation of the victims before reaching the next departure site/port.

Corrupt officials in detention center, internally Displaced Person camps, or refugees’ camps: In North and West Africa, trafficking may be facilitated by reportedly corrupt officials.

Corrupt community authorities: in West Africa, traffickers organize the sexual exploitation of victims near mining areas with the complicity of some corrupt community leaders who benefit from a “redistributive corruption system”.²⁰

“Madams”: women offenders in charge of the sexual exploitation of victims, mostly female compatriots. When exploiting victims in Europe, the victims are sometimes scattered in different countries. They are also in charge of arranging logistics and communication with clients online. They also manage the collection of the illicit profit. They are often former victims.

Watcher: members of criminal confraternities monitor victims in destination countries.

“Victim Sorter”: at some point, victims are “sorted” to be exploited in different places in destination country.

Kingpins: “Madams” can be the heads of the OCG, but in some cases, they work for male heads.

Business owners: owners of hotels, nightclubs, brothels, and bars as well as taxi drivers and hotel employees facilitate or even encourage sexual exploitation of the victims, from which they benefit.

Illicit proceeds movers: Hawala agents enable criminals to move the proceeds from sexual exploitation from Europe to Africa or from a country to another one, thanks to the Hawala system. Money mules are also moving cash transnationally.

Wahaya husband: in West Africa, a traditional slavery practice called Wahaya, or “Fifth wife” allow some husband to take or buy a fifth wife to exploit her sexually, among others.

Terrorists and non-state armed groups: In the Sahel region, terrorist groups and NSAGs use women and girls, sometimes from internally displaced camps, for sexual exploitation, including sexual slavery through forced marriages. Jihadist groups such as Boko Haram or Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) abduct women for the purpose of sexual slavery.

3.2 Offenders' nationality

In North Africa, the majority of offenders arrested are nationals from North African countries and the rest are from West African countries. Within a single organized crime group, they tend to share the same nationality. It is likely that a larger proportion of foreign criminals operate in West Africa compared to North Africa, with a more diverse range of nationalities among offenders, coming from West, Central, and North Africa, as well as from countries in Asia or the Americas.

European countries have requested most INTERPOL Notices and Diffusions targeting West and North African offenders involved in sex trafficking, with a majority of these targeting Nigerian nationals. This suggests strong linkages between OCGs from these countries, notably Nigeria, and sex trafficking in Europe. Since 2021, there has been a decrease in INTERPOL Notices and Diffusions requested by European countries targeting individuals from Nigeria for trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation, with the coincidental emergence of INTERPOL Notices and Diffusions targeting other West and North African nationals.

Some European countries also noted a decrease in arrests of Nigerian sex traffickers starting in 2021. This trend may be explained by the weakening of these OCGs due to an increased enforcement pressure. Alternatively, it may be attributed to a potential lack of detection, due to the adoption of new modi operandi.

Impact and evolutions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic: Restrictions limited sex trafficking opportunities, pushed them further online or in hidden locations, and reduced enforcement activities. UNODC 2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (UNODC GloTIP 2022) report shows a similar pattern at a global scale, with a decrease in 24 per cent of the number of detected sex trafficking victims during the pandemic. In countries where lock-down was implemented, the closing of public venues limited the possibilities of sexual exploitation. Remaining sexual exploitation activities might have moved "into less visible and less safe locations".²¹ This situation would have also hampered law enforcement capacities to combat the crime.

3.3 Features of sex trafficking OCGs

In North and West Africa, sex trafficking is reportedly mainly organized by individual offenders and transnational networks of specialized cells. Complex networks gathering diverse illicit

players with specific roles are strategically deployed at key points along the routes of the countries of origin, transit, and destination. United States Department of States (US DoS) noted that in Libya, “international observers continued to report systemic and prevalent official complicity in, and at times perpetration of, human trafficking crimes” as “various armed groups, militias, and criminal networks infiltrated the administrative ranks of the government and engaged in illicit activities, including human trafficking.”²² In Côte d’Ivoire, “traffickers often operate in well-established networks consisting of both Ivoirians and foreigners.”²³

In Europe, identified African traffickers are either individuals (including victim’s family members) or transnational OCGs. Sex trafficking Nigerian criminal confraternities such as the Black Axe, Supreme Viking Confraternity, Arobaga Vikings, the Maphite, and the Eiye syndicate are becoming more organized, violent, and sophisticated. They also collaborate with European mafia and OCGs and are diversifying their criminal activities while focusing less on human trafficking^{24 25 26 27} As demonstrated by the INTERPOL Operation Jackal III, West African OCGs are poly-criminal and also involved in cyber fraud, drug smuggling, and violent crimes both within Africa and globally.²⁸

As highlighted by Europol, human traffickers are indeed “resourceful and agile”: to respond the demand, they can adjust resources and modify their modus operandi. Such reactions “not only demonstrate business awareness, but also a strong logistical setup and significant resources allowing them to easily adjust their business models.”²⁹

Austrian police noted that Nigerian OCGs in Europe are managed by ‘Madams,’ who are high ranking members of Nigerian sex trafficking OCGs. Some of them travel between Nigeria and Europe and have several Nigerian victims forced to work for them. Their victims often reside in different European countries. The ‘Madams’ use Nigerian OCGs member to monitor the victims during the transport from Nigeria and during the exploitation phase in Europe.³⁰

3.4 Gender and role of the sex trafficking offenders

Information from member countries suggests that in North and West Africa, among those arrested for sex trafficking, there is almost equal distribution of men and women offenders. In Europe, women offenders and “Madams” play a prominent managing role. Austrian police reported that Nigerian OCGs are usually led by a “Madam” whereas males are used to monitor the victims.³¹ However, Europol also noted that in the EU, female traffickers, often former victims themselves, are co-opted, and work for the higher tiers of the OCGs, who are males. The latter “tend to keep themselves distanced from the victims and operations.” It is worth noting that digitalization of the THB process has led to an expansion of the role of women offenders in Europe, who “can be tasked with recruitment, grooming of victims, physically

controlling victims, arranging logistics, communication with clients, and collection of illicit profits.”³²

4. TRAFFICKING FLOWS OF VICTIMS FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

A general and underlying pattern organizes almost all displacement of women for sexual exploitation: traffickers, to maximize their illicit profits, move the victims mainly from rural and poor regions towards economic hubs with enough wealth and demand in sexual services. The economic hubs can be urban, mining, fishing, agriculture, or touristic zones, within the victims’ countries, or neighboring countries in West or North Africa. Following this pattern, victims are also displaced beyond Africa, notably towards Europe and other destinations. Opportunistic traffickers also sexually exploit women migrants on their way towards Europe. Two main types of itineraries will be considered in this section: the flows within Africa, which include the domestic flows³³, intra-regional flows³⁴ within West Africa, and inter-regional flows³⁵ between North and West African regions. The other main type of flows are the flows of victims outgoing from West and North African regions towards Europe and the rest of the world, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.1 Flows of victims in Western and Northern Africa

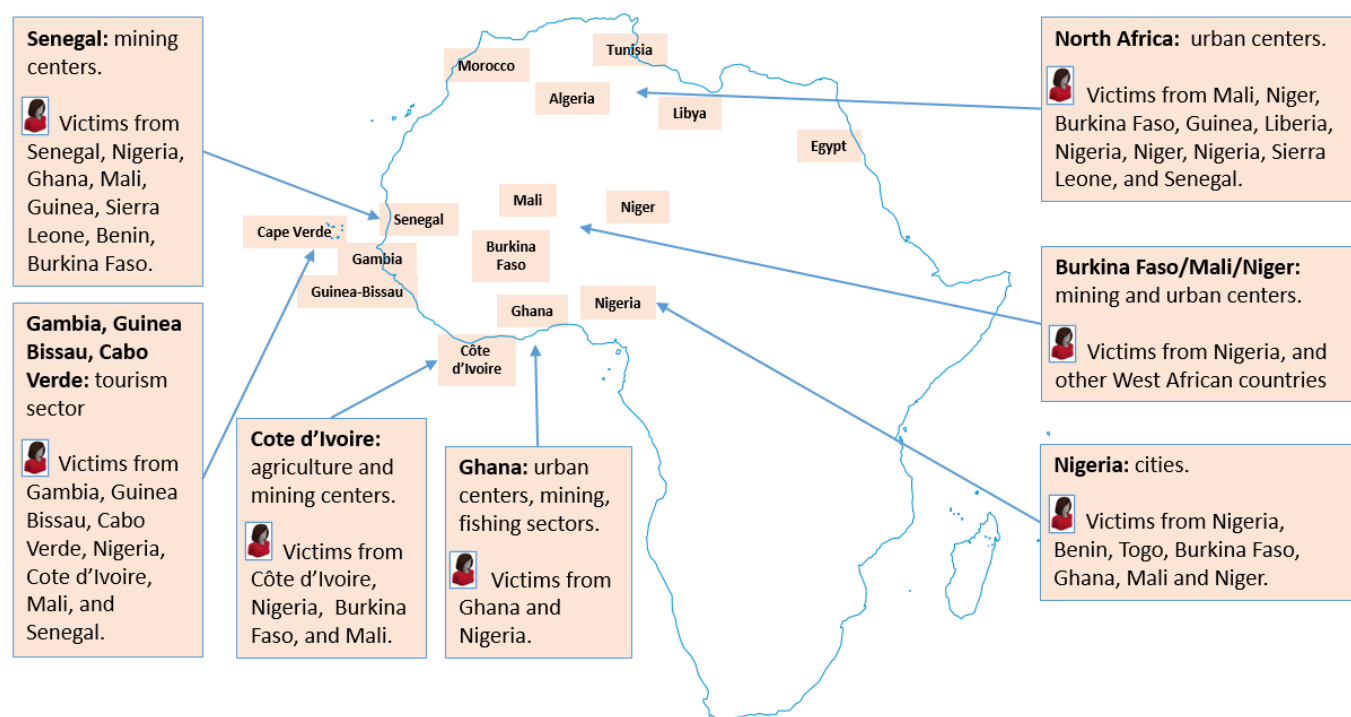


FIGURE 3: LOCATION AND TYPE OF ECONOMIC HUBS IN WEST AND NORTH AFRICA AND NATIONALITIES OF THE VICTIMS TRANSPORTED TO THESE HUBS. (SOURCE: US DOS)

According to UNODC, in the sub-Saharan region, 85 per cent of the victims are trafficked within their home country.³⁶

In **Benin**, the trafficking is mainly internal and sex traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims. The northern, central, southern, and border regions are reportedly 'high-risk regions for human trafficking'.³⁷

In **Burkina Faso**, sex traffickers sexually exploit national and West African victims in Ouagadougou and in mining cities.³⁸

In **Cabo Verde**, OCGs exploit West African women, including from Nigeria and Senegal.³⁹ Nigerian victims are transported to and exploited in Cabo Verde by Nigerian OCGs.⁴⁰

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, traffickers reportedly exploit Ivorian, Nigerian, Burkinabe, and Malian women in sex trafficking.⁴¹ Nigerian traffickers sexually exploit Nigerian and West African women from neighboring countries in cocoa-producing regions, and in northern and western mining regions, including near gold mines in Tengrela.⁴² During INTERPOL Operation PRISCAS, a woman and a man were arrested in Côte d'Ivoire: they were exploiting 35 victims.⁴³ Traffickers reportedly sexually exploit Moroccan women.⁴⁴

Gold mining and sexual exploitation: According to ISS, the trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation on mining sites is fueled by three main factors. Firstly, there is an increasing demand for sexual services by gold miners, whose number has increased with the development of mining sites. Secondly, there is a local belief according to which "sexual intercourse before extraction increases the chances of finding gold." Thirdly, research by the ISS shows that "this illegal market is integrated into a redistributive corruption system that involves officials and community authorities."⁴⁵

In **Gambia**, traffickers "fraudulently recruit women from West African countries, especially Nigeria and Sierra Leone, for jobs in tourism, and subsequently exploit them in sex trafficking."

⁴⁶ Offenders also exploit Bissau-Guinean girls in sex trafficking in the Gambia.⁴⁷

In **Ghana**, Ghanaian and Nigerian sex trafficking victims are moved to mining regions, but also to fishing sectors (Lake Volta region), urban and commercial centers, and border towns. Moreover, movements of women vulnerable to sex trafficking from the North of Ghana towards cities are amplified by droughts induced by climate change.⁴⁸

In **Guinea**, Guinean and West African victims, including from Guinea Bissau⁴⁹ and Sierra Leone,⁵⁰ are exploited by traffickers. Victims of sex trafficking are exploited in Conakry and in mining cities in Lower and Upper Guinea.⁵¹ Sex trafficking victims from Asia are also reportedly exploited in Guinea.

In **Guinea-Bissau**, traffickers sexually exploit local and foreign victims in the Bijagos archipelago and in bars, nightclubs, and hotels in Bissau.⁵²

In **Mali**, victims of sex trafficking are recruited from West African countries, particularly Nigeria, and are exploited in Mali, usually in small gold mining communities. African women migrants transiting Mali to Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and sometimes Europe are potential

victims of sex trafficking.⁵³ Nigerian traffickers transport Nigerian women and girls to Mali to sexually exploit them.⁵⁴

Female sexual exploitation by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) In Mali, it is reported that terrorist groups and NSAGs use girls, among others, “for sexual exploitation, including sexual slavery through forced marriages to members of these armed groups.”⁵⁵ In Burkina, violent extremist groups reportedly exploit women, including internally displaced persons, in sex trafficking.⁵⁶ Boko Haram extremist group and NSAGs continue to abduct women in the north of Nigeria for the purpose of sexual slavery.⁵⁷ In Niger, the jihadist organization Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) reportedly “exploits women and girls as young as 13 in forced marriage, sometimes through abduction.”⁵⁸

In **Mauritania**, West African women and girls, including from Senegal and Sierra Leone,⁵⁹ are also vulnerable to sex trafficking. In the port city of Nouadhibou, offenders sexually exploit migrants from Sub-Saharan African countries transiting Mauritania on their way to Europe.⁶⁰

In **Niger**, Nigerian women are exploited in sex trafficking in northern mining cities and transportation centers. In Niger, migrant women from West Africa on their way towards southern Europe via Algeria, Libya, and Morocco, are sometimes exploited by the transporters in sex trafficking. Nigerian sex trafficking victims are also exploited in Niger’s neighboring countries, in border zones with Nigeria, and “along the main east-west highway, primarily between the cities of Birni N’Konni and Zinder.”⁶¹

In **Nigeria**, sex trafficking victims are also moved internally following a rural-to-urban pattern. Victims are displaced from the Eastern States to Edo State, and from Edo State to Osun and Oyo States. This internal trafficking has been described as a “tutorial on prostitution,” before the victims can be moved abroad.⁶² Data from the National Authority for the Prohibition of the Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) covering the first semester of 2021 shows that most female victims from sex trafficking originated from Benue, Akwa Ibom, Ogun and Kano States and that 80 per cent of the rescued victims were Nigerian.⁶³ Nigeria is also a destination country for sexual exploitation for victims mainly from Benin and Togo, and to a lesser extent from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Niger.⁶⁴

In **Senegal**, victims from Nigeria but also from Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Benin, and Burkina Faso, are sexually exploited in the southeastern gold mining region of Kedougou; they usually transit via Mali.⁶⁵ Nigerian traffickers transport Nigerian women and girls to Senegal to sexually exploit them.⁶⁶ Open source information indeed affirms that victims are brought mainly from Nigeria and Burkina Faso via Mali and forced to prostitution by women traffickers on illegal gold mining sites in Senegal (Diabougou, Soreto, Mouran, Saraya departement

(Kédougou, sud-est), Tambacounda (est), Wakilaré village.)⁶⁷ Offenders also exploit Bissau-Guinean girls in sex trafficking in Senegal.⁶⁸

In **Sierra Leone**, offenders recruit and move victims from rural provinces to exploit them in cities, mining centers, and commercial fishing boats in Monrovia.⁶⁹

Togo is a destination country for Nigerian victims who are exploited in Lomé. Togo is also a transit country for these victims, recruited and transported by Nigerian traffickers to be exploited in cities in Mali or Ghana.⁷⁰

A possibly underestimated number of victims: *Due to cultural issues and underreporting, there are likely more victims of sex trafficking in West Africa. According to US DoS, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations reportedly noted that “sexual crimes, including sex trafficking, were underreported due to cultural taboos and a reliance on informal resolution mechanisms rather than the formal criminal justice system.”⁷¹ According to the UNODC 2022 GloTIP report, trafficking for sexual exploitation in West Africa, is the second most common form of exploitation after forced labor and represents 41 per cent of all detected victims.⁷²*

North Africa

In **Algeria**, sex trafficking victims are Algerian women, and West African women, notably female migrants from Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria.⁷³ According to the US DoS, Beninese victims, transiting via Nigeria and Nigerian victims, transiting via Benin, are exploited in Algeria.⁷⁴ Some West African victims are forced to prostitute themselves by members of their own community in Tamanrasset, Oran, and Algiers. US DoS also noted that Nigerian trafficking networks “strengthened in Algeria and past smuggling routes from Edo State, Nigeria, through Agadez, Niger to Libya were shifting to Algeria.”⁷⁵

In **Egypt**, nationals and sub-Saharan victims, including Guinean victims, are sexually exploited⁷⁶, including Guinean women.⁷⁷

In **Libya**, traffickers reportedly force sub-Saharan women into prostitution, mainly in the towns of Ubari, Sebha, and Murzuq in southern Libya,⁷⁸ as well as in Benghazi, Misrata, and Tripoli.⁷⁹ Nigerian sex trafficking victims are transported through Niger to Libya by trafficking networks.⁸⁰ Nigerian traffickers sexually exploit irregular migrants at multiple stages of their journey through Northern Africa to Europe. It is estimated that 67 per cent of women in Libya or transiting Libya on their way to Europe are victims of trafficking.⁸¹

In **Tunisia**, the US DoS reported domestic and foreign victims. The majority of identified West African female victims of trafficking are Ivoirian. Others were originating from Burkina Faso, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. Sub-Saharan migrants are at risk of being exploited in sex trafficking.⁸² Other identified female victims of trafficking are originating from Cameroon, Sudan, and Syria.⁸³

In **Morocco**, domestic victims and sub-Saharan women migrants heading to Europe via Melilla and Ceuta or the Canary Islands are likely to be victims of sexual trafficking as well. Nigerian victims are exploited in sex trafficking, while transiting through Oujda or Nador towards

Europe. It is worth noting the increasing number of victims from Southern Asia, according to the same source.⁸⁴

4.2 Flows of victims between West and North African regions and the rest of the world

These flows include the exploitation of North and West African victims in another region or when a victim is brought from any region to North Africa or West Africa to be sexually exploited.

Europe: West African victims identified in Europe mainly originate from Nigeria and transit via Niger, Libya, and Italy towards nearly all Western European countries. Another route towards Europe for Nigerian victims is via Niger, Algeria, and Morocco to the Spanish mainland. Transport also takes place by air from Nigeria, with unknown stopovers to Austria.⁸⁵ Austrian police informed that Austria is a destination country as well as a transit country for predominantly Nigerian victims. They are usually the eldest their family, aged between 18 and 25, and come from the southern Christian part of Nigeria.⁸⁶

According to US DoS information, West African victims, mainly from Nigeria, are sexually exploited in France, Italy, Spain, Austria, and the UK.⁸⁷ Nigerian victims are transported through Libya for sex exploitation in Italy and other European countries.⁸⁸ For instance, 80 per cent of women in Spain's unlicensed brothels are victims of sex trafficking, with Nigerians forming a large percentage of that population.⁸⁹ The US DoS also noted an increase of migrant women from Côte d'Ivoire arriving in Italy, who are likely to be sexually exploited in Libya and then in Italy.⁹⁰ Victims also originate from Burkina Faso,⁹¹ Gambia,⁹² and Ghana.⁹³ Victims from Guinea exploited in Europe transit via Senegal.⁹⁴ Finally, Cabo Verde archipelago is also a transit route to Europe for migrants and possible women victims of sex trafficking.⁹⁵ According to a report by UNODC, trafficking of Nigerian victims to West and Central Africa is more common than trafficking to Europe.⁹⁶

Central, East and South Africa: Nigerian traffickers also transport Nigerian victims to Central and South African countries,⁹⁷ as well as towards East Africa.⁹⁸ Guinean women are also exploited in Angola.⁹⁹

Middle East: According to the US DoS, sex trafficking of West African victims to the Middle East is also significant. Nigerian victims are also reportedly exploited in the UAE and victims from Benin are sexually exploited in Lebanon and the Gulf countries.¹⁰⁰ Victims also originate from Burkina Faso,¹⁰¹ from Guinea,¹⁰² Niger,¹⁰³ Gambia,¹⁰⁴ Ghana,¹⁰⁵ and Mauritania.¹⁰⁶

Mauritanian victims are exploited in Saudi Arabia¹⁰⁷ and some West African victims are recruited and transported to Middle East through North Africa.¹⁰⁸

Americas: Traffickers exploit Guinean victims in sex trafficking in the United States.¹⁰⁹ Nigerian OCGs reportedly exploited Cabo Verdean women in sex trafficking in Brazil.¹¹⁰

Emergence of victims from Asia exploited in West Africa or by West African traffickers: Some cases of Asian women exploited in West African countries were reported. Chinese victims were reportedly exploited in Senegal¹¹¹ and Thai victims in Benin.¹¹²

4.3 Additional information on West and North African victims in the EU

Decrease in identified Nigerian victims in some European countries

Several European countries noted a recent and ongoing decrease in the number of identified victims from Nigeria. In some country, it decreases by more than 80 per cent from 2021 to 2023.

Possible explanations for the decrease in identified Nigerian victims

This decrease could be possibly explained by several reasons. Firstly, the decrease in the number of migrants through the Mediterranean route, meaning a decrease in potential sex trafficking victims.¹¹³ Second, in March 2018, the Oba of Benin – the religious leader of Benin City – pronounced a public revocation of the oaths undertaken by the Nigerian victims. This oath is taken during a traditional ceremony, during which the victims pledge before a juju priest to obey the traffickers, and not to cooperate with law enforcement, or a curse will harm them.¹¹⁴ Third, successful international cooperation and operations between origin, transit and destination countries may have permitted a reduction of the crime. Moreover, implementation of legislation to fight against prostitution targeting the demand and protecting the victims in some European countries might also explain the decrease.¹¹⁵ Finally, since the pandemic, there has been a trend towards hidden prostitution. In this case, the decrease would not reflect an actual decrease in victims but would rather be the result of difficulties to detect the victims.

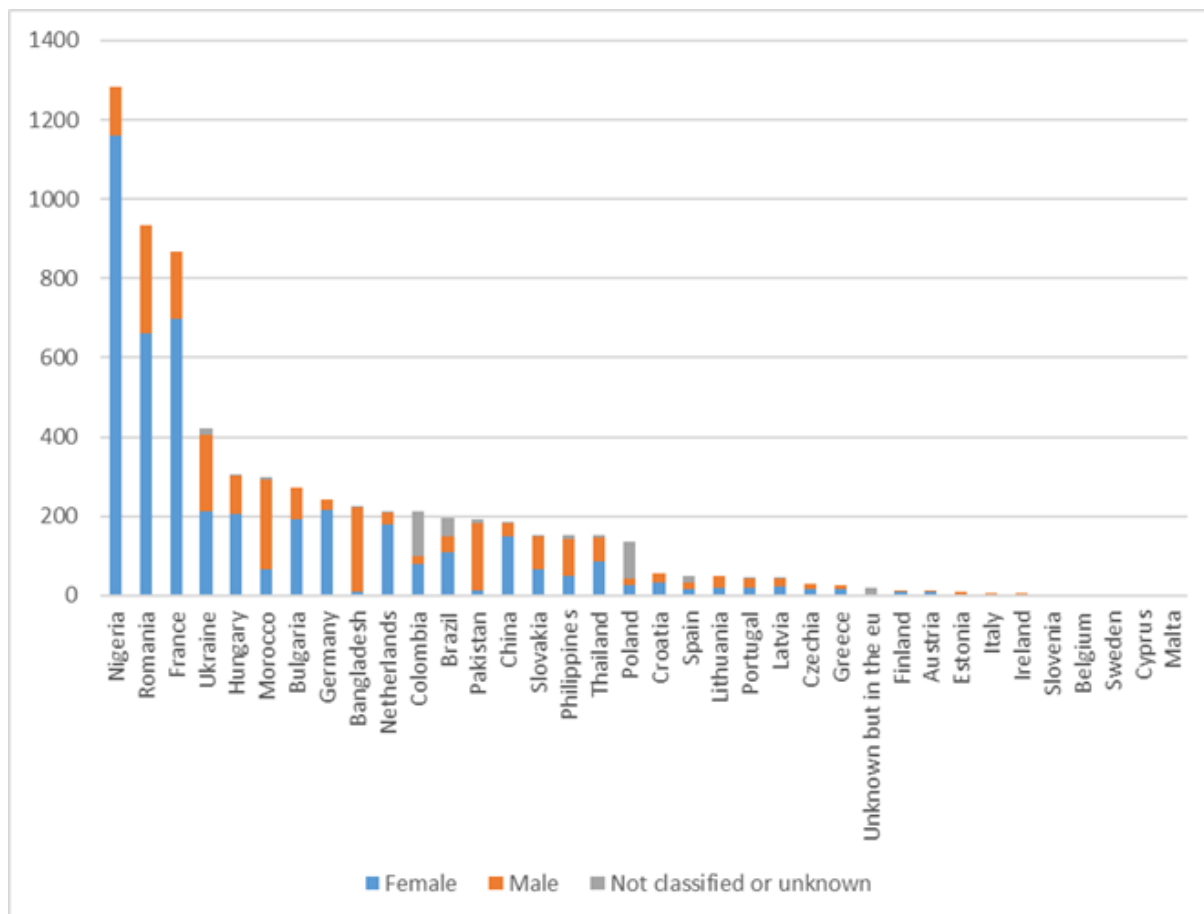


FIGURE 4: NUMBER OF VICTIMS PER CITIZENSHIP OF EU27 AND TOP 10 NON-EU27 AND SEX IN 2022
(SOURCE: EU COMMISSION)¹¹⁶

Open sources information on African victims in Europe shows that Nigerian women are the most represented. As shown in the figure 4, in 2022, Nigeria was the main country of citizenship of non-EU victims in the EU, with 1,312 Nigerian citizens reported victims, most of which were women.¹¹⁷

In France, according to the annual conclusions of NGOs in charge of assisting victims of trafficking, in 2022, 52 per cent of all victims of sexual exploitation were Nigerians, a stable figure compared to 2021. Associations also observe a diversification of countries of origin for victims of sexual exploitation, with victims mainly coming from Côte d'Ivoire and, to a lesser extent, Guinea, Mali and Senegal.¹¹⁸

4.4 Impact of instability and conflicts on flows of sex trafficking victims

Externally and internally displaced people are at risk of sex trafficking by criminal networks in Africa and in Europe. US DoS highlighted that approximately two million internally displaced

offenders use
fraudulent and
deceptive schemes
to recruit the
victims both online
and offline.

persons (IDPs) in Burkina Faso, “are vulnerable to forced labor and sex trafficking.”¹¹⁹ Nigerian women of IDP camps in Northeast Nigeria are fraudulently recruited to work in Europe, but are sexually exploited in North Africa, in the Gulf and in Europe. Corruption of officials is also reported as an important facilitator of human trafficking from Nigeria. In Italy or elsewhere in Europe, traffickers recruit victims directly from asylum or migrant reception centers.¹²⁰

Conflicts are opportunities for traffickers: 73 per cent of detected victims of trafficking originating from a country in conflict come from Sub-Saharan Africa and 11 per cent from the MENA region. Moreover, according to UNODC, sex trafficking of women and girls “is often part of the systematic sexual violence perpetrated against civilians during and after conflicts.”¹²¹

5. MODUS OPERANDI

5.1 Recruitment

Recruitment scenarios: In West and North Africa, offenders use fraudulent and deceptive schemes to recruit the victims both online and offline. The main reported methods include: fake advertisements for opportunities abroad,¹²² such as well-paid jobs, false immigration offers to Europe, and study opportunities. In Mali, traffickers propose jobs as waitresses in Bamako, in beauty parlors in Europe or in the United States.¹²³ Other common fake jobs include hairdressing,¹²⁴ modeling jobs, or employment in shops and salons.¹²⁵ Mauritanian women are proposed fake jobs as nurses or teachers or are lured by fraudulent marriage proposals to traffickers from MENA countries.¹²⁶ In Morocco, female migrants seeking assistance at “safe houses,” are usually forced into prostitution by traffickers of their own nationality.¹²⁷ According to information provided by Austrian police, traffickers offer fraudulent job offers as nannies and receptionists in Austria or other parts of Europe.¹²⁸

Cyber-enabled recruitment: To lure the victims online, recruiters mainly use fake identities on mainstream social networks and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, Messenger, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Telegram or Instagram.

OCGs in Africa use social media to improve their social engineering schemes: they study the profiles of potential victims to tailor their messages to recruit victims online. A 2023 UNODC report

corroborated the fact that over the last few years, “traffickers have been increasingly relying on social media platforms to identify and recruit potential victims” whereas “five to ten years ago, traffickers got in contact with the victims through personal recruitment.”¹²⁹ Increases in internet penetration within the countries where victims are recruited might also contribute to an increase in new victims.

According to Europol, “most victims are identified and recruited via the Internet, particularly on social media platforms.”¹³⁰ In the EU, traffickers tend to offer fraudulent business agreements: for instance, they propose that the prostitution profit would be shared between them. By voluntarily accepting a deal, “victims do not perceive themselves as such.”¹³¹ In the EU, the use of the Internet allows the traffickers to increase their anonymity. For instance, they use encrypted communication applications, and they benefit from “legislative discrepancies in regulating and providing data”.¹³²

Offline recruitment: Such recruitment generally takes place through intermediaries. For instance, victims from Ghana are recruited thanks to fake contracts, by registered and unregistered agents.¹³³ Family relatives are also involved. Nigerian women are also often recruited at markets or shops.¹³⁴

5.2 Control of the victims

Data analysis of the Global Synthetic Dataset of the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), a database provided by the International Organization for Migration (OIM), allowed for the ranking of the various means used by traffickers to control their victims. Figure 5 below shows that from 2018 to 2022, traffickers controlled victims from Nigeria and Ghana using the following means, in decreasing order: physical, psychological or sexual abuses, false promises, denial of basic needs, threats to the victim or family, debt bondage or withholding of wages, excessive working hours, withholding of documents, and finally by using psychoactive substances.¹³⁵

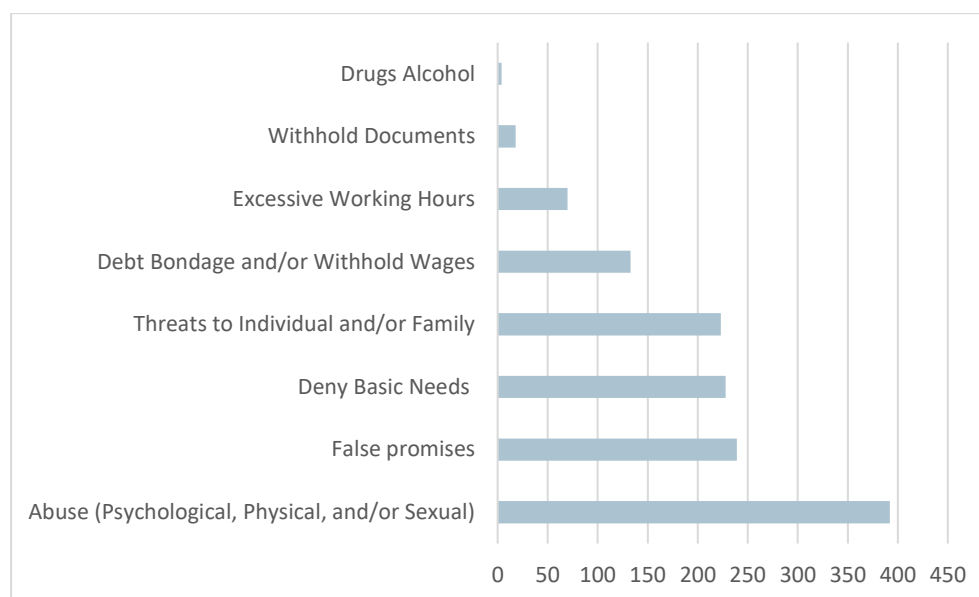


FIGURE 5: MEANS OF CONTROL REPORTED BY IDENTIFIED VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING FROM 2018 TO 2022 (SOURCE: CTDC)

Debt bondage is a control mechanism. While some Nigerian sex trafficking victims arrive in Europe knowing they will be involved in commercial sex work, traffickers coerce them to stay in prostitution by “altering working conditions and increasing victims’ travel debts.”¹³⁶ Traffickers exploiting West African women in Senegal’s mining regions force them into prostitution to reimburse travel fees, ranging from USD 2,550 to 3,500.¹³⁷ In Tunisia, a nightclub owner fraudulently said he would pay the debts of a sub-Saharan migrant if she agreed to enter into prostitution.¹³⁸

Being away from home is also a means of controlling victims. To do so, traffickers mainly move their victims via land routes, using taxis, private cars, or public transportation, such as buses. They often modify their itinerary, change transportation means, including travel by foot, to avoid detection. As previously mentioned, online platforms and social networks applications are used to facilitate the movement of victims with tickets being paid by traffickers using mobile money applications.

Traffickers also commonly use **psychological and physical violence, as well as threats of violence** to control their victims. In Europe, traffickers exploit West African victims under the physical control enforced by the members of the OCG and thanks to threats of violence against their family in West Africa.¹³⁹ In some cases, “parents of some victims encourage them to obey their traffickers and endure exploitation to earn money.”¹⁴⁰

Cyber-enabled control of the victims: However, in some cases, physical proximity is no longer needed to control the victims since control can be exerted via blackmail (e.g. by threatening to share sexual material online).¹⁴¹ Technology also allows for real-time monitoring: movement of the victims can be restricted and/or controlled thanks to smartphone GPS devices, cameras and location-sharing applications.¹⁴² Some perpetrators sometimes use

technology “to perpetuate the victimization and stigmatization by the broadcasting of material depicting sexual violence among the community of the victim.”¹⁴³

Perpetrators may also exert control over victims by **limiting their freedom of movement** and subjecting them to **sexual violence**. According to the US DoS, in Libya, victims’ movements can be restricted by Libyan and Nigerian traffickers, who sexually exploit Nigerian victims in sex trafficking in “control houses” or “prostitution camps” until they can repay fraudulent travel debts. A “reportedly high prevalence of sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence and exploitation of female migrants along the migration routes to Libya and in Department for Combatting Irregular Migration (DCIM)-run and militia-run detention facilities in Libya” is noted.¹⁴⁴ Some female inmates are reportedly “sold” to traffickers who then exploit them in sex trafficking.¹⁴⁵ Migrants are subject to torture (such as electric shocks) and sexual violence (including rape and forced prostitution) is prevalent.¹⁴⁶ UN reports also reported that some Nigerian women, kept in so-called “connection houses”, were “sexually exploited and raped by up to 20 men a day without receiving any contraception, often become pregnant and are forced to pay for unsafe abortions.”¹⁴⁷

In the context of migrant smuggling in West and North Africa, women are reportedly more exposed to sexual violence than men. Migrant women are commonly forced into sexual services to pay for transportation or “sex-for-passage” bribes to law enforcement officers. Moreover, sexual violence can also be used as a “demonstration of power” or even “to coerce fellow migrants who are forced to witness the rape of travel companions.”¹⁴⁸

Victims are also controlled through the **holding of identity documents**. The passports of Ghanaian victims are seized, and they are sometimes physically abused.¹⁴⁹ Traffickers exploiting West African women in the mining regions of Senegal also confiscate identity documents.¹⁵⁰ INTERPOL-coordinated operations in West Africa revealed similar means to control victims.

Sex trafficking victims are also controlled through **religious practices**. In Nigeria, or upon arrival in Europe, many Nigerian women participate in a traditional ceremony with a juju priest and take a loyalty oath: the women must obey their traffickers, or a curse will harm them or their family. This oath also prevents victims from seeking assistance or cooperating with law enforcement.¹⁵¹ About 90 per cent of the girls trafficked to Europe are reportedly taken to shrines for “oaths of secrecy.”¹⁵² Nigerian victims are reportedly

Perpetrators may also exert control over victims by limiting their freedom of movement and subjecting them to sexual violence.

controlled thanks to the “Juju oath, which includes absolute obedience and reimbursement of the travel costs (approx. EUR 40,000).”¹⁵³ The Juju priest is paid for the ritual. In Benin, the increasing use of Voudoun curses, a traditional religious practice, is also reported as a means to control Beninese women victims.¹⁵⁴

5.3 Exploitation of the victims

Locations of the sexual exploitation

Information based on the answers from the responding countries from West and North Africa shows an important diversity of places of exploitation (Figure 6). Exploitation mainly occurs in public spaces, that is to say open to the public, which represent 58 per cent of the places of exploitation: brothel (19 per cent), hotel (12 per cent), massage parlor (12 per cent), club/bar (9 per cent), and the street (6 per cent). Private places include the home of the client (12 per cent), the flat provided by the trafficker (12 per cent), online streaming (15 per cent), and other private and hidden places (3 per cent). In one reported case, 30 victims of sexual trafficking, were rescued from a hotel in Lomé where they were housed and forced to prostitution.¹⁵⁵

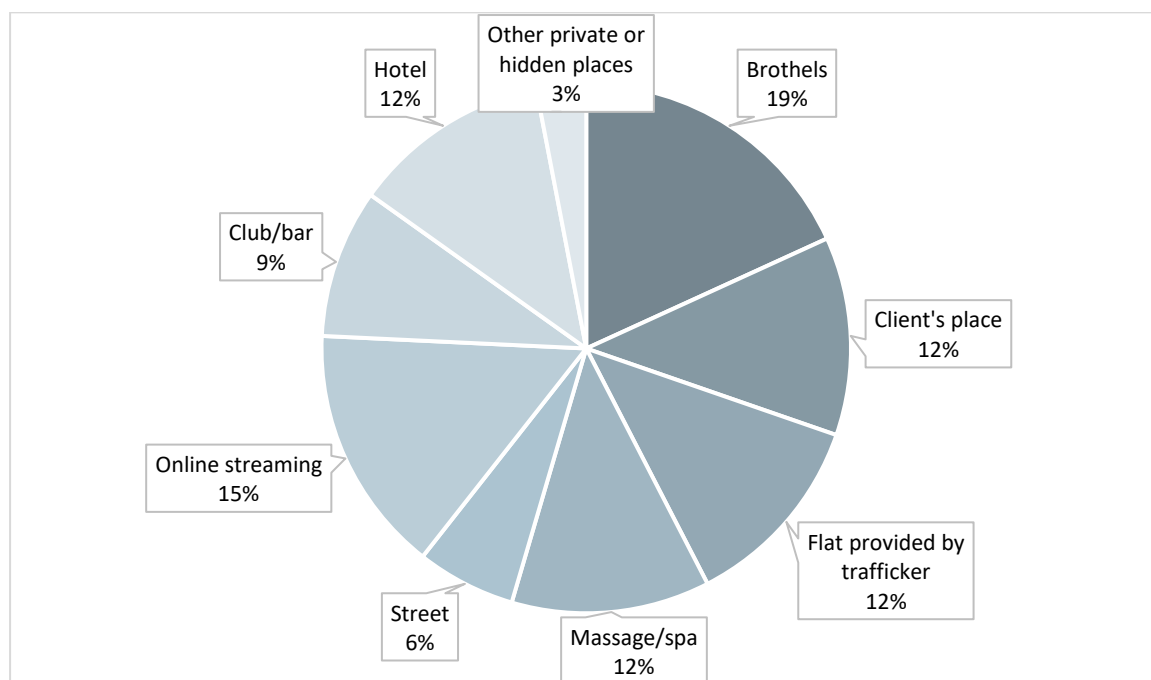


FIGURE 6: PLACES OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AS REPORTED BY NORTH AND WEST AFRICAN MEMBER COUNTRIES

According to UNODC, information based on court case summaries from countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the most common locations for the sexual exploitation of victims are private places, mainly at the client's private home (48 per cent) and in apartments provided by the trafficker (32 per cent).¹⁵⁶ Similarly, in the EU, exploitation tends to move to more hidden private places: "Even though legal business structures are still used as locations for abuse (i.e. hotels, restaurants, cafes, nightclubs, sex clubs and massage salons), exploitation increasingly occurs in privately owned or rented apartments, hindering law enforcement from detecting criminal activities."¹⁵⁷

Mixed exploitation

Victims of sexual exploitation are sometimes subject to other types of exploitation. In North and West Africa, information suggests that victims of sexual exploitation are also subjected to forced begging, forced criminality, forced labor, and organ removal. In Niger, the US DoS reported that some girls and women are exploited for forced labor and sexual servitude because of the traditional slavery practice of Wahaya, or "fifth wife."¹⁵⁸ According to UNODC, victims who face other forms of exploitation are mainly detected in mixed labor and sexual exploitation situations. At global level, this subset of victims has increased in share from two per cent in 2018 to 10 per cent in 2020.¹⁵⁹

Digitalization of sexual exploitation

As seen above in figure 6, online sexual exploitation represents 15 per cent of the 'location' where the exploitation takes place in North and West Africa. Sex traffickers use mainstream social media and post advertisements on local websites to exploit their victims. According to Europol, the internet allows OCGs to more easily organize the exploitation of victims while reducing risks. Indeed, digitalization of the crime area "has allowed the leadership of the criminal networks to coordinate their operations remotely, thus reducing risks while maintaining profits." Moreover, an increase in people's online presence means an increased audience and more potential victims and clients for traffickers. Europol underlines that "the digitalization of the many stages of the trafficking process was exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic."¹⁶⁰ In the EU, "most of the communication between clients and victims, and the planning of logistics behind encounters is also handled online. Victims therefore do not remain in one place and can easily be moved between locations, cities and even countries. 'Sex tours', during which victims travel to different cities to meet clients in rental apartments and hotel rooms, are increasingly reported."¹⁶¹

Adaptation to criminal markets

In North and West Africa, OCGs involved in trafficking in women for sexual exploitation adapt their activities based on the demand for sexual services. Similarly, in the EU, where sexual exploitation is the most frequently reported form of exploitation,¹⁶² demand fuels trafficking. Europol noted that "continued demand for sexual services and the opportunity to exploit cheap labour are ample incentives for the trafficking networks"¹⁶³ In Europe, the DoS reported

that “traffickers encourage Nigerian victims to claim asylum to obtain legal residency and facilitate further exploitation.”¹⁶⁴

Complicity of offenders from the private sector

In West and North Africa, the exploitation of victims is reportedly facilitated with the complicity of staff of the private sector. Some bars, hotels, and taxi drivers are reportedly involved. Cabo Verde, hotel employees and taxi drivers facilitate tourists’ participation in commercial sex and encourage demand for it.¹⁶⁵

Illicit financial flows and money laundering from sex trafficking

In Northern and Western African regions, information suggests that illicit proceeds from the exploitation of victims circulates at national and international level mainly in cash. Other means used are bank transfers, mobile money services, money service providers, barter trade, virtual assets, money mules, and Hawala system. Investment in real estate and services activities are used to launder illicit money.

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