

# Finding A Way Out

*A qualitative research on the patterns after  
exploitation in the Netherlands amongst Nigerian  
and Ghanaian victims of Human Trafficking*

“Perspectives on Rights”  
Amsterdam, The Salvation Army  
(Recht in Zicht, Leger des Heils)



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and Integration Fund of the European Union



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Celine van den Berg-Doef



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*Is there a way out?  
And if so, is there sufficient  
support to realise it?*

# Foreword

"Finding a Way Out" started out as the working title of this research: aiming at gaining insight in the patterns identifiable amongst the escape routes of Western African victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands. We hoped there might be a pattern which could lead to a good practise, so that victims could be reached out to in earlier stages of exploitation or escape and helped more effectively. During the course of the interviews conducted for the research our perspectives on the escape and exploitation shifted: had there been a unique escape moment or had the Madam maybe lost interest in feeding and sheltering the victims once new victims were delivered? Had our interviewees actually left exploitation or are they still caught in the web of exploitation?

If for one thing this research has challenged our definitions and frameworks which we have been applying for many years in our legal support to victims. It has proven us that most of our clients are still in the same or similar exploitation as to which their initial traffickers brought them to from Western Africa. The presence, abuse and threats of the traffickers might no longer be predominant to these victims. However they are still bonded by debts to their madam or have fallen prone to new exploiters.

The victims often still perceive no other option than to prostitute themselves for money, shelter, food and/or protection.

Victims of human trafficking who are undocumented belong to the most vulnerable of victims of human trafficking. They try to survive in the grey areas of the Netherlands amongst other undocumented migrants, where legal frameworks do not protect, but hinder them. With limited access to professional support and provisions as well as being excluded from the formal economy their chances of being re-trafficked are big.

In addition the 12 women that extensively shared their stories clarified how unique each individual story was. Patterns can be scetched out in the modus operandi of their traffickers and in the organisation of the networks of different Western African groups in the Netherlands with as main geographical area the South Eastern part of Amsterdam (Bijlmer). Next to identifying similarities in their experiences, great variations were visible in the resilience to the exploitation of trafficking and the perceptions of the traumatic events.

'Finding a way out' therefore turned out to be an ambitious title: is there a way out? And if so, is there sufficient support to realise it?

In our project "Perspectives on Rights" we believe there is a way out, although a very complex one in which partnerships with prosecutors and immigration services are crucial. This research proves to us that more specific knowledge of the Western African networks could contribute to improving a multi-disciplinary approach to trafficking amongst this specific group. In addition it points out that specifically the South Eastern part of Amsterdam needs more attention in the prevention and protection of (potential) victims and the prosecution of the traffickers. And finally: as long as these victims do not have a legal status, the protection and support can not be provided. Those women that were able to start a new life in the Netherlands after all, did so when they received a residence permit.

# Introduction

## 1.1 Palermo Protocol

In 2000 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children. For the first time in history, a definition of ‘trafficking in persons’ was internationally agreed on. Article 3 reads: “Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.” The Protocol has two main objectives.

Firstly, it establishes international standards that can demonstrate similarities in national criminal responses to trafficking and support international cooperation in investigating and prosecuting trafficking in persons cases. Secondly, the Protocol aims to protect and assist trafficked persons with full respect for their human rights. The support provided to (potential) victims should be tailored to their needs and capacities.

## 1.2 The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army (TSA) is deeply committed to establish ‘safe havens’ for victims of trafficking in which their lives can be restored and where they receive the support they need for rebuilding their lives towards sustainable (re)integration in the local community. TSA actively reaches out to the most vulnerable, oppressed and marginalized populations in 127 countries worldwide, including victims of trafficking, from a great variety of source, transit and destination countries. Since 2013 TSA has been developing an internationally coordinated effort to fight human trafficking in Europe (the European Anti Human Trafficking Task Force – AHT). Activities of the Salvation Army in the fight against trafficking are aimed at the prevention of (re)trafficking in source and destination countries and to the protection and rehabilitation of victims in destination countries.

## 1.3 Safe Havens

In 2016 TSA successfully made an application with the project Safe Havens, in the grant procedure Actions addressing trafficking in human beings. The ‘Safe Havens’ project is about the (re)integration of non-EU victims of trafficking. This research report is part of one of five work packages that focusses on carrying out a pilot programme for sustainable integration and safe return of (undocumented) non-EU victims of trafficking in partnership between TSA Netherlands and TSA Sweden.

## 1.4 Undocumented victims of human trafficking

The largest group of registered victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands are of Dutch origin. Victims of human trafficking coming from abroad, are large in numbers as well but are underrepresented in the national registration, especially victims being trafficked from Western Africa. The former National Reporteur expressed her concerns in the beginning of 2017 when the Centre against Child and Human Trafficking (CKM) dedicated a-month programme full of expert-meetings, discussion sessions and all sorts of activities to raise awareness for victims of human trafficking from Western African countries. The National Reporteur stated that the Dutch authorities fail in both the detection of victims of Western African background and in the tracking down of the human traffickers involved (National Reporteur, 2017).

When you are a victim of human trafficking, you can report the crime to the police and press charges against the human trafficker. The Dutch government is committed to put a series of protection measures in place. For a victim to be safe, they have rights which include shelter, social benefits, legal assistance and psychological and psychical care. When you are a non EU citizen, and you don’t have a legal status in the Netherlands, you will obtain a temporary legal status pending the police investigation and court proceedings. This permit is for the victim to be of dispense to the police during the investigation.

When the criminal investigation does not lead to the arrest and prosecution of the trafficker and the investigation is stopped, the temporary residency permit will be withdrawn. With this withdrawel the victim not only loses her legal status, she also loses her right to protection, shelter, social benefits, legal assistance and psychological and psychical care. Although she is still a victim, she is no longer a victim in a legal manner.

When victims of human trafficking drop out of the referral mechanism in place in the Netherlands, this is where the project “Perspectives on Rights” (PoR) steps in.

## 1.5 “Perspectives on Rights” project

The project has existed since 2008 and started of as a pilot project at the organisation currently known as FairWork. Since 2015 the project has been taken in by the Salvation Army. At the start of the research 60 clients were part of the project. The greater part originates from Western African countries, most are female and the sexual exploitation was the predominant form of exploitation (see table 1). Clients stay in the project for 1-4 years, although exceptions such as 6 or 8 years do appear as well.

The projects’ objective is to strengthen the position of victims of human trafficking who are undocumented. It uses the rights-based approach to work with victims towards an existence in dignity in the Netherlands or the country of origin and tries to work towards a future in safety and freedom.

The project gives legal support to victims of human trafficking who do not have the right to protection measures from the Dutch government since they either have not brought criminal proceedings against the human trafficker (yet) or they have lost such protection as a result of a dismissal of a criminal investigation into human trafficking. The project offers assistance for those victims who have become undocumented due to dismissals of criminal investigation as well as to those who have not yet pressed charges.

The legal support that is provided centers around three basic activities that contribute to strengthening the position of a victim of human trafficking. They include assistance in obtaining:

- a residence permit;
- a compensation of damage suffered;
- a passport or other documents of legal identification;

Given the extreme social and economic vulnerability of undocumented people, the support of the PoR project is not limited to legal assistance. Moreover, issues concerning shelter, income, medical care, finances, education and social networks are dealt with as well.

The research “Finding a Way Out” is conducted with 12 clients of “Perspectives on Rights”. In this research we refer to them as clients, respondents, interviewees and victims.

# About the research

## 2.1 Research aim

The aim of this research is to get a better understanding of the role of social networks of Western African victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands in gaining access to those who have more resources and knowledge and to acquire social capital, which improves their situation. Secondly, we analyze the “best practices” in the cases in which victims have successfully stepped out of exploitation and found their way to authorities or care providers. How can this knowledge be of help to current victims who have not taken this step? Not only the network in the destination, but also the network in the source country are part of the research.

Many scholars have discussed the significance of social networks in migration. Usually migrants migrate to places and regions where they know they can rely on relatives, kinship or fellow nationals for accommodation, assistance, and information about beginning a new life in an unfamiliar place (Andrikopolous, 2017). However, our clients were trafficked to Europe and unfortunately had no say in any of their future movements until the moment they escaped their deplorable situation of exploitation. Post-exploitation they start acquiring social capital in order to improve their situation. By social capital we mean resources that can be utilized to improve one’s situation (Bourdieu, 1986). Resources can be actual, such as money, food, housing, passport, education or a residence permit or virtual such as friendships, trust and power. We have little insight in how our clients build their social networks, based on mutual trust and reciprocity, and which resources they gain through networking. If we have an improved understanding of social networks and the resources of our clients, we may be able to better identify those coming out of exploitation. We have to consider the dynamics of networks: the social ties our clients post-exploitation develop are unlikely to remain static

especially of migrants experience social and geographical mobility (Ryan, 2011). It must be noted, that not all social networks and bonds that are developed lead to improvement of someone’s situation: according to Anthias ethnic ties, which means social relationships that you develop with someone of the same ethnic background, do not necessarily increase your advantage. Gender, class and social context could prevent you from utilizing resources. (Anthias, 2007).

## 2.2 Research method

The lion’s share of our clients originate from Western Africa. The group was sampled from the Nigerian and Ghanaian client population of 75% of the Perspective on Rights project. Most of these clients live in the same area in the South East of Amsterdam, also referred to as “the Bijlmer”. 12 victims were willing to participate intensely in the research. This gives a number of respondents which is not representative for victims of human trafficking or Western Africans as a whole. However, the interviews do offer a deeper and qualitative insight of networking strategies of our clients. The interviews were conducted in English within the period December 2017 – July 2018 and took upto 3 hours. With most respondents we held two or three in depth interviews as a follow up to the first round of interviews (see tables 2 and 3 for a list of interviewees and relevant information).

The participants were reluctant to have the interviews recorded, therefore we used written records. We made sure to analyse not only what was presented and what was not presented, but also how victims presented themselves.

The names of all individuals are pseudonyms. Two legal case worker who are themselves involved in the project as legal case workers conducted the interviews. Our long-term relationships with our clients was vital to building up the necessary level of trust for interviewing them. On the other

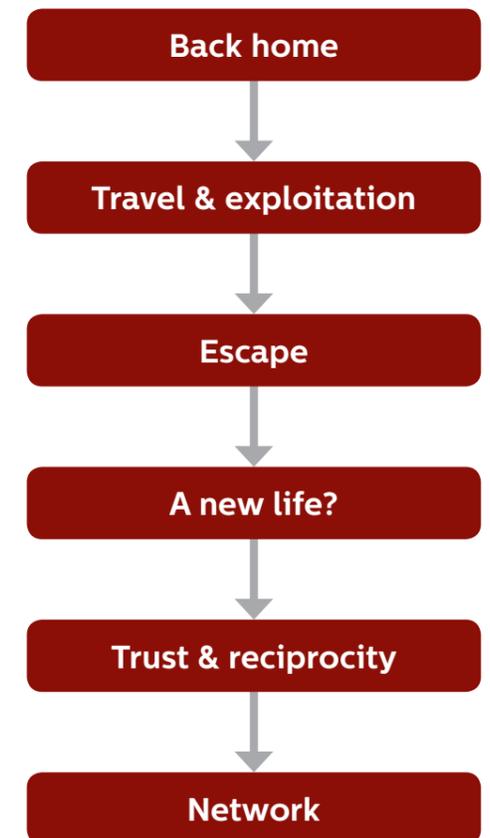
hand, we do acknowledge that an active involvement of the researcher with the community under study can influence the interviewees’ responses and produce compromising findings (Landau, 2012).

We use the narratives of the respondents to paint a picture of the process they have gone through, from the moment they leave their country of origin to the country of settlement. By analysing the interviews we come up with patterns which we illustrate and make it more lively by using quotes (process depicted here to the right).

Explicit attention was put to understanding the last three elements of that proces as to see where patterns in the escape and rebuilding of a life could be identified. What interviewees shared, gave us deeper understanding, whilst we also became aware of that what was selectively not expressed: the painful and embarrassing elements of their exploitation and current life in vulnerability were at times left unaccounted.

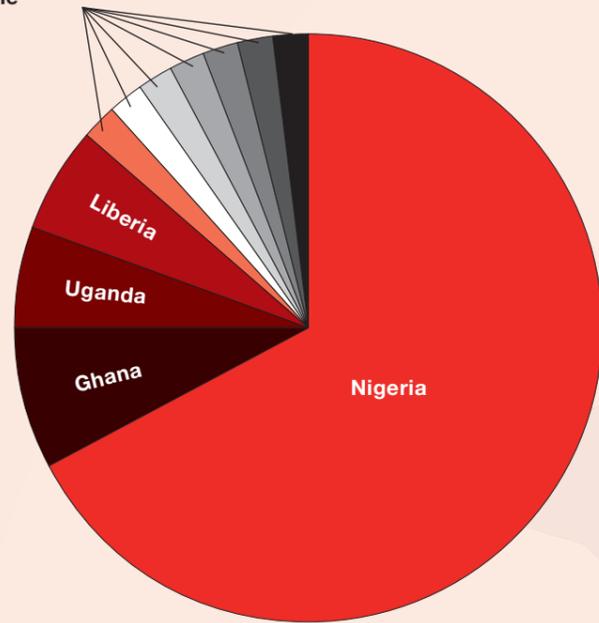
The outcome of the interviews is also linked to the experience and knowledge “Perspectives on Rights” developed in the work with victims of human trafficking since 2008.

To analyse the process of networking of our clients, we firstly depict a picture of the social context of the interviewees. By capturing all different experiences, we try to identify patterns amongst the interviewees in chapter 4. We conclude the report with a series of recommendations.



**Table 1: Client population in December 2017**

Guinea, Cameroon, Ivory Coast,  
Gambia, Morocco, Angola,  
Sierra Leone

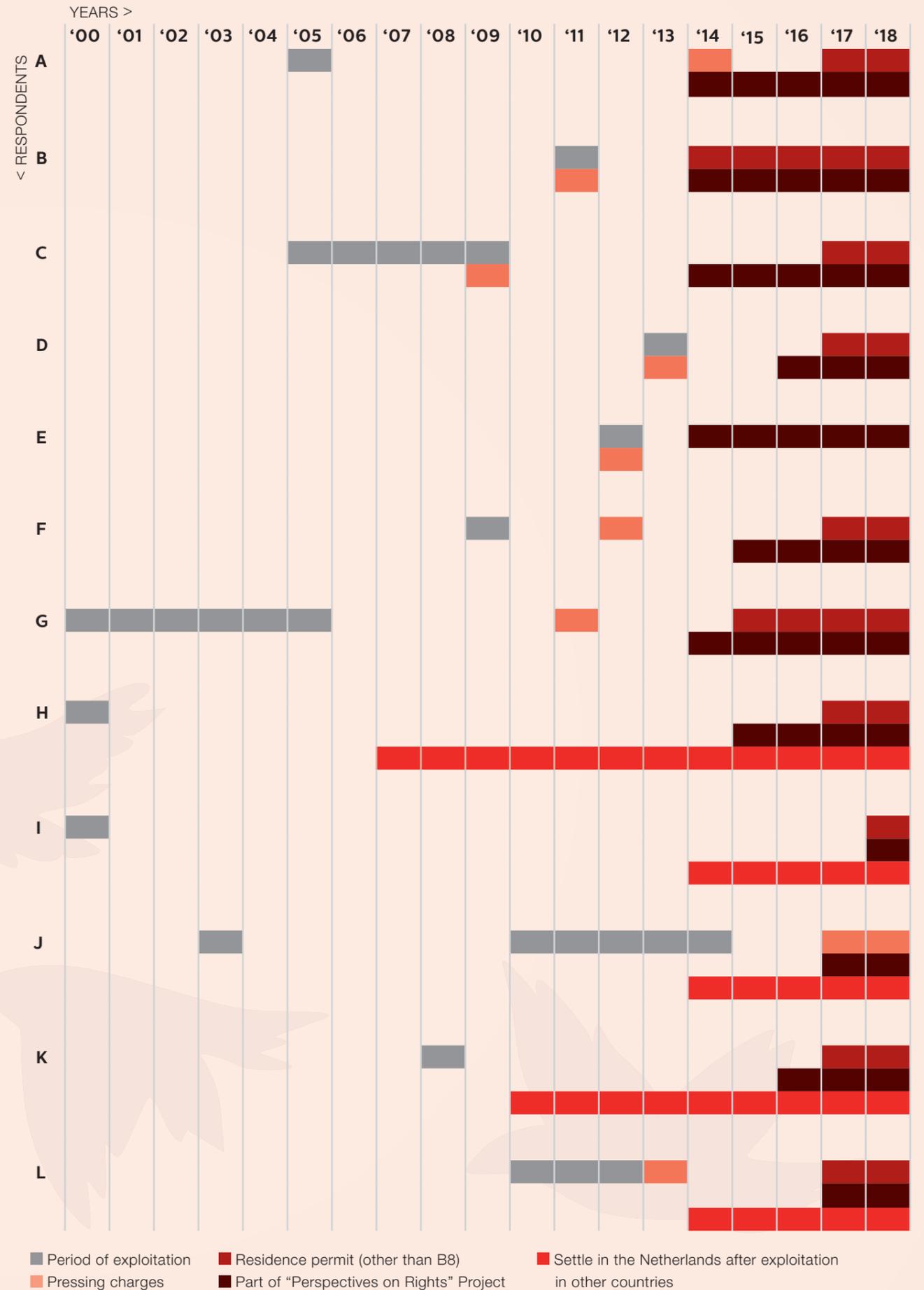


**Table 2: List of respondents**

Respondent	Year of birth	Nationality	Date of first interview
A	1977	Nigerian	15-01-2018
B	1967	Ghanaian	16-01-2018
C	1983	Nigerian	19-1-2018
D	1964	Ghanaian	22-2-2018
E	1989	Nigerian	29-01-2018
F	1975	Nigerian	19-06-2018
G	1978	Nigerian	23-03-2018
H	1974	Nigerian	20-02-2018
I	1978	Nigerian	17-07-2018
J	1975	Nigerian	10-11-2017
K	1979	Nigerian	11-12-2017
L	1982	Nigerian	03-07-2018

90% of the respondents are Christian and 10% muslim

**Table 3: Timeline of respondents**



■ Period of exploitation    
 ■ Residence permit (other than B8)    
 ■ Settle in the Netherlands after exploitation in other countries  
■ Pressing charges    
 ■ Part of "Perspectives on Rights" Project

# Interviews

## 3.1 Back home

The trafficking of Nigerian women started in Italy in the 1980s. Before then, Nigerian women of usually poor, uneducated background who migrated in search for job opportunities to Italy, had ended up in prostitution. Taking advantage of the organized crime infrastructure available in Italy, the women began to recruit other Nigerian women from their region, paying for the travel expenses, and creating a system of debt bondage which evolved in a growing system of human trafficking (Nadeau, 2018). A trafficking ring was established by Nigerians operating in different areas in Italy and soon after, it spread across Europe. In the Netherlands a primary cell started operating in the beginning of 1990s. Over time the human trafficking businesses expanded to other Western African countries, such as Ghana and Sierra Leone which became source countries for trafficked women as well (UNODC, 2009).

The respondents give a variety of reasons why they trusted the travel agent, as they call the person who 'offered' them a job in Europe and organized the journey. The first reason is poverty. Despite being the largest economies in Africa, levels of poverty due to economic reasons also affect the levels of education, health and living standards, despite continental and nationwide economic growth. Nigerian women are affected by various discriminatory traditional and socio-cultural practices which put them at a greater disadvantage than men. Violence against women and girls, including rape, sexual assault, and domestic abuse, is commonly accepted and therefore give rise to serious problems. (Oxfam, 2017)

G. for example, faced harsh living conditions in her youth: G: 'I was abused, beaten by my father. My mother left when I was Esther's age [5 years]. My stepmother treated me bad as well. She tried to poison me: she used a needle and thread and put that in the fufu. I asked a stepsister to come and have a bite which she refused. That was the moment I was sent to the village to live with an auntie, a sister of my father. I was left to myself. I had to go into the bush and collect wood and things to sell. At some point the family moved to Lagos and they did not earn enough to take me. I was 8-10 years old and all by myself in the house. I was always hungry. When I see a rat, I cook it.' Her father eventually sold her to a white man who showed up in the

village and told G. that her father had arranged schooling for her abroad. She went along and ended up in Lebanon where she was exploited for several years.

Next to poverty, interviewees encountered a wide range of problems which forced them into leaving their home and, without anyone to rely on, were prone to become a victim of human traffickers. Like F., who is a lesbian, was caught while being with another woman. Many Nigerians strongly disapprove of homosexuality. Nigeria stands out for the virulence and violence against gay men in particular as well as lesbians. Nigerian lesbians and bisexual women are targets of extortion which makes them very vulnerable.

The Ghanaian victims who were lured into human trafficking show similar vulnerabilities. Being a widower and a mother of three, D. had to rely heavily on others to make ends meet. She found herself lucky she was part of a very tight community a couple of hundred kilometers from Accra, the capital of Ghana. However, for reasons unknown to her, the community turned against her and banned her from the village. She and her children fled to Accra. She met a white man, Peter, who promised to marry her and buy her a plane ticket for the Netherlands. The latter he did, the first he did not.

All of the interviewees shared being in a vulnerable position in the country of origin. Living in severe poverty, persecution due to their homosexuality, forced marriages, female genital mutilation: they all felt the urgency of escaping from their circumstances. As options were limited, they accepted any help offered. This made them an easy prey for traffickers, who came to them with promises of jobs or a better life in Europe.

## 3.2 Travel agents and Madams

The journey of a trafficked woman would comprise a recruitment, a smuggling, and an exploitation stage. The person who recruits women in Western Africa is called an 'agent' by our respondents (the trafficker). The two Ghanaian interviewees were taken to the Netherlands by white Europeans.

The Nigerian interviewees were all but one taken abroad by other Nigerians. In some cases the traffickers used relatives and friends of potential victims for trustworthy introductions.

A family friend of C. arranged her going away with her stepfather. Being a single father of 8 he did not have enough financial means to take care of his biological and step children. C. came to live with him after her father and his friend were murdered, but her stepfather was glad when C. could go away and earn money. A Nigerian man sold her to a Nigerian woman who was based in Limburg, the Netherlands, for whom C. was forced to work as a prostitute. Victims of human trafficking call such a woman a 'Madam'.

I. travelled to Europe with a Nigerian woman who turned into her Madam in the Italy. This woman, who went by with the name Lucky, used to travel back and forth between Nigeria and Italy. A. was trafficked by a friend of her aunt who she trusted.

*“Madams live in the South East of Amsterdam.”*

Ghanaian B. was in a relationship with her trafficker. He promised to marry her once they would arrive in Denmark. Instead, he forced her to have sex with his friends in exchange for money that he took from her.

All interviewees were forced to prostitute themselves and without getting any profit. Not one of them was told they would have to do so when in Europe. They were promised jobs in the cleaning industry or supermarket. Some knew about Nigerian women ending up in the European sex industry, as it is a widely known migration system in Nigeria. But the assumption is often that their situation would be different. One interviewee did suspect what was lying ahead of her, however, she did not see a way out.

It is remarkable that most of the interviewees' initial destination in the Netherlands was the South Eastern part of

Amsterdam where they lived part of their exploitation, and to which they return after leaving exploitation. A: "Madams live in the South East of Amsterdam."

## 3.3 Voodoo

Our clients show a great respect for "contracts". Back home they accepted a contract offered by the travel agent or madam to travel to Europe. The huge debt that is installed on them is only revealed to them in the country of destination and generally they had no full knowledge on the terms attached to their agreement. Nevertheless they are highly committed to pay the Madam huge amounts of money she asks for. The fact that in most cases the Madam promised a job in for example a restaurant, but instead she forces them instantly to go into prostitution is remarkably not valued as a breach of contract by our clients.

Because of the violence that is being used against them and the sexual exploitation they undergo unvoluntarily, clients show great resentment with regards to the Madam. However, at first sight they do not show an urgent need for her to be convicted for the crimes committed. The psychological dependency described earlier plays an important role here as well as also their belief in Voodoo.

Many articles and reports have been published on how the trafficking is conducted. Voodoo in the context of Nigerian human trafficking refers to the 'use' of ancient West-African religious rituals in which a pact of obedience is sworn and a promise is made to pay the debt. A priest connected to a shrine makes the women take an oath. The ultimate goal is the creation of an intimidating environment in which women are under great pressure to pay the debt. Voodoo binds victims to the traffickers (Van Dijk, 2003) and prevents them from breaching the "contract" or pressing charges against them. Client I. believes health problems she is suffering are caused by a spirit that entered her body through the priest.

Traffickers also gain control over women by using violence. L. tells about the heavy physical abuse by her Madam. She was trafficked to Italy and the Madam who had bought her forced L. to stay in a so called connection house. During the day she was forced to prostitute herself on the streets, at night she had to do the same work inside the connection

house. She explains in detail how she was beaten and kicked multiple times a day by her Madam after she returned from the streets. She ended up in hospital after she was run over by one of her clients who refused to pay for her services. The Madam showed up at her feet and kept on threatening her. After her discharge from hospital, she returned to the connection house as she had nowhere else to go.

The two Ghanaian victims are aware of the existence of voodoo as well, however, being trapped into trafficking by white people, were not forced to go to a voodoo priest or to make any oaths.

### 3.4 Escape

At the time of the interviews none of the victims were under the direct control of the Madam anymore: they managed to escape from exploitation and many of them reported the crime to the police (see table 3 on page 11).

E. reported to the police that the Madam left the key in the door and she could escape. A. explains she was not kept in the house 24/7. She went out during the day and had walks through the neighbourhood with other girls who were also being exploited. She never ran away because she had no clue where to go to as he did not know anyone and was not aware of any place she would be safe. Every now and then she sees Nigerian women in the streets of whom she is sure of they are being exploited by a Madam. A. herself, after 2 years of working for her Madam, walked out of the flat to never return.

*“When I see the Madam,  
I call the police.  
They gave me the number  
and I call the police.”*

I. explains how she managed to escape her situation. She was trafficked to Italy and after a year in sexual exploitation, one of her clients offered her a ride to escape from the Madam and the forced prostitution. She points out that she had hoped for the entire year of exploitation that someone else would be bold enough to go to the police. I. never had the courage to do so as she was scared for the Madam to kill her or her family back home. She tells about daily beatings by the Madam and also the abuse by the other girls who are forced to beat each other. A friend of I. was beaten to death. She says: “When I see the Madam, I call the police. They gave me the number and I call the police.”

E. states that if a Madam has only one woman, there is a high probability she would make sure you never leave whereas when you are many, you may be successful one day. D. says her profits went down which made her Madam furious but at the same time less observant. “You have to be lucky, that for the Madam things change for the worse.”

Not one of the victims paid the debt in full. Walking off does not automatically mean you are outside of the spheres of influence of the Madam. H. explains that she managed to escape and moved in with someone in the same area where she was exploited, in the South East of Amsterdam and for a long time she was threatened by her Madam. Although she has never seen her again, for a considerable time, people came at her door forcing her to pay money to the Madam. Others say they left the Madam and the debt as it is.

Although interviewees say that voodoo works, not all of the victims say that they are still afraid of its use by the Madam. When the Madam uses the power of voodoo to intimidate the victims: threats and intimidation do not solely come from voodoo rituals (Van Dijk, 2003). From the interviews it appears that the context of intimidation and force continues when the Madam is still present. However, when being away from the Madam, especially for a longer period of time, the victims seem to be less concerned about the impact of voodoo.

Within “Perspectives of Rights” more clients describe the above: as soon as they find a church to which they start belonging, the impact of the Voodoo declines. However over

time the fear can increase again after life events such as loss and illness take place or when they lose trust in the church they joined: the victims then again feel the power of the Voodoo. The belief in Voodoo is not static and changes over time with powerful and less powerful periods following each other. I: “It works. Even now. If I am sick it could be the voodoo.”

*“It works. Even now.  
If I am sick it could  
be the voodoo.”*

E. insists voodoo is powerful and works. She tells she was afraid to escape from the trafficker for a very long time, just because she thought the voodoo would haunt her and make her sick. She had promised by swearing an oath to the spirit world, not to escape or disclose her exploitation to the authorities and to pay back the debt that she owed. But she has no fear of the Madam anymore. E: “Free from the traffickers’ bondage.”

Praying and following the word of God could strengthen someone against the threat of witchcraft. Pentecostalism, to which most of our respondents are converted to, disapprove traditional healers and rituals (Dijk, R.A. van, L. ten Kate, 2015). L. says she has learned from the priest of the Pentecostal church she attends that she is not to believe in traditional beliefs: “true Christians do not believe in witchcraft”. However, this is difficult for clients as many health issues are best to explain for them by pointing at voodoo. So although they on the one hand do not seem to be that stressed by the Madam and the voodoo curse, they still are concerned that in some way it still affects them.

Another remarkable finding is the fact that although the victims fear (or feared) their Madams, some of the respondents also expressed a certain understanding and

even appreciation for their Madams. This ambiguous relation the victims feel is common amongst victims of trafficking or imprisonment in general (kidnapping etc). It seems the Madam purposefully creates a picture of the exploitation and their role in it as a normality. All violence and excesses are justifiable in that context. This contributes to a psychological mutual dependency between the victims and the Madam / trafficker. The victims are indoctrinated with the normality of the exploitation and the trafficker on his or her turn needs the support and affection of its victims to justify the deeds (Herman, J. 1997). In addition it is recognised that Madams often have taken this role after having been victims of trafficking themselves. It can be their manner of escaping their own exploitation. The victims are usually aware of this fact.

This finding underlines the complexity of the relationship between trafficker and victim which has lasting effects also after the exploitation. Some of the interviewees described their understanding of the motives of the Madam as reason why not to report to the police.

### 3.5 Starting a life

For the victims it resulted easiest to start building social ties with others of Western African background. In Amsterdam, Nigerian and Ghanaian communities are relatively large and centered in the southeastern part of Amsterdam: Amsterdam Zuid-Oost also known as ‘the Bijlmer’. All of them have lived in this part of the city, at least for some time. Five victims reported the crime of human trafficking right after they managed to escape from the trafficker. Part of special protective measures for victims of human trafficking, they went to a shelter aimed specifically at victims of human trafficking. In these shelters a variety of relationships were established.

C. describes her first friend X who she met in the shelter. X is a very religious Nigerian woman who has a habit of praying day and night. Unlike C. who ran away from the human trafficker who had brought her to the Netherlands and went straight to the police, X had spent a few years in Amsterdam Zuid-Oost before reporting to the police. She had joined a Nigerian church, Praise Valley, and convinced C. to join her and become a member as well which she gladly did.

*“If you know people you are ok.  
When you don’t know people you will suffer.”*

A. shares a similar story; the woman she befriended in the shelter took her to the Prayer House in Amsterdam Zuid-Oost. Respondents describe a lively and easy accessible Western African network available at the shelter. Remarkably, not one of them is still in touch with any of the Nigerian and Ghanaian women they acquainted in there: E.: “Why would I still want to see them? It was fun in there. But of what help are they?”

*“Getting help is to  
offer something”*

Being in the shelter, the interviewees were provided with necessary legal, financial and psychological care. They did not rely on others for getting by, resources were readily available. Hence, E.’s remark on the fun part of the relationships she had at the shelter. It changed completely for her when the police stopped the investigation into the charges she made against the person who trafficked her, and her permit was subsequently withdrawn. She was forced to leave the flat she was staying in when financial assistance was cancelled. Now she needed to have a network for her to survive, which was very difficult for her. E. felt lonely when she realized: “Getting help is to offer something.”

It turns out for these four respondents that they experienced great challenges when forced to leave the shelter. They share similar accounts on high levels of stress in their lives. A place to live, for example, is not very easy to get by. C. had been a member of the church her friend in the shelter had introduced her to for a short period of time. The pastor advised her to be present for a few more months and then make a request to the church community for a place to stay. She followed his advice and asked the deaconess to make an announcement at the end of the service. She was allowed to stay in a room of a 3-bedroom flat rented by one of her fellow church members.

### 3.5.1 Church

For all respondents, church is not only a place for worship but also where they go to socialize, meet new people and maintain their established connections. They mostly attend Pentecostal churches which are abundant in the South East of Amsterdam. Most of the churches are led by Ghanaian pastors although one respondent refers to a Nigerian pastor. A. and D. both entrusted their stories of trafficking to the pastors of their respective churches.

All respondents have attended various churches. They looked around and chose for the church they felt most comfortable at and met their needs best, be it from a religious perspective or from a more practical view, such as geographical location. C. switched churches when she moved and her new landlord offered her a weekly ride to her church, the Christ Revival church. E. switched as easily: “I just need a place to worship God.”

D. attended a Ghanaian church which was a referral from someone she knew and trusted. However, the church closed down not long after and she changed to a church in Ganzenhoef (in the South East of Amsterdam). P. joined a church where they do not accept homosexuality. Since people started talking about her sexual preferences, she decided to try the church of a woman she met at the psychologist, called “the Mountain of Fire”, where she didn’t know people.

F. feels pushed to pray all by herself in the chapel of the Onze Lieve Vrouwe Gasthuis (Eastern Amsterdam), because of her homosexuality. G. took refuge in a church at the Dennerodeweg (in the South East of Amsterdam) when she escaped from the trafficker. At night many people slept in that church, she explains.

### 3.5.2 Meeting Points

Besides churches, our clients use spaces where people of the same background gather, such as waiting areas: these also facilitate interactions. Notably at social services organisations in Amsterdam South-East that cater for all citizens but are very popular with (undocumented) migrants

such as waiting areas of particular general practices, mental health care providers and NGOs like Voedselbank and aid organizations.

Clients make extensive use of public spaces to connect to others. Gathering places include street markets, metro stations and shopping areas. Commercial enterprises such as beauty parlours, supermarkets and restaurants run by people of African background are particularly useful as information hubs. The people who run those companies and churches and drivers of illegal taxis (‘snorders’) who have most extensive networks and resources. Lastly, social events offer network opportunities as well. Weddings and birthday parties are important events that regularly take place at neighbourhood centres and are attended by many people. Our clients point out that they attend festivals such as Kwakoe Festival, either to make money or to meet up with friends and acquaintances.

### 3.5.3 After exploitation in other European countries

Interviewees who were exploited in another European country, but made their way to the Netherlands, recall different stories on that very first phase of their stay. They at least knew someone as they stress one only leaves for a place when you are confident someone is taking care of you in some way. In other words, you only decide to move somewhere else when you are certain you can rely on someone for housing, food and etc. J. accounts: “If you know people you are ok. When you don’t know people you will suffer. I knew someone who left from Italy to Amsterdam. He just went, he knew nobody. He was back in a week. How will you survive?”

F. for example, was trafficked from Nigeria to Spain. Having fallen pregnant she longed even more to flee her Madam. She managed to escape. On the metro she got on, someone handed out leaflets for his church. F. went to this specific church where she met a Nigerian woman to whom she revealed in the following weeks she was in danger. Through this new contact she got a telephone number of someone she knew who was living in the Netherlands. Before boarding

a bus, F. called the woman and asked her if she would take her into her house which she was willing to do. Her host was a woman from Cameroon, the first person she got to know in the Netherlands, in the city of The Hague.

In Italy, C. got to know a Nigerian man who travelled back and forth between the Netherlands and Italy. She succeeded in persuading him to get a friend of his in Amsterdam receiving her and providing her with a room. When all seemed to be organized, she boarded a train for Amsterdam.

### 3.6 Mutual trust and reciprocity

While all respondents acknowledge that their social networks at their initial settlement are mainly Western African, they speak in predominantly negative terms about female Western Africans living in the Netherlands. Time and time again, interviewees stress the existence of profound suspicion and mistrust between especially Nigerian women.

G. cannot trust black people: ‘It’s with black people, it’s inside us that we cannot keep secrets. When we hear something, we tell it others. You can never tell someone your problems because if you have a fight with someone, even a little crash, then your secret will not be secret anymore. That’s why I never open up to people. I say hi and hello and how is life but that’s it. When I needed a place to stay I asked someone and the next time I was at the Voedselbank (res a location for food donations), people asked me why I was looking for a house.’

A. says she is extremely careful when it comes to sharing information as: “You know people but you don’t know them, so I don’t tell my problems to anybody, not even my two friends that I spend much time with.”

Respondents point out that they were betrayed by the people that trafficked them to Europe and that this is why they lost trust in others in general. E. looks ashamed when she tells that: “I still cannot accept the fact that I was fooled into thinking I was going abroad to have a job in a supermarket. I will never place trust in anyone again’.

Notwithstanding their attitude towards other Western African women being distinctly negative, they admit they rely heavily on them for getting access to resources. The second person K. gets to know in the Netherlands, is a Nigerian woman who she meets in a playground. After talking a few times to her, K. approaches her for job opportunities. She leads her into her first cleaning job.

The respondents do share personal problems with others, in order to get information or assistance. A: "She knows what I want her to know and the other way around." When she desperately needed to extend her network, A. intentionally told a Nigerian woman at a Nigerian supermarket in the South East of Amsterdam that she lived in the Roggeveenstraat, which is widely known among Western Africans to be a shelter solely for victims of human trafficking. She was quick to pick up the signal and told her about the existence of a meeting place where she could meet others.

A. claims '99 percent of Nigerian female migrants who stay in the Netherlands worked in prostitution' and therefore it was not burdensome for her to ask for help.

F. who started begging for money when she was desperate for money. She deliberately spoke in Igbo language as to reach out to people of her tribe. When she was asking for money at the metro station she attracted the attention of another Igbo woman and they engaged in a long conversation that landed F. at the Worldhouse, a meeting place for undocumented people, which 'brought [her] from the dark into the light'.

The respondents acknowledge they themselves make resources available for others as well. A.: "We all tell each other where to get help and where to go to for cheap clothing or food for free. But I don't tell where to get money. Oh, no no no!" They refer other victims of human trafficking to for example Worldhouse or the "Perspectives on Rights" project.

### 3.7 Inside and outside the West African network

Most respondents solely have ethnic specific ties: they connect to other Nigerian and Ghanaian people. Some do refer to trans-ethnic ties. C. for example, goes to Nigerian gatherings that are attended by lots of people of Surinam or Afro-Caribbean background as well. She tells about knowing a few Surinam women who she talks to in the streets. L. has a friend at whose place she hangs out a lot. A wide range of male migrants, from Togo, Benin and Ghana, also gather there every now and then. In general, most respondents have settled in the South East Amsterdam and rely on an ethnic specific social network. Except for three respondents who have established networks that are very different from the ones described earlier. They did start off living in the South East of Amsterdam, attending social gatherings and churches focussing on Western Africans and having solely Western African connections. But over time they moved out of this part of Amsterdam.

B. obtained legal status in 2014 and has been working at a fastfood restaurant for over two years now. She lives in social housing and although she is in the South East of Amsterdam every now and then to meet friends and go to African restaurants, she prefers to 'be away from it all'.

B: "I do not want to have anything to do with them (res other Western Africans). I like it in the West of Amsterdam. It is a mixed area, whites, Arabs and not many Africans. It's how I like it. I attend a mixed Dutch church and I like it that way. Too much trouble in the South East of Amsterdam ."

The same applies for G. She and her three children have a legal status as well. The children have Dutch nationality and G was granted a residence permit in 2017. They are staying in a shelter in the East of Amsterdam provided by the municipality. She never wants to move back to the South East of Amsterdam 'It is not good for integration. I signed up for housing in Almere, Zaanstad and Purmerend. I want us to be in a white environment. The South East of Amsterdam is not good for my children. Their priority is education. Look at Obama, he went from nothing to glory. That's what I want for my children too.'

H. is very traumatised and is enrolled in a municipal aid programme for undocumented migrants with heavy health problems. She receives a monthly allowance and rents a room in the West of Amsterdam. She attends a mostly white church and has several cleaning jobs. She knows a few people who assist her in getting cloths and learning Dutch. She embraces her life in this part of town.

This however is very difficult for most of our clients. An additional difficulty for respondents and our clients in general to enable integration outside of the Western African networks, is their low level of education: most clients have attended primary school at best. Illiteracy is very common. Due to poor education, our clients have little knowledge on topics such as democracy, welfare states, law, politics and the like. It is difficult for our clients to understand how they relate to the society at large, let alone their position in it and their rights and duties.

*"I can see it by the look on their face. Scared faces and isolated, not willing to talk to anyone. Just sitting on the metro, staring."*

# Findings

## 4.1 From vulnerability to vulnerability

The research has brought us to understand more of the backgrounds of our clients and especially of their (extreme) vulnerable position in country of origin. It is striking that they were, without exception, extremely marginalized in the country of origin.

The causes of their marginal position within their home country were severe poverty, a deviant sexual orientation, expulsion or forced marriage. An offer from an 'agent' to leave for Europe was seen by the respondents as the opportunity to flee marginalisation and build a better life. When this turned out to be a lie, all respondents indicated that they were being forced to work for the human trafficker. Traffickers could keep them in their power by using physical and psychological coercion and imposing a debt. In addition, 10 women had taken an 'oath' back home with a 'priest' from a 'shrine' that proved to be a very effective coercive measure. Breaking the vow will cost you your physical or mental well-being or your family members are targeted. According to the interviewees who have made this vow, the voodoo has certainly kept them in exploitation and after exploitation, prevented them from reporting the trafficking. However, it must be noted that most respondents show changes in their fear of the voodoo over time: losing and gaining fear in different situations.

Although none of the interviewees have paid the debt in full, therefore breaching the contract, the fear for the voodoo curse can change when the trafficker is not using violence or physical threats to keep them in control anymore. We noted that although for some of them the voodoo curse loses strength, the belief however in its powers is still present. According to a minority (of the interviewees), they feel they are less bound by voodoo as according to them, the churches they attend to rule out any traditional belief including juju rituals.

However such as other clients of the projects have noted over time: once they encounter loss or illness in their new life or are disappointed by their church ( or change to another denomination) the fear can suddenly increase again to a paralyzing level.

In this research we collected a variety of accounts on how the respondents managed to escape from the trafficker. What becomes clear is that the most important factor in the escape is the changing personal situation of the trafficker: this appears to give rise to opportunities for victims to escape their deplorable situation. Respondents tell about traffickers who are being sought by law enforcement organizations and subsequently flee the country. Secondly, victims refer to a drop in revenues earned by them over time; they appear to become less profitable to the trafficker who then loses interest in keeping them in prostitution. This however does not release them from their debt which still has to be paid in what ever way possible. Without exception, the physical and psychological violence and, in most cases, voodoo rituals, have left the respondents with hefty traumas and physical burdens of the period of smuggling and exploitation. Some of the interviewees spent over 5 years in sexual exploitation, leaving permanent scars on their bodies and psyche.

A majority of respondents indicated that after their escape from the exploitation situation they still felt under the strong influence of the trafficker; easily traceable because they are all living in the same neighborhood surrounded by people that have ties amongst each other.

## 4.2 Struggling to get grounded

Our respondents, once they managed to escape their exploitative situation, have to deal with physical and mental traumas and without a social network to rely on. They describe a sense of helplessness, traumatization and physical and mental damages, hence starting their return to an alien and foreign society in a hugely vulnerable position. Still they have to start building their social networks in order to survive. A: 'I can see it by the look on their face. Scared faces and isolated, not willing to talk to anyone. Just sitting on the metro, staring.'

The initial networks all our respondents built were quite dynamic: As is often the case, migration throws people together based on shared ethnicity. The networks our respondents built when they just settled in were dynamic and generally not very sustainable providing them with minimal resources to survive.

Respondents who were exploited somewhere else in Europe and decided to settle in the Netherlands, appear to have a few, fellow Western Africans through whom they can get access to necessary basic resources. The interviewees brought directly to the Netherlands began making connections at the shelter where they were taken in after reporting to the police.

The very first step for all of them was becoming a member of a church which is attended by pre-dominantly West-African migrants. It gives them a sense of belonging and they meet people who face similar problems and challenges to which they can relate to.

The church apparently functions, besides being a place of worship, as a meeting place and is crucial for building the respondents' social networks. All of the respondents were forced out of the national human trafficking victims' protection (referral) system, since not one criminal investigation into the respondents' cases led to actual charges. Being left without social benefits, a roof or a legal stay, the church becomes the most important resource for the respondents. Via church members, they get hold of basic means such as food, housing and money to get by. Our respondents are selective in their choice of churches, based on the amount and level of resources that are provided by the church. They do change churches if they sense they get more value at another one.

Earning an income is difficult for our clients, given their undocumented status, hence they solely depend on the informal labour market with its scarcity of jobs. Most turn to male members in their social networks for financial assistance. By prostituting themselves they receive money, clothing, housing and food. Hence, prostitution continues to be part of their lives. Exploitation by their Madam is replaced by another form of coercion. The social network the respondents have built up serves for the toughest of survivals.

The vast majority of respondents started building networks (and attending churches) in the South Eastern part of Amsterdam, making this a very relevant area to set up future support activities for undocumented victims in order to be

able to reach out to them and lower the threshold to help. This part of Amsterdam has provided them in a first access to minimal resources helping numerous victims (this also accounts for the majority of Perspective on Rights clients) to survive. Their vulnerability however also makes the South Eastern part of Amsterdam an attractive area for traffickers to find victims for new exploitation. Demand for help and supply in resources are available in this area, as well as demand for prostitution, cheap labour, drug courreering and the supply of exploitable potential victims. Most victims fall prey to new exploiters in this area when they look for resources to survive whilst also paying back their debts to their initial traffickers. It makes this area extremely important for more support and protection of victims as well as more police capacity and prosecution of traffickers.

## 4.3 Finding a way out

The social networks of our respondents changed over time: respondents who have stayed in a shelter, built networks of which durability is often limited. Having left the shelter, they have to start building networks over again. This time, being in need of other resources since they are cut off of social benefits and assistance provided by the Dutch government. Most respondents build a network of people similar to them. Western Africans form a tight community and the respondents seemed successful in gaining access to.

However respondents do not seem at ease in these networks, distrusting most members of their community. With no other options to survive, it is their ongoing dependence on ethnic ties for minimal resources, which keeps them stuck where they are.

Some respondents have moved beyond the ethnic specific networks. Resources such as a legal status or a steady allowance from the municipality took away the dependence on social networks for survival. In other words: the interviews show that without a residence permit or social benefits, our clients remain dependant on Western African networks and have no opportunity to find a way out of ongoing prostitution, coercion and poverty.

# Recommendations

## Placing the victim at the centre

Based on what the victims shared in the interviews the extreme vulnerability of their position in the Netherlands has become apparent. It has moved us to understand their situations more profoundly as well as the forces and institutional frameworks that keep them in this vulnerability in the Netherlands.

It brings us back to the second objective of the Palermo Protocol which calls upon the countries to protect and assist trafficked persons with full respect for their human rights and putting the victims' needs and capacity at the centre. The harsh reality is that for this specific group, the Western African victims, the Protocol does not deliver that aim.

The lacking capacity of prosecutors to dismantle the Nigerian criminal networks has a direct effect on the victims: after pressing charges they are terrified the networks will trace them down in the appointed shelter or apply revenge on loved ones back home. As soon as the police investigation is stopped, they have a second concern: how to be safe without protection and survive without benefits.

During the proces of reflection, pressing charges and investigation their needs and difficulties are not taken seriously. They are not met in their needs for safety once they are no longer of value to the criminal investigation. They are not understood in the difficulties they have to speak openly about their exploitation and exploiters: the fear of Voodoo, the cultural and educational differences and the impact of the trauma. They are required to share their traumatic experiences over and over again, something they are not always capable of. They do not receive trauma informed treatment by the police in the process of reflection and pressing charges.

**Therefore the most important recommendation of this research is to live up to the Palermo Protocol and all consecutive European Conventions signed after 2000 by the Netherlands by effectively putting Western African victims at the centre of all support and protection provided.**

Effectively this leads to a range of specific recommendations:

### 1. More protection and support to undocumented victims of trafficking

By providing safe shelter, trauma treatment and trauma informed care as well as a basic form of livelihood, also after the criminal investigation has stopped unsuccessfully.

### 2. Raising Awareness amongst actors in contact with potential undocumented victims

Projects that support undocumented victims of human trafficking, such as "Perspectives on Rights", should raise awareness amongst Churches and other meeting points (3.5.2) where these victims access resources (such as in the South East of Amsterdam). It is important to strengthen the capacity of churches and service providers to identify (potential) victims amongst (church) visitors and refer them to prosecution officials and support services.

### 3. Information or Western African networks on Human Trafficking and possible support

Information dissemination should be increased among Western African networks on how access to different resources could be acquired. This can be done through church leaders, health care professionals (General Practitioners, psychologists and midwives), social workers and by providing leaflets and brochures at meeting points. Such as African supermarkets, bars, restaurants and the Voedselbank (food parcel distribution).

### 4. Circumstances in country of origin as Asylum Ground

Immigration services, lawyers and care givers should pay greater attention to circumstances that lure vulnerable Western African women into trafficking as it gives more comprehensive notion of various traumas existing and can lead to an earlier detection of asylum grounds

### 5. Human Trafficking as Asylum Ground

The Dutch protection mechanism for Western African victims of human trafficking fails to deliver: criminal investigation and legal procedures dictate prosecution of traffickers and does not protect victims after the investigation is not succesful. Victims of human trafficking for whom pressing charges do not lead to successful prosecution, should still be entitled to protection by the Dutch government. Of the protection measures, a residence permit is the most important for this group as an income is guaranteed and hence, dependency on the ethnic network and increased vulnerability is put to an end. The possibility of human trafficking as an additional asylum ground should be looked into as current legal framework does not fully protect victims of human trafficking.

### 6. Voodoo

Further investigation should be done on opportunities to decrease or ban the impact of voodoo as there is a general understanding that voodoo prevents Western African victims of human trafficking from testifying. When they do press charges they can remain fearful of the Voodoo until they have paid their debt (there are even cases reported in which the trafficker was sentenced and victims kept on working until payment was fulfilled). Our research shows a change in the impact of the curse over time, for example due to a change in beliefs. The recent developments of influential Nigerians ( the Igbo King Oba Ewuare II for example) voicing a counter ritual to the voodoo could be used to support the victims in loosing their fears for Voodoo.

### 7. Relationships that coerce

The relationships of the victims in the country of origin and in the Netherlands withhold victims in establishing a new life. Their ambiguous relationship to their Madams and the expectations of the family back home should be researched deeper as to understand these multiple compromising influences.

### 8. Role models

Role models (such as experience experts) who have managed to gain resources and move beyond the ethnic specific networks, should be utilized in order to help representing the possible for victims of human trafficking.

### 9. Culturally sensitive police interrogations

For police and immigration services to improve the processes of interrogation and cross-examination, it is necessary that they gain more knowledge on the Ghanaian and Nigerian context. Knowledge about the country of origin, its customs, challenges, ways of communicating and important networks from these countries are vital to the better understanding of the victims from these countries. Additionally, victims are requested to tell their stories over and over again, something they are not always capable of doing due to trauma. Trauma informed treatment of these cases therefore could be supportive in gaining more evidence than is currently the case.

### 10. Investigations on Western African Criminal Networks

More knowledge on the modus operandi of Nigerian and Ghanaian criminal networks and the impact of the undermining activities they develop in the Netherlands is necessary to trace perpetrators. With more knowledge and insight in the networks it will become possible to start investigations not merely on testimonials of victims but more effectively: on information from various sources and respondents. This will contribute to the rate of success of investigations. In the Belgian and French context police have developed good practices in investigations on Western African Criminal Networks which can serve as an example.

### Finding a way out

... is possible when different stakeholders in the Netherlands join forces and contribute to the realisation of these recommendations it will be possible to put the victim at the centre of anti human trafficking approaches. Finding a sustainable way out for victims of human trafficking with a West African background could then become a reality.

*“Free from the traffickers’ bondage.”*

## ATTACHMENTS

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# Interview guide

The interviews all included a fixed set of topics as mentioned in this interview guide:

## Friendships

- Over time, who, where and how did our respondent befriend others?
- Who do our respondents call friends, who are acquaintances?
- What do our respondents share with friends and what do they keep for themselves?
- What would our respondents ideally like to get out of a friendship?
- Do our respondents end friendships and if so, why?
- What nationalities are friends of our respondents?

## Organizations

- Do our respondents go to organizations? Aid organizations? Church? Sports clubs? Other?
- If so, how do they find out about these organizations?
- Do our respondents go by themselves or together with others?
- Why do our respondents go to organizations?
- Do our respondents meet other people at those organizations?
- Which nationality/ethnic community do go those organizations?

## Trust

- Do our respondents trust people of their own community?
- Do our respondents trust people outside of their community?
- Do our respondents trust organizations?
- Do our respondents trust government institutions?
- Do our respondents trust lawyers?
- Do our respondents trust people back home?

## Geography

- Where do our respondents stay?
- Where do our respondents meet people?
- Do they actively go to places where they can meet new people?
- How do our respondents find out about meeting points in general?

## General information

- Do our respondents have jobs?
- How do our respondents get an income?
- Do our respondents have a place to stay?
- Do our respondents have children?
- Do our respondents have a partner?

## Transnational networks

- Are our respondents in contact with people in their country of origin, and if so, why?
- What do our respondents share with people in their country of origin?
- Do our respondents travel to their country of origin?
- Are our respondents in contact with people outside of the Netherlands/COO, and if so, why?
- What do our respondents share with people outside of the Netherlands/COO?

