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PRESS RELEASE

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Greece: Nigerian women make a living on the street

Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) disseminates today's **Inter Press Service News Agency** article by **Apostolis Fotiadis** on the Nigerian trafficking women in Athens, about whom hardly anyone seems to care, including the, as it turned out in the case of one of them, incompetent anti-trafficking police and prosecutor authorities.

GREECE:
Nigerian Women Make a Living on the Street

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Apostolis Fotiadis

ATHENS, Sep 25 (IPS) - Every night besides the town hall of Athens, next to Omonia square, where the narrow streets of the popular entertainment hub district Psirris begin, black girls from Nigeria gather to work.

Dressed provocatively, they approach people who pass by and offer their services. "Come on baby I know you want me", you hear one say playfully with a big smile on her face. Or is it a mask she wears?

The beautiful young Nigerians, between 20 and 25 years old, are victims of trafficking, forced to prostitute themselves for little money.

"Everyone knows that. The young Athenians who gather in Psirris to have fun; the policemen who casually drive through the area to keep an eye on things; the mayor of Athens; most of all the 'customers'," says resident Miltiadis Papatomopoulos, as he stares at the girls, and the people walking by.

Nigerian girls appeared on the steers of Athens during the Olympic Games. They never left. Nobody knew where they came from, and no one particularly wanted to. Until Dina Daskalopoulou, a journalist working on social issues, thought that this could not go on.

"I did it for two reasons," she told IPS, talking of her decision to start investigating the issue. "First, because everybody, citizens and officials, had an attitude that 'these things happen, nobody can stop them'. And then because anyone I talked with insisted that no one can really go out there and tell

this

story."

Her story, put together after six months work, circulated Mar. 24 in Eleftherotipia, a big national daily. She found that the girls come from Edo region in Nigeria, a place which regularly provides people to global slave labour networks.

The girls are sold for a couple of thousand euros by their families, or they are lured by traffickers with promise of a better life. There are an estimated 50,000 girls from there being sexually exploited around Europe.

Most transit through Italy. They are charged up to 40,000 euros for the trip, and they are then forced into prostitution to pay their debt. Several of the women have said that traffickers, most often Nigerians, use tribal voodoo superstition to persuade the girls that if they escape or speak up, they and their families will suffer.

Daskalopoulou's report includes a telling account by a Nigerian girl, arrested for illegal prostitution Nov. 18. The young Nigerian, referred to as 'K.L', had been denied help as victim by the anti-trafficking prosecutor, and was ordered to leave the country, despite a detailed complaint she had filed against her traffickers.

'K.L' went into hiding. Returning home would mean a danger to her life because in the region she comes from people obey the Sharia law, under which relations outside of marriage can be punished with torture and death. After the intervention of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and with the support of the Greek branch of Helsinki Watch (GHW) a second court recognised her as a victim Jun. 1, and ordered legal action against her traffickers.

"This raises the issue how the anti-trafficking prosecutor and police perform their duties. They should be checked, and if found incompetent, replaced," Panagiotis Dimitras from GHW told IPS.

GHW has condemned the lack of political will to fight trafficking. Several irregularities have been reported in the conduct of investigations. Police officers are often 'missing' from courts when called in to give evidence.

Lack of interpreters makes action more difficult. "Victims meet the police for the first time in operations when they are arrested for illegal prostitution or as irregular immigrants," Dafni Tsixli from Amnesty International told IPS. "The majority of policemen are not able to distinguish a victim, and often victims themselves are unable to explain their situation.

"After recognition the victims are given one month to decide if they want to co-operate with authorities, or face automatic repatriation. This is very short notice considering what they are going through. One way or another many of them are deported, and their cases don't go to court. More than half of them become victims of trafficking again," she said.

Marianna Theodora, a medic and member of the NGO Praxis, says the Nigerian women do not get the protection other sex workers are entitled to.

"Women who declare their occupation as prostitutes in Greece can have a free medical examination every two weeks. But the Nigerian girls are illegally in the country, and therefore excluded from this protection. Moreover, they are not educated, or informed about the danger of sexually transmitted virus like HIV or hepatitis, and from our research we know that they engage in intercourse without protection."

In Greece support and protection services are organised in a way to reach victims only after they are detained for violation of the law. The help then often comes too late. The victims have already suffered immensely; many of them have been trafficked for years, and are trapped in the complications of a legal system that is largely hostile to them.

"I published my article in a big paper; I tried to provoke reactions going after the ministry of public with a second article. I left clues that I have information in my hands. No prosecutor, police or politician ever asked for them," Dina Daskalopoupou said.

"I tried hard to understand why so few people react to a crime taking place in front of our eyes, and I think I know the reason. The Nigerian girls are not 'big business' they satisfy demand from low quality 'customers' -- young Greek guys and migrants. Perhaps they become the prey of corrupted authorities as well. Many seem eager to look the other way." (END/2007)
