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Neither predator nor prey

What trafficking discourses miss about masculinities, mobility and work

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Within mainstream discourses around trafficking, men typically appear as predatory and exploitative, while boys appear as victims. This flattens the complexities of social life and obscures the ways that constructs of adult masculinity frame the trajectories of labour migrants and the brokers of their labour and migration. This article challenges those discourses, drawing on research with two groups of male labour migrants characterized as ‘victims of trafficking’, as well as with ‘traffickers’ who help them to move and give them work.

The first are adolescent boys moving from Benin to work in the artisanal gravel quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria. The second are adults from across West Africa who have made the illegal journey to Italy, where they live in African ‘ghettos’ and work as gang labourers on various agricultural harvests. In each case, migrants and their brokers come from the same or similar communities; (shared) ideals of masculinity and manhood structure the evolution of their mobility and labour. Gendered transitions towards social adulthood, the pressure to attain riches and status and a social duty to show responsibility for those younger and less successful than oneself are all important. A focus on these gendered social transitions towards manhood can take us beyond simplistic ‘victim-perpetrator’ dyads.²

Stubborn stereotypes

The conventional depiction of boys and men within the iconography and literature on trafficking can be divided into two types: (1) that which emphasizes victimhood and powerlessness, and (2) that which emphasizes evil and a willingness to exploit (Howard & Forin, 2019). These are two halves of the victim-victimizer dyad, in which the victim is rendered ‘innocent’ by virtue of his ingenuousness or lack of power (often mapped onto depictions of his childlike purity), while the victimizer is dehumanized and represented in one-dimensional fashion as the embodiment of evil and threatening (black) manhood (see O’Connell Davidson 2015 for a wider discussion of this phenomenon). Each of these is present within my ethnographic fieldsites.

The powerless victim

In West Africa, the flow of teenage boys from the Za-Kpota region of southern Benin to the artisanal gravel quarries of Abeokuta in Nigeria has been taken as a paradigmatic case of child trafficking (Howard 2017a). In the press, civil society reports and government-donor reviews, these adolescents are almost always constructed as hapless, agency-less and defenceless children. A *France 24* (2002) story about them describes the following:

The idea is that the child is sold into bonded labour for a fixed term – normally two or three years. At the end of the term he gets a bicycle and 100 or 200 dollars...If he completes three terms his master may build a new hut for the child’s family.

Many of the families who sell their children into slavery are unapologetic. ‘How do you expect me to keep 37 children here when I have no income?’ shrugged Luc Gbogbohoundada, an octogenarian with eight wives. Gbogbohoundada lives in Za-Kpota, a village across the border in Benin about 150 kilometres from Abeokuta. Za-Kpota is notorious as the child-trafficking capital of the region.

Likewise, in *The Guardian*, fully 10 years later:

The abuse Timothy Goudjana suffered as a teenage labourer in Nigeria still haunts him. But decades later, he sent two of his own children, at a much younger age, to a similar fate.

Human trafficking is the world’s fastest rising organised crime. Each year, 4 million African children – equivalent to Liberia’s entire population – are traded for labour before their 15th birthday.

Most come from villages like Zakpota, in central Benin, where hundreds of parents – pushed to the wall by destitution – send their children to neighbouring Nigeria.³ (Mark 2012)

Within this vignette, teenage migrants appear only passively, as subjects of a transaction and victims of an implicitly brutal economic *and* cultural context, with all the racist neo-colonial discursive baggage the text implies in relation to ‘backwardness’ and ‘savagery’ (see Okyere 2014 and for fuller discussion of this).

Although dealing with adults, the typical depiction of adult African male migrant workers labouring on Italy’s agricultural harvests is strikingly similar. Take the launch of a campaign to legalize the practice of gangmastery:

This campaign is necessary if we are to punish the terrible crime of *caporalato*. Gang masters are especially widespread in agriculture and in construction, both sectors employing hundreds of *thousands of workers, especially migrants, who are stripped of their rights and reduced to the condition of slavery*.⁴ (my translation; emphasis added)

The passivity in the depiction is echoed in the image below from a related campaign, which draws on a classic abolitionist iconography of supplicating black maleness (Fig. 1). The hands of the supplicant – rendered unthreatening as well as unfree and in need of rescue – are bound by the symbol of their subjection, the tomato. Importantly, they are both disembodied and abstracted from their structural backdrop (which, as Cheney 2010 argues, is vital for a depoliticized politics of pity).

The ruthless victimizer

Alongside the abstract victim is the perpetrator. In both of my ethnographic fieldsites, African male ‘traffickers’ are represented as ruthless, individualistic exploiters who instrumentalize others in the service of power and profit.

A classic example of this representation in Benin is the ‘sensitization campaign’ ‘*Ana, Bazil et le Trafiquant*’. Created as part of UNICEF’s anti-trafficking work, ‘Ana, Bazil and the Trafficker’ is the story of a bright, young girl, Ana, from a poor village in southern Benin, who falls prey to a trafficker. The story opens with scenes depicting Ana’s idyllic home life, her love of school, her housework and the struggles her family face to get by. Shortly thereafter, the arrival of a mysterious outsider heralds the shattering of her world. The smooth-talking stranger approaches Ana’s parents and begins to persuade them that Ana does not need to remain in school, that she could work and help the family, and that if she came with him, he would be able to place her in a wealthy household that should set her up for life. Though at first reluctant, Ana’s family ultimately agree, at which point ‘the Trafficker’ secretly reveals his evil plan to sell Ana into servitude.

In Italy, by contrast, the ‘folk devil’ (Weitzer 2007) is more commonly represented as a *caporale*. A *caporale* is a historical personage from feudal southern Italy who was critical to the organization of agricultural labour and has long been associated with coercion and exploitation. His name has come to denote the archetypal labour trafficker, and is synonymous with the mafia-related extraction of forced labour – in English, the term means ‘gangmaster’ (Perrotta 2014). He features regularly in the Italian media, and often internationally. Titles such as the following are not uncommon: ‘Are your tinned tomatoes picked by slave labour? How the Italian mafia makes millions by exploiting migrants (Jones and Awokoya 2019).

Complicated realities

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the social realities of the two ethnographic fieldsites I explore here are far more complex than allowed for by these victim-victimizer dyads, which reduce masculinity and indeed manhood to benign innocence or vicious violence. This section will delve into that complexity.

Overview of the research⁶

The research behind this article took place in four stages, from 2007–2015. First, I spent nine months across two trips in the Zou region of southern Benin. My research assistant⁷ and I selected four case study villages from the two *communes* most associated with ‘trafficking’/migration to the artisanal gravel quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria. There, current and former migrants to the quarries, individuals involved in the migrant labour network linked to them, ‘traffickers’ and village authorities were sampled. Our principal research tools were semi-structured and open-ended interviews and focus group discussions. The focus groups were useful for gathering group-level data on community perceptions of migration and labour as well as the role of gendered social transitions in them, while the interviews enabled deeper understanding of how young migrants make sense of their experiences. We also developed migration histories with a number of respondents.

Second, in 2012, I spent one month in Abeokuta in the quarries themselves. This allowed me to not only triangulate what I heard in Benin, but also to engage young labour migrants at their place of work and, thus, in the midst of their apparent trafficking and exploitation. The research involved: (1) observing the living and working conditions of those in the quarries, and (2) interviewing young migrant labourers and other key actors engaged in the quarry economy, including labour leaders, landowners, gravel purchasers, traders, transporters and even the apparent ‘traffickers’. I also interviewed 30 youths who were, or had been, involved in the migrant labour network linking the Zou to Abeokuta. Third, in 2014, this data was substantiated by additional material gathered by my assistant, who returned to the quarries to interview a further 50 young labourers.

The fourth stage of the research was the first that was comparative – in southern Italy. This centred on the tomato harvest in Foggia, Italy’s primary agricultural *comune*, where a research assistant and I spent the entire 2015 tomato harvest. The research was ethnographic in nature and involved interviews, participant observation and unstructured conversations – primarily in the most ‘infamous’ of Italy’s migrant labour ghettos: Rignano Garganico, outside Foggia. There, we observed the living and working conditions of those involved in the harvest and apparently subject to the *caporale*’s trafficking. We also conducted interviews with representatives of the many ‘classes’ engaged in the local agricultural economy, including workers, labour leaders, landowner farmers, business associations, respected figures in the ghetto community and a handful of so-called *caporali* ‘gangmasters’ themselves. Again, the focus of our research was on the nature and experience of work and mobility, the role played by identities and relationships in each and the importance of perceptions of manhood and social adulthood

Money, mobility and masculinity

Unsurprisingly, research in both settings found things to be a good deal more complicated than the reassuring, black-and-white picture of victimhood and criminality relayed above. This and the following section will discuss those complications. First, in contrast to the image of victims as passive and innocent, the research revealed that migrant workers in each location actively *seek out* their work, and do so primarily for the money. Every single one of the more than 80 respondents in Abeokuta and 40 in Foggia underlined this fact. Gascoigne’s story illustrates it well:

Profile 1: Gascoigne

Gascoigne is a 29-year-old Ivorian. He comes from a lower middle-class family in Abidjan. We know this because he tells us that he has relatives in France, and because another relative paid for him to get to Italy. The story of his journey is shocking, but not unlike a great many of the stories around here. He crossed the Sahara and the Mediterranean, the latter journey in a boat that lost one quarter of its passengers. I ask him whether he was aware of the dangers before setting out, and he smiles: ‘Of course I did’. ‘Then why did you come?’ He smiles again. ‘In Abidjan, I was a mechanic. I earned around €25 a month. Now I make up to €1,000. Wouldn’t you have?’

As is the case anywhere under capitalism, money is necessary for whatever these young men want to achieve. Although they work hard, and arguably experience exploitation,⁸ they nevertheless *choose* their work and do so because it represents a sound opportunity for them to earn the cash they require (as is extensively demonstrated in the wider literature – see for example, Hashim & Thorsen 2011; Morganti 2011; Peano 2017; Thorsen 2007).

Why do they require it? This is where their masculinities and their gendered social transitions towards manhood come in. Ultimately, adolescents in Benin-Nigeria and young African adult males in southern Italy are all in pursuit of their status as ‘men’ and all need money to achieve it, since money is what grants them the (relative) independence and power that forms the script of their adult manhood:

Box 1: Autonomy, money and manhood

Neil: What makes a man in this village?

Boy 1: A boy becomes a man in our community when he works and eats without the help of his parents [nods and ‘hms’ all round].

Interview with a group of adolescent boys, Tenga Village, Benin, 14 May 2010

Neil: What makes a man in this village?

Pietro: To be a man in this village is to farm, to have a big harvest and to be able to sell your crops.

Interview with Pietro, Zelele, Benin, 10 May 2010

Neil: How do you become a man here?

Yomana: It used to be through farming lots of land...

Paul: ... or you could be a big singer...

Yomana: Yes, you would also then be ‘considered’. Now though it is very hard, there is little good land, so you cannot be independent and can’t even get married. You have to migrate.

Interview with Yomana, Frederic, Paul and Bernard, Bopa, Benin, 2 September 2007

Neil: How is the work here? They say it is extremely hard.

Sissi: It is hard but it is OK. I am strong and I came here to work. I want to make my future here in Italy and to earn what I need.

Interview with Sissi, Foggia, Italy, 31 August 2015

For so many of these boys and men, successful labour mobility is the pathway towards both riches and manhood. For teenagers in Abeokuta, it is a way to earn the cash necessary to build their own dwelling and thus to get married, to contribute to their wider family and thus to fulfil their social duty as a ‘good son’, to earn the badge of successful returnee and thus be ‘considered’ a young man who has braved adversity and beaten it. Likewise in Foggia, the average tomato-harvesting West African 20-something has moved to make his fortune, likely with the goal of sending money back to his kin and achieving the status of a ‘made man’ in Europe. All of these progressions rely on norms of adult masculinity that emphasize independence, autonomy, courage, the ability to provide for others and to endure. None of them align neatly with the powerlessness and victimhood of the imagery described earlier, which is why, when asked, boys and men in these settings rejected the idea that they were victims or ‘innocents’.

Profile 2: Alchide

Alchide is 18. He, like so many workers in Abeokuta, is from the Zou region of Benin. He has never been to school, and spent many of his teenage years as an apprentice welder. Once he finished his apprenticeship, he lacked the money necessary to pay for his ‘graduation’ and formal incorporation into the trade. So he moved to Abeokuta at 17, following an older male relative who is one of the ‘bosses’ in the gravel pits.

Alchide views the work he does as ‘absolutely fine’. ‘You need to be strong’, he emphasizes, ‘but what you do is easier than the farm work you’d be doing at home’. His work earns around £10 per day for his boss, and from this sum the boss takes his own cut, pays for the living expenses of all his workers and puts some aside to eventually pay each of these workers when they finish their two-year contracts and return to Benin.

Alchide gets on very well with his boss, a fact no doubt aided by the two being relatives. The boss ‘looks after us’, he explains – providing food and board, along with money for a visit home at the end of the year.

In general, he is happy and not a little proud to be here. In his view, what makes you ‘a man’ is being financially autonomous, having one’s own house and supporting a family. He needs this work to achieve these goals, and he knows that he is respected for pursuing them. His dream is to become a famous welder, and this is what he aims for. He rejects the notion that this work is ‘forced’ or ‘bonded labour’, and he thinks that it is absurd that some call it ‘slavery’. There is no doubt that some bosses are exploitative – a term he defines in terms of not receiving the money promised – but he does not suspect that his will be one of them.

Yet there is a darker side to this operation of masculinity in the form of the pressure ‘not to fail’ that these young men experience. In Benin, I heard tell of how successful migrants are respected (with success taken to involve returning with riches), such that those who have struggled, generally keep quiet and refuse to share their experiences. Worse, boys choose to endure abuse rather than flee and return empty-handed. Similarly, in Italy. Many a migrant worker shared horror stories of exploitation, violence and generalized racism. Undoubtedly, most endured trauma on their crossings of the Sahara and Mediterranean. Some admitted to regretting their decision to come and give up a life of security for one of permanent and structural exclusion. Yet none would choose to return or share the burden of their stories with their families. Facebook profiles are always celebratory, often at a landmark of cultural significance, while much of what little money is earned is sent back to maintain a pretence of success at the expense of food or shelter in Italy.

Facilitators, not folk devils

Similar pressures apply to the so-called traffickers facilitating migration and labour between Benin and Nigeria and West Africa and southern Italy. This is why it is not uncommon to find that facilitators were once themselves young migrant workers who ‘graduated’ to the more senior position of an organizer who is able to extract a surplus from the younger or more vulnerable.

However, in contrast to the simple ‘bad guy’ depiction of dominant discourses, in both of my ethnographic fieldsites, ‘traffickers’ play a critical intermediary role, and in doing so, they line both their own pockets *and* make money for the various groups with whom they collaborate (see also Howard & Forin, 2019). What is more, they accumulate, not only by putting others to work, but by valorizing their own sociocultural capital and their position as sociocultural and economic intermediaries. In Abeokuta, each boss is a bridge between a community in search of work in Benin and a site of work in search of workers in Nigeria. The boss knows the back roads leading illegally from one country to the next and in Abeokuta, he knows the lorry drivers and landowners integral to the entire process. In Foggia, that intermediary position is even more marked. The tomato harvest simply could not take place if *caporali* were not able to organize labour gangs and coordinate with farmers. Many spend weeks planning the summer schedule. Unlike most migrant workers, they speak Italian and can communicate with farmers, while, unlike farmers, they speak various West African languages and can thus communicate with workers. Without this intermediary function, there would be no harvest, and no money for anyone. Everybody knows this, and this is why workers implore their bosses to hire them. In making the decision of who to hire, and when, bosses in both Foggia and Abeokuta do so on the basis of profitability calculations, but never solely. For like entrepreneurs everywhere

else, they are embedded in sociocultural and moral systems – meaning that sometimes they hire family, friends, or simply those less fortunate than themselves and upon whom they have taken pity. This may not make them socialists, but it does beg the question as to whether they are any different from any other petty capitalists in other legal parts of the economy.

Profile 3: Trevor

Trevor is an influential figure in the Zou region of Benin and runs a successful local business that employs many interns, including a number sponsored by a non-governmental organization (NGO) to stay at 'home' instead of migrating. We first met in 2007, when he was introduced to me by a local official as 'a former trafficker' who had apparently repented and decided to change. He became one of the most significant participants in my research, introducing me to a large group of 'traffickers' involved in the migrant labour network linking the Zou and the quarries.

Trevor first migrated to Abeokuta when he was 11. He did so because he was poor and because he and his family had seen others from their community migrate and return with riches. He worked for five years and returned with a bike, a radio and 25,000 FCFA (£35) – not an insignificant haul for a 16-year-old in the 1980s. At 16, after a brief period at home, he returned to Abeokuta for another six years, becoming a boss and also engaging in the production of *sodabi*, the region's palm wine.

During his time as a boss, Trevor returned to Benin every two years and routinely brought more boys with him back to Nigeria. Parents and boys would approach him on his visits to ask if he could find them work and take them with him. Sometimes he found this a burden, because finding work for everyone took a lot of time and effort. But to refuse would have been seen badly – as if he wished to keep the wealth he had made for himself and not offer the same opportunity for others.

When boys were young (between 10 and 14), an advance on their wages would be paid to the parents, who would negotiate the contract on the child's behalf. In these cases, a boy's earnings would be considered like any other component of the family economy. By contrast, when the boys were older (in their mid to late teens), they would often negotiate their own two-year contracts, and would keep their wages upon completion. This is in keeping with local developmental norms, which see teenage males progressively incorporated into adulthood and independence.

Trevor was adamant that his relationships with all his workers were good, and that he saw what he was doing as helping them and their families. During one meeting, he repeatedly shouted, '*Aider! Aider! Aider!*', the French word for 'help', to emphasize the solidarity function of his activities.

In 2003, Trevor left Nigeria, returning to Benin to start his business. He maintained personal links with the quarry economy, and was one of the most ardent critics of the dominant anti-trafficking discourse. In one of our last discussions, he picked up a piece of sellotape and exclaimed: 'If I earn one of these here, but five of them over there, then why the hell would I stay here?'

Profile 4: Arfa

Arfa is an Ivorian national in his 40s. He comes from a 'political family' in Abidjan, and has been in Italy for 20 years. He is there legally and is one of the elders of the ghetto community. He is a major labour-broker, and owns one of the most vibrant, sport-watching bars in the ghetto.

A major theme in our discussions is the dominant trafficking discourse surrounding *caporali*. For all its material lack, the ghetto is a hyperconnected place. And Arfa, along with all the other established ghetto figures, knows about this discourse. They read it online and see political, civil society and union figures pronouncing it on TV. It enrages them – and the union representative who is most vocal in peddling it is now consequently a *persona non grata*. 'These guys mobilize stereotypes and scapegoats because it suits their purposes', Arfa complains. 'It attracts attention for their campaigns, and it attracts funding for them'.

In Arfa's understanding, the *caporale* is more a 'guide' and 'facilitator'. His role is mediation and organization. He has contacts and brings people to work. He is someone who has a car, is legal and speaks Italian. He goes around and asks farmers for work, then he plans the schedule and brings workers to do the job. He may earn a bit extra for his services and some more for transport. But he never syphons off people's money. Those he puts to work are mostly people he knows and trusts. But of course, he underlines, the *caporale* is human and when a young man comes crying, desperate for work, he will be helped. 'No one will go hungry here', I am told.

As if to emphasize this point, he tells me a story that elicits nods of pride from around the table. Last month, a well-dressed young man drove up to the ghetto looking for Arfa. He was Malian and had become very successful over the past few years in Paris. He had come to Arfa to show his gratitude, because eight years ago, when this man had first arrived in Italy and knew no one, he came to the ghetto hungry, desperate and lonely. Arfa found him in tears and shared his food with him. He then found the boy work.

Before I say goodbye on our last meeting, I ask Arfa: 'What would really help people here?' The answers are simple: 'Give everyone papers, give them work and leave them alone'.

These profiles speak to the ambiguities at play within the masculinities that are dominant in these communities. On the one hand, having the status of an elder (and successful) male, able to provide work (or not) for younger males, bestows upon Trevor and Arfa gendered structural power, which they evidently revel in. Both are respected individuals and I witnessed younger men and women defer performatively to them on a number of occasions. Yet with their status comes a sense of duty and responsibility. Both characterize themselves as father figures, generous in their provision of labour opportunities and in Arfa's case, even the provision of leisure. Arfa maintains the premier football-screening bar in the ghetto and on match days, it is always full, with patrons never paying to enter and almost never buying a beer. When I asked him why he had a bar at all, he explained that it was to provide some entertainment and connection for the young men. Once more, we are in the grey territory of complexity, missed by the victim-victimizer dyad.

Conclusion

Mainstream discourses around trafficking obscure far more than they reveal. As their focus is on criminality, they construct the 'problem' as one of one-dimensional 'baddies' exploiting similarly one-dimensional 'goodies', who are 'good' by virtue of their victimhood. In this, they reduce complicated lives and their gendered and generational trajectories, as well as the interrelationship between these and political-economic structures, to a flattening and simplified binary.

Yet in the two very different contexts examined in this article – Abeokuta and Foggia – we see that adolescent and adult migrant workers actively seek out their work, even where it may be exploitative or challenging. And they do so primarily because it offers them the chance to make the money that is essential for their livelihood projects and in particular, for their gendered social transitions towards the status of respected men.

As is the case anywhere, their projects are fundamentally conditioned by the social relations they inhabit and the identities they seek to attain. In each of these cases, 'success' means money, status, material independence and the ability (and durability) to bestow charitably on others. The

pressure of these requirements can be relentless, but it also embeds these young males in relations of reciprocity that bring with them camaraderie, solidarity and protection. Often, those offering such protection are the very labour brokers constructed as the root cause of people's problems.

The dominant discourse thus misrepresents the lives of these boys and men at the margins, and it disrespects them in the process. It strips 'victims' of their agency and criminalizes the brokerage that is essential to the economic activity on which they depend. Worse still, in spreading what is effectively a reassuring morality tale, the dominant discourse of criminality depoliticizes the *structural* relations that underpin exploitative work and mobility in the first place. ●

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2. I wish to be clear at the outset, lest there be any confusion, that in making the claim that hegemonic masculinities and the transitions through them matter to our understanding of how men and boys move and work, why they do so, how they navigate their experiences, relate to their successes and failures and ultimately construct their images of themselves, I in no way seek to suggest that the same is not *also* true of women and girls. Inevitably it is. And indeed, ample research suggests that many of the transition experiences and social pressures I identify here play out similarly amongst them. However, my primary research was carried out entirely with male migrant workers, young and old, and it sought in part to explore their experiences of their maleness, including how it related to their work and mobility. This article therefore focuses exclusively on males and on masculinity. For readers interested in similar perspectives on girls, women and female gendered social transitions towards adulthood, the work of Stacey Vanderhurst (2017), Jennifer Cole (2010), Jennifer Cole and Christian Groes (2016) and Sine Palmbech (2016) are all excellent.

3. See <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2012/nov/27/benin-poverty-child-traffickers>; also <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/17/childprotection.uk>.

4. Available at: <http://cgilfoggia.it/news/default.asp?id=2805> (accessed: 18 July 2016).

5. Available at: www.radiondadurto.org (accessed 18 July 2016).

6. This description draws on a parallel in Howard (2017b). The same is true of the profiles below.

7. I speak French and Italian and so where possible, research was conducted in those languages. Where participants spoke other languages such as Fon, my research assistant acted as a translator.

8. Indeed, in no way do I wish to romanticize the work, migration or living conditions of any of these boys and men. All are harsh, some awful. And while I emphasize their agency and conscious (as well as unconscious) decision-making, this is not to take away from the difficulties and injustices they experience or the structural and individual factors that underlie these.

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Fig. 1.

Source: *Radio Onda Urto*. Available at: www.radiondadurto.org.

Fig. 3. xxx

Fig. 4. xxx