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The frame of Nigerian sex trafficking between internal and external usurpers: A qualitative research through the gaze of the female Nigerian cultural mediators

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Abstract

The present qualitative study, through a psychoanalytic and culturally sensitive lens, aims at shedding light on the representations of the Nigerian sexual trafficking phenomenon and on the peculiarities of the relationship with trafficked women, from the perspective of five Nigerian female cultural mediators who work in the field of anti-trafficking. A semi-structured interview was developed and analyzed according to the principles of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis-IPA. On the background of a complex process of construction of borders between the Self and the Other, the findings show that the complexity of the cultural mediation work is higher with trafficked women due to the similarities in terms of gender, ethnic, and cultural identities. These similarities produce continuous oscillatory movements between identification/dis-identification, confusion/differentiation, and admiration/envy. Sexual trafficking emerges as a complex chain folded over itself made by a succession of internal and external usurpers, which mutually reinforces one another, worsening the mental health of

migrant women and exacerbating their vulnerabilities. The findings show the need to build thinking spaces specifically directed to the female cultural mediators who work with trafficked women in order to protect them from the risk of vicarious trauma as well as to promote an awareness about the complexities involved in their work. The possibility to understand human and sexual trafficking on a deeper level allows the planning of more person-centered clinical interventions, which can take care of women's well-being as well as prevent the high and very frequent risk of dropping out.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is considered one of the most alarming phenomena of the last century. According to the latest data, between 2016 and 2018, 50,000 victims of trafficking and exploitation were registered world-wide. In Europe, between 2017 and 2018, the victims of sexual trafficking and work exploitation were around 26,500. The most at-risk population is represented by women and young girls, with higher risk if they are migrants, asylum seekers, or refugees (Eurostat, 2018). In Italy, during 2020, around 2000 women were taken in by the national anti-trafficking system (Save the Children, 2021), with a high prevalence of Nigerian women, since it is estimated that around 80% of Nigerian women who enter Europe are trafficked (IOM, 2018). The most worrying aspect is that the existent data at our disposition concerns the "registered cases", that is, the cases of that women who are correctly identified and, in most cases, supported by the authorities. The available data, therefore, does not take into account the enormous range of women who are not identified, making the phenomenon, in the same way as other gender-based violence cases, an "invisible" and "unclear" phenomenon, in which the "buried" aspect constitutes a very complex challenge to deal with, as researchers as well as clinicians.

Nigeria is one of the top West African counties in terms of the number of women trafficked. Here, the human and sexual trafficking proliferates levering on the high rates of poverty, unemployment, and corruption (Akor, 2011; Fayomi, 2009), as well as on the gender inequality and patriarchal society present (Carling, 2005; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2013; Okojie, 2009). The "chosen" places for women's recruitment are remote villages where the women, often young girls in the age range of 16–23 years old, are misled with the false promise of a new life in Europe. Different concrete and symbolic aspects, such as the religious and cultural beliefs, as well as the role of the *madame* or *mamán*, contribute to increase submission and fear (Beneduce & Taliani, 2006; Dunkerley, 2018; Ehiemua & Valentine, 2020; Mancuso, 2013; Mannino & Giunta, 2019; Millett-Barrett, 2019; Taliani, 2012; Van der Watt & Kruger, 2020). The journey toward Europe is studded with horrors and abuses, especially during the crossing of the Sahara and the permanence in Libya (Tessitore, 2022; Tessitore & Margherita, 2020; Tessitore et al., 2022). Here, the women, while waiting for their embarkation to Italy, are usually closed in so-called "connection houses", forced into prostitution and subjected to different kinds of violence. Once in Italy, the criminal organizations have the role to continue to threaten the women and pressure them into selling their bodies. The exit from this circle of violence is very complicated and, often, never definitive, since the dropout of women from the anti-trafficking system represents one of the major problematic aspects of the interventions, which are put in place (Tessitore & Margherita, 2021).

Empirical research on Nigerian sexual and human trafficking is still scarce and underdeveloped. Major reasons could be traced to the great difficulty in reaching the women, since they are actually "hidden" during the exploitation as well as once they come out and, additionally, in the reluctance to speak about the experience of violence and the tendency to "cover it up" as much as possible. However, the possibility to understand the individual, relational, cultural, and social dynamics subtended to this emerging phenomenon appears even more urgent in order to enrich its scientific comprehension and increase the development of person-centered interventions able to take care of the Cultural Otherness.

From the author's point of view, interesting enhancements might come from the experiences of professionals (i.e., cultural mediators, educators, social workers, psychologists) working in this field, who need to be considered as an integrated part of the field in which the individual, relational, social, and cultural dynamics involved in the migration experiences unraveled. They are often invested in the deepest fragile and traumatized aspects of their clients and, at the same time, they are also the "first" to be able to see and recognize, even before the migrants themselves, the traumatic value of their experiences. Regarding the different professions, from the authors' point of view, the cultural mediators play a very crucial role within the transcultural research and clinical practice. From the position of "third" in the space, they become the guarantor of the *cultural double* (Nathan, 1990), the representative of an experiential and pluralistic knowledge able to facilitate and promote the encounter with the Cultural Otherness, as well as a sensory-perceptive probe, which orients the clinicians along the path of the symbolization processes often disrupted by traumatic experiences (Larchanché & Bouznah, 2020; Margherita & Tessitore, 2019; Tessitore, 2021).

The present qualitative study builds on these premises and was created with the general aim to explore, through a psychoanalytic and culturally sensitive lens, the meanings and the dynamics subtended to the Nigerian trafficking phenomenon, through the gaze and the experiences of the Nigerian female cultural mediators working in the field of anti-trafficking. From the author's point of view, the Nigerian female cultural mediators, as an expression of femininity, ethnicity, and cultural similarity, and at the same time different from those of the women trafficked, might represent a sort of *alter ego* capable of enriching our understanding of the phenomenon and, at the same time, shed light on the peculiarities that the femininity acquires within both the transcultural practice and the trafficking system.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis-IPA (Smith, 1995, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008) was used for this study. The IPA approach is a methodology with a phenomenological background aimed to give importance to the narrative truth, considering the participants as the real experts of the phenomenon under research and an idiographic focus that enables the in-depth exploration of life experiences. This increasingly popular qualitative research methodology offers material suitable for psychodynamic understanding and interpretation (Willig, 2013). The *idiographic* nature of the IPA method, focusing on the study of individual cases rather than on general principles and norms, allows the participants and their personal view of world to have an active role. By virtue of its idiographic character, the priority in the choices made by the participants is directed to their homogeneity, rather than their numerousness. Therefore, it emphasizes the subjective perspective and the comprehension of the meanings, feelings, and representations, which the participant gives to his/her personal and social world. The IPA follows a *double hermeneutic*: participants try to give sense to their experiences while the researcher tries to understand the sense given by participants through his/her personal symbolic system. Moreover, the IPA approach considers participants the "real experts" of the topic being investigated, allowing a *phenomenological* research in an attempt to give more importance to the narrative truth than to the objective one. The IPA methodology comprises different steps, which define both the phases of implementation of the research design as well as the data analysis.

2.1 | Participants

The participants were recruited through a purposeful sampling (Morse, 1991; Patton, 1990), widely used in qualitative research. Coherently with the homogeneity criteria of the participants' group required by the IPA, the selection of the participants was conducted according to the following inclusion criteria:

- being Nigerian women;
- being cultural mediators;
- working with Nigerian trafficked women.

To recruit the participants, different Neapolitan cooperatives and third sector associations, which manage the so-called "refuge house" aimed to host Nigerian trafficked women once they come out (i.e., because the women reported the traffickers to the authorities) of the trafficking system, were contacted. In these cooperatives, the cultural mediators work as freelance professionals, "following" the coming out process of Nigerian women from the trafficking system. Therefore, in these cooperatives, they perform different roles: for example, they are called to mediate/translate interviews between the women and other professionals (i.e., psychologists, lawyers, social workers working in the "refuge house" or social services, immigrant lawyers working in the public sector), and also to follow the women in the different activities aimed to promote their inclusion within the Italian society (i.e., searching for work). Being freelance professionals, the Nigerian cultural mediators also work as mediators/interpreters in other contexts outside of the anti-trafficking system (i.e., community centers for migrants, prisons, Territorial Committee, in Italy, has the aim to evaluate the international protection request submitted by asylum seekers, etc...), even though they might meet and work with trafficked women there as well.

Despite the high number of applications sent, only five cultural mediators ultimately agreed to take part in the research. The final group of participants was in an age range between 34 and 56 years old. All the participants arrived in Italy more than 10 years ago and had all worked as cultural mediators for more than 3 years. Apart from the work within the anti-trafficking system, all participants also work as cultural mediators in several other contexts. During the interviews, it emerged that two out five participants have been victims of sexual and human trafficking themselves (Table 1).

2.2 | Setting and procedures

The research aims were presented to the third sector institutions that work against human and sexual trafficking in the Campania Region. Then, the participants who agreed to take part in the research were contacted individually. Each participant received an informed consent and filled in a socio-demographic schedule before the administration of the interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions, the interviews were administered online, via Skype. Despite the estimated time for each interview being around 40 min, each interview lasted more than 1 h (range of time: from 1 h to 2.15 h). Each meeting was audio and video-recorded in order to guarantee the transcription of the interviews.

2.3 | Instruments

Following the IPA guidelines, a semi-structured interview was developed *ad hoc*, aiming to explore three main thematic areas:

T A B L E 1 Characteristics of the participants

Pseudonym	Age	Country of origin	Arrival in Italy	Start of the cultural consultation	Working field
Irma	34	Nigeria	2007	2016	- Anti-trafficking - Medical and psychological interviews - Territorial Committee for the evaluation of the international protection request
Penny	39	Nigeria	2009	2016	- Anti-trafficking - Prisons - Community centers
Ambra	40	Nigeria	2006	2014	- Anti-trafficking - Territorial Committee for the evaluation of the international protection request - Medical and psychological interviews
Amanda	42	Nigeria	2003	2017	- Anti-trafficking - Psychological interviews - Territorial Committee for the evaluation of the international protection request
Victoria	56	Nigeria	1993	2001	- Anti-trafficking - Medical and psychological interviews - Territorial Committee for the evaluation of the international protection request

1. the cultural mediation: exploration of meanings and feelings of the cultural mediation (i.e., *Would you like to talk about your work? What are your duties? Why did you choose it...*);
2. the representation of Nigerian trafficking: exploration of representations and meanings of the phenomenon (i.e., *Would you like to explain to me the Nigerian trafficking phenomenon? What are its characteristics and consequences...?*)
3. the relationship with the Nigerian trafficked women: exploration of professional experiences, meanings, and feelings of working with Nigerian women in light of the same gender and ethnic identities (i.e., *How do you see your clients and how do you think they look at you...? What are the difficulties and resources in working with trafficked Nigerian women?*)

2.4 | Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the procedure described in the IPA process (Smith, 2011). All the interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and analyzed individually. The different stages of the analyses were cross-checked at various intervals by the authors. The IPA process of data analysis needs an iterative analysis that provides a strong interaction between the reader/researcher and the text. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher reads the texts several times in an order to familiarize themselves with the participants' narratives: first, each interview needs to be paraphrased; then, the researcher writes comments, notes, and connections to the text on the basis of their interpretation. From this first step of analysis, some *subordinate themes* emerged. Their number usually reflects the richness of a specific passage in the texts. The connection between the subordinate themes, on the basis of their contents, determines the formation of *superordinate themes*, which represent a sort of container of the subordinate themes' meanings.

3 | FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews produced four superordinate themes. Each superordinate theme was composed by three subordinate themes. Table 2 shows the emerged themes and their frequencies for each participant (Table 2). Some subordinate themes were named with terms or phrases used by the participants during the interviews, which were considered particularly significant.

1. The funambulists

The first superordinate theme, *The funambulists*, reflects the representations of the participant's professional identities and describes the motivations, the difficulties, and the resources, which revolve around the work of cultural mediation. First, *(1a) Between borders and trespassing* describes the complex work conducted by the women to keep a line between the Self and the Other, the private life and the work, the enduring research of a boundary, which might help protect the inside as well as preserve the outside. The participants seem to oscillate between the incapability to put the brakes on their work, to separate their private life from their working one, producing the situation of always being available and nourishing the fantasy of being omnipotent:

> "*I always answer the telephone...even after midnight... if someone searches for me, I am always present... Yes, I always answer. I am always at disposition.*" [Victoria]

> "*I cannot leave the problems I deal with at work outside home...sometimes...they call me during the night and I answer. You must answer, you must support the clients, you must give them comfort...!! I think this thing is like a part of me...*" [Amanda]

> ...and the necessity that the border becomes a barrier, a confinement which may reveal the fear of being sucked in from the violence of the stories, which participants interpreted and translated:

TABLE 2 Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Irma	Penny	Ambra	Amanda	Victoria
1. The funambulists					
1a. Between borders and trespassing	*	*		*	*	*
1b. Mediate	*	*		*	*	*
1c. Heimlich—unheimlich	*	*		*		*
2. The feminine frame					
2a. "With men, it is different…"	*	*			*	*
2b. A big effort	*	*		*	*	*
2c. "They call me "mom", and I feel them daughters…"		*			*	*
3. The androgynous frame					
3a. The power of femininity	*			*	*	
3b. A chain bent over itself	*	*		*		*
3c. The power of the masculine	*	*		*		*
4. The "pillars" of trafficking					
4a. The affects of violence	*	*		*	*	*
4b. A money issue	*	*		*	*	*
4c. "No one African could say these things are not real…!"	*	*		*	*	*

"I try to not enter into the client's life story...I try to put a barrier...between my profession and the clients... Because if the story involves me too much, after it could become complicated. I translate, I do everything I need to do, when the conversation finishes, my work also finishes. I do not want to be emotionally involved...I listen to so many stories...! Therefore, when I finish, I come back home to my family...and I begin a new life. Work is work, family is family, leisure is leisure. That's it! You must put a barrier...there!" [Irma]

From other interviews, it emerges that the capability to find the right distance between the Self and the Other is like a work in progress, capable to put in play a transformative movement identity only where the border is able to maintain a certain porosity (Bion, 1962) and fluidity, a process in which, gradually, the confusion could be avoided as well as the differentiation preserved:

"At the beginning I did not know how to keep my work far from my private life...I think I went well beyond the empathy...that is, I put myself inside and for months I had so many nightmares...due to the personal stories I herded...step by step I learned how to separate my private life from my work without losing my human side. You know, this is very important because migrants often are treated like numbers...I learned the difference, I learned how to change myself and my personal view of the world. I learned from the experience, from the education, from the work I have done on myself. I think a cultural mediator is not only an interpreter...I think each cultural mediator needs to work on his/herself...there are so much implications in our job!" [Ambra]

The work of differentiation between the personal and working life and, consequently, between the Self and the Other, is accompanied by a continuous work of differentiation between the translation activity, which is required in determined contexts, and the more complex activity to *(1b) Mediate*:

"We need to differentiate between the contexts in which we work...I mean...during the evaluation of the international protection request, for example, you need to be a linguistic mediator, rather than a cultural mediator. Being a cultural mediator means to explain well some aspects, maybe cultural aspects...during the evaluation, in front of the Territorial Committee, we need to be as impartial as possible...even though we know that the client says something which is not so right for his/her position, we cannot intervene...this work should be done before the evaluation from other colleagues who are not called to translate in front of the Committee...There, you have the duty to report what the clients are telling..." [Ambra]

The mediating activity assumes, instead, a high density and reflects multiple shades of meaning. First, the capability of being a "bridge" between the own culture of origin and the hosting one emerges, within a continuous work of testimony and transmission of their personal roots so that they cannot be forgiven:

"I think the cultural mediator needs to mediate...to develop a bridge... I mean...you do not need to throw away your culture. I left Nigeria but the Nigerian culture is mine, a part of me...we need to also transmit this to the client and, at the same time, we always learn it...!" [Penny]

Moreover, the mediating activity emerges as a weaving of the delicate process of integration that the participants lived before their clients, and represents the first and main incentive to start this work, in an attempt to help the similar, and simultaneously themselves, through a work of remembering and repeating in order to work-through (Freud, 1914):

"I would like to give a voice to all that people who, like me, arrived in Italy...they are not alone, I felt alone... the integration process is difficult...at the beginning, above all, you always feel yourself as "unknown" ...this is the main motivation which pushed me to start..." [Irma]

Being in contact with the compatriots is not free from ambiguities. A marked ambivalence emerges in the contact with the Other, on the one hand so similar, on the other hand, so different from the Self. The interviews witness continuous movements between a familiar and an unfamiliar sense, between *(1c) heimlich–unheimlich* which permeates the relationship with the Other, conferring it a deeply uncanny connotation:

> *"The relationship with your compatriots is difficult...with the girls there could be feeling but also envy... we are so similar but also so different...and the fact that a Nigerian woman plays this role is difficult for them...some girls are capable to tell you this thing through the words...other girls tell you it in other terms..."* [Amanda]

Similar/different and trust/distrust are dimensions that gradually emerge in a clear categorization "we–them" beside the difficulties in understanding the Other, who stimulates the insurgence of persecutory anguishes and makes central the sense of a profound betrayal, factual, or potential:

> *"For them, to see me, a black woman, working as a mediator is a surprise. In their imagination, black women can be waitresses or caregivers, maybe prostitutes... this is good because we can become good models for them"* [Ambra]

> *"I remember when I started...my compatriots thought I was a police informer...Often it happens they told me, <<you are like me, why are you betraying us?>>. Working with Nigerians is much more difficult!"* [Penny]

2. The feminine frame

The second superordinate theme catches the peculiar shades that characterize the relationship of genders between the participants and the clients. From the interviews, it emerges that *(2a) "With men, it is different..."*, highlighting the differences in terms of resources and difficulties in working with male clients. The major obstacle seems to include the patriarchal hierarchy, which is typical of a Nigerian cultural context and defines the relationship between sexes:

> *"With men it is difficult because African men are difficult. For Nigerian, and in general for Africa, men need to be superior. They are considered superior. Maybe there is also still a patriarchal society in Italy, but in Africa it is much more evident and when I worked with men, often they told me <<you are a woman, why are you talking?>>"* [Penny]

On the other hand, it also seems that when the cultural mediators are able to overcome this limit, the relationship with men becomes easier than that with women:

> *"With men it is easier...they make your work less heavy, more fluid...men trust in you more than women. The reasons why they come is very different from the women's ones..."* [Irma]

What remains complex is the work with women, *(2b) A big effort*, because of the different intertwined levels of fragility, which make the process of trust construction very hard:

> *"It is very very difficult...especially the development of the trust. Without trust, girls do not speak to you. I think women have higher resistances. It is a delicate process. You cannot be their friend but you need their trust in you...!"* [Victoria]

With victims of human trafficking, the relationship seems to be more complex. The trafficking produces a regressive movement in the trafficked women, which seems to return them to childhood. The insertion into the prostitution business exacerbates the regression, for example, through nocturnal work, which undermines the circadian cycles, evoking the image of an unregulated infant. The regression, the ambiguities, and the contradictions of an all-female relationship, which inevitably leads to the recollection of the memory of the relationship with their own mother and with the *madame*, as well as the position of vulnerability assumed by the women, beside the one of protection, containment, and welcoming of the cultural mediators, builds the basis for a sort of mother–daughter relationship. *(2c) "They call me "mom", and I feel them daughters…"* witnesses the coloring of the relationship between the cultural mediators and the female clients, which assumes specific modalities of meeting and conflict:

"*…I had too many difficulties…some girls laid their hands on me…! This girl now is going to exit from the reception center and now she calls me "mom" … I see them like daughters…I really want to help them to leave this system.…*" [Amanda]

"*They really suffered a lot, as with the madame. I understand they are on the defensive, they are like lions, ready to attack!*" [Ambra]

3. The androgynous frame

The third superordinate theme describes the androgynous structure of Nigerian sexual trafficking, focusing on the role played by the feminine and the masculine. The first subordinate theme catches the ambivalence, which turns the link between the women and the *madame* around. *(3a) The power of femininity* shows that dependency and idealization are confused, until to strip her of the negative connotations:

"*The women continue to believe in the madame…once the debit extinguishes, often they go to the madame's house…their relationship is very confused and ambiguous…it is difficult for women to come out of it. The madame is a source of worry but she is also so emulated…*" [Irma]

"*(…) they feel in debt to the madame…so they also feel the need to protect them or to feel gratitude for them. <<Because she takes me off from misery, they "saved">>, told me once a girl…the possibility to speak comes often late, when the women have already extinguished the debit. They are so worried and so controlled!*" [Ambra]

The second subordinate theme shows a subtended risk of Nigerian trafficking, the one characterized by an inversion of sense within the dynamic of exploitation: once the woman has paid the debt, the victim acts a concrete *identification with the aggressor* (Freud, 1936) and becomes the perpetrator herself. *(3b) "A chain bent over itself…"*:

"*I often listen <<since they used me, now it's up to me…>>. Her was a madame herself! She said she was beaten and paid a lot of money and now someone needs to pay for her!*"[Irma]

"*It is like a vicious cycle which never ends…the madame is a victim herself and the cycle goes on again and again*" [Ambra]

Finally, the third load-bearing axis that contributes to strengthening the women's bond with the exploitation is the presence of different men beside the *madame*. Strongly anchored to the patriarchal and sexist structure of Nigerian society, through the theme *(3c) The power of the masculine*, the participants highlight that the male presence,

through the systematic use of violence toward the women, assumes the specific function of reinforcing the chain of dependency and control:

"For example, if a girl, once arrived in Italy decides to run away, here the mafia intervenes. The mafia men start to monitor the girl and to threaten her physically. A man is stronger than a woman!! The madame know it!" [Irma]

"The male role within trafficking is fundamental in order to submit the girl into prostitution. Often after the violence in Lybia, the girls implore compassion. The mafia men do not have compassion and organize sexual meetings in group! The male presence is used to strengthen the chain, to submit the woman even more and to knock them out! They reinforce the madame power on a physical level..." [Victoria]

4. The "pillars" of trafficking

This theme describes the complex dimensions of violence and power, which can be found within the trafficking phenomenon. The first subordinate theme, *(4a) The effects of the interpersonal violence*, catches the main effects that characterize the violence suffered by women. The body emerges as a "chosen" theater of violent actions: the body of women is repeatedly violated, abused, and exposed "nude" in front of the Other. Guilt and shame for what the women have endured can slowly emerge, thanks to the strenuous work of the cultural mediators:

"they seem to abandon their body...they feel ashamed of themselves...and, at first, they blame themselves... they endured so much violence...and only slowly they can arrive to put into word this violence, guilt and shame they felt. You know, the woman in Africa needs to be "pure"!" [Amanda]

"You know, to prostitute...that work takes away your dignity...that work takes everything away...it is like you are "nude" in the street...yeah... "nude"!" [Irma]

(4b) A business issue shows the economic violence subtended from trafficking, which is described, first of all, as a "business issue". The participants describe a specific profiling procedure performed by traffickers in order to recruit the victims. Young girls, belonging to very poor families, often represent the main seekers for "sponsors" and make the submission and the dependency even more weighty and significant:

"Sometimes the parents search for sponsors who can help their daughters to earn...you know, in Nigeria there is so much poverty!! The traffickers look at the individual, social and contextual vulnerabilities. They promise money and richness in Europe and the girls end up believing them!" [Victoria]

"The traffickers are called "boghe". They find such girls, especially the most vulnerable, and they promise richness and happiness in Europe. The economic issue is the main issue within the human trafficking, the main for traffickers and the main for girls. Sometimes these girls did not end school due to poverty and just to leave Nigeria they believe in a false dream..." [Amanda]

In conclusion, the third theme, *(4c) "No one African could say these things are not real...!"*, catches the meanings, which turn around the spiritual power of the *juju*. The voodoo ritual contributes to permanently consoled submission and dependency, putting pressure on a cultural and symbolic dimension:

"The juju is real! No one African could say these things are not real! Vodoo is not always something bad, you can also use it for good things. The one they do on trafficked women is bad, of course!" [Victoria]

"Well, the juju should be a good thing, because many years ago in Nigeria there were some traditional healers who used these powers to heal. As everything, the juju can be manipulated and used to have power on girls. The juju strengthens the chain even more since the girls promise to pay and they are threated. As African, I said that these things exist, are real, of course. Often girls feel themselves free to speak about it once it expired and they finished the payment. It is very complicated!" [Ambra]

4 | DISCUSSION

The findings show a discreet homogeneity about the meanings and representations expressed by the participants on the Nigerian trafficking phenomenon and their work with trafficked women.

The first superordinate theme, *The funambulists*, catches the representation around the work of cultural mediation and the functions it plays for the participants. Immediately, from the narratives emerge that this profession requires a certain care for the construction of borders. As a helping profession, it concerns the approach and taking care of problematic situations and vulnerable people, requiring the entrance into the Other's life story and the accompaniment in the difficult process of identity re-definition, which migrants need to pass through (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). The process of establishing the boundaries between the Self and the Other, and how fluid or rigid these boundaries may be, emerged as a central core of the interviews in the wake of a double movement: to protect the "inside" (i.e., the own life, intimacy, experiences), in order to preserve the "outside", creating the conditions through which they are able to safely welcome the Other and avoiding the risk of fusion and confusion. Within narratives, a redundancy emerged in the use of terms "keep inside-kick out" beside the difficulty experienced by the cultural mediators in regulating these movements. An everlasting oscillation between the "too much" and the "too little", between the possibility to make the borders *porous* (Bion, 1962) or to transform them into tall walls, persisted, giving proof of the complexity of this profession and outlining the borders' construction as a never-ending process. The cultural mediation emerged as a work of *testimony* and *mediation*: witnessing and *incubating* the horror, intended as the process of hosting, in their own psychic apparatus, the inhuman (De Micco, 2017), and being the *third*, developing bridges between different symbolic orders emerged as the principal functions of this work. The term "mediation", from the Latin *medius*, literally "what is in the middle", regards the task of building a bridge between two worlds. "Being a bridge" means, therefore, moving in a *transitional space* (Winnicott, 1971), occupying the *place of the third* (Benjamin, 2004), intended as a supportive place for identity in the dialog with the difference, able to promote differentiation despite the similarities. In this sense, the cultural mediators work as *mediator objects* (Vacheret, 1985), serving as an intermediate area of experience able to allow a fertile dialog between the differences as well as between the internal and the external reality (Tessitore, 2021). In this sense, the participants highlighted great differences between the "simple" translation process and that of mediation, since mediating allows a global comprehension of the Other, and in this case of the Other–Stranger, attending to the process of symbolic significant of the world. Doing this work with the compatriots implicates thinking about and passing through the dialectic *heimlich–unheimlich*, similar–different. The similitudes between the cultural mediators and the Nigerian clients as well as the intrinsic asymmetry of roles and functions seem to contribute to a rigid categorization of the reality along the polarization "we" (migrants, Nigerians, black, without power) versus "them" (local, Italians, white, powerful) and in which, again, the cultural mediators seem to be in the middle and, therefore, maybe nowhere. Moreover, the sense of bewilderment and betrayal that are the hallmarks of the *unheimlich* can also be seen within the set of complex developed anguishes through which the cultural mediators are seen like both mothers and not-mothers, and, similarly, the elusive set of potential similarities and differences emerged between Nigerian men, Nigerian male traffickers, Italian men, and Italian mafiosi. All these such relational configurations seemed to put in play a very *uncanny* experience (Freud, 1919).

The second superordinate theme, *The feminine frame*, underlines the role played by the gender differences in the cultural mediations and the way in which these are perceived by the participants. If the relationship with men seems to be characterized by a dynamic of power in which the more explicit and perceived level is the men–women asymmetry, typical of the Nigerian patriarchal society and of the sexist view of male clients, this kind of relationship also appears, simultaneously, easier, compared with the one between females. Here, the participants testified that the relationship between women is very complex due to the multiple levels involved that often return it to the peculiarities of the mother–daughter primary relationship. In the case of the relationship with trafficked women, this relationship also associates the cultural mediator to the *madame* and the trafficked women to what the cultural mediators "could have been", or sometimes, as in the case of two participants, they really have been, generating complex mechanisms of identification and dis-identification. In this relationship, continuous back movements toward dependency, aggression, and destructiveness interchange with forward movements of greater independency and acceptance of anger along the complex process of trust development. Of course, it is the possibility for the cultural mediator to *survive* the attacks, being able to alternate illusion and disillusion, which can make herself a *sufficiently good mother* (Winnicott, 1971).

The androgynous frame describes the "hermaphroditic" structure of trafficking, in which the feminine and the masculine, waving together, play a central as well as specific role. The all-female relationship between the women and the *madame* assumes very ambivalent and ambiguous configurations. The *madame* emerges, on the one hand, with the characteristics of a "bad mother", a "puppet-mother", who beats, abuses, lies, and rejects but also, on the other hand, as a "good mother", who seduces and saves from poverty, promising richness and freedom. Fear and terror, gratitude, as well as admiration and envy characterize, therefore, this all-female relationship. In many cases, the ambiguous and ambivalent characteristics of this relationship seem to feed a complex spiral of psychic mechanisms where moving along an *identification with the aggressor* (Freud, 1936) is the only way to recover an active position and manage the passivity, running the risk to transform the victims into perpetrators. Therefore, the *madame* emerges from the narratives as the "first ring" of an intricate and multilayered chain of exploitation bent back on itself. Beside the ambiguous and ambivalent dimensions that characterize the all-female relationship between the trafficked girls and the *madame*, from the narratives also emerge that the "masculine" plays an important role within the trafficking. In this sense, with the aim to sustain and reinforce the seductive aspects of the similarity with the brutality of the diversity, the men belonging to the Nigerian Mafia, stronger and powerful, have the function to physically and psychologically submit the women even more.

In conclusion, The *"pillars" of trafficking* describe the different dimensions of violence and power, which sustain and nourish the frame of trafficking. The first "pillar" is represented by the physical and psychological violence that the women are subjected to and its effects on the women's bodies. In the experience of violence, the body ceases to exist as guarantor of the narcissistic identity and becomes an object-testimony of the fragmentation of the Self (Margherita & Troisi, 2014). In the case of trafficked women, the shame, which always accompanies the experience of gender-based violence (De Vincenzo & Troisi, 2018; Troisi, 2018; Troisi et al., 2021), also assumes the characteristics of a social injury which make the women "impure and dirty" and is accompanied by complex feelings of guilt and mechanisms of scission and negation, which contribute to the silence's increase. Beside the physical and psychological violence of rape and exploitation, economic violence, which takes advantage of the poverty and feeds the financial profits, gives shape to Nigerian trafficking as a "business issue". The business aspects, in their concrete and real aspects, assume a stronger affective shade since often the girls are sold by their families themselves generating a *familiar mandate*, which grasps the chain even more, making the possibility to come out even more difficult. Finally, besides the physical, psychological, and economic violence, a cultural and spiritual one also emerges through the use of the *voodoo* rite as instrument of social control as well as reinforcement of the links with cultural belonging. The *juju* emerges, therefore, as an internal jailer (Mannino & Giunta, 2019), the "last ring" of the framework with the explicit aim to exacerbate the anguish through the intangibility of the spirituality and of its "unproved" effects.

The present study is not free from limitations. First of all, during the process of the participants' recruitment, many resistances were encountered. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic complicated the first contact; on the

other one, from the authors' point of view, the small number of participants should be connected to the topic investigated which, in the wake of the gender-based violence, might point to the "unspeakable" dimensions of violence that need to be silenced more than flaunted. This aspect confirms the need to sensitize and train the professionals toward the possibility to make visible the invisible even more (Tessitore, 2021; Tessitore & Margherita, 2021). It should be also outlined that, during the interviews, two out of five participants revealed that they themselves had been trafficked in the past. This aspect should be seen as both a strong and a weak point. Despite it representing a non-homogeneous dimension in the group of participants, it has also allowed to reach a more in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon from the point of view of women who have survived trafficking and who, voluntarily, decided to talk about it. It has allowed, therefore, to unintentionally reach the real protagonists of this fleeting phenomenon, providing insights for further research and confirming the potential of investigating the point of view of the cultural mediators on this topic. Of course, this aspect suggests a re-reading of the small number of participants who agreed to talk about their work, and Nigerian sex trafficking, hypothesizing that great part of them could have been survivors. Additionally, it also suggests the need to carry out further in-depth exploration about the intrinsic motivation, which pushed the women to do this kind of work in this specific field.

5 | CONCLUSION

The study offers some useful reflections in terms of clinical implications. First, it suggests the importance to build spaces of thinking specifically directed to the Nigerian female cultural mediators who work with trafficked women. This action appears very urgent in order to protect the professionals from the risk of vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990), as well as to promote an awareness about the complexities involved in the cultural mediation and, above all, in the one directed to Nigerian trafficked women. In this sense, the study shows that the relationship between the cultural mediators and the trafficked women is complicated from several factors: the same gender, ethnic, and cultural identities and, often, the same experience of sexual exploitation. Such dimensions produce continuous oscillatory movements between identification and dis-identification, confusion and differentiation, as well as admiration and envy. The more cultural mediators become aware of these aspects, the more they would be able to generate a reflective and *métissee* (Moro, 1998) practice, allowing the creation of a "third space", the one of the social link, able to become a space for dialog, exchange, meeting, and bonding with the Other, beginning with recognition of each Other's differences. This aspect might allow them to enrich their professional practice and to preserve them from the risks of any eventual "collapse", promoting well-being and stress reduction (Cozzolino, Girelli et al., 2020, Cozzolino, Vivob et al., 2020) as well as affective sensemaking (Salvatore et al., 2021). The study also describes the sexual and human trafficking as a very complex and multilayered phenomenon. From the participant's narratives, sexual trafficking emerges as a complex chain folded over itself made by a succession of internal and external usurpers (i.e., the *madame*, the women's family, the Nigerian Mafia, the *juju*), which mutually reinforce, worsening the mental health of migrant women and exacerbating their vulnerabilities. The possibility to understand these complexities and the involved unconscious dimensions allows to plan more person-centered clinical interventions able to take care of women's well-being as well as to prevent the high and very frequent risk to dropout.

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