

Chapter 2

Case analysis

In this chapter, Myria analyses two court cases involving human trafficking in which it acted as a civil party, thus giving it a full view. This analysis provides a clear image of how an investigation is initiated and carried out in the field. Furthermore, for the main forms of exploitation, this part provides an illustration of the phenomenon of human trafficking. The analysis is based on the cases' police reports (PR) and focuses on the criminal system and the victim's perspective. We first take an in-depth and critical look at the summaries of the reports, in which the investigators summarise the case. A great deal of attention is also paid to the initial reports, which indicate the basis on which the case was actually initiated and whether any victims were intercepted and detected. In addition, the case file includes the reports of the hearings of the victims, suspects and witnesses, the informative reports, the files containing the transcripts of the phone taps, the observation reports and, finally, the reports of the letter rogatory. Studying specific cases is a cornerstone of policy evaluation. It provides a better understanding of the implementation of the investigation and prosecution policy in the field, as well as the thorny issues involved. Once compiled, these findings are also an important source of information for the focus of the annual reports and an indispensable basis for formulating recommendations.

1. Sexual exploitation: Nigerian case – Meccano, and the victim Eunice

Introduction

This Nigerian case mounted in Brussels, relating to events that took place between 2016 and 2018, resulted in convictions for human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, exploitation of debauchery, criminal organisation and illegal stay⁴⁶³.

Four defendants were prosecuted, three of whom were convicted in absentia. Only the Nigerian defendant residing in Belgium was arrested. A European arrest warrant had been issued for the other defendants, but they remained unaccounted for and rested arrested. Three Nigerian victims of prostitution and Myria filed a civil suit.

What is important in this case is that the Nigerian woman Eunice, who was murdered by a client, was one of the victims of this network. Since then, Eunice has come to symbolise the precarious position of Nigerian sex workers in Brussels. A documentary was made about her and a street in Brussels was named after her.

⁴⁶³ Myria, *Annual Report 2021, Trafficking and smuggling of human beings. Visibly invisible*, pp. 61-62; Brussels Dutch-speaking Crim. Court, 12 January 2021, 26th ch. (final); see [Myria's website](#) (case law).

1.1. | Network

1.1.1. | Structure of the network

The criminal organisation was based on the main defendant's family network in Nigeria. His father is a powerful tribal chief in Benin City and holds a prominent position there. They carried out their criminal activities in Nigeria, Niger, Libya, Italy, France and Belgium.

The family was known in the criminal underworld for its human smuggling and trafficking activities. They smuggled Nigerian girls into Europe to exploit them in prostitution. It also operated on the orders of 'madams' in Belgium and France, in collaboration with other Nigerian families such as 'mama M'⁴⁶⁴. According to the phone taps, there seemed to be a certain amount of competition between these families. Each one boasted of having made the most money.

P., the main defendant, lived mainly in Italy where he had obtained a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. He had a reputation in the criminal underworld as an expert on the Libyan route and maintained close links with contacts along this illegal migration route. He was also the owner of one of the safehouses in northern Italy where Nigerian smuggling victims had to stay during their transit.

His father, the tribal chief, is a voodoo priest who subjected the victims to a voodoo ritual, in Nigeria, that required them to swear never to speak to the police and never to run away. In addition, they were never allowed to reveal the names of their smugglers or exploiters, and had to swear that they would pay the debt incurred for their illegal journey. He played an important role in the network in Nigeria. He was not prosecuted in this case but he never actually entered Europe.

The sister of the main defendant, who features among the other defendants, housed the victims of smuggling in her flat in northern Italy, a major staging post for Nigerian girls smuggled in after having been recuperated from the camps in southern Italy. She then sexually exploited them in Belgium and France. At the same time, she sent victims to the co-defendant K. in France for sexual exploitation. In Brussels, the victims were first assigned to street prostitution and later worked in windows. The victims were under the control of the co-defendant M., who was arrested and convicted. She organised prostitution in Brussels, collected money from the victims and also managed the victims' safehouse in Vilvoorde.

The 'Yemeshe' system was used for prostitution. This is a Nigerian prostitution modus operandi that allows a girl who does not have a regular place of prostitution to use the window of a contract prostitute for a few hours. In return, the girl has to hand over 50 % of her income from prostitution. The girls had to charge customers EUR 20 for 15 minutes of sex work.

As for the brother of the main defendant, he was probably one of the managers of a camp in Sicily (Italy) where the smuggled Nigerian victims arrived and were lodged.

1.1.2. | Link with human smuggling

The smugglers' camps are located in Valderice, near Palermo (Sicily) and its 'hotspots' where Nigerian victims from Libya arrive by boat before being placed in 'camps'. Based on statements from current and former victims, and thanks to contacts with the Italian authorities, the police know that this region is home to a large number of Nigerian criminal networks.

On the orders of the Nigerian madams, their gang members extract the smuggled Nigerian girls from the 'camps' and transport them to northern Italy, more specifically to Ferrara, Jesolo, Varzi and Rovigo where the Nigerian networks operate. The girls are 'parked' in the safehouses of the defendants or family members of the Nigerian 'madams'. The victims are then taken to their final destination, in France or further afield in Belgium, in particular, where they are sexually exploited.

The Nigerian victim F. explained in her statement how she, Eunice and the victim H. had taken the illegal migration route from Nigeria to Italy:

"We left by bus for Kano State. There were more than 50 of us on the bus. From Kano, we travelled overland to Libya in several vehicles. The journey to Libya took about two weeks. We arrived in Sabah and were made to stay in a neighbourhood known as 'Prince Ghetto'. Here, we were housed by a Nigerian called 'Prince', who ran the ghetto of the same name. We had to stay in this ghetto for about a week. Then, we were all put into a kind of jeep called a Hilux and taken to the coast. It took three weeks to cross the desert. A few dozen people died during the journey because they were physically exhausted and fell out of the jeeps. It was certain they would die in the desert. I managed to hold on and that's how I was able to get to the coast".

464 Myria, *Annual Report 2018, Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 74-82.

“Once we arrived at the coast, we were housed in a ghetto where we had to wait for a week. One Sunday night, we were suddenly told that we would be crossing the Mediterranean. Boats known as ‘lappa-lappa’ were used for this crossing. They’re large inflatable boats, and about 150 people had to get into each one. When we left, five of these ‘lappa-lappa’ boats were used, and I think there were about 600 of us in total. We left on these boats around midnight. The next day, around 07:00, we were rescued by the Italian coastguards”.

In her statement, the Nigerian victim H., who was accompanying her with Eunice, gave more details about the crossing, especially about a kidnapping:

“When the boat was about to leave, we were intercepted by some Arabs and transferred to a building. They asked to contact the smugglers or the people we were destined for. They then asked for money for our release. A smuggler came to the building to buy us back, after which we were taken back to his ghetto”.

The victims' statements also mentioned attempted rapes. For instance, in the absence of his girlfriend, smuggler A. attempted to rape victim H. in an Italian safehouse:

"I'd like to point out that A.'s girlfriend was normally always present in the house. However, one day she was absent and A. tried to rape me. I stayed in that house for about 10 days".

1.2. | Asylum

Several Nigerian victims had sought asylum in Lille, France. The defendants had forced them to do so. Phone conversations revealed that one of the suspects had acted as a facilitator. According to the police, this is a typical modus operandi for these networks: "Based on our experience, we know that Nigerian human smugglers use this modus operandi to avoid forced repatriation of their victims to Nigeria after a police check in Belgium. If they apply for asylum in France, they end up on the other side of the Franco-Belgian border and quickly return to work in the Brussels prostitution scene".

These findings led the police to suspect that the network was not only involved in the smuggling and sexual exploitation of its victims, but was also initiating asylum procedures in France for them.

In addition, the defendants used black taxis⁴⁶⁵ to further exploit their victims within the context of their asylum applications. The victims were transported from France to Belgium in these black taxis, which dropped them off at the suspects' home in Brussels. In addition, the findings showed that these black taxis also drove to France to collect money with the victims' Mastercards. These cards were given to the victims in France after they sought asylum there. A Mastercard represents a monthly amount of EUR 320 per victim.

1.3. | Start of the investigation

On 19 January 2017, the Nigerian victim F. filed a civil party complaint with the Brussels investigating judge against the main defendant for trafficking and smuggling in human beings, from the Bruges detention centre, through her lawyer specialising in asylum law. The Brussels federal judicial police (FJP) then went to the detention centre to hear her. On the basis of her detailed statements, the police contacted the Brussels reference magistrate for human trafficking, who recognised her as a victim of trafficking. She was then referred to a specialised reception centre for victims of human trafficking, where she was looked after.

⁴⁶⁵ An unregulated taxi company that allows its drivers to work illegally.

The Nigerian victim F. had been found by local police working the streets in the red-light district of Sint-Josse-ten-Noode on 5 November 2016. During the check, the police noticed that she did not have a residence permit and she was transferred to the detention centre in Bruges. She applied for asylum there, but was refused, including by the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS). During the appeal against this decision by the CGRS before the Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL), her lawyer referred to her statements to the effect that she had been forced to prostitute herself on the street and had been transported illegally to Belgium. She risked her life if she refused. According to her lawyer, the CGRS knew that she had been arrested by the police when she was working the streets. She had not given concrete answers to questions about her prostitution activities, her itinerary, her smugglers or her stay in Belgium because she was too scared, according to her lawyer. The CALL confirmed the negative decision of the CGRS, which had found her asylum narrative to lack credibility. The victim had told her lawyer that there was no way she could return to Nigeria. The asylum lawyer then spoke with the victim, convincing her to lodge a complaint with the investigating judge against the main defendant, to provide all the necessary information to the public prosecutor and the investigating judge, and to cooperate if necessary. This proves how important it is for asylum lawyers to be aware of the status of victim of trafficking. At a later stage, victims may be assisted by a lawyer specialising in criminal law and familiar with human trafficking, who may be appointed by a specialised reception centre, as was the case here.

In this respect, it is important to be aware that the perpetrators contact their victims in the detention centres in order to manipulate them. For instance, victim F. stated at her hearing that the main defendant had phoned her at the detention centre with one and the same message:

"Since I've been at the Bruges detention centre, P. has called me several times. He assured me that I should not worry. Even if I was sent back to Nigeria, he would make sure that I was brought back to Europe. Within a month".

1.4. | Criminal investigation

Investigative actions

The investigation was based on a retroactive phone investigation ('retro-zoller') on phone numbers known to the defendants and victims - including the deceased Eunice -, consultation of the 'mama M.' case file with information from phone taps, interviews with victims and witnesses, searches in the windows of the Gare du Nord neighbourhood in Brussels and a bank investigation.

Social media

During their hearings, the victims showed the investigators the defendants' Facebook profiles and identified them on the basis of their photos. This is how victim H. identified defendant K., who was active in Belgium and France: "When you ask me whether K. has a Facebook profile, I can tell you that their Facebook pseudonym is X. You show me a photo of this Facebook profile. I recognise K. in it".

Financial investigation

The majority of the Nigerian victims had to pay off an illegal migration debt of EUR 30,000. Several of them had already repaid most of this debt by prostituting themselves. One of them said that she handed over between EUR 400 and EUR 600 a week.

Every Monday, the victims had to bring the money from their prostitution to an 'Africa Shop'⁴⁶⁶, i.e. an African hairdresser's. The manager acted as a Nigerian money courier who then transferred the proceeds of prostitution to the perpetrators' families in Nigeria via Western Union.

A banking investigation was carried out into the receipts and payments made with the Western Union card and other bank cards.

On the basis of a zoller phone investigation and the hearing of a defendant, the investigators were also able to uncover a strategy within the criminal organisation to counter money laundering investigations. It transpired that the defendant had contacts in the port of Antwerp to have cars sent to Nigeria. Proceeds from prostitution were used to buy second-hand cars in Belgium in order to conceal the criminal origin of the income. The cars were then sold at full price in Nigeria.

⁴⁶⁶ Myria, *Annual Report 2018, Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 75 and 77.

1.5. | Analysis of the victims

1.5.1. | Recruitment of the victims

In this case, the police were able to trace 13 Nigerian victims, although they were not always able to locate them. However, five victims were identified by the police, three of whom were granted the status of victim of human trafficking.

The victims were not aware of their final destination. However, several of them knew that they would have to work in prostitution. Some had received a vague promise of employment.

It is clear from the victims' statements that they were in a particularly vulnerable position. All the victims were in a very precarious financial and/or family situation, because they needed financial resources to (help) support their family, to pay for the care of a sick family member or because they were orphans.

On their departure from Nigeria, they were forced to undergo a voodoo ritual at the home of the father of the main defendant, promising to obey their exploiters and repay in full the EUR 25,000 to 30,000 in smuggling debts they had incurred. The families of the perpetrators and victims knew each other well, which made it possible to exert pressure.

1.5.2. | Detection of the victims

Several Nigerian victims who had been traced through phone data and digital messages could not be located. Some had initially shown no interest in the status of victim but, it was possible to win their trust in the end.

Eunice, who was later killed by a client, was one of the five victims intercepted by the police. During a police check of a window in Brussels, Eunice ran off and hid in the toilets. She was in possession of an asylum application attestation issued in Lille, France, which led to her identification. Eunice explained that she had been in Belgium for a few months and that she had spent around six months in Lille before that. She said she was prostituting herself of her own free will. She wanted to earn money to support her seriously ill mother in Nigeria. As a result of her illegal stay, her fingerprints were taken and the Immigration Office (IO) issued her an order to leave the territory (OLT).

Eunice had been indirectly incited by the victim F. to contact a specialised reception centre for trafficking victims. This is an excellent example of victims' awareness being raised by their peers. However, this approach proved unsuccessful, as the victim with whom she was in direct contact was not interested herself at the time.

Victim F. explained that she had encouraged victim H. and Eunice to do so. At the time, victim F. was already being supported by Payoke and maintained phone contact with victim H., who was staying in the same safehouse as Eunice, in Vilvoorde:

"I suggested to H. that we meet at Antwerp Central station to go to Payoke together and tell them that they too were victims. H. told me that she was working on a project at the time, without going into details. Once the project was finished, she was going to contact me so that we could go to Payoke together. Contact between H. and I was cut off on the orders of P. (the main defendant), who began to monitor her smartphone. H. risked serious problems if she did not obey."

Finally, victim H. explained to the police how she had ended up at PAG-ASA through a hospital, which demonstrates the importance of making hospitals aware of the indicators of human trafficking:

"After being violently assaulted by a client, my injuries were so serious that I had to be hospitalised. I was then transferred to PAG-ASA. That's when I realised how precarious my situation was. So I contacted your services, where I declared myself a victim of human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation".

In the case of victim R., trust was built up step by step thanks to the specialised Africa team of the federal judicial police (FJP) in Brussels and the interpreter, a former victim of Nigerian prostitution who is familiar with voodoo culture and hence a real-life expert.

After the magistrate ordered the FJP to hear the victim, they found her in the window. She complied with the police officers' request to follow them to the station without protesting. The police described the hearing as follows:

"Initially, R. made no effort to explain her situation to us. However, when confronted with all the clues and evidence in the case file, and with the help of the interpreter, R. quickly made us understand that she was indeed a victim of human trafficking and sexual exploitation and that she had been smuggled into Belgium by the defendants' network and forced to work as a prostitute in Brussels".

Some Nigerian victims in detention centres were not granted victim status because they had not been referred to a specialised reception centre in time. For example, the police wanted to hear the fifth identified victim of the network, who was being held in the Bruges detention centre following a police check for street prostitution.

When the police arrived, they learned that she had already been transferred to the 127bis detention centre in Steenokkerzeel and was in the process of being repatriated to Rome, Italy.

1.5.3. | Victim status

Victim F. was at the heart of the investigation. She had lodged a complaint against the defendants with the investigating judge through her lawyer while she was in a detention centre.

She stated that when she was recruited in Nigeria in August 2016, the main defendant made false promises to her about a job offer as a mechanic in Italy. For this, she owed him EUR 25,000 and would have to repay him the sum with what she was going to earn in Italy.

When she arrived at the defendant's safehouse in Italy at the end of her perilous illegal journey (see above), she asked him where she was going to work as a mechanic. The main defendant laughed at her and told her that the place was in Belgium and that she had to go there.

Once in Belgium, she was confronted with the harsh reality of being transported to a residence in Brussels' North district. The same day that she was forced to prostitute herself in the street under threat, she was arrested by the local police and detained at the Bruges detention centre.

Victim F. was then heard three times and questioned about new evidence in the investigation. It emerged that she had received death threats and that a curse had been placed on another victim:

"There was a girl, I., who had been smuggled in by P. (the main defendant). I learned that I. had run away. P. cursed this girl and told me that I would never be able to escape. If I tried, he would kill me".

She also told the police that the main defendant had tried to contact her at the reception centre and that she had informed the centre's caregivers. This was to avoid breaching the conditions of support: no contact with the presumed exploiters.

If a victim stopped paying before her debt was paid in full, pressure was put on both the victim and her family by the defendants or their families, in particular by harassing the victim in person or by phone to get her to go back to work and resume payments. In the days following her arrest, victim F. was called several times by the main defendant and later by the latter's brother.

The families of the victims living in Nigeria were also threatened. On the basis of e-mails from victims H. and R., the police were able to establish that their families were being sought by the perpetrators' families. The police were also able to deduce that all the people involved in the network, both in Nigeria and in Italy, were kept closely informed of events in Belgium. This gave them the opportunity to react in a particularly threatening manner towards the victims and thus to exert enormous pressure on them, both physically and psychologically.

Thanks to her contact with her family, victim H. informed the police in October 2018 via PAG-ASA that the family of the arrested defendant intended to approach the Oba (king of Benin City)⁴⁶⁷:

⁴⁶⁷ In Nigeria, the Oba is a person with a very important religious function and great moral authority. The Oba is the religious leader of the Edo culture and can be considered the king of Edo State. The Oba in office at the time of the events (2018) had worked at the United Nations between 1981 and 1982, and then served as Nigeria's ambassador to several countries, including Italy. During his time as ambassador to Italy, he had witnessed the trafficking of Nigerian nationals for the purpose of sexual exploitation, with Italy acting as a transit country.

"They said they wanted to go to his palace to lay a curse. They want the person responsible for M.'s arrest to be cursed, to go mad or something like that".

It is not known whether this happened or whether it had any effect. On the other hand, the Oba had previously made it known, at a specially organised ceremony on 18 March 2018, that he was putting a voodoo curse on anyone facilitating illegal migration. At the same time, he had lifted all the curses that human traffickers had placed on victims⁴⁶⁸.

2. Labour exploitation: poultry farming case in Turnhout

Introduction

This case concerns human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation involving the use of fraudulent postings, bogus self-employment and illegal employment. The events took place between December 2004 and July 2012 in the poultry farming sector. Seven defendants appeared in court, including a Belgian of Bulgarian origin, four Bulgarians and two legal entities. In addition to the charge of human trafficking, they were charged with other offences including money laundering and social and fiscal offences. The Turnhout Criminal Court⁴⁶⁹ found that the charges against all the defendants had been established. Following his appeal, the main defendant was acquitted by the Antwerp Court of Appeal in 2019⁴⁷⁰.

2.1. | Network

2.1.1. | Structure of the network

Around 40 Bulgarian workers had been employed since 2005 as poultry catchers in one of the companies run by the main defendant and his brother (co-defendant). The workers were either illegally employed, fictitiously posted from Bulgaria, or employed as bogus self-employed workers. Their exploitation can be divided into two phases.

The first phase included exploitative situations involving fraudulent postings and illegal employment. Through a posting, the main defendant had set up a fraudulent structure with members of his family to avoid paying social security and tax in Belgium. None of the posted workers had been registered for social security in Bulgaria or had a work permit in Belgium. The Bulgarian workers had to carry out physically demanding work for a derisory salary and without any social security protection for many hours at night. The temporary accommodation arranged by the main defendant for several workers was totally inadequate. The first phase also involved illegal employment, whereby the workers had to work on a trial basis without being declared.

The second phase was characterised by bogus self-employment within Belgian companies run by the main defendant and his family. The situation of the bogus self-employed workers concerned was, in principle, no different from that of their colleagues, with an equivalent income. The bogus Bulgarian self-employed workers received shares (without having to pay for them), signed a number of documents in a language they did not understand, were unaware of their status, received an hourly wage and did not know that they were self-employed.

The main defendant and his family had made substantial profits from these schemes. Despite the various inspections and the arrest of the main defendant, the family continued its activities without being troubled. They were invariably chosen by customers for being the cheapest, leaving few opportunities for other companies in the market.

This social and economic disruption of the sector allowed the organisation to operate below the market price, creating unfair trade practices and eliminating all fair competition.

⁴⁶⁸ Myria, *Annual Report 2018, Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, p. 55.

⁴⁶⁹ Antwerp Crim. Court, Turnhout division, 20 December 2017, see Myria, *Annual Report 2018, Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Minors in major danger*, pp. 119-120. This decision is available on [Myria's website](#).

⁴⁷⁰ Antwerp Court of Appeal, 13 November 2019, see Myria, *Annual Report 2020, Trafficking and smuggling of human beings, Behind closed doors*, pp. 86-87. This decision is available on [Myria's website](#).

2.1.2. | Multi-purpose criminal structure

According to a police report, the file shows that offences were committed over a long period of time and in a planned manner, suggesting the existence of a criminal organisation. Greed and power are clear from the statement of the main suspect, who expressed his desire to become President of Bulgaria through the Muslim party he had founded. The main defendant stated that in addition to his investments in real estate, he mainly used the proceeds to finance his political party and his activities inside and outside Bulgaria. He regarded the years of financial fraud as an advance from the State in his bid for power.

The main defendant added that most of the workers were members of his party, which was confirmed by the fact that the majority of Bulgarian workers had a membership card. This card could be bought in Antwerp for EUR 5. It is therefore not inconceivable that the many Bulgarian workers were linked in one way or another to his party, thus creating, according to the police, a certain form of debt bondage, and reinforcing the position of power and dependence.

The main defendant had set up 'straw women' within his companies to pursue his criminal activities. The organisation exerted influence on politics, the media, public life, the judiciary and the business world. This was reflected in the Bulgarian media coverage of their arrest and the attention of the Bulgarian authorities and Belgian security services.

Further analysis revealed that the defendants' empire was not limited to the poultry sector, and that there were also links with the prostitution scene. For instance, several Bulgarian workers were posted by the main defendant to Belgian companies that also ran cafés and were known to the police for human trafficking. It is worth noting that one of these cafés was officially an outlet for the sale of jewellery and precious stones. However, findings revealed that this company was also active in the poultry sector. At the same time, one of the company heads was already known to the police for prostitution, human trafficking, threats and fraud.

In addition, the main defendant held shares in Belgian cafés, several of which had gone bankrupt and were also involved in prostitution. Among the co-defendants, one woman was known to the police for prostitution and had declared that she had switched from the hospitality to the poultry sector. Documents relating to the takeover of a café in the Netherlands were also found, indicating an (international) expansion of their criminal empire.

Following this critical analysis, the question arises as to the extent to which there has been a conversion from the prostitution sector to the poultry industry.

2.2. | Start of the investigation

In February 2011, the federal judicial police (FJP) in Turnhout were informed by colleagues in Antwerp of the use of illegally employed workers in the poultry sector. They noted that the person was already known within the framework of two earlier cases, in Antwerp and Hasselt, for human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation, as well as aggravated theft. They then notified the reference magistrate at the public prosecutor's office and proposed planning a multidisciplinary control operation. The magistrate agreed. The investigation began with a brief, discreet observation by the police, which gave them an idea of the layout of the premises and the scope of the check to be carried out. The multidisciplinary check was carried out by members of the FJP, the local police, the Social Legislation Inspectorate (CLS), the Immigration Office (IO) and the Antwerp Social inspection service (now the NSSO inspection department (ECOSOC teams)). Following this check, the main defendant was interviewed and an initial outline of his network was drawn up. Twenty-three Bulgarians were also intercepted and subsequently repatriated. A month later, a second multidisciplinary check took place, during which nine other Bulgarians were intercepted and repatriated. A year later, another multidisciplinary check took place in Hasselt. This shows that the practices continued and that repeated checks were necessary.

2.3. | Criminal investigation

2.3.1. | Investigative actions

Four searches were carried out, three with consent and one on a warrant from the investigating judge. During the search of the main defendant's home, USB sticks containing lists of Bulgarian party members were found. More than 21,000 Bulgarians were on the lists, illustrating the size of the party. A document relating to one of the Bulgarian companies was also found. This made it possible to establish the first links between the poultry farming business and the prostitution ring mentioned earlier, along with the cafés in Antwerp. Copies of identity cards were also found.

In May 2011, the investigating judge in Turnhout ordered a search of a property sublet by the main defendant. The housing inspectorate, in collaboration with the Turnhout FJP, entered the property and found a number of shortcomings, including damp in the roofing, poor air quality and an unsecured entrance. A request for a declaration of uninhabitability was sent to the mayor of Beringen.

Internet searches were also carried out. This proved to be an important source of information on the political activities of the main defendant.

2.3.2. | International cooperation

In 2012, a letter rogatory was sent to Bulgaria, against the defendants, in search of: evidence of human trafficking, money laundering and tax fraud through witness interviews; evidence for the financial investigation, such as money transactions and bank accounts with money transfer agencies or banks; and information on the land registry and legal entities involved. During the financial audit of the main defendant, the Bulgarian authorities discovered that he owned 35 properties in Bulgaria. These properties formed part of the main defendant's money laundering activities. Thirty-three of these Bulgarian properties were seized and confiscated.

2.3.3. | Financial investigation

Following the initial multidisciplinary check, a financial case was opened in parallel for money laundering, in collaboration with the FJP's money laundering unit, the special tax inspectorate (STI) and the deputy public prosecutor specialising in tax matters. Investigations were carried out on the bank account and financial transactions.

The investigation led to the conclusion that during the period from 2005 to 2011, the main defendant had embezzled more than EUR 1,400,789.73 in income from his activities, which was not recorded in any account.

The investigating judge also took into account the strategy of financial draining and ordered the following: "Please take all necessary measures to seize the real estate of X., his family and his companies".

The majority of the Bulgarian workers said they earned EUR 10 to 12 an hour and were paid in cash. One of the poultry company's clients denied this, saying: "In addition, I'd like to point out that they're the best poultry catchers and the cheapest. [...] As to how much the catchers earn per hour, I can say that I once heard the figure of EUR 6 per hour. Certainly not EUR 12 per hour".

2.4. | Analysis of the victims

2.4.1. | Evidence of human trafficking

Many of the victims employed belonged to a severely discriminated minority, namely the Roma, as the main defendant himself stated. During recruitment, the defendants took advantage of their vulnerable situation. Several of the victims were staying illegally in Belgium.

The victims spoke only Bulgarian and came from the poorest part of Bulgaria. Several of them stated that they had signed documents in a foreign language (namely Dutch), and were thus unaware of their status within the company.

They were the subject of labour exploitation and completely at the mercy of their boss, the main defendant. Working hours were not fixed in advance; the team leader called them when there was work and they had to be available at a moment's notice. In addition, the Bulgarian workers were totally financially dependent on their employer. They had to do physically demanding work for many hours at a time, often at night. In practice, the poultry catchers had to work more than 14 hours a day, only part of which was paid. In addition, the working conditions were unacceptably unhygienic. All the workers were working without any protection in the hen houses, even though they were exposed to ammonia. They also had to hand over part of their wages to the employer for accommodation. During a hearing, the main defendant indicated that he had housed the Bulgarians in a house that had subsequently been declared uninhabitable. Finally, according to the police, it is also possible that, because the workers belonged to his Muslim political party, religious motives contributed to the voluntary nature of the work.

2.4.2. | Victim statement

Several statements made by victims revealed the precarious situation in which the Bulgarian workers found themselves. Some workers had come from Spain to work here. One of the victims, who had to work illegally during their trial period, said: "I can start working on a trial basis. I do not know how long this trial period will last. If I do well, I might get a contract. For the moment, I have not signed anything yet". Another victim said that they had no residence documents, even though this is what they had been promised.

Thirty-two Bulgarians were repatriated following the multidisciplinary check. It should be noted that eight of them returned. One victim with a bogus self-employed status said at their hearing: "Then, after being questioned by the Immigration Office, I was repatriated to Bulgaria. I was only in Bulgaria for two days. I then took the bus back to Belgium. Several other repatriated Bulgarians were with me". The victim also said that on his return, the son-in-law had taken over the role of the main defendant after the latter's arrest.

2.4.3. | Victim status

Very few of the victims wanted to obtain victim status. Owing to the precarious living conditions in Bulgaria and cultural affinities, the workers did not consider themselves to be victims. "I know what it means to be a victim of human trafficking. I do not consider myself a victim of human trafficking", said several Bulgarian workers. Two Bulgarian workers nevertheless obtained this status. The first victim worked as a bogus self-employed person in the poultry farming business and had to do physically demanding work for very long periods of time. The second worked as a waitress in a café founded by the main defendant, where she was unknowingly the unpaid manager ("straw woman"). As she could not make ends meet, she also worked in the poultry farm. She said: "This week, we worked on several other farms. After Herentals, we had to go to Brussels. There, we worked from 10:00 in the morning until 05:00 the next morning. That week, I worked on different farms from those in Herentals and Brussels. I only received EUR 50 for that week". After being informed by the FJP that she was a victim of trafficking, she was referred to a specialised reception centre for victims of human trafficking.

In the end, two protagonists filed a civil suit during the trial: the second victim and Myria.