

## SOCIETY



A prostitute at work in Madrid's Casa de Campo. / GORKA LEJARCEGI

Marina, sticking her chin out, "No, I don't believe in it." She says there are people who are Christians in their heads, but that they believe in their hearts. "And another thing, if you do not pay, then there will be a lot of problems."

Isolated from the reality around them, their lives, beyond the time they spend working, is reduced to three things: looking after their hair, television — they particularly like South American soap operas — and going to church on Sundays. A church in Barcelona has allowed the Evangelist community, to which most Nigerians are belong, the use of an attic to hold their services. Squashed into a tiny room and spilling out into a narrow passageway, and barely able to see the pastor, they pray to a cross set against a mural. The young women try to blend in with the other worshippers, who in turn try to ignore them. The sermon seems interminable. The children stand stock still for two hours.

"The truth will set you free! Come here and you are among the chosen ones! Many of your compatriots wanted to do the same," says the preacher, warming to his theme. Many of the faithful clutch a well-worn Bible. The pastor brings his sermon to a close, and the congregation, locked in concentration, with eyes closed, repeat the prayer and raise their faces up to heaven. There is no reference this time to the drama that each

of them lives through every day. In other cities however, the preacher is prepared to tackle the subject. In Paris, in a converted gymnasium in the Mercadet district, the pastor says from his pulpit, "We know of the tragedy that many of these women are living through in Europe, and what they are going through. You will have to pay your debts, but we pray and ask the Lord to make sure that the madames do not put too much pressure on you, and that they give you time." One of them sits impassively in the front row. The church erupted in celebration when one

### The Nigerians believe that the society they find themselves in is fundamentally racist

woman said that the police had let her go after being held for three days. The pastor absolved her after she confessed to working the street.

After making a donation, the Barcelona mass ends at midday. The Nigerian women wait to greet others in the same situation as them. They are unaware that shortly before, a number of groups held a demonstration nearby, demanding rights and better protection for prostitutes in Barcelona, while at the same time criticizing the police for their policy of clearing El Raval

in the city center, and where a five-star hotel is being built. Most of those attending the demonstration were Spanish and South American women. They all had their faces covered with white masks. There were no Nigerians among them. "It is not easy to talk to them. There is a language and cultural barrier," says Lourdes Perramón, from the El Lloc de la Dona women's collective, which works with immigrants. The Nigerians believe that the society that they have found themselves in is fundamentally racist, and so keep to themselves. They also intuitively understand that they have very few other opportunities, as is the case with South American women. And then there is the eternal question of the voodoo. A tribal, sacred pact.

With little option but to prostitute themselves, and with no hope of legalizing their status here, the Nigerian women are obsessed with buying a job. They need a work permit, and will pay whatever is necessary to get one. A work permit means that they no longer have to worry about the police. But it has to be said that they authorities are hardly over-zealous in pursuing these women: they cannot be expelled, because nobody knows where they are from. "They are in a kind of legal limboland," says lawyer María Helena Bedoya, who says that the police tend to be tougher on Nigerian men. She says that the police are aware of the women's situation,

and that they are victims of people-smugglers and organized crime. "I am not going to get into moral judgments about the fact that they are prostitutes," says an investigator who shares the opinion of a judge who has already spoken out on this issue.

"But we are not really dealing here with slavery, because many of these women come here of their own free will. But that doesn't mean that they are not being exploited, and that many people live off them, and that is a crime. The debt is always getting bigger, and they have virtually no chance of paying it off.

### Very few of the Nigerian women are prepared to break out of the vicious circle

They are being used, and they are being used as a commodity. And the United Nations and the Council of Europe have agreed that this issue is now as big a problem as drug or people-smuggling."

Very few of the Nigerian women take advantage of witness protection programs, and even fewer are prepared to shed their chains and break out of the vicious circle they live in. The network will never be broken, because the women already here then go back and bring others, sometimes as a way of paying

off their debt, and hoping that they might rise to the level of madame themselves. Others, who may have had a relationship with a European, have ended up working in brothels. They have little hope of ever breaking out of their situation, and for many of them things are made worse by the fact that they have children. One member of the network said, with a certain degree of cynicism that having a child gave them God's protection, because they at least have something pure in their insides. Jane, another young woman, says that some of her friends were raped while waiting in Morocco for a place on a crossing. "It's not their fault, it's not their fault," says a young woman who had to leave her two children in Nigeria with her mother, and who feels ashamed at how she lives. She has always told her family that she works in a restaurant, or cleans offices. She takes out a photo of her two children. She calls them each week. She hasn't seen them for years.

Dawn breaks, and once again, Betty arrives home. She opens her bag and shows a few euros. It wasn't a very good night. It was cold. Her daughter is already awake and running round the room. The coming and going starts up. Clean, cook, shop, work, pay, avoid sleeping, avoid the police. Tomorrow will be the same. And then it starts all over again. The wheel that never stops turning. The never-ending story.