

Analysis of the driving Forces Aiding Human Trafficking in Nigeria and the Way Forward

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Abstract

Human trafficking, commonly referred to as trafficking in persons (TIP), represents a pervasive form of modern-day slavery in Nigeria. Emerging into public discourse in the 1980s and gaining prominence nationally and internationally in the late 1990s, TIP has since entrenched itself as a critical socio-economic and human rights challenge. Nigeria is currently classified as a source, transit, and destination country for trafficking victims. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the key driving forces underpinning human trafficking in Nigeria, including poverty, ineffective governance, corruption, and entrenched cultural practices. The paper further examines the consequences of TIP, which manifest as inhibited economic growth, stunted human development, and diminished self-worth among affected populations. Despite government interventions, including the establishment of agencies tasked with investigation, prosecution, and victim rehabilitation, these measures have largely failed to curb the prevalence of TIP. Drawing on this analysis, the study advocates for intensified public enlightenment initiatives and strategic collaboration among governmental and non-governmental actors as essential mechanisms for mitigating human trafficking and promoting sustainable solutions.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Law Enforcement Agents, Nigeria, Trafficked Persons

Introduction

Human trafficking, widely acknowledged as a contemporary manifestation of modern-day slavery, entails the illegal recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through the use of force, coercion, deception, or abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation (Ajayi, 2022). It has emerged as one of the most profitable transnational criminal enterprises, generating an estimated \$150 billion annually, with approximately two-thirds of this revenue derived from commercial sexual exploitation and the remainder from forced labour in sectors such as domestic service, agriculture, construction, and informal economic activities (Ajayi, 2022). Recent global estimates indicate that over 50 million people are living in conditions of modern slavery, reflecting a significant increase from earlier reports, with women and girls constituting nearly 70 per cent of victims, while children account for a disproportionately high share of those exploited. These figures underscore the persistent and evolving nature of human trafficking as a critical global human rights concern.

The burden of human trafficking is unevenly distributed across regions, with Africa identified as one of the most affected continents. Within this context, Nigeria has been consistently recognized as a major source, transit, and

destination country for trafficking in persons (UNODC, 2023; United States Department of State, 2024). The prevalence of trafficking in Nigeria is closely linked to a range of structural and systemic challenges, including widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, rapid population growth, and limited access to quality education. Additionally, socio-cultural practices, gender inequality, and entrenched patriarchal norms further exacerbate the vulnerability of women and children, who represent the majority of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriage, and child labour (ILO, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). The increasing sophistication of trafficking networks, coupled with the rise of digital technologies and social media platforms, has facilitated new and more covert recruitment strategies, thereby complicating efforts at detection and prevention (Interpol, 2022).

Conceptually, human trafficking extends beyond the mere physical movement of individuals to encompass the processes through which persons are manipulated, controlled, and exploited for economic and non-economic gains. In the case of children, the requirement of coercion is often absent, as their inherent vulnerability and dependence render them particularly susceptible to exploitation through deception, persuasion, or abuse of trust (UNODC, 2023). This broader understanding highlights the necessity of situating human trafficking within its socio-economic and cultural context, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria.

Given these dynamics, the persistence of human trafficking in Nigeria necessitates a critical and systematic examination of the underlying factors that drive and sustain the phenomenon. Such an analysis is essential for informing effective policy formulation and designing targeted interventions that address both the root causes and structural enablers of trafficking. Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes an analysis of the driving forces aiding human trafficking in Nigeria and explores viable and sustainable pathways for addressing the challenge.

Conceptual Understanding of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention in recent years. The United Nations defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through the use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations, 2013). Contemporary studies reaffirm this definition, emphasizing that exploitation may take various forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, and organ removal (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). This definition highlights that human trafficking is not solely about movement across borders but fundamentally about the exploitation of individuals under conditions of control and vulnerability.

According to Odewaga (2021), human trafficking is commonly analysed through three interrelated elements: the act, the means, and the purpose. The act involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, which may occur either within national boundaries or across international borders. The means refers to the methods employed by traffickers, including coercion, force, deception, fraud, or abuse of authority and vulnerability. The purpose is exploitation, which constitutes the defining feature of trafficking and distinguishes it from related phenomena such as smuggling. Importantly, in the case of children, the element of coercion is not required, as their vulnerability alone is sufficient to establish trafficking.

While human trafficking is often narrowly associated with commercial sexual exploitation, contemporary scholarship underscores its broader scope. It encompasses a wide range of exploitative practices, including domestic servitude, forced labour in agriculture and mining, forced begging, child soldiering, and involvement in criminal activities such as theft and fraud (International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2023; UNODC, 2022). Victims are frequently subjected to inhumane conditions, including physical and psychological abuse, deprivation of liberty, and life-threatening situations, particularly during hazardous migration journeys across borders. Many victims lose their lives in the process, reflecting the grave human security implications of trafficking.

In the context of developing countries, particularly in Africa and Nigeria, human trafficking has assumed alarming proportions, driven by socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, poverty, and weak institutional frameworks (United States Department of State, 2024; IOM, 2023). Young women, girls, and increasingly young men are trafficked for purposes such as commercial sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and exploitative labour in sectors like mining and agriculture, often for little or no remuneration and under coercive conditions. These dynamics highlight the gendered and age-specific dimensions of trafficking, with women and children disproportionately affected.

Scholarly discourse further distinguishes between different forms of trafficking based on scope and movement. Internal trafficking refers to the recruitment and movement of persons within a country, often from rural to urban areas or between regions, for exploitative purposes such as domestic work, child labour, or sex work (UNODC, 2022). In contrast, external or cross-border trafficking involves the movement of individuals across national or international borders for similar exploitative ends, often facilitated by transnational criminal networks (IOM, 2023). Additionally, specific forms such as the trafficking of women focus on the gendered nature of exploitation, particularly for sexual and domestic purposes, where victims may be deceived or coerced into conditions of servitude.

Causes of Human Trafficking

The precise origin of human trafficking cannot be definitively determined; however, the phenomenon gained significant prominence in Nigeria during the early 1990s, coinciding with the rise of transnational crimes such as drug trafficking and advance fee fraud (commonly referred to as “419”). According to Bello (2024), human trafficking particularly involving women emerged as a coping strategy adopted by families seeking relief from severe economic hardship following the mismanagement of oil revenues during the 1980s and 1990s. This period marked a decline in economic stability, which significantly increased the vulnerability of many households.

One of the most widely acknowledged drivers of human trafficking is poverty. As noted by Muhammed (2024), citing World Bank (1995), over 45 per cent of Nigeria’s population lived below the poverty line, a situation that has persisted and, in some cases, worsened in the 21st century (World Bank, 2023). Poverty creates conditions of desperation, making individuals especially women and children susceptible to exploitation by traffickers who promise better economic opportunities. Closely related to poverty is the issue of low levels of education and ignorance. Many victims, particularly women and girls, lack adequate education and awareness of the risks associated with migration. Consequently, they are easily deceived by traffickers who present false narratives of lucrative employment and improved living conditions abroad (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023).

Family structure and size have also been identified as contributing factors. In many African societies, including Nigeria, large family sizes often associated with polygamous households place significant economic pressure on limited resources. Rotimi (2001) argues that in such contexts, children and adolescents may seek opportunities outside the home to support themselves or their families, thereby increasing their vulnerability to trafficking networks. This is particularly evident in rural and low-income urban communities where access to sustainable livelihoods is limited.

In addition, poor governance, corruption, and high unemployment rates significantly contribute to the prevalence of human trafficking in Nigeria. Weak economic policies and inadequate job creation have compelled many individuals to seek employment opportunities abroad, often through irregular migration channels. The perception that countries in Europe and North America offer better economic prospects, due to stronger currencies and higher wages, further motivates migration (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2023). However, while male migrants may access certain forms of labour, women especially those with limited education are more likely to be channeled into exploitative sectors such as commercial sex work (UNODC, 2023).

Conflict and insecurity also serve as major push factors for human trafficking. Globally, over 1.5 billion people live in conflict-affected regions, where instability increases vulnerability to exploitation (World Bank, 2022). In

Nigeria, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram have been implicated in trafficking-related activities, including the abduction of women and children for forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and use as child soldiers (Ojukwu, 2023). These conditions create an environment in which trafficking can thrive with minimal resistance.

Cultural practices also play a role in perpetuating human trafficking. One such practice is the widespread tradition of entrusting children to wealthier relatives or acquaintances, often with the intention of providing them with better opportunities. While this practice may be well-intentioned, it can be exploited by traffickers when children are “given out” under informal arrangements that lack proper oversight (Oduh & Ogiri, 2023). In such cases, children may be subjected to domestic servitude, forced labour, or other forms of exploitation, thereby reinforcing cycles of abuse and vulnerability.

Nigeria’s Experience in Human Trafficking

Nigeria remains one of the most significant countries affected by human trafficking, functioning simultaneously as a source, transit, and destination country. Nigerian women and girls are predominantly trafficked for purposes of domestic servitude and sexual exploitation, while boys are more commonly subjected to forced labour in sectors such as commercial agriculture, construction, mining, and quarrying, as well as involvement in petty crimes and drug trafficking (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022). Nigerian victims are trafficked both within and beyond the African continent.

Within Africa, they are commonly transported to countries in West and Central Africa, including Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Benin, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Gabon, and Guinea, as well as to Southern Africa, particularly South Africa (IOM, 2023). Beyond the continent, Europe remains a major destination for Nigerian trafficking victims. Women and girls especially from Edo and Delta States are frequently trafficked for forced prostitution, particularly to Italy, which has historically been identified as a primary destination (Oga, 2021). However, trafficking networks have expanded to other European countries, including Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, and Russia. The trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe for sexual exploitation remains one of the most persistent and highly organized trafficking flows, characterized by complex transnational networks that are difficult to detect and dismantle.

In addition to Europe, victims of trafficking from Nigeria are also transported to North African countries such as Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, as well as to the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, where they are exploited for domestic labour and sexual purposes (ILO, 2022; IOM, 2023). These migration routes are often dangerous, exposing victims to severe human rights abuses, including violence, exploitation, and, in some cases, death during transit.

A notable and distinctive feature of the Nigerian trafficking system is the use of traditional religious practices, particularly oath-taking rituals (commonly

associated with “juju”), as a means of controlling victims. Traffickers often subject victims to ritual ceremonies conducted by traditional priests, during which personal items such as fingernails, blood, or hair are collected, and victims are compelled to swear oaths of secrecy and repayment of debts (UNODC, 2023). These rituals create a strong psychological and spiritual hold on victims, instilling fear of severe consequences should they disobey or attempt to escape. This mechanism significantly limits victims’ willingness to seek help from authorities and contributes to the persistence of trafficking networks. Studies indicate that a large proportion of trafficked Nigerian women subjected to sexual exploitation in Europe have undergone such oath-taking rituals prior to departure (IOM, 2023).

Nigeria also serves as a destination country for victims trafficked from neighbouring African states, including Togo, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Benin, Liberia, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ghana (UNODC, 2023). In these cases, boys are often exploited in labour-intensive industries such as mining, while women and girls are subjected to prostitution or exploitative domestic work. Furthermore, Nigeria functions as a transit hub for trafficking operations, facilitating the movement of victims from neighbouring countries to other regions, including Europe and the Middle East.

In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in internal trafficking within Nigeria. Victims, particularly women and children, are frequently trafficked from rural communities to urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja,

Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna, Port Harcourt, and Calabar (United Nations, 2022). This internal trafficking is primarily driven by economic disparities between rural and urban areas and is often associated with exploitation in domestic service, agriculture, prostitution, and, in some cases, ritual practices. The growing prevalence of internal trafficking highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach that addresses both cross-border and domestic dimensions of the problem.

Efforts by the Nigerian Government in Combating Human Trafficking

Nigeria is widely recognized as one of the countries most affected by human trafficking, functioning as a source, transit, and destination nation. A significant number of Nigerian women and girls remain at risk due to factors such as poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, and socio-cultural practices that marginalize vulnerable groups. Globally, human trafficking generates billions of dollars annually from the exploitation of millions of victims, the majority of whom are women and children. Estimates from the Global Slavery Index suggest that hundreds of thousands of Nigerians are victims of modern slavery, although the accuracy of these figures remains contested due to challenges in data collection and underreporting (United Nations, 2022; Walk Free Foundation, 2023). This underscores the need for improved data systems and stronger collaboration between government and non-governmental organizations in addressing the problem.

Human trafficking poses a serious threat to Nigeria's socio-economic development, as it undermines human capital formation and deprives the nation of the productive potential of its youth. Many victims experience severe exploitation, resulting in lost opportunities, disrupted education, and long-term psychological and physical harm. Consequently, the Nigerian government has taken several legal, institutional, and policy measures to combat the menace.

At the international level, Nigeria is a signatory to several key treaties and conventions aimed at preventing and combating human trafficking. These include the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (commonly known as the Palermo Protocol), which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Nigeria is also a party to other international human rights instruments, such as the Slavery Convention, the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons, and various conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), including those on forced labour and the worst forms of child labour (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2023; ILO, 2022). Additionally, Nigeria has ratified conventions aimed at protecting women and children, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols.

Domestically, the legal framework for combating human trafficking is anchored in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended), which guarantees fundamental human rights. Section 34 of the Constitution provides for the right to dignity of the human person and explicitly prohibits slavery, servitude, and forced labour. Other relevant provisions include the rights to personal liberty (Section 35) and freedom of movement (Section 41). Although earlier criminal laws such as the Criminal Code (applicable in southern Nigeria) and the Penal Code (applicable in northern Nigeria) address related offences like prostitution and forced labour, they did not comprehensively define or address human trafficking in all its forms.

To address these gaps, the Federal Government enacted the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act in 2003, which was subsequently amended in 2015 to reflect emerging trends and strengthen enforcement mechanisms (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), 2022). This legislation provides a comprehensive legal framework for the prevention, prohibition, and punishment of human trafficking offences in Nigeria.

A major institutional response to human trafficking in Nigeria is the establishment of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) in 2003. The agency is mandated to coordinate national efforts against trafficking and operates through specialized departments,

including investigation, legal and prosecution, public enlightenment, and victim rehabilitation. NAPTIP adopts a strategic framework commonly referred to as the “4Ps”: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership. Prevention efforts focus on public awareness campaigns, community engagement, and capacity-building programmes. Protection involves the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of victims through mechanisms such as the National Referral System. Prosecution entails the investigation and legal prosecution of trafficking offenders, while Partnership emphasizes collaboration with local and international stakeholders to address the root causes of trafficking (NAPTIP, 2022; UNODC, 2023).

In addition, the Nigerian government has undertaken efforts to address trafficking linked to conflict and insecurity, particularly in the North-East region. Through joint military operations and humanitarian interventions, authorities have worked to rescue abducted women and children and disrupt trafficking activities associated with insurgent groups (UNICEF, 2022). Despite these efforts, challenges such as weak law enforcement, corruption, inadequate funding, and limited public awareness continue to hinder the effectiveness of anti-trafficking initiatives.

Conclusion

The prevention of human trafficking and the protection of victims should remain the central focus of Nigeria’s anti-trafficking strategy, despite the progress already made by the government. Human trafficking in Nigeria is a

complex and multifaceted phenomenon involving diverse forms of exploitation, internal and cross-border movements, and affecting men, women, and children. It is further shaped by unique contextual factors such as domestic servitude, the use of traditional oath-taking rituals for control, and socio-cultural obligations, all of which require tailored and culturally sensitive responses. While international organizations contribute significantly to anti-trafficking efforts, the Nigerian government must take primary responsibility for strengthening institutional frameworks, particularly in victim protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Additionally, addressing trafficking linked to conflict, especially involving insurgent groups like Boko Haram, remains critical, alongside ensuring accountability for perpetrators. Ultimately, sustained progress depends on stronger collaboration between national and international actors, effective policy implementation, and a coordinated approach aimed at addressing both the root causes and structural drivers of human trafficking.

Way Forward

To effectively combat human trafficking in Nigeria, it is essential that the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) strengthens its collaborative mandate with both international and domestic stakeholders. Early and timely interventions should be prioritized, and a

holistic, multi-level approach based on collaboration between agencies, regions, and countries is critical.

The Nigerian government must ensure adequate funding for NAPTIP, particularly to support the prosecution of trafficking offenders, victim rehabilitation, and specialized programs such as the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former child combatants that address their unique needs. Formerly trafficked individuals should be incorporated into anti-trafficking initiatives, as they possess valuable knowledge about trafficking operations and can serve as informants or undercover agents to prevent similar exploitation.

Awareness and education campaigns should be comprehensive, continuous, and culturally sensitive. Strategies may include the use of films, videos, drama, and community-based programs delivered through schools, parent-teacher associations, religious institutions, and vulnerable occupational sectors such as hairdressing or domestic work. These campaigns should particularly address harmful cultural practices, such as “giving” children to relatives or selling children, which increase vulnerability to trafficking. Regular training should also be provided for law enforcement officers, including police and immigration personnel, to enable them to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as young women travelling with non-family members or those engaged in prostitution.

At the national level, the government should coordinate all anti-trafficking initiatives, supporting both frontline agencies and grassroots organizations. Moreover, long-term prevention requires addressing structural drivers of trafficking through the provision of employment opportunities, youth empowerment programs, and access to quality education. By combining effective enforcement, community awareness, victim rehabilitation, and socio-economic interventions, Nigeria can significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the prevalence of human trafficking.

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