

## Trafficking of Nigerian Girls and Women for Sexual Exploitation: A Violation of Women's Rights

**Mezie-Okoye, Charles Chukwurah**

*Centre for Conflict and Gender Studies*

*Faculty of Social Sciences*

*University of Port Harcourt*

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### Abstract

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Human trafficking is beginning to attract global attention as a result of its detrimental consequences for development. This is especially so in the African context where the incidence of human trafficking- especially women's Trafficking has been increasingly attributed to the incidence of poverty worsened by the neo-imperialist capitalist pattern of development culture which maximizes individual profiteering and well-being above communal well-being. This paper focuses on the socio-economic conditions that force women and girls into the human trafficking industry. This paper questions the veracity in the proposed systemic connections between poverty and trafficking especially with regards to women's trafficking in Nigeria. Poverty is shown to be one of the major root causes of this phenomenon. The relationship between poverty and other socio-economic issues such as crime, corruption, illiteracy and HIV/AIDS are discussed. The government's efforts at tackling these problems are analysed, and further preventive measures also discussed. Formal and informal discourses in Social Sciences have tended to link the incidence of women trafficking with the rising incidence of poverty in the 21st Century African State. It is not only poverty that is driving this but bad leadership and corruption in the developing countries. The Nigeria's legal framework has not done enough to stem the tide of this man inhumanity to man. The study therefore suggests that government needs to do more than it is doing to curb this social malaise. The study finally recommends ways to stem this tide.

**Keywords:** *Human trafficking, Human rights, Poverty, Women's rights, Sex industry, Slavery, HIV/AIDS*

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*Corresponding Author:*        **Mezie-Okoye, Charles Chukwurah**

### **Background to the Study**

"Violations of human rights are both a cause and a consequence of trafficking in persons. Accordingly, it is essential to place the protection of all human rights at the centre of any measures taken to prevent and end trafficking." The United Nations began to approach trafficking in women as a human rights violation in the early 1990's. As outlined above, prior to this time, reiterations of the need to address trafficking equated the problem with forced prostitution ([http://www.stopvaw.org/trafficking\\_violates\\_women\\_s\\_human\\_rights](http://www.stopvaw.org/trafficking_violates_women_s_human_rights)).

Additionally, according to the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court trafficking can be considered a crime against humanity or a war crime under some circumstances.

Scholars and activists have identified a number of human rights violations that may occur in the context of trafficking. For example, in a trafficking case, as described above, the following civil and political rights may be violated: the right to personal liberty and autonomy, the right to bodily integrity, the right to freedom of movement and expression, the right to freedom from torture or other cruel or inhuman treatment, the right to be free from discrimination and the right to be free from forced labour and slavery. Trafficking may also violate a woman's social, cultural and economic rights, such as health, free access to education and information, and favourable working conditions, including just compensation and reasonable working hours.

Trafficking in women violates women's human rights. However, it is important that laws intended to protect women from trafficking are not themselves so restrictive that they violate such rights. In the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons 2005 report, Ms. Sigma Huda says that she believes "in spite of its overwhelming human rights dimension, trafficking continues to be treated as mainly a "law and order" problem," and that victims of trafficking can suffer from "re-victimization" as they are "criminalized and prosecuted as illegal aliens, undocumented workers or irregular migrants rather than as victims of a crime themselves."

The overwhelming majority of trafficking victims and migrants make the treacherous journey from Edo State (particularly Benin) and Delta States to Kano, from where they are smuggled into Niger or Algeria before traversing 500 miles over the Sahara Desert into Libya. CNN contends that Edo State is the most trafficked through destination in Africa. NAPTIP, in its 2018 Report, confirms that the largest numbers of victims rescued outside of Nigeria were rescued from Libya and are from Edo State. Edo State has long been an internationally recognized sex trafficking hub, with built-in infrastructures and networks which support the sale of human bodies. According to IOM, an astounding 94% of all Nigerian women trafficked to Europe for prostitution hail from Edo State, with Italy being the number one destination country. In fact, a 2003 United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute Report concluded that "virtually every Benin family has one member or the other involved in trafficking either as a victim, sponsor, madam or trafficker." The question on everybody's lips is why Edo State? Is Edo State the poorest state in Nigeria or the governors that have governed Edo State over the years have not been doing the needful to provide the democratic dividends to the people as they should have.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study relied on two sources of data, primary and secondary and yielded qualitative information. My research assistants and I interviewed 25 survivors of human trafficking, 3 of them children and 22 women, about their experiences of trafficking and reintegration after they have been rescued. We were guided by two victims of trafficking that were among the first batch of trafficked victims that were deported from Italy in 2005 when I wrote my first article on human trafficking. Most of the victims this time are still from Edo State and came back from Italy and Libya. Only two of the victims are from Delta State. Their experiences provided insight into the vulnerabilities that lead to trafficking, and problems with government services. We conducted research in Benin City (Edo State) and Asaba (Delta State). These two ladies that served as gatekeepers were themselves victims of trafficking and got reintegrated into the society by the help of some Catholic Reverend Sisters have their saloon and Boutique now. It was easier for us to interview and administer questionnaire to these victims their guidance. These locations were chosen because we are conversant with this location in Benin City.

Some girls and women we interviewed told us that initially they did not know what they were getting into until it became too late to get out. Two of the interviewees (victims) said they were lured into going to Italy by a woman customer in one of the big markets in Benin City. They were told that they could make a lot of money plaiting hairs in Italy because they are very good with plaiting of hairs. The lady customer introduced them to a man she said it was her brother that lives in Italy. The rest is a story they would not like to remember. Most survivors were exploited in trafficking for years. Most of these victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation, but many faced multiple and intersecting forms of exploitation and abuse. The number of men that slept with them each night was determined by their madam who collected money from these men before they came to sleep with them. They said that for years they were sex slave to these white men that came to patronized them in Italy. Some of our friends that were held with us died in the process when they tried to escape. It was a terrible experience and no one will like to member it. They were traumatised to say the least. One of the respondents told us that at a time she was praying to God to take her life. She thought of committing suicide but could not find anything in her room that she could use. What is in her room was just a bed and sets of bed sheets, a dressing mirror and makeup kits and toiletries only. The eight (8) under age among them said they were used as domestic labour but once awhile the man in the absence of the madam will have sex with her and warned her not to mention it to his wife and usually give her money to shut her up. One fateful day the man was having sex with her as usual but the wife having suspected that something was going wrong, double backed and caught them in the act and fought her husband breaking his head. It was that day she drove her out of the house and she ran to a Catholic Church in the street there in Italy and reported to the Priest there who took her to the Police station and pleaded with the police not to manhandle her but to send he back to Nigeria, and that was how she came back.

We identified some of these victims with the assistance of the gatekeepers. Two of these survivors were married women. One told us that it was the husband that pushed her into this venture because of economic hardship in the country. She said that the first thing she did was to divorce the said husband for pushing her into prostitution and the trauma she went through

for two years before she was rescued. She told us that she does not want to marry again when we enquired whether she is still remarried with man. The second married woman amongst the survivors told us that she made herself available to be taken to Libya when she was introduced to a man in Benin City who introduced her also to yet another man. She left the former husband because he was abusing her, beating her for any slight provocation because she could not give him a child. She told us that she and her friends that were trafficked to Libya and Italy went through hell and that even if she paid a million that she will never dream of doing that again because they were treated and used like animals. Men came into your room to have sex with you whether you like it or not. She told us that some of her customers had sex with her unprotected and she later discovered on coming back to Nigeria that she has been infected with HIV and has been on drugs ever since.

The interviews were conducted in English and only two was done in “broken English” (pidgin). They all consented to the interview and gave out information willingly especially when told that their names and identities will not be revealed. Our gatekeepers assisted us in interviewing two officials of the Edo State Taskforce against Human Trafficking and were intimated on the organisation is handling human trafficking issues.

### **Results and Discussion**

The survey revealed diverse background of respondents. 5 or 20% of the respondents fell within ages 10-19 years, 13 or 52% stated 20-29 years, another 7 or 28% indicated 30 and above years. Majority of the respondents were educated. The percentage of respondents with primary, junior secondary school and senior secondary education was 3 or 12%, 7 or 28% and 6 or 24% respectively. Other 9 or 36% of respondents had tertiary education. In terms of marital status, 20 or 80 of the respondents are singles whereas 3 or 12% are married while 2 or 8% are divorced. Low percentage of educational attainment of the respondents is because of gender inequality, economic realities of the study area and families require young girls to drop out of school early in order to help their mothers while some were forced to leave when they were pregnant. Most of the respondents were petty traders while some were involved in plaiting hair in the market in Benin City and Asaba. Two of the children amongst them were road hawkers before they were trafficked. Today most of them are hairdressers, second hands clothes sellers and three of them sell hair attachments and makeup kits whereas, two older ones among them have small restaurants ((Mama-put) and they are doing well.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Trafficking of women and HIV/AIDS**

Trafficking in women and girls is increasingly being linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS. This link has important consequences for individual and public health. The nexus of the global epidemics of sex trafficking and HIV/AIDS primarily manifests in the lives of women and girls. This intersection exists in sex trafficking victims' increased vulnerability to HIV infection, the proliferation of HIV infection through sex trafficking, and the perceived and actual clashes between HIV and sex trafficking prevention efforts.

Allison Loconto (2002) uses the example of the trafficking of Nigerian women into Italy for reasons of prostitution and sexual exploitation to highlight the human rights violations committed against trafficked women, the massive infection of HIV/AIDS among them, and the social repercussions of this despicable global trade. Apparently concerned on the continuous spread of HIV/AIDS, and the accompanying social malaise in Nigeria, the Executive Director of Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON) Mrs. Bisi Olateru-Olagbegi has decried the continued inhuman treatment meted out on women and children through trafficking and forced labour. Supporting Allison Loconto's (2002) study, The Director pointed out that this has aided the spread of HIV/AIDS in the country (Femi Adekoya and Babatunde Bodurin, *The Guardian* [Nigeria], 2 December 2004).

Sex trafficking increases the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. The HIV/AIDS pandemic can be both a cause and a consequence of sex trafficking. On one hand, child-prostitutes are sought by customers because they are perceived as being less likely to be HIV positive, and this demand leads to child sex trafficking. On the other hand, trafficking leads to the proliferation of HIV, because victims, being vulnerable and often young/inexperienced, cannot protect themselves properly, and get infected (“Human Trafficking and HIV/AIDS”. [santac.org](http://santac.org)).

The direct and individual impact of sex trafficking and HIV on girls and women is illustrated by the experience of “Gita” (not her real name). Gita grew up in India and was sold into sexual slavery by a family member when she was twelve years old. When she arrived at the brothel in Mumbai, she was locked in a room, raped, tortured, and abused until she was deemed sufficiently obedient. When the brothel owners began selling Gita, she was threatened with death if she refused to have sex with a customer. Most days she was forced to have sex with ten to twenty men. The brothel did not provide her with condoms, and she was not able to control which of her customers chose to practice safer sex. During her early teens, Gita contracted HIV from a customer. However, she was not allowed to seek testing or treatment and was forced to continue having unprotected sex with several men per day for several more years.

Gita contracted HIV as a direct result of her status as a victim of sex trafficking. She also, unknowingly and unintentionally, may have spread HIV to customers who bought her after she became infected. If Gita was never trafficked, she may not have become infected with HIV and, in turn, transmitted it to her customers who bought her and their future sex partners. Preventing this multiplier effect of HIV transmission catalysed by sex trafficking involves fighting two global phenomena – a deadly disease and a highly complex and lucrative criminal industry, both of which disproportionately affect girls and women around the world ([www.americanbar.org](http://www.americanbar.org)).

The study calls for an integrated approach to prevent trafficking and HIV in the context of sex work. “To achieve this goal, greater dialogue is required across the spectrum of responses to sex trafficking and HIV within sex work, including advocates for the rights of both sex workers and children, advocates for the prevention of trafficking, law enforcement policy-makers and practitioners, as well as those leading public health efforts to reduce HIV in the context of sex work,” it said.

### **Trafficking: A Violation of Women's Right**

In its *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* UNODC revealed that two-thirds of the identified victims of trafficking were women. In his message for the day, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed that whether the crime against women is rape, domestic violence, genital mutilation or trafficking for sexual exploitation, it is inexcusable and must be stopped. Human trafficking is, indeed, one of the worst forms of violence against women and girls. Traffickers may use violence to intimidate and subdue the victims. Once recruited, the women usually find themselves in situations with severely curtailed freedoms. Many times they suffer extreme physical and mental abuse, including through rape, imprisonment, forced abortions and physical brutality at the hands of their so-called "owners". The victims become isolated, losing ties with their former lives and families. With a better understanding of why women in particular are vulnerable to trafficking and how traffickers operate, and by providing the necessary legal and technical assistance to ensure that effective countermeasures are in place, this crime can be stopped (unodc.org/2009).

Women and girls account for 70% of detected victims of global human trafficking and sexual exploitation accounts for 53% of detected forms of exploitation. Within these statistics there are clear links and consequences for the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of victims. Trafficking is often a 'gendered crime' with evidence currently suggesting that those trafficked into the sex industry and as domestic servants are more likely to be women and children.

The limited research on the health impact of survivors reported high levels of physical and/or sexual abuse before (59%), during (95%) and after their exploitation with commonly reported health problems after the trafficking experience that include sexual and reproductive health problems. The sexual and reproductive health of the victims of forced labour and human trafficking for sexual exploitation should be recognised at local, national and international policy levels as an integral element to the full achievement of SRHR across the Federation.

Finally, upon return to Nigeria, many women and girls said they struggled with depression, anxiety, insomnia, flashbacks, aches and pains, and other physical ailments that have sometimes limited their ability to work effectively. They said they struggled to provide financially for their families, lacked adequate food, or struggled to find money to access health care. For some, their suffering is worsened by families who blamed them for the abuses, ostracized them, or complained that they returned without money. For God's sake Nigerian authority, these women and girls that were repatriated from overseas are victims and not perpetrators or traffickers and should be treated with pity and given all the necessary assistance and support to restart their lives.

Nigeria's Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons spells out the need for "the restoration of the victims of TIPs [trafficking in persons] and exploitative/hazardous child labour to the state of physical, psychological, social, vocational, and economic wellbeing through sustainable assistance programmes." It notes the importance of a holistic approach to protection and assistance of survivors (National Policy on Protection and Assistance to

Trafficked Persons in Nigeria). But despite this policy and other guidelines, many trafficking survivors told Human Rights Watch that Nigerian agencies and NGOs did not provide them with comprehensive, adequate, and long-term care. Most of the NGO staff and survivors interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that the Nigerian government, and international agencies that fund anti-trafficking efforts, focus more on short-term assistance for survivors than long-term, comprehensive assistance and care.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that the issue of violation and non-implementation of women's rights to the feminization of poverty that forms the basis for women's active involvement in human trafficking especially with regards to sex trade. It is indeed true that women play major roles as recruiters, facilitators and sponsors in the trafficking chain in Nigeria. However, the arguments in this paper tried to show that institutionalized and systemic discrimination and marginalization of women is the major factor that promotes the pauperization of women and motivates their involvement in the human trafficking. Furthermore, this paper argues that until the Government of Nigeria translates its commitments on gender equality into practical action to affect the realities of the lives of women in Nigeria women's involvement in trafficking in Nigeria would be difficult to curb. It is also important that the government build~ the capacity of its Nigerian Immigration Service and National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Person and other related matters (NAPTIP) to be able to actively prosecute perpetrators and act positively to protect prospective and repatriated victims of human trafficking.

### **Way Forward**

The lack of adequate legislation, proper functioning machinery and an effective judiciary promote the perpetuation of the incidence of trafficking in women in Nigeria. There is need to enforce with purpose legal provisions to being perpetrators to justice. However, government is increasingly making efforts to prosecute traffickers and facilitate their reintegration. Several people have been arrested in recent days in connection with trafficking rings. Also efforts of campaigners such as Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), Women Trafficking & Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) and the Catholic Church in Nigeria are beginning to payoff. Human trafficking is starting to attract some stigma especially among perpetrators but government need to implement more stringent punitive measures to act as deterrent to prospective traffickers (Fayomi, 2009).

The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act was adopted in 2003, which was repealed and replaced with an updated version in 2015. This Act seeks to: a) provide an effective and comprehensive legal and institutional framework for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution and punishment of human trafficking and related offences; b) protect victims of human trafficking; and c) promote and facilitate national and international co-operation ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)). It established the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP).

The law prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons, including for sexual exploitation, procurement or recruitment of person for use in armed conflicts, organ harvesting, buying or selling of human beings, forced labour, and employment of a child under the age of 12 as a domestic worker. It guarantees a number of rights for trafficked persons, including the right to compensation and restitution, and includes penalties for offenders ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)).

It is true that democratic governance in Nigeria has reduced the incidence of violations of human rights, however, violations of human rights especially women's rights continue unabated. The federal Government of Nigeria lags behind in its commitment of ensuring the implementation of women' and girls' rights with its slow progress towards the domestication of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it's non implementation of the affirmative action of 30 per cent representation of women at all levels in Decision making and its inability to enact and implement legislations that will eliminate violence against women and foster gender equality between women and men in Nigeria speaks volume of its level of accountability in this regard. It is important that Nigeria begin to take practical steps to actualize the implementation of CEDAW and CRC.

Government in particular should make the country attractive to citizens especially the youths through qualitative public education, job creation and provision of social infrastructures, which often constitute the push factor for emigration. Since women and girls are the most vulnerable to trafficking, the federal government is expected to reinforce relevant national laws and international conventions and protocols that protect the rights and privileges of individuals against trafficking. Law enforcement agencies like the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), Nigeria Immigration Services (NIS) and Nigeria Custom and Exercise (NCE) could also assist the National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) with intelligence and logistic support to fight the crime. Members of the public also owe a duty to NAPTIP by providing information to help NAPTIP to track down suspected trafficking syndicates. Above all, since globalization has influenced and aggravated human trafficking, just as other trans-border crimes, the necessity for closer cooperation and collaboration between Nigeria and other countries to nip the crime in the bud cannot be underestimated.

There is the need to wage war against poverty. The ability to successfully, reduce poverty, is the starting point of victory over human trafficking. The government should work seriously to alleviate the suffering of the people. Unless this is done, no war against human trafficking can be won. Parents and guardians should also be mindful of porous propositions by dubious tour operators seeking to encourage bogus overseas trips for their young daughters.

To end trafficking and break cycles of exploitation and suffering, survivors should be supported to heal from the trauma of trafficking, and to make a decent living in Nigeria. Effective rehabilitation and reintegration require a holistic package of support that addresses the multiple factors which contribute to the risk of trafficking and exploitation. But rehabilitation and reintegration efforts in Nigeria are plagued by a lack of individualized and comprehensive services, weak victim identification, and problems with funding, coordination, and evaluation.



According to the 2015 TIP Report, the Government of Nigeria does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. For instance, the Government has to implement formal procedures for the return and reintegration of Nigerian victims to ensure that victims are afforded adequate care upon their return to Nigeria; take proactive measures to investigate and prosecute government officials suspected of trafficking-related corruption and complicity in trafficking offenses; Take proactive measures to investigate and prosecute government officials suspected of trafficking-related corruption and complicity in trafficking offense. Much is also required in the area of counselling, rehabilitation and reintegration. Victims, most of who are traumatized, disoriented and haunted by their experience should first undergo counselling before rehabilitation and subsequently adequate reintegration into the society.

Nigerian criminal justice and Law Enforcement agencies such as Immigration, Police, Interpol and the intelligence services should live up to expectations in fighting this crime head on and not paying lip service to it. The menace of human trafficking is damaging, disastrous and devastating to the victims, the family and the society at large. In view of the pervasive and penetrative effects of human trafficking on Nigeria and Nigerians, there is need for a continuous synergy of efforts to curb the menace. The government, Law enforcement agencies, media, religious bodies, traditional rulers and the civil society organizations all are expected to play a pivotal role in the war against human trafficking.

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