

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN BENUE STATE: A MODERN DAY SLAVERY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the causes and effects of human trafficking in Benue State. A mixed-methods approach has been adopted for the study. The findings from this research show that human trafficking is a significant socio-economic challenge in Benue State, with many victims being lured into trafficking through fake promises of employment and education. The study has identified poverty, lack of proper education, and unemployment as major factors contributing to human trafficking in Benue State. The effects of human trafficking identified in the study include physical and emotional abuse, sexual exploitation, and forced labour. The study further recognizes human trafficking as a form of contemporary slavery with a range of socio-economic ramifications. The study concludes that with the associated effects and implications on the nation's economy and society, human trafficking has taken on complicated dimensions and grown elusive. Therefore, there is the need to build coordinated and well-articulated initiatives such as policy measures, anti-human trafficking campaign, and stringent penalties for those who engage in trafficking, among others. This can contribute significantly in fighting human trafficking phenomenon in Benue State particularly and Nigeria generally.

Keywords: *Traffic, Human Trafficking, Slavery, Modern day Slavery, and Benue State*

Introduction

Slavery and human trafficking have a very long and primordial history. There is enough proof to state that affluent individuals have employed slaves for physical satisfaction or manual labour since the beginning of time. Africans were once sent as slave labour to many nations throughout the world after being transported over the Atlantic Ocean. Although British colonists founded in the New World, they were also at first liable for and proponents of the slave trade in Africa. However, Britain later emerged as the country spearheading efforts to put an end to the slave trade in Africa. It is estimated that the global market for human trafficking, a modern-day form of slavery that involves the unlawful trade of individuals for financial gain or human

exploitation, is worth \$150 billion.¹ According to a study by Pathfinders Justice Initiative, the majority of this sum (\$99 billion) is generated by pansexual-sexual trafficking and exploitation, with an additional \$51 billion being generated by unintentional forced labour such as domestic labour, agricultural activities, and other economic achievements.² Additionally, according to current estimates released by the Global Slavery Index between January and July 2018, there are approximately 40.3 million victims of modern slavery worldwide, 71% of whom are young women or girls and 25% of whom are children under the age of 18. Likewise, several international organizations and Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) including the Walk Free Foundation, International Labour Organisations (ILO), and International Organisation of Migration (IOM), show that there are roughly 49 million victims of contemporary slavery worldwide or over 49.5 million people.³ It is important that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) 2020 comprehensive report on trafficking in persons also gives an estimation of the number of children in slavery at about 30% of worldwide victims, whereas 79% of persons trafficked for sexual exploitation which the more rampant practice of human trafficking are young women and girls.⁴ Also, 99% of the 4.8 million preys of commercial sexual exploitation in the previous years were mostly of women and girls, with one out of five being children, a claim by the International Labour Organization. Furthermore, Global Report on trafficking in persons Vienna provide comprehensive analysis of global human trafficking trends, including data on victims, traffickers, and trafficking flows. It highlights regional differences, emerging patterns and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on trafficking activities.⁵

Relatedly, NAPTIP further revealed that Nigerians who are victims of human trafficking are frequently mistreated and exploited both home and abroad.⁶ Most current publications on human trafficking in Nigeria by international organizations also revealed that domestic human trafficking accounts for the bulk of Nigerian victims of trafficking. Therefore, the NAPTIP figure for victims who were saved does not necessarily reflect the total number of victims of both domestic and international trafficking in Nigeria. It is evident that human trafficking in Benue state has an impact on people of all ages, genders, and geographic regions within the country. As a result, human trafficking, a modern form of slavery, involves coercion, deception and exploitation. Human trafficking is a growing criminal industry even though it is against both international and domestic laws. People who have been the victims of human trafficking may be coerced or compelled to labour in a variety of jobs, both covertly and overtly. Some of the examples

include working for web chauffeur services, on corners of streets, as kidnapping victims, or in private households, as well as in manufacturing facilities, factories, slums, and spas.⁷ The sectors of the economy most frequently associated with human trafficking are those related to agriculture, construction, apparel and textile manufacture, catering and restaurants, domestic labour, entertainment, and the sex business. Even though human trafficking affects everyone in society, the majority of victims come from vulnerable backgrounds. These weaknesses are a result of behaviours and policies that marginalize whole groups of people, leaving them especially vulnerable to victimization.

An increased number of people are trafficked from rural communities in Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Bayelsa, Ebonyi, Imo, Benue, Niger and Kwara States to cities such as Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna, Calabar and Port Harcourt. Trafficking to these regions is predominantly for exploitative domestic work, farm labour and prostitution, with incidents of human trafficking and forced labour particularly prevalent in Lagos. The same source also submits that international trafficked Nigerians come from all parts of Nigeria but some states tend to provide more trafficked persons than others. These states include Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ebonyi, Kano, Ogun, Oyo and Lagos.⁸

Benue State on the other hand has a growing record human trafficking despite several efforts and initiatives by the state government. The impact of criminal syndicates, the ongoing loss of young women and children to sexual and forced labour exploitation, and the need for coordinated and ongoing focus are all issues that must be addressed in order to combat trafficking and bring those responsible to justice. Government, foreign organizations, NGOs, and Civil Society Organisations will need to put up more effort, skills, and resources to better combat human trafficking in Benue State and its detrimental consequences on the entire Nigerian population at large. It is against this backdrop that the study examines the causes and effects of human trafficking in Benue State in order to suggest possible policy interventions.

Theoretical Discourse

In relation to human trafficking and human rights, both general systems theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory are often already present and applied when talking about interventions, even if not explicitly. Clawson and colleagues completed a needs assessment for trafficking victims and agencies that provide services to victims. In their assessment, they looked at the inputs of current efforts and services available via the throughput of victim care.⁹ The outputs, or the current state of victim care as

a result of the services available, were analyzed in relation to how they can feed back into informing future efforts and services available to victims. Since it has been several years since the analysis, a general systems theory approach could be taken again to look at current inputs, influenced by previous outputs and feedback loops, on victim care.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can be seen when evaluating risk factors for human trafficking and human rights violations. Poverty, a history of abuse and neglect, substance use issues, political instability, homelessness, and marginalized identities have been highlighted in their work as risk factors for an individual to become a human trafficking victim. Risk factors can be understood within the ecological systems model, which assists social workers in identifying areas for intervention and prevention for at-risk populations.¹⁰

Conflict Theory, Structural Functional and Maslow Theory

Conflict theory emerged in the late 19th century from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Conflict theory explores power structures and power disparities—that is, how power differentials affect social inequality.¹¹ Conflict theory serves as the opposite to functional theory, which will be explored later. Conflict theory operates on the premise that humans are self-interested and competitive by being forced into conflict over scarce resources and wealth. Within conflict theory, wealthier classes are able to maintain power over lower-income and ethnic minority groups by allowing oppressed groups to believe that the advancement of another oppressed group will be to their detriment; therefore oppressed groups assist in the oppression of each other in the hopes that they will be the ones to advance. From this perspective, social order exists through coercion of oppressed and less powerful groups by the ruling and more powerful classes. Similarly, social change occurs through a conflict, evoking human response in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. There is a lot of social work practice that evolves from addressing social injustice through conflict theory. Early social work efforts at eliminating oppression of immigrants, women, and children were based in conflict theory, and efforts continue today through development of empowerment strategies for nondominant groups. However, critics of conflict theory say that the theory does not account for social unity and shared values, stating the theory is too radical and therefore, there is the need to apply another theory, preferably structural-functional theory.

Structural-functional theory or functional theory states that every part of a society serves a function in maintaining the solidarity and stability of the whole.¹² Ideally, all the parts of a society maintain equilibrium and a state of

balance under perfect conditions. However, when problems arise, it is because a part of the social system has become dysfunctional; usually caused by some type of rapid change, which the other parts of the system are not able to adjust to and compensate for quickly enough. At this point, the society must decide if it will adjust by returning to its pre-conflict state or work to find a new equilibrium. Functional theory acts as the opposite of conflict theory because it operates on the premise that humans are inherently cooperative and caring, each playing their role in maintaining the harmony of the society. Functionalists believe that all problems regarding minority groups can be solved by small adjustments in the social system to return to equilibrium. Critics of functionalist theory, who often prefer conflict theory, argue that the focus on stability ignores the inequalities of class, gender, and race that are often the creators of conflict.

In relation to human trafficking and human rights conflict theory aims to offer a broad explanation for why and how social inequality, power imbalance, and oppression are able to occur. Sexism, racism, and classism are often contributors to human rights violations, as highlighted in the case of child brides, sex trafficking, organ trafficking, and other forms of victimization. Barner, Okech, and Camp illustrate how socio economic inequality not only between classes on a small scale, but globally between developed and underdeveloped nations fuels sex trafficking, violence, and political strife and civil war.¹³ From a similar perspective, embracing a functionalist view requires one to question how and why oppression are able to occur. It also requires one to examine the utility of human rights violations and their place in maintaining an equilibrium. For example, functionalists would argue in the past that gender roles existed because they played a functional role in systematically meeting the needs of society with men engaging in labour and wage-earning tasks while women were engaging in homemaking and nurturing tasks.¹⁴ Some would still argue this to be the case in modern times. In the case of human rights, in order to address these kinds of violations, it is important to identify the function the violation plays in maintaining a system within society, and then determining what changes need to be made to move to a new form of harmony absent of the violation. Human trafficking in the form of labour trafficking fulfills the need of cheap labour to create more profits; sex trafficking meets the demand for sex and provides money or other things of value to pimps; child soldiers play various roles in meeting the needs of militant groups during armed conflict; and organ trafficking supplies a limited resource to an ever-growing list of needy recipients. Human rights violations as a whole can always be examined from the perspective of the function they play in a larger picture.¹⁵ In order to

prevent human rights violations, however, it is important for social workers and other professionals to understand the need the violation fulfills and intervene at a point that prevents the need for the violation to occur.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the most basic theories of social work and informs much of the field's practice. Maslow's hierarchy is designed as a pyramid to showcase the importance of needs being met in order to reach optimal wellness.¹⁶ Psychological and safety needs make up the bottom two tiers, and operate as the components of basic needs. Belongingness and love, and esteem needs are the middle two tiers as well as the components for psychological needs. Then, finally, self-actualization tops the pyramid as the component for self-fulfillment needs. In order to reach self-actualization, the most basic of human physical and psychological needs must be met first. If basic needs are not met, like hunger and shelter, the body will focus all efforts on finding these things and the mind will not be able to focus on things of personal interest until basic needs are met. Critics of Maslow's hierarchy state the model is too simplistic, and fails to account for cultural norms and drives. Additionally, few things in life are linear, and the hierarchy implies a linear route to self-actualization.¹⁷

In terms of human-trafficking, Maslow's hierarchy of needs can help practitioners understand why victims are drawn to and controlled by traffickers. According to Maslow, risk factors for victims include homelessness, prior neglect and abuse, and poverty.¹⁸ A lack of housing, food, clothing, safety, and financial security cover most of the two rungs of basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy. Traffickers are able to offer these things to victims, which both draws victims to traffickers as well as makes it difficult to leave. Traffickers also offer intimate relationships and friendships, even if temporarily, meeting some aspects of psychological needs and further bonding victims to them—this is especially true in the case of sex trafficking of minors. In addressing the recovery and healing of human trafficking victims, service providers must work up the pyramid to be effective; first addressing basic needs like housing, clothing, food, and a sense of security and safety from their trafficker. Once basic needs have been met, psychological needs can be addressed through group settings, therapeutic interventions, trauma therapy, and a sense of accomplishment in healing. Then survivors, following Maslow's hierarchy, will be on track to reach self-actualization. It therefore focuses on the root causes of human trafficking and its socio-economic effects of human in Nigeria using Benue State as a study area. Benue State is selected because it is a known area for

sex trafficking in Nigeria. Benue State is among the 36 States in Nigeria, with population of about 6,141,300 people.¹⁹ The state has 23 Local Government Areas, and is located in the North-Central region of Nigeria.

Historical Background of Human Trafficking in Benue State

Causes of Human Trafficking in Benue State

The present financial state in the nation; the socioeconomic standing of the traffickers and their prey; impoverishment and joblessness; inexperience and lack of education; absence of an adequate organizational framework; victims' unrestrained sexual urges; victims' upbringing; and a lack of attention from the government and some other Agencies that are tasked with the responsibility of combating the problem are some of the major causes of human trafficking in Benue State and Nigeria at large. According to some findings:

....The causes of human trafficking appeared to be many, intertwined, and overlapping one another. But the report also emphasized how different levels of the causes of susceptibility, such as destitution, joblessness, low levels of literacy and schooling, substantial amounts of state fraud, violent conflict, lack of social security, subpar customs, social or religious abuse, a weakening of values, and few options for safe and legal migration, created different vulnerabilities to trafficking. Over half of those surveyed by Human Rights Watch for research on the experiences of victims who were deported to Nigeria dropped out of basic or secondary education for financial reasons; according to the study on the aggregate demand for sex and cheap labour. Although Benue is one of the poorest states in Nigeria when looking at the state of the economy, its residents do endure relative poverty.²⁰

The CLEEN Foundation and Pathfinders Justice Initiative did a similar study in 2018 and found that traffickers were more inclined to contact "the impoverished and most disadvantaged" as well as the ignorant and mentally fragile. These reports further declared as follows:

The main demographic that recruiters focus on for their victims is people who are financially vulnerable and concerned. Families that are unable to educate their children or provide the necessary social and economic welfare are the ones who will be targeted. One of the main informants said that "in recent times, many human traffickers appear to be very intelligent, and they are aware of how to play to the wits of the victims. They will try to persuade you if you don't have a strong enough will to resist their temptations with worldly goods. Despite this, poverty may cause parents to sell their

daughters to a prospective husband, and child marriage can result in the impoverishment of women through separation, divorce, or abandonment.²¹

The Role of Technology in Accelerating Human Trafficking in Benue State

Technology has played a significant and multifaceted role in human trafficking, both as a tool for facilitating exploitation and as a means for combating it. On one hand, the proliferation of digital platforms and communication tools has enabled traffickers to operate with greater efficiency, anonymity, and so on. The internet, particularly social media, dating apps, and online classifieds, have become a common avenue for traffickers to recruit victims. They often use fake profiles, deceptive job offers, or romantic relationships to lure vulnerable individuals, including minors, into trafficking situations. The dark web further exacerbates the issue by providing a hidden space for traffickers to advertise, sell, and exploit victims while evading law enforcement detection. Cryptocurrencies have also emerged as a preferred method for financial transactions in trafficking operations, as they offer a level of anonymity that traditional banking systems do not.²²

Moreover, technology has enabled traffickers to monitor and control victims more effectively. GPS tracking, spyware, and other surveillance tools are used to restrict victims' movements and maintain dominance over them. Traffickers also leverage digital communication platforms to coordinate logistics, such as transporting victims across borders or arranging illicit transactions, often using encrypted messaging Apps to avoid detection. The global nature of the internet allows traffickers to operate across jurisdictions, making it more challenging for Law Enforcement Agencies to track and prosecute them, as the case may be.

Effects of Human Trafficking in Nigeria

There are numerous effects of human trafficking. For the purpose of this study, they are grouped under the effects of human trafficking on; Nation Building; the country's image abroad; the rate of violence and crime, and finally child's development. According to the study, among all the negative effects of human trafficking particularly in Nigeria, the country's reputation overseas has suffered the most damage. In Benue State to be precise, it is a commonplace to see youths in their teens being trafficked to Italy, Spain, and to other locations every year. Majority of the victims have ended up into prostitution, menial jobs and other shady deals.²³ This did not portray a good image for the state and country as the case may be.

Another negative effect of human trafficking in Benue State as revealed in this study is the increase rate of school drop outs leading to retardation of their social development. To buttress this, UNICEF observes that poverty, conflicts, and trafficking constitute the factors promoting HIV/AIDS.²⁴ Young women and girls are trafficked for prostitution which makes them the most vulnerable groups open to HIV infection. Inadequately informed, seduced or forced to have unguarded sex, once infected with HIV/AIDS, they are frequently left starved of care or without support. Also, orphaned children due to AIDS are often vulnerable to trafficking owing to high level of poverty of their households and societies, and as a result of the stigmatization, rejection, or disregarding to which they are exposed by their immediate societies.²⁵

We cannot overstate how detrimental this social illness is to the development of the Nigeria and Benue State as well as the rate of crime and violence experienced. For instance, the percentage of those that strongly argue that human trafficking has significant effect on nation building stood at 35.10 percent.²⁶ This is fairly high to draw up useful conclusion on the debilitating effects of human trafficking. Also, there is a significant consideration that human trafficking increases the rate of violence and crimes in the society with the percentage of 34.73 percent as statistical data to support the notion.²⁷

Conclusion and Suggestions

Human tracking is a significant socio-economic challenge in Benue State, as seen in many parts of Nigeria. The State, which is known for its agricultural activities, faced challenges such as poverty, unemployment and lack of education particularly for the girl-child that made its population vulnerable to trafficking as observed in this study. Human traffickers often exploit these vulnerabilities, luring the victims with promises of employment, education, and a better life abroad, only to subject them to force labour and sexual exploitation. Based on the findings above, the study makes the following suggestions:

- i. Benue State should enact laws that specifically prohibit human trafficking, provide adequate penalties for traffickers and adequately monitor their enforcement.
- ii. The State government should also review existing laws and policies to ensure they are aligned with international standards and best practices.
- iii. Both the State government and Federal government should launch comprehensive Anti-Human trafficking awareness campaigns targeting communities, schools, and vulnerable populations to educate them

about the dangers of human trafficking and how to recognize and report suspicious activities.

- iv. Government and other stakeholders should create platforms that will ensure support services for trafficked victims, including shelters, counseling, healthcare, and vocational training, to facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.
- v. Additionally, the implementation of sustainable economic empowerment programmes aimed at providing viable alternatives to trafficking, such as skills training, entrepreneurship opportunities, and microfinance initiatives for women, and victims of human trafficking in Benue State should be considered.
- vi. The State government should also foster collaboration among Government Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and international partners to streamline efforts, share resources, and exchange best practices in combating human trafficking

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