

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Trafficking in women and children: A hidden health and social problem in Nigeria

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Trafficking in women and children recently emerged as a global issue. This study assessed the pattern of trafficking in women and children and factors influencing it. Quantitative and qualitative study designs were used. Women and children aged 15 - 49 and 10 - 14 years respectively constituted the study population. A multistage cluster sampling technique was used to select sample. Quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted. Among the interviewed women, 16.8% had experienced trafficking preceding the survey. The most frequent type of trafficking was commercial sex (46.7%) followed by child labour (34.5%). Educated and enlightened people (57.3%) appeared to be the main perpetrators of women and child trafficking followed by intimate/close associate (32.1%). Contributing factors for trafficking in women and children in this study are poverty (58.7%), parental discrimination favoring boys over girls (51.4%), lack of knowledge of human slavery and trafficking (33.6%) and family disintegration (21.5%) increase in school dropouts, lack of governments' monitoring of trade working environment and poor socio-economic conditions appeared to be significantly associated with trafficking in women and children ( $p < 0.05$ ). This study therefore suggests that human trafficking could be tackled by, enacting a comprehensive law that specifies severe punishment for traffickers, rehabilitate victim and increasing security at border posts.

**Key words:** Trafficking, women, children, problem, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country of origin, transit and destination for human trafficking and is subject to both national and international flows of human trafficking. Women and children make up the vast majority of the human trafficking chain. This is a result of push factors that are rooted in poverty, inequality and discrimination, resulting in survival strategies that expose the most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Pull factors include the lure of opportunity and huge economic differentials that make even relatively poor neighboring regions seem a likely source of livelihood; as well as the lucrative trade in adoption and organ transplants.

In Africa, over 50,000 victims are believed to be trafficked annually according to the U.S. Department of State, although the extent of trafficking is not well documented (Human Right report, 2001). Like elsewhere,

poverty and the low status of women are major contributing factors in Nigeria. In addition, wars and civil strife engulfing countries like Sudan and Rwanda, as well as the indifference of some governments make women and children vulnerable to trafficking (John and Karin, 1998). Trafficking in children for labor is a serious problem in Togo and Benin as well as Botswana, Zaire, Somalia, Ethiopia, Zambia, Nigeria, Algeria. Victims are trafficked to Nigeria, Gabon, Ghana and South Africa. Africans, especially women from Nigeria are trafficked to Western Europe and the Middle East (John and Karin, 1998).

The trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is a high-profit, low-risk trade for those who organize it, but it is detrimental to the millions of women and children exploited in slavery-like conditions in the global sex industry. This trade, which the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called an outrage and a worldwide plague (Annan, 2000), is conducted throughout the world with near impunity, in many cases carrying penalties far less severe than drug trafficking

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(Richard, 1999). According to United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (article 3 (a)), trafficking in human beings refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. Globalization and increasing structural disparity between North and South have led to an endless flow of people migrating from the "South" to the "North," in search of a better life, or to escape discrimination and oppression. As documented and undocumented migrant workers or as mail-order brides, these men and women are exposed to various forms of exploitation, both in the process of migration and in their destination country.

The most conspicuous form of this kind of exploitative migration is human trafficking. Often described as a "contemporary form of slavery," it is accompanied by serious human rights violations. The most common form of trafficking involves women and children who are trafficked to work in the sex industry. These victims are very often scarred physically and psychologically from their experiences. Numerous UN documents, including the declaration on the elimination of violence against women, indicate clearly that trafficking constitutes violence against women.

Nigerians are generally poor financially, with about two-thirds living in rural areas and earning less than \$1 per day. The income level amongst the population and level of education, especially amongst women is very low. As a result of poverty and a lack of income generating opportunities at home, more and more women, especially young women, are migrating in order to be able to provide for their families, both within their country and overseas. The trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is accompanied by potentially life long and/or life-threatening health consequences; it prevents victims from attaining the highest possible level of physical, mental and social well-being. Victims' health is affected by the trafficking process itself and also by sexual exploitation. Clandestine migration often requires sub-optimal means of transportation, putting the victims at risk for starvation, drowning, suffocation and exposure to the elements. Numerous reports of accidents and deaths have caused the International Organization for Migration to identify trafficking as the most dangerous form of migration (Gushulak and MacPherson, 2000). Other health risks in transit include exposure to violence and communicable diseases. Despite the lack of concrete data, the trafficking of women and children for sexual

exploitation all over the world has become a very visible phenomenon on the ground.

Trafficking in human beings is a global issue, but a lack of systematic research means that reliable data on the trafficking of human beings that would allow comparative analyses and the design of counter measures is scarce. There is a need to strengthen the criminal justice response to trafficking through legislative reform, awareness-raising and training, as well as through national and international cooperation. The support and protection of victims who give evidence is key to prosecuting the ringleaders behind the phenomenon.

For victims trafficked into the sex industry, the environment of sexual exploitation introduces further health risks and social problems. Little scientific investigation of the health and social problems of trafficking victims have been conducted, perhaps because the population is difficult to access, hence the justification for this study. Another justification for this study is that the conditions of sexual exploitation during trafficking are what constitute violations of the civil and human rights of so many trafficking victims. Regardless of how they are recruited and transported, most women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation are denied at some point the right to liberty, the right not to be held in slavery or involuntary servitude, the right to be free from cruel and inhumane treatment, the right to be free from violence and the right to health.

The study results will be used to develop a draft for a Nigerian government authority that will permit regional cooperation to prevent and eradicate the trafficking of persons in general and of women and children in particular.

The objective of this study is to assess the pattern of trafficking in Women and Children and factors influencing it. The study also looked into the social and health problems associated with trafficking.

## **THEORETICAL FRAME WORK**

Human trafficking is the result of various forms of discrimination based on gender, poverty, ethnicity, nationality and so on. In particular, the racial dimension of human trafficking can not be overlooked. Consideration must be given to the fact that a large portion of the victims/survivors of trafficking belong to discriminated minority groups and that racism in their destination countries often prevents them from seeking effective remedies for their exploitation and human rights violations (UN, 2003).

There is a rising trend in the international arena to strengthen measures to combat trafficking by means of preventing transnational organized crime; the aim seems to be to choke off the funds of terrorist organizations, as part of the "war against terrorism. This means that by cutting the funding net work, the trafficking activity will not

only dwindle but eventually seize. What are the measures put in place internationally? It follows that attempts are being made to prevent transnational organized crime from taking place by means of combating human trafficking. It is in this context that this study looks at the formulation of the "UN Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations convention against transnational organized crime" (Palermo Protocol), the main focus of which is the prosecution of traffickers rather than the protection of victims.

There are some national and international legal instruments in Nigeria which can be used to address certain aspects of human trafficking such as child labor and sexual offences. In 2003, Nigeria passed the child rights act which comprehensively deals with the issue of child trafficking. Moreover, Nigeria ratified the UN Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children in 2001 and passed a national law against trafficking in 2003 entitled "Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003". Nigeria is one of the few African countries to have passed such a law. However, many challenges remain. There is a continuing need for the further ratification and implementation of international legislation along with the use of national legal tools currently available to fight against trafficking in human beings. The persistence of harmful cultural practices, the growth of the reach and influence of organized crime and the persistent loss of young women and children to sexual and forced labor exploitation require concerted and constant attention. To better combat human trafficking in Nigeria and the attendant damaging effects throughout Nigerian society, will require the energy, talents and resources of government, international organizations, NGOs and civil society.

Over the past decade, trafficking in human beings has reached epidemic proportions. No country is immune. The search for work abroad has been fuelled by economic disparity, high unemployment and the disruption of traditional livelihoods. Traffickers face few risks and can earn huge profits by taking advantage of large numbers of potential immigrants.

Trafficking in human beings is a crime in which victims are moved from poor environments to more affluent ones, with the profits flowing in the opposite direction, a pattern often repeated at the domestic, regional and global levels. Trafficking in human beings is not confined to the sex industry. Children are trafficked from Nigeria to work in sweatshops as bonded labor in European and America countries. A recent CIA (Criminal Investigation Authority) report estimated that between 45,000 to 50,000 women and children are brought to the United States every year under false pretenses and are forced to work as prostitutes, abused laborers or servants.

In many cases, trafficking patterns are also related to conflict situations as combatants (or even peacekeepers) create a market for the services of victims and the effects

of conflict erode the capacity of law enforcement and other authorities to combat the problem. As a form of organized crime, trafficking can also threaten sustainable development and the rule of law, as illicit profits are used for corruption, other criminal activities and in some cases, terrorism. The assistance, support and rehabilitation of victims is also a significant problem, particularly in source countries where resources are often limited and in the case of trafficked children, where the need is most acute.

## METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative study designs were adopted in this study. Women and Children aged 15 - 49 and 10 - 14 years respectively constituted the study population. Eight out of sixteen Local Governments in Kwara State were clustered into four groups with two clusters per group. Kwara State was chosen to assess the situation and pattern of women and children trafficking as a result of increasing trend in this social vice in Nigeria. Eight out of sixteen local governments were chosen because of limited resources to cover the entire state. Closeness and similarity in sociodemographic characteristics were used in grouping 2 local governments into a cluster. For quantitative study, data on 462 Women and 100 Children respectively from rural and urban slums were analysed. A multistage cluster sampling technique was adopted to select the sample. The stages are as follows:

**Stage one:** All the LGAs were grouped into four zones.

**Stage two:** Simple random sampling technique using ballot method was used to select two LGAs from each zone.

**Stage three:** Proportional allocation of the calculated sample size from each LGA was carried out.

**Stage four:** Systematic sampling method was used to recruit respondents from the selected LGAs utilizing the sampling frame from the LGA. A proportionate sampling technique was adopted in determining the number of subjects selected from each cluster since cluster varies in population size depending on the LGAs. Details and objectives of the study were thoroughly explained to the participants and their consents properly obtained either by signatory/thumb printing of the consent protocol or verbal approval with a living witness. Eight hundred questionnaires were distributed, 200 in each cluster. Of each 200 questionnaires, 150 were administered to women and 50 to children in each cluster. Women and children were interviewed by four trained research assistants and most questionnaires were completed on the spot, while others had to be filled in and returned later. Qualitative data collection techniques like informal interview and focus group discussion were adopted and data were collected from a group of 100 children selected following convenience sampling technique. Six focus group discussions were conducted among the women and children. A focus group consists of 8 people, while a note taker recorded all responses from the participants following a designed FGD guideline. The FGD responses were put into descriptive form in study result. This study was conducted between May to October 2008.

## RESULTS

Socio demographic characteristics Women and Children aged 15 - 49 and 10 - 14 years respectively constituted the study population. Majority of women (64.7%) and

children (77.5%) were in the age range 20 - 24 and 15 - 19 years respectively. The mean age of trafficked women was 18.6 years (SD +0.54), whereas the mean age of traffic children was 14.2 years (SD + 0.73). More than three-quarters (87.4%) of trafficked children were girls. The marital status of the women ranged from, single (64.5%); married (17.3%), divorced (3.4%), widowed (4.7%). About two thirds (66.4%) of women had no formal education, while 22.3, 8.2 and 3.1% were holders of primary, secondary and tertiary institution certificates. The occupational status of the women included housewife (22.3%), civil servants (17.8%), farming (19.6%), petty trading (15.9%) and unemployed (24.4%). A significant percentage (68.5%) of women respondents earned less than one American Dollar per day. More than (57.9%) half of the children were occupational apprentices while 31.6 and 10.5 % were secondary and primary school dropouts respectively. More than four-fifth (83.7%) of children parents had no formal education while only 9.6 and 6.7% had secondary and primary educations respectively. Slightly more than half (51.8%) of the children lived with their biological parents while others lived with uncles (16.4%), cousin (12.1%), neighbours (8.4%) and friends (11.3%). About three-quarters (72.4%) of the children were from polygamous family setting.

### **Type and pattern of trafficking including contributing factors**

Majority of women respondents (61.7%) were not aware of trafficking in women and children as a growing problem in Nigeria. Among the interviewed women, 16.8% has experienced trafficking preceding the survey. Indeed, 8.4% percent cited specific instances of child trafficking inform of child labor and prostitution known to them.

The most frequent type of trafficking was commercial sex (46.7%) followed by child labor (34.5%). Other types of human trafficking revealed by this study include selling of women to brothel owners (4.3%), working in dirty, difficult and dangerous areas (7.6%), domestic servitude (4.8%) and free sexual services in exchange for ignoring the doctored documents produced by traffickers (2.1%). Educated and enlightened people (57.3%) appeared to be the main perpetrators of women and child trafficking followed by intimate/close associate (32.1%). A variety of reasons appeared as the contributing factors for trafficking in women and children and the common ones in this study are poverty (58.7%), lack of parental education (60.45), parental discrimination favoring boys over girls (51.4 %), cultural practices and traditional attitudes (35.6%), lack of knowledge of human slavery and trafficking (33.6%) and family disintegration (21.5%). Other contributing factors include family disharmony (32.6%), family indebt (7.3%), marital disharmony (15.8%) and domestic violence (14.2%).

Multivariate logistic regression analysis revealed that

increase of school dropouts, Lack of governments' monitoring of trade working environments, poor socio-economic conditions in terms of low asset index and low monthly income appeared to be significantly associated with trafficking in women and children ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### **Health and social problems of trafficking**

This study revealed a variety of health and social problems encountered by trafficked women and children. According to women respondents, the problems include lack of access to birth control (90.6%), constant rapes (80.8%), forced abortions and contraceptive use (79.5%), sexually transmitted infections (68.9%), repetitive stress injuries (75.4%), inadequate rest (66.4%), psychological abuse (90.5%), depression (83.6%) and emotional trauma (72.4%). The children reported inadequate sleep (67.4%), regular sickness episodes (54.8%), home sickness (68.2%), depression (71.8%), maltreatment (55.4%), neglect (67.5%), hawking (52.3%) and verbal abuse (78.2%) and sexual abuse (70.6%).

### **Focus group discussion (FGD)**

During the FGD, the victims expressed surprises in the way and manners they were tricked by their traffickers. One woman stated that her trafficker promised her good accommodation and well paid job, but to her utmost dismay, she was "asked to pass a night with a white man for a week pending the time her accommodation apartment will be ready. She confessed that she was raped twice and her trafficker threatened her with deportation if she fails to co-operate".

In one group discussion, an economist graduate, 22 mentioned that human trafficking include "forced and child prostitution, domestic servitude, illegal and bonded labor, servile marriage, false adoption, sex tourism and entertainment, pornography, organized begging, organ harvesting and other criminal activities".

In a group discussion that included children aged 12 - 14 years of age, one child mentioned that her mother was bribed and tricked to follow the trafficker to Lagos to work for only one year so as to save enough money to pay her family debts. Unfortunately, "the girl echoed that she was lured into prostitution and she started crying". Another 11 years old girl said "she was trafficked as a domestic servant (house help) because it is a cultural practice in her area for a girl of 10 years and above to travel out to work and earn goodliving/money for her parents. Surprisingly the trafficker used her as slaves and even abused her that her parents are illiterates and she too behaves like illiterates". Most of the traffickers expressed adequate knowledge of human trafficking but poor knowledge of its implications. In the area of sexual abuse, all victims of human trafficking felt that sexual abuse is a frequent occurrence. This was attributed to

their predicament and lack of help or who to help.

## DISCUSSION

Trafficking of humans involve moving men, women and children from one place to another and placing them in conditions of forced labor. However defined, what is generally accepted is that human trafficking, whether in women or as child labor, constitutes a fundamental violation of the human person. The practice includes forced prostitution, domestic servitude, unsafe agricultural labor, sweatshop labor, construction or restaurant work and various forms of modern-day slavery. This global violation of human rights occurs within countries and across borders, regions and continents. The boundary and scope of the traffickers is so wide that only God knows who is safe. This therefore implies that the problem under focus is enormous, more so for those who live in highly corrupt societies. While corruption is a common phenomenon in human practice, human trafficking as presently practiced is a recent addition to the dictionary of global woes.

Results of this study revealed that most of the trafficked women and children were in the age range of 20 - 24 and 15 - 19 years respectively. It should be noted that this is normally a highly productive age in terms of economic and social labor (like mothering) and similar to age range in all societies as similarly expressed by Ogbo (2003). Furthermore, it is also the common age with the traffickers. For example, in 2001, of the 51 detainees, 33 were young women between the ages of 18 and 20, while 17 others were men suspected of being behind the trafficking of the girls. (Odunuga, 2001). Majority of traffic children were girls. This is not unexpected in African society especially Nigeria and in particular, the study area, where there is preference for boys than girls who are usually sent out at early age as domestic servitude.

Poverty is a major contributing factor to trafficking in women and children as evidenced by this study as (68.5%) of women respondents earned less than one American Dollar per day. Exploiting the poverty and the low status of women in the developing world, middlemen are able to bring together the supply and demand for cheap labor and sex in ways that would have simply been unthinkable. Evidently, globalization has not only stimulated the movement of capital, goods and technology but also the movement of all categories of peoples from one end of the world to the other. This global development brought in its wake the loosening up of protective barriers and political boundaries which organized criminal gangs have capitalized on to perpetrate many heinous acts including human trafficking. There is little doubt that globalization has created inequalities and inequities resulting in the migration of the poor to the rich regions of the world. Hand in hand with this came the commercialization of humanity, which is modern day

slavery. In times past, slavery and slave trade existed in various forms: people became slaves as war captives; criminals were punished with enslavement and in some cases individuals in impoverished circumstances sold their relatives. However, in whatever form it took, it was quickly realized by most civilizations that the practice was the basest of crimes against humanity.

Abuse and hawking are prominent social problems reported by children in this study. This finding is corroborated by Ebigo (1989a), whose situation analysis of child abuse and neglect in Nigeria, found that child abandonment, sexual abuse, child neglect, vagrancy, kidnapping and hawking were the most reported forms of child abuse and neglect. Abuse and hawking as social problem of human trafficking is not un-expected in Nigeria because Children in urban areas are quickly caught up in the daily struggle for survival and material gain which has also been similarly expressed by (Ebigo, 1989b).

There are still traces of apathy and ignorance. For example, 22.3% percent of the respondents said that they would ignore the sight of a child being trafficked while 58.5% said that they would choose to discuss the problem with the parents or close relatives rather than to report it to the constituted authorities meant to handle such cases and 70.8% percent said that in Africa especially in Nigeria children are expected to assist their parents economically. The implications of these findings are in three folds. Firstly, these viewpoints may be a reflection of cultural traditions that problems should be settled within the family unit so as to protect the family against public shame and humiliation. Secondly, stigma and shame which accrued to them personally following such a report to a constituted authorities. Thirdly, the findings reflect the ineffectiveness of institutional responses to a growing social problem. The welfare agencies have not been able to assert themselves effectively as an extension of the family problem solving process, hence the reluctance of the public to turn to them for assistance.

During focus group discussion, all the women participants vowed not to report their ordeal to the police authority. Unfortunately, law enforcement agents in whom women should place their trust do not make things any easier. Sometimes, law enforcement officers become part of the syndicate. In Bosnia, Human Rights Watch found evidence of visa and immigration officials visiting brothels for free sexual services in exchange for ignoring the doctored documents produced by traffickers to facilitate transport through the country (Osita Ogbo, 2003). In 2001, a former police officer and 50 other Nigerians were arrested in Conakry by Guinean authorities. The report disclosed that 95 per cent of those being held were from Benin, Edo State and that the former police officer among them used to work for the Benin police command (Osita Ogbo, 2003). Whilst the link between procurers of victims within Nigeria and their external collaborators has not been properly established, it has been revealed that the

Nigerian Police, instead of counseling and enhancing the rehabilitation of the victims, further aggravate the predicament of these women by subjecting them to persecution and extortion while they are in holding cells. This development can only be counter-productive to the efforts at curbing this crime against humanity. This point to the fact that some collusion exists between the traffickers and certain government agencies as similarly expressed by Osita Ogbo, (2003).

As a result of lack of reliable and accessible statistical figures from the Ministries of Justice and social welfare, the police and the health institutions, it was decided to conduct a focus group discussion to complement the questionnaire survey among the trafficked women and children. Among other matters, they were asked if they were aware of human trafficking in their environments, whether they had actually seen or experienced trafficking and if so, what types. Bearing in mind the areas of women and child trafficking already ascertained by previous studies, the questionnaire was designed to probe attitudes, perceptions and behavior with regard to women and child trafficking. Responses from focus group discussion appeared to reflect proper understanding of negative effects of women and child trafficking, as 92.6% suggested capital punishment like life imprisonment on traffickers. This could also be reflection of life experience and information sharing with the victims.

Sexually transmitted infections as a health problem have been reported by 68.9% of women in this study. Not only are trafficking victims at risk of contracting STIs through their circumstances of sexual exploitation, they also are more likely to suffer complications from the infections. Untreated bacterial STIs, such as gonorrhea and chlamydia, can result in pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) if the bacteria invade internal reproductive organs. PID can be asymptomatic or accompanied by mild and nonspecific symptoms, making it difficult to diagnose even if a woman can get to a health care provider. Without treatment, PID can cause severe and permanent damage, including chronic pelvic pain, ectopic pregnancy and infertility. The risk of these complications increases with multiple episodes of PID (Conde-Glez, C., et al.). Trafficking victims may also be at an increased risk for cervical cancer, because they are exposed to the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) (U.S. Center for Disease Control Division of Sexually Transmitted Diseases. (2001).

Emotional trauma (72.4%) and rape (80.8%) are important health problems associated with trafficking being reported in this study. The consequences of psychological, physical and sexual violence associated with trafficking and sexual exploitation include emotional instability, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts and physical injuries such as bruises, broken bones, head wounds, stab wounds, mouth and teeth injuries and even death<sup>44</sup>.

## Conclusion

The findings from this study conclude that, women and child trafficking constitute a serious problem in Nigeria; Poverty, lack of parental education; family indebtedness; and Cultural practices and traditional attitudes are, to some extent, contributory factors. The practices of women and child trafficking place the victims at extreme risk of physical danger, psychological trauma, depression, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections including HIV. It is not that women and child trafficking has not been recognized as a hidden problem, it is, however, that the political will begin to tackle this problem in Nigeria has been that of non-commitment. The legal system is also weak and the institutions assigned the role of family and child welfare had failed to meet the challenges posed by this nationwide problem.

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