



AN EVALUATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, human trafficking is one of the most serious forms of human rights violations confronting the world, including Nigeria. It involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by force, deception, or vulnerability. Nigeria has been identified as a major source of human trafficking affecting women, men, and children across all the geopolitical zones. Due to harsh economic conditions, most persons are lured by human traffickers to seek better opportunities outside their location, within or outside the shores of Nigeria. In contrast, others voluntarily opt to be trafficked. There are persons trafficked for various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, child labour and organ harvesting. Human trafficking has continued to increase in Nigeria despite the enactment of several laws and the establishment of institutional mechanisms to combat this menace; human trafficking remains prevalent in Nigeria. This paper evaluates the nature and scope of human trafficking in Nigeria, examines the existing legal regimes, and identifies the challenges hindering the effective implementation of anti-trafficking laws. The paper argues that there is a need for a multifaceted approach to combating human trafficking by addressing gaps in implementation and enhancing global cooperation to curb this heinous crime. It concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening Nigeria's response to trafficking in persons through legal reforms and enhanced victim protection/support systems.

KEYWORDS: *Trafficking, Human Trafficking, Exploitation and Human Rights.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking has emerged as one of the most serious transnational crimes confronting the international community. It is a pervasive, complex global issue that involves the illegal trade of human beings for forced labour, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. Human trafficking has become a worldwide scourge comparable to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹ Trafficking is an age-old practice that dates back to the era of slavery, endangering the lives of the victims, their families and the community. It has been identified as one of the fastest-growing criminal industries

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¹ Y. Olomojobi, *Human Rights on Gender, Sex and the Law in Nigeria* (2nd Edn., Lagos: Princeton & Associate Publishing Co. 2021) 44.



in the world.²It can be described as a modern form of slavery.³ Because the victims are subjected to exploitation through coercion, deception and abuse of vulnerability. It is a lucrative business organised by a group of persons who, over the years, have colluded with government officials to perpetuate this grave violation of human rights and dignity.

Nigeria has gained international attention due to the prevalence of trafficking of persons across different states. Nigeria is well known globally as a source country for the trafficking of persons.⁴ Victims are trafficked both internally within Nigeria and externally to countries in Europe, the Middle East and North America.⁵ The increasing incidence of trafficking has raised serious concerns regarding the protection of human rights and the effectiveness of Nigeria's anti-trafficking legal framework. Nigeria is not alone in the battle against human trafficking; it has continued to be one of the major global challenges bedevilling every nation of the world,⁶ and poses a huge threat to peaceful human existence. Due to the wide range of purposes for which persons are trafficked, which include forced marriage, forced labour, sexual abuse, hawking, mining, begging and adoption. Human trafficking has become widespread across Nigeria's states, showing the depth of the problem. Certain states, such as Edo, Lagos and Delta, have been identified as major trafficking hubs due to migration pressure and economic factors. Trafficked persons may also be recruited into forced and compulsory engagement in the activities of militia groups,⁷ a situation that threatens national security,⁸ thereby undermining human rights and damaging Nigeria's reputation.

Although Nigeria has adopted various legal measures to combat trafficking, the persistence of the crime suggests that these measures have not been fully effective. This paper, therefore, evaluates the legal and institutional responses to human trafficking in Nigeria, examines the challenges undermining their effectiveness and the way forward.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

The paper clarifies some of the key concepts that underpin the discourse on human trafficking, namely: trafficking, human trafficking and human rights.

² P.O. Iwe, "Human Trafficking and Challenging Economy in Nigeria", *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies* (2021) (4) (1) 57- 67

³ E.B. Okeshola and A.A. Adebimpe, "Human Trafficking: A Modern Day Slavery in Nigeria (2018) (8) (2) *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 41

⁴ E.B. Onyekachi and A.J. Azubike, "The Menace of Human Trafficking Across the Sahel Region and the Efforts of Naptip (2021) (6) (1) *IDOSR Journal of Arts and Management* 15-29

⁵ M.O. Izzi and P.I. Gbobo, "Child Trafficking in Nigeria: A Violation of the Rights of Children to Life, Security and Dignity" Wigwe C.C. (ed) *Readings in Law and Contemporary Issues* (Owerri: Zubic Infinity Concepts 2020) 101 – 119

⁶ M.O. Izzi and A.E. Gabriel-Whyte, "Women and Girls as Endangered Species in Human Trafficking" in Chukwumaeze, U., NnadiI and Okorie K (eds) *Beyond Excellence: A Book of Readings in Honour of Justice Pascal Nnadi, Chief Judge, Imo State Judiciary 2014 – 2020* (Owerri: Zubic Infinity Concepts 2020) 208 – 301

⁷ K. Onu, An Appraisal of the E.U – ACP CotonouPartnership Agreement (2018) (9) (3), *The Gravitas Review of Business and Property Law*, 133 - 153

⁸ Homeland security (.gov) "what is human trafficking?" <http://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-is-human-trafficking/> accessed 4th January, 2026



2.1 Trafficking

Trafficking is a complex and multifaceted issue that involves the exploitation of individuals, particularly women and children, for various purposes either within or across Nigerian borders. It is deeply embedded in our global supply chain, which normally begins with an offer that the victim might not be able to resist, but unfortunately, they end up being trafficked for prostitution or forced labour upon arrival at their destination. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) approximates that over 120 million Nigerians are victims of trafficking.⁹

Trafficking may be defined as any activity leading to recruitment, transportation, harbouring or receipt of persons, using threat or use of force or a position of vulnerability.¹⁰ The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015,¹¹ defines trafficking as acts involved in the recruitment, transportation within or across Nigeria borders, purchases, sale, transfer, receipt or handwriting of a person involving the use of deception, coercion or debt bondage for the purpose of placing or holding the person, whether or not involuntary servitude (domestic, sexual or reproductive), enforced for bonded labour or in slavery – like conditions.¹²

The definition highlights three essential elements – the act of recruitment, the use of threat, force or abuse for exploitation. Where these elements exist, trafficking is established under the law. This means that human trafficking involves some form of exploitation. It occurs with or without the consent of the trafficked person.¹³ It is usually an unpleasant experience,¹⁴ but the traffickers continue to engage in it due to the huge amount of money involved. The victims, who are mostly girls and women, when trafficked externally, are usually forced into prostitution.¹⁵ Whilst those trafficked internally may be used for rituals, cheap labour, and prostitution.

There is no gainsaying that trafficking has a very severe impact on the victims, leaving them with long-lasting emotional and physical trauma and, in extreme situations, death. Trafficking affects mostly women due to their vulnerable nature. Trafficking is a very complex phenomenon caused by a diverse set of circumstances, such as a person's status, income disparities, gender inequalities,

⁹ Child trafficking in West: Policy Response (2002) *UNICEF Innocent in Sight*. <http://www.unicef-org/publication/325-child-trafficking-in-west-africa-policy-response>. Access 10 January, 2026.

¹⁰ United Nations Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and children, 2000

¹¹ The Trafficking in Person (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015; Repealed and Replace the earlier Act of 2003 (as amended in 2005). It is currently the legal regime governing human trafficking in Nigeria

¹² The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015; Section 64

¹³ L. Akor, "Trafficking of Women in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and the Way Forward (2011) (2) (89 – 110) *Corninus Journal of Sociological and Social Policy*, 90

¹⁴ G.U. Omen & others, "The Socio-Economic Effects of Human Trafficking in Nigeria (2018) (3) (8) *IJRDO Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 120

¹⁵ N. Okpalakunne, "The Evils of Human Trafficking, Child Labour in A.O. Njoku "Human Trafficking and its Effects on National Image: The Nigerian Case (2015) (3) (2)) *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Academic Research*, 24



discrimination, as well as political, social and economic disadvantages,¹⁶ and the victims are usually from any race, irrespective of their age.

2.2 Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the trade of humans for forced labour, sexual slavery or commercial sexual exploitation by traffickers or other persons. It involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, labelling or receipt of persons for exploitation. Human trafficking can be internal or external. Internal trafficking, which is also known as domestic trafficking, occurs within the territorial or national boundary of a state, while external trafficking involves the movement of people across national and international borders.¹⁷ Human trafficking is a transnational crime that involves the movement of victims across multiple countries.¹⁸ It has been identified as a global problem with Nigeria as a country of origin, transit and destination. It costs across most societies, with the victims being used for all sorts of illegal activities ranging from domestic purposes to sexual slavery.¹⁹

The United Nations defines trafficking as any activity leading to recruitment, transportation, harbouring or receipt of persons, using threat, or use of force or a position of vulnerability.²⁰ Due to the complex, cross-border nature of human trafficking, it requires a coordinated, multi-disciplinary national and international response. It can happen in any community to persons from any race, age, gender or nationality. Victims of trafficking are usually forced into prostitution, begging, crime, marriage, forced labour, domestic servitude or organ harvesting. The effect of human trafficking on victims can be severe and long-lasting, and many experience difficulties in accessing health care and other essential services.

Combating human trafficking requires a comprehensive approach by all stakeholders, considering the high level of involvement of a network of persons at the national and international levels. This will involve governments, non-governmental organisations, and civil society to prevent trafficking, protect victims and also prosecute traffickers.

2.3 Human Rights

A right may be said to be that which a person is entitled to have, to do or to receive from others and which is enforceable by law. They are the essential components of human life that enable individuals to realise their full potential in a conducive environment regulated by law. Rights are

¹⁶ J. Ezeilo, *Women, Law and Human Rights. Global and National Perspectives* (Enugu: Acena Publishers, 2011) 398

¹⁷ J. Dyikuka and O. Agboneni "A Critique on the Legal Framework for Combating Human Trafficking in Nigeria" (2023) (11) (1) *Afe Babalola University Law Journal*, 97-118.

¹⁸ N.S. Okogbule, "Combating the "New Salary" in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Legal and Policy Responses to Human Trafficking" (2019) *Journal of African Law*, 59.

¹⁹ E. Madunagu, *Trafficking in Girls: Report of a Thesis in Akwa Ibom & Cross River State of Nigeria* (Calabar: Clearline Publications 2002) 85.

²⁰ United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, 2000, art 3(a)



simply moral and legal claims and or entitlements.²¹ Laski refers to rights as social concepts deeply linked with social life.²² The term human rights has suffered a great definitional problem, perhaps due to the fact that human rights as a concept arises from the very nature of humans being born with some inalienable rights. In Singh's opinion, the realisation of human rights is the first and final goal and purpose of the state.²³ Human rights are claims of individuals or groups, some of which are already contained in a nation's body of laws, whilst others are yet to be actualised.²⁴ Henkin, on the other hand, describes human rights as those liberties, immunities and benefits which, by accepted contemporary values, all human beings should be able to claim "as of right" of the society in which they live.²⁵ Human rights may therefore be defined as those rights that empower both the weak and vulnerable, protecting them from abuse of basic rights which are accrued to every individual from birth unto death, including victims of human trafficking. As a matter of justice, others are bound to respect, and governments are bound not only to respect but, to the extent possible, also to protect.²⁶ The implication of this is that, except by due process of law, no citizen, including victims of human trafficking, can be deprived of these rights.

3.0 Legislative Intervention in Combating Human Trafficking in Nigeria

Nigeria has several key interventions against trafficking, primarily through dedicated national, regional and international laws. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

(i) The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as the grund norm of the country, has a binding force on every authority and person in Nigeria.²⁷ The Constitution enshrines fundamental human rights of all citizens, which indicates the position taken by Nigeria in its fight against human trafficking.²⁸ It is important to consider some of the provisions of the Constitution that prohibit human trafficking, thereby making it a clear violation of the fundamental rights of citizens. In Chapter IV of the Constitution, where the fundamental rights of citizens are clearly provided, a careful examination of these rights clearly indicates that human trafficking is a breach of some of

²¹ I. Shivji, *Concept of Human Rights in Africa* (Dakar: Cordestia Book Series, 1989) 20

²² H. Laski "A Classic Representation of the Theory of Rights" (1992) *Journal of Human Rights* 20

²³ N. Singh "Human Rights: Various Meaning" in Biswal T. (ed) *Human Rights, Gender and Environment* (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015), 43

²⁴ E. Osita *Human Rights in Africa, Selected Problems* (Lagos: Macmillan 1984) 5.

²⁵ L. Henkin, Human Rights in Bernhard (ed) *Encyclopaedia of International Law* 1985 265

²⁶ B. George "Natural Law" (2008) (31) (1) *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 56

²⁷ CFRN 1999 (as amended), s1.

²⁸ *Ibid*, ss 33 – 45.



these rights, including the right to life.²⁹ right to human dignity,³⁰ right to freedom of movement,³¹ the right to personal liberty and discrimination.³²

Chapter II of the Constitution contains the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy, which make reference to the maintenance of human rights and the protection against exploitation; this human trafficking clearly violates. Although section 34 of the Constitution guarantees the right to human dignity. The section prohibits slavery, inhumane and degrading treatment, as well as forced labour, nor be held in servitude nor forced for compulsory labour.³³ By virtue of these provisions, although human trafficking was not mentioned specifically, it is obvious that all the elements of human trafficking are prohibited expressly. Failure to include the term human trafficking in the constitution has affected the legal backing that the nation's grundnorm is expected to give to such a global menace.

(ii) Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015

This Act repealed and replaced the earlier act of 2003 (as amended in 2005 and enacted by the National Assembly on the 26th March 2015. It is currently the legal regime governing human trafficking in Nigeria, supported institutionally by the establishment of the National Agency for combating human trafficking (NAPTIP).³⁴ It criminalises all forms of human trafficking. It was enacted to strengthen the 2003 law, enforce the investigation and prosecution of human traffickers, increase penalties and improve the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts. It also seeks to protect vulnerable people, prosecuting offenders and working in partnership with other agencies. The Act provides trafficked persons with access to adequate health services and protection against discriminatory treatment.

The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is Nigeria's focal agency for combating human trafficking, empowered to prosecute offenders under the Act.³⁵ It is responsible for law enforcement, as well as providing protection and counselling for victims. The Act serves as implementing legislation for Nigeria's International obligation under the Trafficking in Persons Protocol Supplementing the Transnational Organised Crime Convention. The Act also empower NAPTIP to establish a Trafficking Trust Fund, which holds assets forfeited by traffickers. One of the strengths of the Act is that it criminalises all forms of trafficking, including recruitment, transportation, harbouring, and exploitation of persons. The Act also provides severe penalties, including imprisonment and fines, for individuals convicted of trafficking offences. This reflects Nigeria's commitment to combating modern slavery and protecting vulnerable persons.

²⁹ CFRN 1999 (as amended), s 33

³⁰ *Ibid*, s 34.

³¹ *Ibid*, s35.

³² *Ibid*, s 42.

³³ *Ibid*, s 34 (1) (c).

³⁴ TIPLEA, 2015, s13.

³⁵ TIPLEA, 2015, s 4.



Another major strength of the Act is the establishment and empowerment of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). The agency is responsible for investigation, prosecution, victim rescue, and rehabilitation. However, despite these strengths, the Act has several limitations. First, enforcement remains weak due to institutional constraints and limited funding for enforcement agencies. Secondly, prosecution of traffickers is often slow due to judicial delays and inadequate investigative capacity. Thirdly, victim protection mechanisms under the Act require further strengthening, particularly with regard to long-term rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

Consequently, while the Act provides a strong legal framework, its effectiveness largely depends on proper enforcement and institutional capacity.

(iii) Nigeria Criminal Code Act, 2010

The Criminal Code prescribes offences against personal liberty or slavery and trafficking for prostitution.³⁶ The criminal code addresses offences related to human trafficking, although it does not define trafficking or state what constitutes human trafficking.³⁷ The Criminal Code imposes an imprisonment of 2 years.³⁸ on any individual who has legal custody or care of a girl under 13 years, induces or persuades the seduction, unlawful engaging in sexual intercourse or prostitution.

(iv) Penal Code

The Penal Code, like the Criminal Code, criminalises human trafficking in Nigeria.³⁹ But provides stricter punishment for offenders. The code creates the elements of human trafficking, which are sex trafficking, forced labour and slavery. The Penal Code imposes a fine and a prison term of up to 10 years on any individual who persuades any girl under 18 years to go from place or do any act with the intent that such a girl will be or is likely to be forced or seduced to illicit sexual intercourse with another person.

(v) Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015

The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) criminalises violence such as forced prostitution, harmful widowhood practices and other harmful traditional practices. Some of these harmful traditional practices, which include oath-taking at shrines, can be directly linked to human traffickers who, for the purposes of ensuring the loyalty of their victims, engage the services of native doctors to take them through some form of rituals. The Act, in section 15, criminalises such harmful practices that lead to exploitation. The major drawback is that it applies mainly in the Federal Capital Territory, though some states are now domesticating it.

³⁶ S.A. Joshua, “Protecting the Nigeria Child Against Child Trafficking: Issues, Challenges and Prospects” (2022) (2) (5) *International Journal of Criminal, Common and Statutory Law*, Pp. 28 – 44.

³⁷ CCA, ss 223, 224, 365 and 369.

³⁸ CCA, s 222 (A).

³⁹ PC, ss 275, 278, 279 and 280.



(vi) The Child Rights Act, 2003

This Act domesticated the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴⁰ It provides for the rights and responsibilities of a child in Nigeria and constitutes a system of childcare, supervision, justice administration and other things relating to a child.⁴¹ This act criminalises child trafficking, exploitation, and forced labour.⁴² and outlaws child exploitative labour.⁴³ In *AG of the Federation v Anthony Okon*.⁴⁴ The accused recruited 7 children for street begging and forced labour. He pleaded guilty to the charge and was convicted with a sentence of 2 years' imprisonment. It is argued that, considering the grave nature of child trafficking, imprisonment is not proportionate to the crime. The Act deals comprehensively with child trafficking and prohibits any form of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, with a punishment of 14 years imprisonment for offenders.⁴⁵ The problem with this Act is that the fines and punishments are not strict enough to deter traffickers; there is a need for upward reviews to deter traffickers.

3.1 Regional Legal Framework

(i) African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1986

The African Charter creates duties and responsibilities for beneficiaries. The Charter sets out to eliminate and discourage discrimination as well as violence against women and recognises the civil and political rights of its citizens. Article 2 of the charter states that every person has a right to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the charter. The charter states that every individual shall have a right to dignity inherent in a human being and protection from all forms of exploitation and degradation, particularly slavery, slave trade, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The charter shares some features with other international treaties that prohibit human trafficking. Nigeria is also bound by regional human rights instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which protects human dignity and prohibits slavery and forced labour.

(ii) The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa 2003.

This protocol, also known as the Maputo protocol, provides that states parties shall take appropriate and effective measures to prevent and condemn trafficking in women, prosecute the perpetrators and protect women who are at risk.⁴⁶ It also prohibits and condemns all forms of harmful practices that negatively affect the human rights of women and are contrary to recognised international standards.⁴⁷ The protocol also enjoins state parties to take necessary legislative and other measures

⁴⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

⁴¹ CRA, ss 26-32.

⁴² CRA, s 30.

⁴³ CRA, s 27.

⁴⁴ Unreported Charge No. 0/26c/2005.

⁴⁵ CRA, s 32.

⁴⁶ Maputo Protocol Art 4 (2) (g)

⁴⁷ *Ibid* art. 5.



to eliminate such practices. By virtue of these provisions, the protocol prohibits all forms of traditional harmful practices which traffickers usually subject victims to before being trafficked.

3.2 International Legal Framework

There is no gainsaying that the international interventions have helped to shape the narrative of human trafficking by identifying it as one of the forms of human rights violations and proffering possible measures through legislative interventions and advocacy to curb the menace; some of these international conventions are examined under the segment of the paper.

(i) The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 1948

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights,⁴⁸ is the foundation document outlining fundamental human rights and freedoms. It also addresses the issue of human trafficking. In Article 3, it establishes the right to life, liberty and security of persons, which relates to victims of human trafficking who are often subjected to forced labour, exploitation and violence. The Declaration prohibits slavery and servitude,⁴⁹ which victims of human trafficking are usually subjected to. Although Article 5 expressly prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, traffickers subject the victims to all these. Victims of human trafficking are also denied their right of freedom of movement as contained in Article 13(1); they are usually confined or coerced into moving in clear violation of this provision. Article 23(1) guarantees the right to work and free choice of employers; traffickers act in contravention of this provision by subjecting victims to forced labour and exploitation. Most traffickers can escape due to the weak enforcement mechanism of the law.

(ii) United Nations Convention against Transnational Crimes, 2001

This convention represents a major step in the fight against transnational crimes. It is essentially an instrument of international cooperation to effectively combat organised transnational crime. It makes it difficult for offenders and criminal groups to take advantage of gaps in national laws, jurisdictional problems or lack of accurate information about the full scope of their activities.⁵⁰ to continue to perpetuate transnational crimes like human trafficking. The convention seeks to prevent organised criminal activities or the concealment of evidence or profits from taking place by promoting measures to curb them. It sets out a range of measures to be adopted by state parties to enhance effective law enforcement, improve information flow and enhance coordination between relevant authorities.⁵¹

The Palermo Protocol supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and establishes a global framework for preventing and combating trafficking in

⁴⁸ Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948

⁴⁹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, art. 4.

⁵⁰ United Nations Convention Against Transnational Crimes, 2001, art 1 and 3 (a-d)

⁵¹ *Ibid*, art. 23 (a) and (b).



persons. The Protocol is built on three major pillars: prevention of trafficking, protection of victims, and prosecution of offenders. Nigeria's anti-trafficking legislation reflects many of the principles contained in the Palermo Protocol. For example, the Trafficking in Persons Act adopts the same definition of trafficking and provides for victim protection and offender punishment. Despite these commitments, challenges remain in the full implementation of these international obligations, particularly in areas relating to cross-border cooperation and victim protection.

(iii) United Nations Slavery Convention, 1927

This convention⁵² entered into force on the 7th of July 1955. Article 1 defined slavery as the status or condition of a person over whom any or all the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised. Its description of slavery, which includes all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with the intent to reduce him to slavery or the acquisition of a slave with a view to sell or exchange and every act of trade or transport in slaves, contains most of the components that human traffickers engage in whilst moving their victims to their destinations.

(iv) Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour, 1930 (No. 29)

This is a core international treaty that requires members to suppress all forms of forced or compulsory labour.⁵³ Its objective and purpose are to suppress the use of forced labour in all sections. The convention, at that time, made provision for a transitional period because it had not been outlawed at that time. However, since 1998, the committee of experts has held that this transitional period can no longer be invoked to justify the forced labour convention. The committee observed that the transitional period had long expired; forced labour was thereafter criminalised.⁵⁴ By virtue of this convention,⁵⁵ forced labour is a punishable offence with members enjoined to ensure strict adherence to the enforcement of this obligation. Unfortunately, forced labour still exists in Nigeria as human traffickers continue to engage their victims in forced labour despite its prohibition.

(v) The Convention against Torture and Other Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984.

This convention provides a critical framework for addressing human trafficking by prohibiting torture,⁵⁶ and ill-treatment, ensuring accountability, prosecution and protecting victims and witnesses. The convention obliges states⁵⁷ to prevent torture in any territory under their jurisdiction, thereby applying to trafficking victims exploited within or across borders. Member

⁵² This convention was amended by the Protocol done at the United Nations headquarters in New York on 7th December, 1953, the amended convention came into force on 7th July, 1955, the date on which the amendments, set forth in the annex to the protocol of 7 December, 1953 entered into force in accordance with Article III of the protocol

⁵³ Forced and Compulsory Convention, 1930, art. 1 (1).

⁵⁴ Convention Concerning Forced and Compulsory Labour, 1930, art. 25.

⁵⁵ It entered into force on June 26, 1987.

⁵⁶ convention against torture and other inhuman, art. 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*



states are also obliged to take effective legislative, administrative and judicial measures to prevent acts of torture in their jurisdictions.

4.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

The phenomenon of trafficking in Nigeria can be traced to historical practices such as slavery and forced labour. However, contemporary trafficking differs in that it is organised through criminal networks operating across national borders. In the 1980s and 1990s, due to economic decline and the structural adjustment policies, many young Nigerians were forced to seek better opportunities outside Nigeria, hoping to escape poverty, but ended up trapped in forced labour or prostitution. Traffickers exploited this situation by promising victims' lucrative employment opportunities abroad. The situation became more pronounced in Edo State, where Edo women became the major source of trafficked women to Europe, precisely Italy.⁵⁸ International pressure and growing awareness of the problem eventually led to the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks aimed at combating trafficking.

Before the passage of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act, to curb the menace of human trafficking, Nigeria was in denial and did not acknowledge human trafficking as a problem of national concern. The agitation by non-governmental organisations and human rights activists forced the Nigerian government to pay attention to the problem of trafficking of women to Europe, which was fast gaining notoriety across the globe. Recently, Nigeria, like most countries of the world, has started tackling the problem of human trafficking.⁵⁹ There was no specific legislation prohibiting human trafficking; this gap enabled the illegal trade to grow into a very lucrative business and flourish for a long time.

5.0 GENDER DIMENSION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

Human trafficking has a significant gender dimension in Nigeria. Women and girls constitute the majority of victims, particularly of sexual exploitation. Gender inequality in Nigerian society limits economic opportunities for women. Many women seek employment opportunities abroad, making them vulnerable to traffickers. Also, socio-cultural factors often place women in economically disadvantaged positions, increasing their susceptibility to exploitation. This is due to the high demand in destination countries. The trafficking networks target women for commercial sexual exploitation and domestic work. In *Attorney-General of the Federation v Mrs Serah Okoya*⁶⁰ The accused, a female, was charged with trafficking 6 girls aged between 19 and 23 from Uromi to Colonial for Prostitution.

⁵⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2022).

⁵⁹ Apart from the national legislation which created the National Agency for the prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, other International Instruments to curb human trafficking include International Labour Organization, Forced Labour Convention, 1960, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979, United Nations Universal Declaration of Transnational Organized Crime, 2003

⁶⁰ Suit No. B/15c/2004 (Unreported)



Addressing the gender dimensions of trafficking, therefore, requires empowerment of women through education and employment opportunities. Stronger legal protection against gender-based violence targeted awareness campaigns for women and girls. A gender sensitive approach is essential for effectively combating trafficking in Nigeria.

Human trafficking remains a serious human rights challenge in Nigeria despite the existence of legal and institutional frameworks designed to combat the crime. The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015 represents a significant step toward addressing the problem. However, enforcement challenges, institutional weaknesses, and socio-economic factors continue to facilitate trafficking networks. Nigeria's commitment to international anti-trafficking instruments demonstrates a willingness to address the problem at both national and global levels. Nevertheless, more effective implementation of these legal frameworks is required. Ultimately, combating human trafficking in Nigeria requires a multi-dimensional approach involving legal reform, institutional strengthening, socio-economic development, and international cooperation.

6.0 FORMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

1. Sexual Exploitation

Sex trafficking is the most common form of trafficking involving Nigerian women and girls. Victims are transported from Nigeria to other regions where they are forced into prostitution. Traffickers often subject victims to ritual oaths and psychological control to prevent them from escaping or reporting their traffickers.

2. Forced Labour

Victims are trafficked for forced labour in sectors such as agriculture, domestic servitude, mining, construction and street vending. Children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in this form. Forced labour refers to a situation where individuals are coerced, deceived or manipulated into performing work against their will, often under the threat of punishment, harm or other forms of exploitation. It may be perpetuated by state or non-state actors, including employers, traffickers or other individuals. Traffickers can commit this crime in any sector or setting, whether legal or illicit, including but not limited to factories, agricultural fields, restaurants, hotels, massage parlours, rental stores, mines, private homes or drug trafficking operations.

3. Child Trafficking



Child Trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, harbouring and receipt of a child for slavery, forced labour and exploitation.⁶¹ It refers to the situation where children are exploited and forced into various forms of labour, domestic servitude, sex-work, child begging and other activities against their will in hazardous conditions without pay or proper care. Child trafficking can include the use of physical or emotional abuse, threats and manipulation to control and exploit children. Once a child is moved or controlled for exploitation, the offence is committed. Child trafficking, which occurs both internally and across borders, is still prevalent in present-day Nigeria. It dates back to the 1980s, following the economic hardship caused by the structural adjustment programme (SAP) imposed by the government.

4. Sex Trafficking

Under the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition), Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015, trafficking is not necessarily defined in one single phrase, but it clearly covers a broader range of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. It refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person by means of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or inducement for sexual exploitation.⁶² Sexual exploitation includes prostitution, pornography, sexual slavery and forced sexual services. Where the victim is under 18 years, once there is evidence of recruitment/transportation and sexual exploitation, this automatically amounts to sex trafficking, and there will be no need to prove force, coercion or deception.

Sex trafficking has been described as an action or practice of unlawfully coercing others into performing sex work or providing sex services. It is a form of human trafficking primarily for sexual exploitation. The consent of the victim is irrelevant where there are elements of deception or coercion. It has continued to thrive due to the financial benefits for the traffickers. It can occur without the victims crossing borders, but in most cases, there is forced relocation. It involves the violations of the rights of the victims, which contravenes the provisions of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) and other regional and international legislations.

5. Organ Trafficking

This illicit trade involves the removal of organs from living and deceased persons without their consent or compensation and their subsequent sale on the black market. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), organ trafficking is a significant global health concern, with thousands of organs trafficked annually.⁶³ It involves vulnerable individuals who are exploited for organ harvesting. The most commonly trafficked organs include: kidney, liver and lungs, which are in high demand due to the shortage of available organs for transplantation. To buttress this assertion is the recent conviction of a prominent Nigerian politician and his wife in the United Kingdom for

⁶¹ United Nations Human Rights Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children 2000, art 3(c).

⁶² United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Women and Children, 2000, art.3.

⁶³ World Health Organization "Human Organ and Tissue Trafficking (United Nations Organization, 2019).



organ trafficking.⁶⁴ The victim, who was a poor street trader in Nigeria, travelled to London to harvest his kidney for transplant for their sick daughter. In return, he was to be rewarded with money and an opportunity to reside in the United Kingdom. The young man, for fear of being returned to Nigeria, reported to the police. This case was the first under modern slavery laws in the United Kingdom, where trafficking in persons to harvest their organs has been classified as a form of slavery, as it treats human being and their body parts as commodities. Harvesting of organs also occurs in Nigeria, but due to weak enforcement and implementation of anti-trafficking laws, it has continued unhindered.

7.0 CAUSES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Several underlying factors have contributed to the persistence of human trafficking in Nigeria. They include, but are not limited to, some of the following: poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, armed conflict, cultural practices, weak law enforcement and globalisation. Poverty remains one of the primary drivers of trafficking. Many victims, due to economic hardship, are deceived with promises of better living conditions and possible employment outside their current location, with a desire to improve their financial position, and fall prey to traffickers. Traffickers exploit their vulnerability by offering false promises of lucrative jobs or education.⁶⁵ This is clearly illustrated in *A.G of Federation v Ese Osagie*,⁶⁶ where the accused was charged with selling and transferring one Faith Ughulu as a slave. He moved her under the pretence of giving her a job from Benin to Lagos, where she was trafficked to Morocco.

Closely linked to poverty is unemployment. It plays a significant role in human trafficking in Nigeria. The limited job opportunities available to most youths in Nigeria have made them seek greener pastures elsewhere. However, in a bid to achieve this, they become targets of traffickers who offer them possible employment with mouth-watering offers, which eventually turn out to be false when they finally get to their destinations.

Illiteracy to a great extent limits awareness about the dangers of trafficking and irregular migration. Most uneducated persons are unable to discern when the so-called employment process or educational opportunity is too good to be true. Considering the high cost of education in Nigeria, some individuals fall into the hands of traffickers who offer them scholarships to study abroad or better job employment. Education is a powerful tool against trafficking as it enables the individual to make enquiries when such proposals are thrown at them, thereby reducing the possibility of being trafficked.

⁶⁴ Nigeria: Kidney – Plot Politician, Ike Ekweremadu: Human Trafficking. Sear<<https://human trafficking searc.org>. accessed 10th January, 2026.

⁶⁵ K. Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (California: University of California Press, 2012), 10.

⁶⁶ (Unreported) Charge No B/17c/2005.



Certain cultural practices, such as sending children to live with relatives or acquaintances for better opportunities, can also expose them to trafficking. Although Nigeria has made progress in enacting anti-trafficking laws, enforcement remains weak. Corruption and inadequate enforcement allow traffickers to operate with relative impunity. These factors have continued to fuel trafficking in Nigeria.⁶⁷

8.0 EFFECTS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking leaves long-lasting emotional and physical impact on its victims as a result of the inhumane working conditions and severe physical abuse they had to endure during the period they were exploited. Many end up with serious injuries, chronic disease and sexually transmitted infections.⁶⁸ Many victims suffer from a range of mental health issues, which can lead to clinical depression and severe anxiety.

The overwhelming stress and trauma may also lead victims to consider suicide as a way of coping with their emotional pain. Most victims are often isolated from their families and support systems during the period they are trafficked. In some cases, the traffickers confiscate their identification documents, forcing them to live in constant fear and dependency. Over time, this erodes their sense of self-worth and autonomy.

9.0 CHALLENGES OF FIGHTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

Despite the existence of robust legal frameworks, Nigeria faces significant legal challenges in combating human trafficking. These challenges impede the effective prosecution of traffickers and limit the protection of victims. Human trafficking is a transnational crime, which makes it difficult to prosecute traffickers who operate across multiple countries⁶⁹ due to jurisdictional lapses, making their arrest or prosecution very difficult. Although human trafficking is recognised as a global issue, there is a lack of synergy between countries in terms of intelligence sharing, conduct of joint operations and prosecuting traffickers. Traffickers exploit gaps in cross-border enforcement by moving victims to evade detection.⁷⁰

10.0 JUDICIAL INTERVENTION TO CURB HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA.

The judiciary is the hope of the common man. The court of law remains one of the mechanisms for addressing the menace of human trafficking. It is imperative to examine some historic judgments

⁶⁷ D. Manbe “Trafficking of Women and Children in Nigeria: A Critical Approach (2016) 5(3) *American International Journal of Social Science* <http://humantraffickingsearc.or/wp-content/updates/2017/06/4> Accessed 20 September, 2025.

⁶⁸ D.R. Hodge and C.A. Leitz, “Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective” in *Social Work and Human Trafficking: A Handbook for Practice*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3 – 12

⁶⁹ A. Bjerkan, The Role of Law in Fighting Human Trafficking: Challenges and Opportunities (2018) (4) (1) *Journal of Human Trafficking* 1 – 20.

⁷⁰ A.T. Gallapher, *The International Law of Human Trafficking*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18.



in a bid to curb the incidences of human trafficking in Nigeria.

In Federal Republic of Nigeria v Jabr Sleiman Iskandar⁷¹ A Federal High Court in Jos, presided over by His Lordship, Honourable D.V. Agishi, convicted a Lebanese human trafficker, Jabr Iskandar Kfour Sleiman, who sexually exploited numerous girls in Jos. The ground-breaking judgment slammed a 12 and 17-month imprisonment without the option of a fine on the 61-year-old convict and also ordered the Honourable Minister of Interior to deport him because his conduct was contrary to the peace and order and corporate governance of the Country.

Similarly, in ***Federal Republic of Nigeria v Favour Anware Okwuede***,⁷² The accused, sometime in 2006, deceived the 19-year-old victim into believing that she would assist her with travel documents to Italy for a fashion design business. Before the journey, the victim was taken to a herbalist, where a certain ritual was performed on her. After they left Lagos, the accused took the victim to the Niger Republic and forced her into prostitution in a brothel she had rented. The accused was convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison for the offence of procurement for prostitution and deceitful inducement.

It is trite to mention that the prosecuting agency is the NAPTIP, and most of the time, it performs its functions in partnership with foreign authorities through mutual legal assistance. For instance, in the case of ***Federal Republic of Nigeria vs Patricia Ekhoe Igbinovia***⁷³ (AKA Mama Bobby, AKA Audu Mariam Olayemi), The accused is a notorious human trafficker who forces young Nigerian girls into prostitution in Spain. She was arrested in Lagos, Nigeria, through a sting operation by NAPTIP agents. Although a conviction is yet to be secured, she has been arraigned before the Federal High Court in Lagos and remanded in the Nigerian Correctional Service till the completion of the case.

The fight against human trafficking is a long one that requires concerted efforts from all relevant stakeholders. According to NAPTIP 2021 statistics, the Agency won twenty-two (22) cases with thirty-one (31) convicted traffickers in the year 2021, out of which Twenty-Three (23) were Males and Eight (8) were Females bringing the total number of convictions won by the Agency from inception to Three Hundred and Ninety -Two (392) with Four Hundred and Ninety-five (495) convicted persons.⁷⁴

These cases are welcome departures from earlier ones where traffickers were given minimum sentences or fines for a grievous crime like human trafficking. As observed by Justice C.O. Idahosa

⁷¹ Unreported, Charge No. FHC/ASB/15c/2021 <<https://naptip.gov.ng/trafficking-in-persons-register/>> accessed September 15, 2025.

⁷² Unreported, Charge No. FHC/ASB/24C/09 <herloc.unodc.org/cld/case--law-doc/trafficking> accessed September 15, 2025.

⁷³ Unreported, FHC/L/345C/2021 <<https://naptip.gov.ng/naptip-commences-prosecution-of-a-spain-based-nigerian-trafficker/>> accessed September 15, 2025

⁷⁴ NAPTIP data analysis, 2021<<https://naptip.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2021-data-analysis.pdf>> accessed September 15, 2025



in *Attorney General of Federation v Franca Edith Asiboja*⁷⁵ where he noted that the issue of trafficking of persons, particularly young girls, has assumed notoriety, and it has damaged the image of Nigeria very deeply.

11.0 CONCLUSION

Human trafficking remains a serious challenge in Nigeria despite the existence of legal and institutional frameworks aimed at combating the crime. Addressing the problem requires a comprehensive strategy that tackles both the root causes and the criminal networks responsible for trafficking. Strengthening law enforcement, improving socio-economic conditions, and enhancing international collaboration will be critical in the fight against human trafficking in Nigeria.

12.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively combat trafficking in persons in Nigeria, the following measures are recommended:

1. Continued efforts to comprehensively address human trafficking by enacting and implementing relevant laws.
2. Strengthening law enforcement and prosecution of traffickers.
3. Strengthening international cooperation in combating trafficking networks.
4. Explore mechanisms for providing protection and relief for victims.
5. Increasing funding for anti-trafficking agencies.
6. Enhancing border security and surveillance.
7. Expanding public awareness campaigns to advance information to prevent human trafficking in underserved communities.
8. Providing economic empowerment programmes for vulnerable groups.

⁷⁵ Unreported charge B./31c/2005.

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