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**Human Trafficking: A Variant of the Historic Slave Trade in  
Contemporary Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Human trafficking is as old as human existence and civilisation. It dates back to the time of old kingdoms where captivities of conquered empires were taken from into slavery and compelled to serve kings and princes of foreign kingdoms. This practice later changed to the sales of recalcitrant or sickly captives to other powerful kings that needed the services of slaves either as palace guards, farm workers, stewards, or in some cases as objects of sacrifice to appease the gods during a festival. Unfortunately, the ascendancy of this practice in contemporary times has now become a bane of challenge to the government, stakeholders and even security operatives as several youths (particularly teen girls) are being recruited as sex workers overseas, or used as 'baby producers' in what is popularly described as a 'baby factory' in Nigeria. This paper therefore examines some recent issues on kidnapping as well as factors responsible for this criminal act in Nigeria. Sequel to findings, this paper made some recommendations.

**Key words:** Human trafficking, Human right, Sex workers, Slave trade, Smuggling of people

### Introduction

The need to protect human rights of an individual is not only esteemed by the Federal Government of Nigeria but also recognized in international laws of nations. Aside the obligation to promote human rights as contained in various paragraphs of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in the 1999 constitution, Chapter 4, Section 30 succinctly spelt out that every human person, has the right to: life; dignity of the human person; personal liberty; fair hearing; private and family life; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression and the press; peaceful assembly and association; freedom of movement; and the freedom from discrimination and ownership of property (FGN, 1999) among others. These rights acknowledge that every human being is entitled to enjoy them without marginalization or discrimination irrespective of their gender, race, complexion, tribe, language, religion, political affiliation, birth circumstance and even socio-economic background. Unfortunately, several illegal practices in recent times such as armed robbery, insurgency, kidnapping, child labour and trafficking of humans are all common social problems infringing on the aforementioned rights.

Trafficking of humans or human trafficking is a modern form of the old transatlantic trade of slaves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is affront to human dignity. It embodies issues of human rights and rule of law, law enforcement and crime control, inequality and discrimination, corruption, economic deprivation and migration, and even psychological terror and physical violence (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe -OSCE, 2004). It also encapsulates matters bordering on sexual exploitation, treat, deprivation, coercion, extortion, molestation, and/or intimidation of person in conditions akin to slavery. Although, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social/human right activist, private and public organizations have offered a variety of services to victims of trafficking. However, responses towards addressing the ascendancy of this social menace are relatively recent.

Studies on the nature and dimensions of trafficking showed that until recently, there were no specific laws in Nigeria which prohibit trafficking in humans (UNICRI/UNODC, 2003; UNODC, 2004). As described by Okojie (2005), the effectiveness of most efforts by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), social/human right activist, private and public organizations (in combating this offence to persons and the state) are yet to be fully evaluated, since most of them are recent or not yet fully developed. Hence, she asserted that the efforts so far all qualify to be described as 'good practices.' What then is human trafficking and how far has it eaten into the fabrics of the nation, are two fundamental questions that forms the trust of this paper.

### **Human Trafficking: Conceptual Clarification**

Human trafficking means several things to several persons and more often than not, individual and institutional definitions differ from various stand points and perspective ranging from human right, historical, religious, criminological, sociological, and even legal perspectives. With a common-sense approach, the two coined terms “human” and “trafficking” put together, could literally be defined as ‘transportation of humans’ or movement by an individual or group of persons from one place to another. This could be misleading in that this could be linked to migration - movement of persons into or out of a state, or region with no illegal connotation. It could also be erroneously described as smuggling of people.

Although related, Okojie (2005) argued that trafficking in persons should not be confused with smuggling of people. According to her, smuggling takes place with the consent of the travellers and implies the crossing of international borders. This is accomplished through the use of force, coercion, and/or deception, with the ultimate intent of exploiting the victim. While the victims may have originally agreed to voluntarily leave with the trafficker, they do so under conditions of deceit or fraud. In principle, the smuggling of persons constitutes an illegal border crossing which is usually opted for when an individual or group is(are) unable to provide the necessary travel paper(s) needed for legal entry into a foreign nation and as such, violate the laws of the state. In contrast, trafficking in persons is a violation of an individual’s human right in a bid for one called “the trafficker” to exploit another -the trafficked (victim).

From legal perspective, a victim of trafficking is recognized under Section 50, Paragraph 10 of the Nigerian Anti-Trafficking in Person Act as being “any trafficked person”. Article 3, Paragraph (a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by the means of threat, or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, 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 purposes of exploitation” (Osimen, Okor & Ahmed, 2014).

United Nations Children Educational Fund (UNICEF) report (2007) as cited in Iyanda and Nwogwugwu (2016) defined trafficking of persons as a forceful and deceitful acquisition sale and re-sale of persons which has consistently featured in both global and national criminal agenda. They also noted that the interpretations of the phenomenon are usually reflected in the socio-economic and political interest of particular institutions, organisations and agencies and within cultural contexts and traditional practices of different countries. Osimen, Okor and Ahmed (2014) described human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation. These definitions all point to the fact that

trafficking always involves exploitation of an individual or group (male or female or both), through the use of deception or coercion. Also, it further shows that this dreadful practice (which has now become a 'shady business' for many) could vary in meaning with respect to sex of victims (male and female), scope or dimension of practice (within the borders of a nation or beyond) and even motives of traffickers (street hawking, child molestation, domestic servitude, sexual trade or exploitation) among others.

### **Issues on Human Trafficking in Nigeria**

Human trafficking in Nigeria is one social problem that is undermining the morality of the society both nationally and internationally. Although, this practice is arguably a variant of the slave trade in the pre-colonial era. However, the recent export and import of "human commodities" (in the form of young men and women) as against goods and personnel outside or into the country is really alarming. As recounted by Ajagun (2012), recent media reports tend to portray Nigeria as the major hub for the illicit human trade (trafficking) while daily busts at the nation's seaports, airports and borders give the impression that human trafficking is an insolvable problem.

Trafficking of human beings especially women and children has become one of the most rewarding illegal economic activities and can be put at par with drug trafficking and arms smuggling (Salt, 2000). Nigeria is notoriously known for two different kinds of trafficking: internal and external trafficking. The former (internal trafficking) is in the form of forced labour, servitude, street hawking and even sexual exploitation that comes in the form of establishing a "baby factory" where teen girls are abducted and kept in a secluded place, sexually molested and impregnated to make merchandise of their babies by selling babies (that are as young as one day old), to secret agents who resell them to herbalist and ritualist for profit. External trafficking on the other hand is often attributed to sex trafficking and domestic labour motives. Today, the so called 'giant of Africa' - Nigeria has become a transit country for trafficked women and children among other countries in the West African sub-region.

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2006), about 83% of child victims of trafficking for domestic service are recruited from Akwa Ibom in Nigerian State while other child victims come from the states of Cross Rivers, Rivers, Ebonyi, Kano and Kaduna. Children victims of trafficking originating in Nigeria were all under the age of 16 (the majority was between 6 and 10 years of age). Foreign children trafficked to Nigeria come mainly from Benin and Togo (an estimated 96%, with 90% of that figure coming from Benin alone), Côte d'Ivoire and Niger. Furthermore, children as young as five and six years old trafficked from Benin have been found working in exploitive conditions in Nigerian mines in the Western part of the country (UNODC, 2006).

With respect to women trafficked to Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation, an estimated 94% are from Edo State, Nigeria while the remaining are from Delta, Kano and Borno States (UNODC, 2006). Many of these women trafficked abroad, are sent to different destinations including West Africa (Benin, Côte-d'Ivoire); Central Africa (Gabon, Cameroon); Europe (Italy, Spain, France) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia) (UNODC, 2006) to engage in all forms of 'dirty jobs' for money. In a bid to travel during the religious pilgrimage- *the Hajj*, young ladies and old women are often sponsored to Saudi Arabia by some 'thick madams,' and forced into street begging, domestic service and prostitution as a means of making money for themselves.

These madams (some of whom are traders and professional prostitutes), have networks with itinerant businessmen who pay them heavy sum of money to 'arrange girls' for them in private hotel rooms. Many trafficked girls have been lured with the promise of getting 'greener pastures' overseas only to get to the 'promised land' to be presented with a new deal of engaging in forced labour on plantations, construction site, quarries or mines, and street crimes like drug peddling. Okojie (2003) also noted that traffickers sometimes move their victims to Europe by caravan, forcing them to cross the desert on foot, and subjecting them to forced prostitution to repay heavy debts for travel expenses.

A regional project launched in 2003 by United Nations office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) found in a Nigerian case study that "those involved include recruiting agents (usually close family), native doctors ('voodoo' priests) who often perform rituals to control the victims, lawyers who draw up debt bondage agreements, estate agents who help to launder trafficking proceeds through real estate transactions, and travel touts and agents who provide the necessary travel documents and arrangements....."(Yemi-Ladejobi, 2006). This shows that traffickers do not work alone but work with a team of 'professional rogues' who are experts in their unlawful practices and various areas of specialization.

### **Causal Factors in Nigeria**

One notable factor responsible for the upsurge in human trafficking in Nigeria among young teens and women is the high demand for sexual services from women of 'African blood' in Europe, America and other developed continents. Parents sometimes play a lead role in supporting this matter as some of them prefer to send their daughters overseas at all cost in a bid to bail the family out of struggle from the other side of the border. Many of them send their daughters to distant relatives, old friends and even 'close strangers' who promise to take care of child(ren) overseas while they stay back in Nigeria, expecting their monthly 'alawi' or remittances through Western Union or Money gram (from a source they do not know). A study by a Nigerian NGO (Girls Power Initiative) attribute the reason girls are more susceptible to trafficking abroad than boys/young men to the success stories of other girls who had been trafficked and

had made it. They also argued that high rate of unemployment among girls due to relatively low levels of female education is a significant predisposing factor (Osimen, Okor, and Ahmed, 2014).

Studies by UNICRI/UNODC (2003) and UNODC (2004) clearly explored factors responsible for the problem of trafficking in Nigeria. Some of the explanatory factors they put forward include: lack of employment opportunities for the youth, poverty and large family sizes, and greater willingness of girls to sacrifice ‘their body’ to assist their families, low level of education of the girl child. They also included: high demand for cheap and submissive child labourers; poverty and lack of employment opportunities; inadequate educational opportunities (including poor quality educational facilities in rural areas); desire to travel by the young; the practice of child fosterage (that is, sending children to live with wealthier relations and friends); large family sizes, death of parents and ignorance by parents on the implications of releasing their children to traffickers. Some other factors like liberalization of trade and movement across borders within the ECOWAS region which made policing the borders difficult; lack of commitment by government and policy makers; inadequacies of criminal and law enforcement agencies to combat trafficking and so on, have also been advanced (UNICRI/UNODC, 2003; UNODC, 2004).

Some scholars (Adepoju, 2000, Eghafona, 2009, Attoh, 2009b) identified factors such as: illiteracy, ignorance, greed, lack of opportunity, inequality, gender-induced cultural bias, persistent unemployment, poverty (a principal driving force), lack of strong political will; access to education, sex-selective migration policies, disruption of supportive system, large family size; high demand for cheap labour; desire for youth emancipation; inadequate political commitment; porous borders, traditional community attitude, and human deprivation (Iyanda and Nwogwugwu, 2016). These scholarly expositions all show that trafficking is not caused by one factor. Hence, parents, security operatives, the government and every Nigerian child all have a role to play in curbing this criminal practice.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of human trafficking in Nigeria today can be described as ‘the return of civilized Nigerians to the trans-atlantic slave trade in our pre-colonial days’. It can be likened to the unguarded backyard fire that is gradually burning the building of a non-challant owner. One could also describe it as the strategy of some ‘shady fellows’ to recruit unemployed youths who are seemingly disadvantaged by reason of the socio-background. Hence, any effort directed towards creating massive employment for the teeming youth, parents and most particular, the girl-child still remains the immediate and ultimate solution to curbing this menace in Nigeria. This position was supported by former President, Goodluck Jonathan, quoted in Wakili (2013) thus:

I agree totally that until we create jobs; until Nigerians can wake up and find food to eat; until Nigerians sick can walk to the hospital and get treatment; the economic indices may not mean much to us.

This remains a fact because job creation plays a pivotal role in empowering the empty pockets, minds and bellies of 'restless lambs' (youths) on the need not to endanger their lives by following after 'ravenous wolves' (traffickers) in their search for 'greener pastures' or 'the better life' beyond borders.

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