

# Human trafficking in Nigeria and its implications for food security

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Human trafficking, especially in women and girls, is not new (UNESCO, 2005) and has acquired shocking new dimensions. This paper looks into human trafficking in Nigeria and covers the dynamics of human trafficking and its agents, purposes and causes. The implication for food security is seen in the light of shrinkage at food production level. Recommendations to control and eradicate this social vice include efforts to enhance women's access to productive resources, encouragement of capacity building among rural women, integration of extension services/messages with anti-trafficking campaigns, increased investment in rural areas through concessional resources and debt-relief investment programmes, more educational opportunities for girls and enhancement of women's legal status in society.

Trafficking in human beings, especially women and girls, is a complex, multifaceted problem, involving multiple stakeholders at both the institutional and commercial levels. It is a demand-driven, global business with a large market for commercial sex and cheap labour. Because of insufficient and unexercised policy frameworks or trained personnel to curb or prevent it, this illicit business continues to flourish.

The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNCAT), (2000) as cited by UNESCO (2006) defined it as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of 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 giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

UNESCO (2006) felt that Nigeria has acquired a reputation for being one of the

leading African countries in human trafficking with cross-border and internal trafficking. Trafficking of persons is the third largest crime after economic fraud and the drug trade (UNESCO, 2006). Many years of military rule have resulted in institutionalized human rights violation and a serious political, social and economic crisis. This has a negative impact on the development of community participation, especially of women and children, despite the efforts of international and national institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) designed to advance their cause. Also, the boom in the 1970s created opportunities for migration both inside and outside of the country (UNESCO, 2006). This gave room for exploitation, for international trafficking in women and children, for forced labour and for prostitution.

UNESCO (2006) tagged Nigeria as a country of origin, transit and destination for human trafficking. In 2001, Nigeria ratified the United Nations (UN) protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children and passed a law against trafficking entitled 'Trafficking in persons prohibition Law Enforcement and Administration Act, 2003.' (UNESCO, 2006; UNAIDS et al., 2004) Of all the African countries, Nigeria is one of the few that passed such a law. The Child Rights Act was also passed by Nigeria in 2003 (UNAIDS et al., 2004). This law deals comprehensively with the issue of child trafficking. Many means have been tried to stem this crime, including economic empowerment and re-integration programmes. These did not yield the expected result. Awareness-raising campaigns were carried out and proved to be more vigorous. Despite these initiatives, the human trafficking business remains a critical problem in Nigeria, more so as most of the women and children being trafficked are from rural areas (UNESCO, 2006), where agricultural activities take place. This has a negative impact on food production as the major

actors in food production are the ones being trafficked. The ugly nature of this trade will be further appreciated when its negative impact on food production is unveiled.

The dynamics of human trafficking in Nigeria are geographical in nature and include internal trafficking and cross-border trafficking.

**Internal trafficking** of women and children has been on the increase in the last two decades (UNESCO, 2006). An increased number of people are trafficked from rural communities in Oyo, Osun and Ogun States in the South-West; Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Rivers, Bayelsa Delta and states in the South-South; Ebonyi and Imo in the South-East, Benue, Niger and Kwara States in the Middle Belt to cities such as Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna, Calabar, Port-Harcourt (UNESCO, 2006), Warri, Benin and Sapele. Those trafficked to these areas are used for exploitative domestic work, farm labour and prostitution. Lagos has the highest prevalence of human trafficking and forced labour.

In **cross-border trafficking**, Nigeria is known to be a source, transit and destination country. Internationally, trafficked Nigerians come from all parts of Nigeria but some states tend to provide more trafficked persons than others (UNESCO, 2006). These states are Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Bayelsa, Delta, Imo, Ebonyi, Kano, Ogun, Oyo and Lagos. The women and children are taken to destinations such as the Republic of Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Gabon and Guinea in West Africa where they are destined to work mostly as domestic servants and on farm plantations. More specifically, UNESCO (2006) argues that women and children recruited and trafficked from Shaki in Oyo state are mainly sent to Guinea, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire to work as hawkers and domestic servants. Recently, Nigerian women and young girls were trafficked to the Republic of Benin for prostitution. Most of them are deceived into believing that their destination is Europe.

Those trafficked to destinations outside Africa find themselves in countries such as Italy, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. The trend now is that Nigerian women and young girls trafficked to the United Kingdom (U.K) work as domestic servants. In fact, the Daily Telegraph (2009) reported that an increasing number of young girls claiming asylum in the United Kingdom are trafficked persons. About 92% of Nigerians trafficked to Europe for prostitution come from Edo State of Nigeria. At the initial stage, most of them came from Benin City, the Edo State capital and from cities in Delta State. With the mounting anti-trafficking campaigns, however, traffickers are moving away from urban centers into rural areas. According to the Nigerian Division of International Criminal Police Organization (2000), there are also records of recruitment from other Nigerian states such as Enugu, Lagos, Ogun, Anambra and Akwa-Ibom states.

The Middle East destination is mainly Saudi Arabia. Girls are recruited from Kano, Kwara, Kaduna, Niger, Borno, Taraba, Yobe, Nassarawa, Plateau, Kebbi, Sokoto, Kastina, Adamawa, Zamfara, Jigawa, Gombe and Bauchi states and taken to Saudi Arabia. Improved immigration records have helped to debunk the erroneous impression that human trafficking for prostitution does not occur in the Northern part of Nigeria. Mashi (2005) stated that "from March 2002-April, 2004, the Saudi Arabia authorities deported 9,952 women and 1,231 underage unaccompanied children. Investigations revealed that the majority of the women deported from Saudi Arabia are from Kano, Borno, Adamawa, Yobem Nassarawa, Plateau, Niger, Kebbi, Kwara, Sokoto, Kastina, Zamfara, Jigawa, Gombe, Bauchi and Taraba states".

Between 1999 and July 2000, anti-traffickers deported about 454 trafficked Nigerians, mostly women and children, from Saudi Arabia (Bassey, 2000). There are indications that Venezuela in South America has also become a point of destination for many people trafficked from Nigeria.

Nigeria has become the distribution center from where trafficked people to West

Africa, Gabon and Cameroon are disseminated; Nigeria serves as a transit point from other West African countries to Europe and the Middle East. Various transit camps are located in places such as Ondo, Akwa-Ibom and Cross River states.

Nigeria receives Togolese women, young girls and children from Benin, Liberia, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana (UNESCO, 2006). Over the years Tuareg women from the Niger Republic have been trafficked into affluent homes in Northern Nigeria to serve as household helpers and concubines. In some cases, the Tuareg women end up marrying their employers who are often affluent business men.

**The main agents** of human trafficking are the traffickers, the trafficked persons and the users. The trafficker is the link between supply and demand. He canvases for and increases supply through the recruitment, deception, transportation and exploitation process and boosts demand through the provision of easy access for trafficked persons. Such people range from recruiters, transporters, receivers, pimps, brothel keepers and corrupt border guards to producers of fake documentation, all of whom benefit from the process as trafficked persons pass through their hands (UNESCO, 2006). The trafficker in most cases is an extended family relation or someone known within the local community.

No matter the scale and means of operation, the process is systematically well organized with the sole aim of profit making from the exploitation of the trafficked persons' labour. Nigerian traffickers abroad have established mafia-like organizations of control in most destination countries (UNESCO, 2006). These people are well connected and operate in cartels and networks which are very difficult and dangerous to infiltrate. They use coded language to communicate among themselves and are ruthless enough to kill to cover their tracks.

This illicit business thrives because of high profits and a low risk of punishment. African traffickers face a low risk of arrest, prosecution or other negative

consequences. Fitzgibbon (2003) thinks that they have exploited the lack of rule of law, the non-implementation of existing anti-slavery laws and the corruption of judicial systems. These lapses create room for perpetrators to escape punishment. Prosecutions are rarely carried out and are fraught with difficulties.

Trafficked persons are also involved in the whole process. These include the women children and few men who are deceived, transported and delivered into the hands of those who exploit them for profit. These people voluntarily consent to be trafficked after being deceived by the traffickers that greener pastures await them at their destination.

As a result of war, poverty, gender inequality, lack of information and high demand for cheap labour, the demographic populations of women and children are put at a high risk. The general lack of prospects in rural areas, where agricultural activities are still carried out using crude implements, often leads to trafficking, and many of those trafficked are from poor rural settlements. Truong (2006) states that one common dynamic is that in times of cutbacks in state services and subsidies, women assume the considerable burden of diminished resources as they are subject to a rigid gender-based division of labour assigning them to the household. Since men tend not to spend their earnings on the household, the women find themselves responsible for the survival of their families. As a result of the enormous tasks on their shoulders, the women seek to diversify their sources of income (Idem, 2003) and this increases the risk of being trafficked. They may send their children to live with other extended family members in wealthier or urban communities or according to UNESCO (2006) seek employment outside the family network. This increases the risk that these children will be trafficked, since the traditional practice of fostering children by other family members and those outside family network has been manipulated by traffickers to suit their selfish purposes.

Those who finally consume the services of trafficked persons are those at the end of the chain. They include the users of sex

workers and the heads of farms or shops in need of cheap labour. Such users tend to go through agents or relatives of the trafficked persons who negotiate with the trafficked persons. UNICEF (2003) states that often they do not perceive themselves as part of the trafficking network, although they are in fact an engine in the machinery of exploitation.

In Nigeria, people are trafficked mainly for prostitution, to work as domestic servants, bus conductors and street traders (UNICEF, 2003). They are also used in agricultural works, brass melting, stone digging and scavenging.

Women and children are trafficked both locally and internationally for sex. During the military regime in Nigeria, thousands of women and young girls were trafficked into other countries, especially Europe. Italy received the highest number of trafficked persons to serve the sex industry there.

The traffickers recruit girls from villages, hairdressing salons and other public places without the consent or knowledge of their parents. They are trafficked with the help of corrupt immigration officers who manipulate stolen travel documents. On arrival in the country of destination, their travel documents are taken from them and they are made to sign an agreement to pay back their madams (female traffickers who sponsor their travel expenses).

In Nigeria, prostitution is considered a social and moral aberration and regarded as a sin. Among Christians, Muslims and idol worshipers, it is a great sin. Though it is considered a sin, some communities trivialize it because of the money they think accrues from it.

On-going rural-urban migration and poverty have made the labour market super-saturated resulting in a reduction in the value of labour, especially in the informal sector. Labour has become cheap there, forcing every member of the family work outside their homes to sustain the family. Consequently, girls of pre-puberty age are recruited from northern states and taken to places like Lagos, Warri, Ibadan and Port-Harcourt as domestic servants, beggars or street traders. The parents of

these girls are always deceived that they will be sent to school or trained in various trades or will work to accumulate money. These girls are usually paid ₦3, 000 monthly, half of which goes to the traffickers as a "fee". According to UNESCO (2006), one such female trafficker was intercepted by the police in Lagos in March 2005 with 40 girls between the ages of 7 and 17 years old.

There is another type of trafficking taking place in Northern Nigeria. This is for organized begging. Traffickers transport physically challenged persons like the blind and crippled to major Nigerian cities such as Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan, Warri, Port-Harcourt, and Benin City for the purpose of begging.

Experienced adult beggars traffick children under their custody. These children are often seen leading the handicapped into organized begging. They are compelled to do this for practically no monetary or intellectual reward other than daily meals.

According to UNESCO (2006), the supply and demand equation is typically described in terms of "push" and "pull" factors which vary with localities and magnitude. The major cause of human trafficking in Nigeria is poverty. There is a strong desire to survive but poverty resulting from unemployment and lack of opportunity promotes human trafficking. UNIFEM Asia (2002) believes that women and girls are more vulnerable to being trafficked because of unequal access to education which limits their opportunities and the lack of legitimate and fulfilling employment opportunities, especially in rural areas. Sex-selective migration policies, formed because farming is regarded as a blue collar job, cause further problems as does less access to information on migration and job opportunities. There is also the disruption of support systems due to natural and human causes and traditional community attitudes and practices, which tolerate violence against women. These are all 'push' factors.

UNESCO (2006) points out women's perceived suitability for work in labour-intensive production; the increasing demand for foreign workers for domestic

and care-giving roles; the growth of the billion-dollar sex and entertainment industry, which is tolerated as a necessary evil, the low risk-high profit nature of trafficking; the ease in controlling and manipulating vulnerable women and the devaluation of women and children's human rights.

According to UNESCO (2006), as pointed out earlier, women, girls and children in rural communities are those mostly trafficked. The major occupation of rural communities is farming. Women are the backbone of the agricultural sector, accounting for 70% of agricultural labour and being responsible for 60% of agricultural production and 80% of food production (Kabeer, 1994). Ahmad and Ismail (1998) state that women are more involved in agricultural tasks than their husbands. These women engage in farming with the help of their children. Those women, young girls and children who do not own their own farms are the source of agricultural labour. There is no doubt about the enormous role of women in food production.

**Food security** which is the desire of every nation, cannot be achieved without the machinery pushing the production of food. According to Uzokwe and Ofuoku (2006), women have taken over most of the male-related traditional farm tasks so the position of women in food production is a very important one. If these rural women continue to be trafficked out of rural communities (the homes of agricultural practices), the problem of food shortage will deteriorate to an extent where there will be food scarcity, especially with the geometric growth rate of the population of Nigeria. This will translate into food production shrinkage.

The factors that influence women's capacity to develop income-generating activities are, according to Centre for Technical Agriculture, (CTA) *et al.* (1999), broad in scope and inter-linked cultural, social and economic values that define the pattern of constraints and opportunities.

Having the afore mentioned in mind,  
\* serious efforts should be made to improve women's access to productive resources such as land, credit and

appropriate technologies to enhance food production.

\*Encouragement of capacity building for rural women is necessary. This should be done through grass roots mobilization, action programmes, training and networking.

\*It is important to develop and reinforce research and information-gathering activities on the village and community level socio-cultural and financial conditions that affect rural women.

\*Extension departments should integrate anti-human trafficking campaigns with their services to the farming population and use various ways of effective communication with and among rural women and parents using rural radio, posters, television, extension-farmers' meetings and others. This is the way to guide and change the attitude of rural families and communities so that they are against human trafficking which is always full of fake promises.

\*Government and non-governmental organizations should increase investment in rural areas through concessional resources and debt-relief investment programmes.

\*More educational opportunities should be accorded to women and girls in rural areas. The legal status of women should be enhanced. Moves against trafficking in humans can only be effective if the source communities can be discouraged from any involvement in it.

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