

**PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF CHILD TRAFFICKING ON VICTIMS AND SOCIETY: EVIDENCE FROM CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS AND RESIDENTS IN BENIN CITY, NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Child trafficking has become an alarming problem worldwide and particularly in Nigeria. This study examines perceptions of the causes and effects of child trafficking on victims and society through the perspectives of child welfare professionals and residents in Benin City, Edo State. It investigates the underlying causes of child trafficking in Edo State and identifies its consequences for victims and their families. The study employed Marxian political economy theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, and labeling theory as its theoretical framework, using a sample size of 502. Findings revealed a disturbing rise in the trafficking of under aged girls into prostitution driven by multiple factors. Political factors include weak government institutions and inadequate commitment to poverty alleviation. Socio-cultural factors include parental absence, large family size, and low literacy levels. Environmental factors include inadequate access to basic social amenities and rapid urbanization. The study concludes that urgent attention from government and relevant authorities is needed to improve child welfare in Edo State and Nigeria generally. It recommends sustained public awareness and media engagement by government, non-governmental organizations, community groups, and media institutions through intensive public education campaigns. The study also suggests establishing secret investigative mechanisms to identify traffickers and confiscate illicit wealth obtained from trafficking as a deterrent. Furthermore, punitive laws should extend beyond traffickers to include complicit parents, religious actors, and corrupt officials. Government should collaborate with destination countries to strengthen border control and enforcement. Finally, poverty reduction, infrastructure, accessible social services and transparent governance are essential preventive measures.

**Key words:** child trafficking, prostitution, child labour, traffickers, child welfare professionals.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Child trafficking is a global social problem and one of the most profitable criminal activities in the world today (UNICEF, 2017; Greenbaum, 2018). The illegal trade in human beings, particularly children and women, continues to increase at alarming rates. Available statistics indicate that more than 160 countries are affected by human trafficking, making it a transnational crime that threatens human security and undermines international stability (Adepelumi, 2015; Pascoal, 2017). As a form of modern-day slavery, human trafficking transcends national borders and poses serious challenges to migration management, border control, and international law enforcement cooperation.

From a traditional security perspective, trafficking necessitates stronger border surveillance, migration control policies, and international collaboration among security agencies (Al Jazeera, 2018). Estimates from international organizations suggest that between 600,000 and 2 million people are trafficked across borders annually, with numbers increasing significantly over the past decade (Borer, 2015; Welle, 2017). Human trafficking takes various forms, including child trafficking, trafficking of women, and, in some cases, the smuggling of men. These activities are often driven by the pursuit of financial gain through sexual exploitation, forced labour, and other forms of abuse (Ampong, Donbesuur & Samanhyia, 2016; Balogun & Iduemre, 2019).

Although human trafficking is a global phenomenon, Nigeria particularly Benin City in Edo State has gained notoriety as a major source of trafficked women and children. The city has frequently been described as a hub for trafficking networks that transport victims to Europe and other parts of the world. Consequently, this study examines the perceived causes and effects of child trafficking on victims and society from the perspectives of child welfare professionals and residents in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Human trafficking has expanded beyond an individual problem to become a major national and international concern. Children, who represent the future and continuity of every society, are among the most vulnerable victims. Traffickers often lure them with promises of better opportunities abroad and sometimes compel them to take ritual oaths to prevent them from exposing their sponsors. Reports indicate that a significant number of deported victims return with serious health challenges, including HIV infections, thereby posing further social and public health risks (Herzwerk, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The problem of trafficking has deeply affected communities in Benin City. Scholars trace its emergence to the mid-1980s when economic restructuring and the adoption of free market policies led to unemployment and widespread poverty (Okoli & Idemudia, 2020). Since then, Nigeria has repeatedly been identified as a major source country for trafficked persons, particularly children and young women exploited in prostitution across Europe (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018; Jorge, Antolinez & Alonso, 2020).

Child trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, harboring, or receipt of persons under the age of eighteen for the purpose of exploitation, including commercial sexual exploitation,

forced labour, debt bondage, or other forms of slavery (Inkyfada, 2020). This crime represents one of the most severe violations of human rights and continues to threaten the safety and dignity of many young Nigerians. Reports indicate that Nigerian victims account for a substantial proportion of African prostitutes in Europe, particularly in Italy, where they constitute a significant share of the sex trade (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2019; CLEEN Foundation & Pathfinder Justice Initiative, 2020).

Victims are frequently trafficked from impoverished communities to urban centres and foreign countries where they are subjected to exploitation and abuse. The lure of foreign currency, combined with local economic hardship and currency devaluation, has further intensified the problem (Euractiv, 2017). Consequently, human trafficking has evolved into a highly organized criminal enterprise generating billions of dollars annually. Several factors contribute to the persistence of child trafficking in Nigeria. These include economic hardship, social pressures, and political challenges such as weak institutional frameworks (Plambech, 2017; Balogun, 2022).

However, poverty remains the most significant driving force. Poverty is often defined as living on less than two dollars a day and is associated with poor nutrition, limited access to education and healthcare, and inadequate information. Rural communities are particularly vulnerable due to limited opportunities and poor infrastructure (Welle, 2017; European Asylum Support Office, 2015). Poverty also represents a broader denial of opportunities and human dignity. It manifests in insecurity, exclusion, and lack of participation in societal processes (Adepelumi, 2015; Pascoal, 2018). Despite Nigeria's vast natural resources and large labour force, over 65% of the population lives below the poverty line, with millions struggling to meet basic needs (Basil, 2020).

Corruption, policy failures, and unequal development have worsened the situation, especially in rural areas where subsistence farming remains the primary livelihood. Given these realities, it becomes necessary to investigate the perceived causes and consequences of child trafficking in Edo State, particularly from the perspectives of residents and child welfare professionals who interact closely with affected communities.

### **Significance of the Study**

Child trafficking spreads rapidly within vulnerable communities and poses serious risks to future generations. Although several scholars and institutions have attempted to address the problem in Nigeria, significant gaps remain in understanding the perceptions of those directly involved in child protection.

This study contributes to existing knowledge by examining the perceptions of both child welfare professionals and community residents regarding the causes and effects of child trafficking in Edo State. By focusing on these groups, the study provides deeper insight into the social dynamics that sustain trafficking and the impacts it has on victims, families, and communities.

Furthermore, the study addresses a gap in existing literature by generating primary data from practitioners and residents rather than relying solely on secondary reports. This approach enhances understanding of the real-life experiences of communities affected by trafficking and offers practical insights into possible interventions.

The findings of this research are expected to raise public awareness about the dangers of child trafficking and highlight its implications for individuals, families, and society. In addition, the study provides valuable information that can assist policymakers, lawmakers, and non-governmental organizations in developing more effective strategies for combating trafficking and protecting vulnerable children.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader academic literature on child protection and human trafficking while providing evidence-based recommendations that can support policy formulation and social interventions aimed at reducing child trafficking in Nigeria.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview of Child Trafficking**

Human trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through the use of force, threat, coercion, deception, or abuse of power for the purpose of exploitation. According to Murugan and Adebaw (2014), trafficking involves manipulating individuals through coercive means in order to exploit them. Similarly, Usman (2014) defines child trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, and harboring of children under harsh and unsafe conditions for exploitative purposes.

Child trafficking commonly involves deception, threats, payment of benefits, or abduction, particularly targeting poor, uneducated, and rural populations. The primary objectives of trafficking include sexual exploitation, forced labor, prostitution, and organ removal. Over the past decades, human trafficking has evolved into one of the fastest-growing and most profitable criminal industries globally. Women and children have increasingly become commodities that are bought and sold for economic exploitation (UNICEF, 2014).

Evidence suggests that many Nigerian women and children have been trafficked to European countries, particularly Italy, for sexual exploitation. Studies indicate that Nigerian nationals account for a significant proportion of trafficking victims in Europe (Ampong et al., 2016; CNN, 2019; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020). Welle (2019) reports that trafficking networks have expanded across international borders, making Nigeria a major source country for victims of human trafficking

Gerassi (2015) describes trafficking as the recruitment and transportation of individuals within or across borders through deception, coercion, or debt bondage for the purpose of forced labor or sexual exploitation. Victims are often held in slavery-like conditions, where they are deprived of their freedom and fundamental rights (Huang, 2017). Similarly, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2019) explains that trafficking occurs when individuals are recruited, transported, or sold within or across national boundaries through exploitative means that violate their human rights.

In simple terms, trafficking involves the movement of individuals from one environment to another, usually across borders, with the intention of exploiting them economically or sexually. Gouty (2015) identifies two major forms of trafficking: domestic (internal) trafficking and international trafficking. Domestic trafficking involves moving victims from rural communities to

urban centers within the same country for exploitative labor or domestic work. International trafficking, on the other hand, involves the transportation of victims across national borders, often from African countries to European destinations such as Italy, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands for sexual exploitation.

### **History and Causes of Child Trafficking in Edo State and Nigeria**

Human trafficking in Nigeria began to gain prominence in the 1980s as economic hardship and unemployment increased across the country (Alhaji, Laminu, & Ansari, 2015). Scholars have also linked modern human trafficking to the historical legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which enslaved millions of Africans and created long-lasting patterns of exploitation and migration (European Asylum Office, 2015).

The emergence of prostitution among women from Benin in Edo State has also been traced to colonial economic transformations and the rise of capitalist trade systems. According to Basil (2020), some Benin women initially traveled to Italy to purchase goods such as gold, beads, and shoes for resale in Nigeria. However, due to economic hardship and limited opportunities at home, this trading activity gradually transformed into involvement in the sex trade. Over time, family members, friends, and acquaintances introduced more women and girls into the network, which contributed to the expansion of trafficking activities.

Usman (2014) notes that these social connections partly explain why a significant proportion of Nigerians engaged in prostitution abroad originate from Edo State. Edo State has historically experienced socio-economic marginalization and ecological degradation linked to international exploitation, colonialism, and post-colonial governance challenges. According to Gerassi (2015), factors such as unequal trade relations, colonial legacies, and corruption among political elites have contributed to poverty and underdevelopment in many regions of Nigeria, including Edo State. These conditions have created vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit.

Cultural and gender inequalities have also played a role in increasing women's vulnerability to trafficking. In many communities, women and girls face discrimination in property ownership and inheritance rights, limiting their economic independence. As a result, poverty and limited opportunities often push them toward risky migration arrangements organized by traffickers (Adepelumi, 2015; Guardian, 2020). Traffickers often lure victims with promises of lucrative employment opportunities in Europe.

According to Jorge et al. (2020), many Nigerian women and girls are told that they will work in well-paid jobs such as domestic work, caregiving, or hairdressing in Italy and other European countries. However, upon arrival, these promises are rarely fulfilled. Victims' passports are often confiscated immediately after arrival, and they are informed that they must engage in prostitution to repay large debts allegedly incurred during the migration process. In many cases, victims are subjected to traditional oath-taking rituals or forms of spiritual intimidation, including voodoo or juju practices, intended to ensure obedience and silence (Al Jazeera, 2018; International Organization for Migration, 2020).

In response to the growing trafficking crisis, several interventions have been implemented by Nigerian authorities and international partners. For example, diplomatic initiatives by the Nigerian ambassador to Italy and support from traditional institutions in Benin have contributed to efforts aimed at reducing trafficking of women and girls to Europe (Malakooti, 2020; National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, 2018). Despite these efforts, trafficking networks continue to operate through complex migration routes.

Initially, traffickers used Nigerian airports, particularly in Kano, to transport victims abroad. However, with increased monitoring forced traffickers to shift to alternative routes through neighboring countries such as Niger Republic and Libya before moving victims to Europe (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, 2019; ABC News, 2020). Weak border control systems and corruption have further enabled these trafficking operations.

### **Socio-Economic Drivers of Child Trafficking**

Poverty remains one of the most significant causes of child trafficking in Nigeria. The country has experienced prolonged economic challenges, including unemployment, inflation, and declining living standards. As a result, a large proportion of the population lives below the poverty line (Balogun & Iduemre, 2019; Semprebon, 2019). Okoli (2020) notes that Nigeria's economic instability has contributed to increased vulnerability among families and young people, making them more susceptible to trafficking networks. Individuals living in poverty often seek migration opportunities in the hope of improving their economic conditions, even when those opportunities involve significant risks.

Researchers have identified several push factors that contribute to trafficking in Nigeria. These include poverty, unemployment, large family size, lack of educational opportunities, cultural pressures, and inadequate political commitment to social welfare (Olusegun, 2021; Balogun, 2022). These conditions create an environment where vulnerable individuals become easy targets for traffickers. Similarly, pull factors in destination countries also encourage trafficking. These include the demand for cheap labor, the demand for sexual services, and the perceived glamorous lifestyle of individuals living abroad.

The involvement of international criminal networks further strengthens trafficking operations (UNICEF, 2017). Porous national borders and weak migration control systems have also contributed to the expansion of trafficking networks. These structural weaknesses make it easier for traffickers to move victims across countries with limited detection. Poverty itself is a multidimensional social phenomenon characterized by lack of access to basic resources such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare (UNHCR, 2020; Balogun, 2022). It also reflects broader socio-economic inequalities in the production and distribution of resources within society.

At the global level, poverty has been identified as a major driver of underdevelopment. According to the United States Department of State (2020), the number of individuals living on less than one dollar per day has increased significantly in many developing countries. Women, young girls, and children remain the most vulnerable groups affected by poverty and exploitation.

Consequently, traffickers often target individuals who are orphaned, abandoned, or economically disadvantaged. These victims are usually deceived with promises of employment and a better life abroad, only to be transported across borders and forced into exploitative labour or prostitution (Premium Times, 2019; Okoli, 2020)

### **Effects of Child Trafficking on Victims, Families, and Society**

Child trafficking has profound social, economic, and psychological consequences for victims, their families, and society at large. The vulnerability of children and families to trafficking is influenced by a complex combination of socio-economic factors, with poverty emerging as one of the most significant drivers, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. Many families experience extreme economic hardship due to limited access to land, employment, education, and financial resources. As a result, some parents and guardians become susceptible to promises made by traffickers who claim to provide better opportunities for their children abroad.

The consequences of trafficking are multifaceted and long-lasting. Victims who fail to meet the conditions imposed by traffickers or sponsors often feel ashamed and fearful of returning to their communities. According to Letitia and Yvonne (2014), many victims involved in prostitution abroad contract sexually transmitted infections and return to Nigeria without adequate medical care, thereby posing significant public health risks. In addition to health challenges, victims are frequently exposed to extreme physical danger, violence, and exploitation. Some victims are killed during trafficking operations or in the course of prostitution activities due to conflicts with criminal networks or exploitative sponsors.

Child trafficking also affects national reputation and social mobility. Reports of Nigerian women being deported from European countries due to involvement in prostitution have brought international embarrassment to the country. Such incidents have created suspicion and stricter immigration scrutiny toward Nigerians seeking legitimate travel opportunities abroad. Consequently, innocent individuals pursuing education, employment, or tourism face increased barriers in obtaining visas and travel permits. Research indicates that a large proportion of trafficking victims are young girls who are trafficked across international borders for sexual exploitation.

Alpes and Majcher (2020) report that a significant percentage of victims trafficked from Africa are women and girls forced into prostitution under exploitative conditions. These victims are often required to engage in degrading activities in order to repay debts incurred for transportation, visas, accommodation, and other migration-related expenses. These debts are usually imposed by traffickers or “madams,” who control the victims and demand large payments before granting them freedom. Family expectations and societal pressures also play a role in sustaining trafficking networks.

In some communities, families invest heavily in sending children abroad with the expectation that they will return wealthy and support the household financially. Studies have shown that some families sell valuable assets, including land and property, to finance the migration of their children (Al Jazeera, 2018; Aluko & Olanipekun, 2019). This expectation places significant psychological pressure on victims, who feel obligated to endure exploitation in order to support their families

and justify the financial sacrifices made for their migration. Another disturbing dimension of trafficking involves the use of traditional rituals and oath-taking practices to control victims.

Many trafficked individuals are forced to swear oaths before traditional priests or spiritual leaders, promising not to disclose the identities of their traffickers or refuse to repay the imposed debts. These rituals often involve the collection of personal items such as hair, blood, fingernails, and clothing materials, which are believed to spiritually bind victims to their traffickers. Such practices create intense psychological fear and discourage victims from seeking help or escaping from their exploitative conditions (Abiodun, Oloyede, Opatoki & Adeyemo, 2019). Traffickers themselves often operate within highly organized criminal networks that exploit the vulnerabilities of their victims.

These traffickers frequently present themselves as benefactors who offer employment opportunities abroad but ultimately force victims into prostitution or forced labor. The trafficking process typically involves multiple actors including recruiters, transporters, document forgers, and sponsors who coordinate the movement and exploitation of victims. In many cases, traffickers use complex migration routes that pass through several countries before reaching the final destination. Nigerian trafficking victims frequently travel through the Central Mediterranean route, which involves movement from Nigeria to Niger, through the Sahara Desert, and into Libya before attempting to reach Europe by sea (Anti-Slavery International, 2020). This journey is extremely dangerous and exposes migrants to severe forms of abuse.

Migrants often travel from southern Nigeria to northern regions such as Kano before crossing into Niger Republic. From there, they pass through desert routes toward southern Libya and later move to coastal cities where they attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Italy. Some migrants also use alternative routes through Spain via the Western Mediterranean corridor (Welle, 2017). Although Nigerians are not among the largest groups arriving in Spain, evidence indicates that trafficking victims have occasionally used this route as well.

During these journeys, trafficked individuals face severe exploitation and abuse. Many Nigerian migrants report experiencing sexual violence, physical assault, and extortion in transit countries such as Niger and Libya. Migrants are frequently required to pay bribes to corrupt border officials in order to continue their journey (Grotti, Malakasis & Sahraoui, 2018). Libya in particular has been identified as one of the most dangerous transit countries for migrants. Reports indicate that migrants face torture, sexual violence, forced detention, and kidnapping for ransom while waiting for opportunities to cross into Europe (Al Jazeera, 2018; Guardian, 2018).

Traffickers and criminal gangs often detain migrants in overcrowded facilities where they are subjected to starvation, severe beatings, burning with hot metals, electrocution, and other forms of torture. Families in Nigeria are frequently contacted and forced to send ransom payments to secure the release of their relatives. In some cases, migrants are sold repeatedly between criminal groups and required to pay multiple ransoms before being allowed to continue their journey (European Return and Reintegration Network, 2021). Another disturbing practice involves the auctioning of migrants in informal slave markets.

Reports indicate that migrants captured in Libya have been sold for forced labor or sexual exploitation. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse, which often results in unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions carried out under unsanitary conditions (European Asylum Support Office, 2017; Leadership, 2020). The dangers of trafficking journeys are further intensified by environmental risks. Many migrants traveling through the Sahara Desert die from dehydration, starvation, or suffocation during transportation in overcrowded vehicles. Others lose their lives while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in poorly constructed boats.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2019), thousands of migrants have died during these dangerous journeys in recent years. The cumulative effects of trafficking extend beyond individual victims and families to society as a whole. Communities suffer from social instability, increased criminal activity, and the erosion of moral values associated with the exploitation of vulnerable populations. Furthermore, trafficking networks contribute to transnational organized crime, undermining national security and governance.

Despite the existence of laws and international agreements aimed at combating trafficking, the problem continues to persist in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State. Government agencies and international organizations have implemented various interventions, but trafficking networks continue to evolve and adapt to enforcement measures. This persistent challenge highlights the need for greater involvement of professionals, including social workers, law enforcement officials, and policymakers, in developing effective prevention and rehabilitation strategies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts two major theoretical perspectives to explain the phenomenon of child trafficking: the Marxian Political Economy Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory.

#### **Marxian Political Economy Theory**

The Marxian political economy theory, developed by Karl Marx, focuses on the experiences of marginalized and exploited groups within society. According to this perspective, society is divided into two major classes: the bourgeoisie, who own and control the means of production, and the proletariat, who provide labor but lack economic power. This relationship is characterized by exploitation, where the dominant class benefits from the labor and vulnerability of the working class.

Within the context of child trafficking, traffickers can be viewed as actors who exploit economically vulnerable individuals for profit. Among, Donbesuur, and Samanhyia (2016) argue that traffickers prioritize financial gain while disregarding the welfare and rights of victims. This mirrors Marx's concept of capitalist exploitation, where economic power allows dominant groups to manipulate and control disadvantaged populations.

The political economy perspective also highlights the role of the state in shaping socio-economic conditions. Weak governance, corruption, and inadequate social welfare systems can contribute to poverty and unemployment, thereby increasing the likelihood that families will use children as

economic assets for survival. Under such circumstances, trafficking emerges as a survival strategy for economically marginalized households.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides another useful framework for understanding the vulnerability of trafficking victims. The theory proposes that human needs are structured in a hierarchical order, beginning with basic physiological needs such as food, shelter, and safety. Once these needs are satisfied, individuals seek higher levels of psychological and social fulfillment, including belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

In many trafficking situations, victims experience severe deprivation of basic needs. Poverty, homelessness, neglect, and lack of security create conditions in which traffickers can easily manipulate vulnerable individuals. Traffickers often promise food, housing, employment, and protection, which correspond to the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy. These promises make victims more susceptible to recruitment and exploitation (Hopper, 2016).

Furthermore, traffickers may create emotional bonds with victims by offering companionship or relationships that satisfy psychological needs for belonging and acceptance. Such tactics make it difficult for victims to escape from exploitative situations. Effective rehabilitation programs must therefore address victims' basic needs before focusing on psychological healing and social reintegration (Gezinski & Karandikar, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to obtain comprehensive and reliable data on child trafficking. The study was conducted in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The target population comprised professionals involved in child welfare and anti-trafficking interventions from key institutions, including the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Child Protection Network, Ministry of Social Development and Gender Issues (Child Welfare Department), Ministry of Justice (Prosecution Unit), Nigeria Police Force (Family Unit), the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (Social Work/Welfare Unit), and among the communities member. These institutions were selected because of their direct involvement in child protection and trafficking-related cases.

### **Sampling Technique and Sample Size**

A purposive sampling technique was used to select two senior professionals from each of the six institutions, resulting in 12 participants for in-depth interviews. In addition, 492 community respondents were selected using simple random sampling for questionnaire administration. The total sample size for the study was 504 respondents.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews to provide deeper insights into the issue of child trafficking. Interviews were conducted in English or Pidgin English, recorded with a digital recorder, and later transcribed.

## **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis. Out of the 492 questionnaires distributed, 478 were successfully retrieved, resulting in a total of 502 valid responses, including the 12 interview participants. Data analysis focused on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and study objectives.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

This presents the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. Out of 478 respondents, 246 (51.5%) were female, slightly outnumbering 232 males (48.5%), indicating balanced gender representation. This balance is significant given the study context, as perspectives on child trafficking can vary with gender, and females often occupy more roles in social and community-based child protection work.

Age distribution shows that respondents predominantly fall within middle age, with 33.5% (160) between 41–50 years, and 31.6% (151) within 31–40 years. Only 18.4% were below 30 years, and 16.5% were above 50 years. This distribution suggests that the majority of respondents are experienced professionals, which supports the credibility of their insights on child trafficking and its socio-cultural dynamics.

Marital status indicates that 65.3% (312) of respondents were married, 22.8% (109) single, 5.2% (25) divorced/separated, and 6.7% (32) widowed. The dominance of married respondents may reflect social stability and experience with family issues, relevant in understanding child trafficking dynamics and preventive measures.

### **Religion and Educational Qualification**

Regarding religious affiliation, 315 respondents (65.9%) were Christians, 135 (28.2%) Muslims, and 28 (5.9%) practiced African traditional religion. This predominance of Christianity aligns with Edo State's religious composition and suggests that religious frameworks may influence community approaches to child protection and interventions against trafficking.

Educational qualification shows that most respondents hold HND/B.Sc degrees (51.3%), followed by NCE/OND certificates (22.6%), M.Sc/Ph.D degrees (13.4%), and primary/secondary certificates (12.8%). The high level of formal education among respondents supports the reliability of their assessments of child trafficking patterns and the effectiveness of institutional responses.

## **Causes of Child Trafficking**

### **Perceived Trends**

Table 4.2 explores respondents' perceptions of the causes of child trafficking. A majority, 83.5% (399), indicated that child trafficking is increasing in Edo State, with 7.9% (38) disagreed and 8.6% (41) uncertain. Respondents identified underage girls being forced into prostitution (87.9%) as the most prevalent form, while domestic servitude (12.1%) was less common. Interviews highlighted that traffickers target young girls due to profitability, and some children voluntarily participate due to economic desperation. Additionally, some parents inadvertently facilitate trafficking due to poverty and ignorance.

### **Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors**

Poverty was highlighted as a primary driver, with 93.3% (446) agreeing it contributes significantly to trafficking. Similarly, 89.3% (427) cited lack of contentment and laziness, and 86.6% (414) noted ignorance and modernization as contributing factors. In-depth interviews underscored these findings, revealing that children's impatience, societal pressures, and deceptive promises from traffickers amplify vulnerability.

Economic factors were split equally: 50% (239) identified high unemployment, and 50% (239) identified poverty as contributing causes. Political factors were reported as 51.9% (248) lack of resourceful support and commitment to poverty alleviation, and 48.1% (230) weak government capacity. Socio-cultural influences were distributed among absentee parents (33.7%), large family size (33.1%), and low literacy level (33.3%), while environmental factors included inadequate access to social amenities (60.7%) and rapid urbanization (39.3%).

Overall, respondents perceive child trafficking as a multi-dimensional problem rooted in socio-economic deprivation, cultural attitudes, and weak governance, reflecting the complex interplay of vulnerability factors in Edo State.

## **Effects of Child Trafficking on Victims and Families**

### **Parental Involvement and Victim Profile**

This shows that 75.3% (360) of respondents believed many parents support child trafficking, whereas 24.7% (118) disagreed. Most trafficked children, 73.6% (352), were between 12–16 years, aligning with in-depth interviews where professionals highlighted the vulnerability of this age group. Respondents emphasized that parental ignorance or financial desperation often drives children into exploitative situations.

### **Consequences for Victims**

The negative impact of child trafficking is evident. 91.8% (439) reported severe detrimental effects on victims, including psychological trauma, fear of the unknown, and social stigma, while only 8.2% (39) suggested positive outcomes. Additionally, 66.5% (318) indicated that trafficking prevents victims from acquiring formal education, and 73.4% (351) confirmed that victims face

societal stigma and emotional distress. Interviews supported these findings, illustrating cases where trafficked children were denied education and subjected to emotional abuse and exploitation.

### **Gender and Involvement**

Regarding gender, respondents indicated that female children (65.9%) are disproportionately involved in trafficking, whereas 34.1% are male. Interviewees explained that females are targeted more due to the lucrative nature of sexual exploitation, reflecting patterns observed in Edo State and beyond.

### **Summary of Findings**

The socio-demographic profile of respondents shows a predominance of educated, middle-aged, and married professionals, with a slightly higher representation of females. The study confirms that child trafficking in Edo State is rising, with underage girls most affected, largely due to poverty, parental neglect, cultural factors, and weak institutional frameworks. Trafficking has negative repercussions, including denial of education, psychological trauma, social stigma, and exploitation, with female children being the most vulnerable. These findings highlight the urgent need for multi-sectoral interventions, including poverty alleviation, parental education, robust law enforcement, and social protection systems.

Child trafficking is a serious crime that violates the dignity and rights of individuals, families, communities, and the nation at large. This study examines perceptions of the causes and effects of child trafficking on victims and society through the perspectives of child welfare professionals and residents in Benin City, Edo State. Data were obtained from professionals working in selected institutions involved in child protection and anti-trafficking interventions, including the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Child Protection Network, Ministry of Social Development and Gender Issues (Child Welfare Department), Ministry of Justice (Prosecution Unit), the State Police Family Unit, University of Benin Teaching Hospital (Social Work/Welfare Unit), and among the member of the communities. These institutions were selected due to their direct involvement in addressing cases related to child trafficking.

The findings indicate that child trafficking remains prevalent in Benin City. Several factors were identified as major causes of the problem. These include poverty, unemployment, ignorance, lack of contentment, and the influence of modernization and globalization. The study also revealed that underage girls are the primary targets of traffickers, particularly for sexual exploitation and prostitution.

From an economic perspective, high unemployment and widespread poverty were identified as the most significant drivers of child trafficking. Politically, weak institutional capacity, inadequate resources, and insufficient commitment to poverty reduction policies were found to contribute significantly to the persistence of trafficking activities. Socio-cultural factors such as large family size, parental absence, and low levels of education also increase children's vulnerability to trafficking.

Environmental factors also play an important role. Limited access to basic social amenities, poor infrastructure, and rapid urbanization contribute to conditions that facilitate trafficking. In addition, migration aspirations among young people seeking better opportunities outside their communities often make them vulnerable to deception by traffickers.

The study further revealed that child trafficking has severe consequences for victims and their families. Many trafficked children are denied access to formal education and are exposed to physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Victims often experience trauma, fear, and social stigmatization upon their return to their communities. Gender differences were also observed, as females were found to be more frequently trafficked than males. The findings also showed that children between 12 and 16 years of age constitute the most vulnerable group.

The study also examined the strategies used by traffickers to facilitate their activities. These include deceptive recruitment practices, organized migration networks, smuggling routes, and the use of traditional oath-taking rituals to control victims. Although Nigeria has established laws and institutions to combat trafficking, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is often undermined by corruption, weak enforcement, and limited resources.

## **Conclusion**

Child trafficking poses serious social, economic, and human rights challenges in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State. The findings of this study highlight the complex interaction of economic hardship, socio-cultural pressures, and institutional weaknesses that contribute to the persistence of trafficking. The consequences of this crime extend beyond individual victims to affect families, communities, and the broader society.

Despite existing legal frameworks and anti-trafficking initiatives, the problem continues to persist due to inadequate enforcement, corruption, and insufficient government commitment to addressing the root causes of vulnerability. Addressing child trafficking therefore requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that includes poverty reduction, improved education, strengthened institutions, and effective law enforcement.

Ultimately, ensuring the protection and welfare of children is essential for sustainable national development. Greater commitment from government agencies, civil society organizations, and community stakeholders is required to effectively combat child trafficking and safeguard the rights and future of children in Edo State and Nigeria as a whole.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

**Public awareness and education:** Government agencies, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and media institutions should intensify public awareness campaigns on the dangers and consequences of child trafficking. Educational programs should particularly target vulnerable communities.

**Improved access to education:** Educational initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program should be strengthened to ensure that children, especially girls, have access to quality education and are less vulnerable to exploitation.

**Strengthening legal enforcement:** Existing laws against trafficking should be strictly enforced. Offenders involved in trafficking activities should face severe penalties, and assets acquired through trafficking should be confiscated to deter others.

**Accountability of all actors:** Legal sanctions should not only target traffickers but also include individuals who facilitate the process, such as parents, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and corrupt government officials involved in trafficking networks.

**Early awareness programs:** Anti-trafficking education should be incorporated into primary and secondary school curricula to educate children about the risks associated with trafficking.

**Improved border control and international collaboration:** The Nigerian government should collaborate with destination countries to strengthen border control systems and prevent illegal migration routes used by traffickers.

**Poverty reduction and social development:** Sustainable poverty alleviation programs, employment opportunities, and improved infrastructure should be prioritized to reduce the socio-economic conditions that make children vulnerable to trafficking.

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