



WOMEN AND SEX TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA: A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PANACEA

Prof. Clifford Meesua Sibani

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
clifford.sibani@ust.edu.ng
08037948880;

and

Etiowo Asuquo Jackson

Department of Religious and Cultural Studie
Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State Universit
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt
etiowo.jackson@rsu.edu.ng
08030497753

Abstract

Sex trafficking remains one of the most egregious violations of human rights in contemporary Nigeria, with women and girls constituting the overwhelming majority of victims. We are committed to view a comprehensive socio-religious analysis of women and sex trafficking in Nigeria, examining the socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors that perpetuate vulnerability, and proposing a socio-religious framework as a panacea. Drawing on existing empirical literature, policy documents, and theological perspectives, the study argues that Nigeria's multifaceted trafficking crisis demands equally multifaceted responses that integrate sociological interventions, including poverty alleviation, education, and legislative enforcement—with the moral authority and community reach of religious institutions. The paper identifies religion not merely as a coping mechanism but as a potent institutional force capable of reshaping patriarchal norms, mobilising grassroots awareness, and providing psychosocial rehabilitation for survivors. The study concludes that a synergistic socio-religious model, involving governmental agencies, civil society, faith-based organisations, and international bodies, offers the most viable pathway to dismantling the structural conditions that sustain sex trafficking in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, Religious, Sex, Trafficking, Women

Introduction

Sex trafficking constitutes one of the most grievous violations of human dignity in the contemporary world, representing a form of modern slavery that systematically strips its victims of autonomy, personhood, and fundamental rights. As a global phenomenon, it disproportionately targets women and girls from economically marginalised societies, where structural vulnerabilities intersect with gender-based discrimination to render populations susceptible to exploitation. In Nigeria, the problem has assumed alarming proportions, driven by a confluence of entrenched poverty, pervasive gender inequality, weak institutional frameworks, and deeply embedded cultural patriarchy that continues to subordinate women within both public and domestic spheres.

Nigeria ranks consistently among the highest source, transit, and destination countries for human trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa (Adepoju, 2005; Okojie, 2009). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) estimates that thousands of Nigerian women are trafficked annually to Europe, the Middle East, and within the African continent itself, where they are subjected to sexual exploitation under conditions of severe coercion, psychological manipulation, and calculated deception. These women are frequently recruited through fraudulent promises of legitimate employment, educational opportunities, or improved living conditions, only to find themselves ensnared in networks of sexual servitude from which escape is rendered nearly impossible by debt bondage, document confiscation, threats of violence, and, in some cases, the invocation of traditional religious rituals such as juju oaths to enforce compliance and silence (Carling, 2006; Plambech, 2014).

The geographic and demographic contours of this crisis are not random. Certain states in Nigeria, particularly Edo, Delta, Cross River, and Lagos, have been identified as prominent origin points for trafficked women, a pattern attributable to a combination of historical migration networks, the normative entrenchment of trafficking as an economic strategy within some communities, and the relative failure of state development interventions in these areas (Agbu, 2003; Okojie et al., 2003). The Benin City phenomenon, wherein young women from Edo State are funneled into sex work in European cities, particularly in Italy and Spain, has received significant scholarly and policy attention as a case study in the structural reproduction of trafficking (Carling, 2006).

The Nigerian state has responded to this crisis through legislative instruments, most notably the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (TIPPEA) of 2003, subsequently amended in 2015 to expand its provisions and strengthen enforcement mechanisms. Yet, despite these efforts, sex trafficking in Nigeria persists at deeply troubling levels, because legislative and enforcement responses alone are structurally inadequate to address the deep-rooted socioeconomic and cultural substrates that sustain the phenomenon (Adisa, 2012; Uyinomen, 2016).

Religion occupies a uniquely central position in Nigerian public and private life, functioning not merely as a system of personal belief but as a persuasive social institution that shapes norms, mediates community relationships, provides welfare services, and commands profound moral authority across diverse populations. With Christianity and Islam claiming the allegiance of approximately 50% and 45% of the Nigerian population respectively (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Scholars such as Agbiji and Swart (2015) and Haynes (2013) have argued that faith-based organisations (FBOs) in Africa possess unique and underutilised capacities for social mobilisation, ethical norm-formation, community-based rehabilitation, and the transformation of cultural values. Unlike state agencies, which often struggle to penetrate the fabric of local community life, religious institutions maintain sustained presence at the grassroots level, command the loyalty of large congregational networks, and possess the symbolic and moral resources necessary to reshape the normative environments in which trafficking is enabled or condoned.

This paper builds on this scholarship to argue that a socio-religious panacea, understood as an integrated approach that couples structural socio-economic reform with the normative, institutional, and clerical resources of religion, offers the most comprehensive and contextually appropriate response to the problem of women and sex trafficking in Nigeria. The paper proceeds by situating the phenomenon of sex trafficking within its socio-economic context in Nigeria,

examining the structural and cultural drivers of vulnerability, critically evaluating the limitations of existing legal and institutional responses, and then advancing a systematic argument for the integration of socio-religious strategies into a comprehensive anti-trafficking framework.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Sex trafficking, as defined by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000), commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol, encompasses the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, coercion, deception, or abuse of power, for the purpose of exploitation, including sexual exploitation. This definition is significant not merely as a legal instrument but as a conceptual frame that foregrounds the mechanisms of control through which traffickers operate. For women specifically, this definition captures the gendered architecture of exploitation, wherein vulnerability is manufactured through both structural inequalities embedded in political economy and interpersonal violence rooted in patriarchal social relations. It is important to recognise that trafficking is not an aberration or an isolated criminal act; it is, rather, a symptom of broader systemic failures in gender justice, economic equity, and social imbalance.

Theoretically, this paper draws on three complementary analytical frameworks that together illuminate the complex causality of sex trafficking and point toward the kinds of interventions most likely to produce durable change. The first is the feminist political economy framework, as advanced by Kempadoo (2005), which situates trafficking within the interlocking structures of global capitalism and patriarchal social order. This framework reveals how women's bodies become commodifiable assets within economic systems that simultaneously exclude women from legitimate markets and create demand for their sexual labour. It directs analytical attention to the macro-structural conditions, including trade asymmetries, labour market inequalities, and the feminisation of poverty, that produce pools of vulnerable women from which traffickers draw

The second framework, the push-pull theory of migration originally articulated by Lee (1966) and subsequently applied to trafficking contexts by a range of scholars, explains the migratory dynamics that underpin much sex trafficking. Push factors, including poverty, unemployment, gender-based discrimination, political instability, and armed conflict, operate simultaneously with pull factors, such as promises of economic opportunity, higher wages, educational access, and improved living standards, to render women susceptible to traffickers' deceptions. Traffickers are adept at exploiting the aspirational logics that push-pull dynamics generate, positioning themselves as migration brokers or employment facilitators who can deliver the futures that sending communities cannot.

The third framework, the capabilities approach advanced by Amartya Sen (1999) and adapted to trafficking contexts by Vijayarasa (2010), frames trafficking as a profound and multidimensional deprivation of human capabilities. These capabilities, which include access to education, health, bodily integrity, emotional well-being, and meaningful political participation, represent the substantive freedoms that constitute a dignified human life. Trafficking does not merely harm its victims in discrete, measurable ways; it systematically destroys the capability sets upon which a full human life depends, reducing persons to instruments of others' economic and sexual gratification. This framework is particularly valuable for thinking about rehabilitation and reintegration, as it shifts the metric of success from mere physical rescue to the holistic restoration of human flourishing.

The socio-religious framework proposed in here synthesises and extends these three perspectives by incorporating the institutional and normative dimensions of religion as a fourth analytical register. It recognises that religion in Nigeria functions not merely as private spirituality or individual belief but as a public institution with profound normative, social, and political dimensions that shape community life at every level (Obadare, 2018). Religious institutions are not peripheral to the reproduction of the social conditions that enable trafficking; in various ways, they are already deeply embedded within those conditions, whether through the patriarchal theologies that validate women's subordination, the silence of religious leaders in the face of trafficking within their communities, or the active mobilisation of ritual practice in the service of traffickers' control mechanisms. The socio-religious framework proposed here therefore posits that sustainable anti-trafficking efforts must simultaneously transform economic structures, gender norms, and moral-spiritual orientations, with religious institutions serving as catalysts and stakeholders across all three dimensions.

The Origin and History of Sex Trafficking in Nigeria

Nigeria's sex trafficking crisis is multi-dimensional in character, spanning internal trafficking within the country's borders, regional trafficking across West Africa, and transcontinental trafficking to Europe and the Middle East. A comprehensive understanding of its scope requires attention to all three levels, as they are interconnected by shared recruitment networks, overlapping vulnerabilities, and the same structural drivers of poverty and gender inequality.

Internally, young women from rural areas, particularly from Edo, Delta, Cross River, and Kogi States, are trafficked to Nigeria's major urban centres, including Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, where they are subjected to forced commercial sexual exploitation in brothels, massage parlours, and informal entertainment establishments (Okojie, 2009). This internal dimension of the trafficking crisis is frequently underrepresented in policy discourse, which tends to concentrate attention on the more visible and politically salient international trafficking routes. Yet internal trafficking affects large numbers of women, involves the same dynamics of coercion and deception as international forms, and in many cases serves as a staging ground through which women are subsequently moved into international trafficking networks.

At the international level, the Nigeria-Libya-Italy route has gained particular notoriety as one of the most dangerous and heavily trafficked corridors in the contemporary global trafficking landscape. Thousands of Nigerian women, the majority originating from Edo State, are transported through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea to southern Europe, enduring hazardous journey conditions, systematic rape and sexual violence along the route, and ultimately forced prostitution in Italian, Spanish, and other European cities (UNODC, 2020). The deception involved in this route is elaborate and deliberate; women are typically recruited through social networks with promises of legitimate employment in hospitality, domestic care, or retail, and become aware of the exploitative nature of their destination only after they have crossed multiple international borders and accumulated substantial fabricated debts to their traffickers.

A dimension of this international trafficking phenomenon that merits particular scholarly and policy attention is the role of the traditional Edo juju oath in the architecture of control that traffickers deploy. These oaths invoke powerful spiritual sanctions, including illness, madness, and death, and exert a form of psychological and spiritual coercion that is, for many victims, more binding than physical restraint (Carling, 2006; Howard, 2017). This phenomenon illuminates the

complex and troubling intersection of indigenous religion, cultural authority, and criminal exploitation, and it simultaneously points toward the potential for legitimate religious authority to function as a counter-coercive force in the anti-trafficking struggle.

NAPTIP statistics reveal a troubling persistence of the trafficking problem across successive years of anti-trafficking legislation and enforcement. Between 2019 and 2023, the agency prosecuted over 2,500 trafficking-related cases, with women and girls accounting for more than 80% of all identified victims (NAPTIP, 2023). These figures, while indicative of an active enforcement posture, almost certainly represent a significant undercount of actual trafficking incidence. The hidden nature of trafficking operations, the pervasive fear of stigmatisation and re-trafficking among survivors, inadequate victim identification protocols among frontline officials, and the social pressure of community complicity in trafficking-normalised areas all conspire to ensure that only a fraction of trafficking cases are ever reported, identified, or prosecuted (Adisa, 2012). The true scale of the problem is, by all credible expert assessments, considerably greater than official data reflects, and any analysis that proceeds solely on the basis of reported cases risks producing a systematically distorted picture of the crisis.

Consequences of Sex Trafficking in Nigeria

The consequences of sex trafficking for survivors are severe, multifaceted, and often irreversible. Physical consequences include sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, gynaecological complications arising from repeated sexual violence, injuries sustained through physical abuse, and the long-term health effects of inadequate nutrition and healthcare access during periods of exploitation (Okojie, 2009). Psychological consequences are equally grave, encompassing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, anxiety disorders, complex trauma responses, and in some cases suicidality, arising from prolonged exposure to sexual violence, captivity, and dehumanisation (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Social consequences compound physical and psychological harm through the dynamics of stigmatisation, community rejection, family breakdown, and the structural barriers to economic reintegration that mark many survivors' post-trafficking lives. These compounding, intersecting harms underscore the urgency of investing not only in prevention and prosecution but also, and with equal commitment, in the comprehensive, long-term rehabilitation of survivors.

Factors Enhancing Sex Trafficking in Nigeria

Poverty and Cultural Misery: Lack of financial independence constitute to sex trafficking as well as cultural discrimination against women.

Unemployment and Economic Hardship: In a nation where millions of graduates are pushed into the society without job, gives reasons for this problem. The hardship in our economy contributes significantly to this problem.

Educational Imbalance: The treatment of women as second-class citizens via preference of the male over the female is a serious challenge. Some women go sex trafficking to be educated.

Internal Crises and Insurgency: The crisis in the nation is enough reason for women to seek for a safe haven via migration just to commercialize sex.

Gender Inequality and Violence: This is a major factor in any African society especially in Nigeria. The human inequality keeps the females insecure.

Property Depravity and Denial of Rights: The denial of access to property is a fundamental problem which in most cases plays out during widow-hood practices. The fact that women are not eligible to inherit property constitute a big challenge.

Government Intervention and Agency Failures

Nigeria's legal response to sex trafficking is anchored in the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (TIPPEA), first enacted in 2003 and substantially amended in 2015 to strengthen criminal penalties, expand the definition of trafficking offences, and introduce enhanced protections for victims and witnesses. The 2015 amendment represented a meaningful legislative advance, notably extending criminalisation to trafficking for organ harvesting and improving the procedural framework for victim identification and protection. The concurrent establishment of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) as the primary institutional vehicle for anti-trafficking enforcement, victim protection, public awareness campaigns, and inter-agency coordination represents a significant and genuine expression of institutional commitment to addressing the problem (NAPTIP, 2023). NAPTIP has, over time, developed shelter facilities, rehabilitative programming, and a dedicated prosecutorial apparatus that, while imperfect, constitutes an important institutional infrastructure.

Systemic Remedies

The translation of legislative intent into effective on-the-ground protection has been severely hampered by a range of systemic and structural challenges. Corruption within law enforcement agencies remains among the most serious and persistent obstacles to effective anti-trafficking enforcement. Multiple credible accounts document police officers, immigration officials, and other frontline state agents actively facilitating trafficking networks, providing protection to known traffickers, or accepting bribes to release arrested suspects and suppress investigations (Adisa, 2012). This institutional complicity is not merely an enforcement problem; it constitutes a fundamental betrayal of the state's protection obligations toward its most vulnerable citizens, and it erodes the public trust in institutions that any effective anti-trafficking response depends upon. Limited prosecutorial capacity, comprising inadequate numbers of trained anti-trafficking prosecutors, insufficient forensic and investigative resources, and poorly equipped court systems, compounds the corruption problem by creating additional bottlenecks in the criminal justice pipeline. Insufficient funding for NAPTIP shelter facilities, inadequate provision of psychosocial support services, and the absence of long-term reintegration programming for survivors further constrain the agency's capacity to provide comprehensive victim protection (Uyinomen, 2016).

At the international level, Nigeria is a state party to the Palermo Protocol, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These instruments collectively provide a robust normative framework for anti-trafficking obligations and women's rights protections, but their practical impact is contingent on the presence of domestic political will and institutional capacity to translate international commitments into enforceable national policy. The ECOWAS Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons, developed for the 2012 to 2014 period and subsequently renewed, represents an important regional coordination mechanism that acknowledges the transboundary character of trafficking and seeks to build inter-state responses. Its results have, however, been decidedly

mixed, in part due to inconsistent implementation across member states and the absence of robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms (Adepoju, 2005).

Civil society organisations have played an increasingly vital and in many respects irreplaceable role in filling the protective and rehabilitative gaps left by state institutions whose capacity and commitment remain uneven. Organisations such as the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), the Girls Power Initiative, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA Nigeria), and numerous faith-based organisations have collectively provided legal aid, emergency shelter, vocational training, psychosocial counseling, and community sensitisation services to trafficking survivors and at-risk populations (Ikeora, 2016). These organisations frequently operate in communities that state institutions are unable or unwilling to adequately serve, and their relational capital with local communities gives them credibility and access that official bodies cannot replicate.

Challenges Facing Sex Trafficking in Nigeria

Traffickers and exploiters often prey on vulnerable individuals with promises of jobs or financial opportunities, only to trap them in abusive situations. This exploitation creates a cycle of trauma, with individuals often finding it difficult to escape due to threats or a lack of support, (Sibani, & Regson, 2025). The following are the challenges facing sex trafficking in Nigeria:

1. Religious Complacency:

The socio-religious panacea proposed in is not without significant challenges and legitimate critiques. Perhaps the most fundamental critique concerns the complicity of religious institutions in the very patriarchal structures that sustain trafficking vulnerability. Many Nigerian Christian and Muslim institutions have themselves been forum of gender discrimination, sexual abuse, and the reinforcement of harmful gender norms. To propose religious institutions as vehicles of women's liberation without confronting this complicity would be analytically and ethically untenable (Obadare, 2018).

2. Socio-Religious Exploitation:

The phenomenon of religious leaders weaponising spiritual authority for exploitation including cases of pastors and Islamic teachers sexually exploiting vulnerable women under spiritual pretexts demands rigorous accountability mechanisms within religious institutions. A socio-religious anti-trafficking approach must therefore include robust internal reforms: gender-responsive governance of religious organisations, transparent financial management of rehabilitation funds, and formal accountability structures that protect women from exploitation by religious leaders themselves, (Haynes, 2013).

3. Weak Political Economic Reform:

There is also a risk that an excessive emphasis on religious responses may inadvertently depoliticise trafficking, framing it as a moral or spiritual problem requiring individual and communal conversion rather than a structural problem requiring state action and systemic reform. Kempadoo (2005) warns against approaches that locate the source of trafficking primarily in cultural or moral deficits rather than in the global political economy of gender, race, and migration that creates structural demand for trafficked labour. A credible socio-religious framework must maintain this political-economic critique while incorporating religious resources.

4. Religious Diversity:

Tensions between different religious traditions and denominations complicate the prospect of unified religious engagement. Nigeria's religious landscape is characterised by significant internal

diversity across denominations within Christianity and Islam, and between these and African Traditional Religion as well as periodic inter-religious tensions. Coordinating a coherent socio-religious response that transcends these divisions requires careful diplomatic engagement and an emphasis on shared values of human dignity and justice that cut across religious boundaries (Agbiji & Swart, 2015).

5. Recognition of Survivors Right and Inclusivity:

Finally, the risk of paternalism inherent in rescue-and-rehabilitation models including faith-based ones must be acknowledged. Sex trafficking survivors are not passive objects of intervention but agents with their own perspectives, priorities, and survival strategies. A genuinely empowering socio-religious approach must centre the voices and leadership of survivors themselves, ensuring that anti-trafficking programmes are designed with rather than for affected women (Vijayarasa, 2010).

Socio-Religious Panacea to Sex Trafficking

1. Religious Empowerment and Follow-up: Religious organizations should empower women and the vulnerable in the society economically and ensures close monitoring to ensure liberation.

2. Intervention through Counseling: Religious and pastoral counseling is key factor for a change of orientation and ensures boldness to challenge injustice

3. Influence of Religious Authority: Religious authority is a key voice in Nigerian nation. They should stand against it, preach against it and ensures government intervenes.

4. Religious Prayer and Deliverance Impact: Prayer should be intensified with impactful deliverance program for the emancipation of those bound. In most cases, it is more of spiritual. The victims need help.

5. Religious Education and Awareness: The presence of education is light to any society. Religious education will reveal the plan and purpose of God for man and create insight to the problem of sex out of marriage.

6 Faith-Based Reintegration and Rehabilitation: Religious organization should reintegrate and rehabilitate those who are traffickers of sex in the society by showing them love and giving them hope.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. The Nigerian government should strengthen its collaboration with faith-based organisations, formalising partnerships through which FBOs receive funding, training, and integration into the national anti-trafficking referral mechanism. NAPTIP should establish a dedicated faith-based partnership unit to coordinate these relationships and ensure accountability.

2. Religious institutions should undertake comprehensive internal gender audits, identifying and reforming internal practices that perpetuate gender inequality and create conditions for exploitation. Religious training institutions should incorporate gender justice and anti-trafficking content into curricula for pastors, imams, and religious educators.

3. A nationally coordinated socio-religious public awareness campaign on trafficking, modelled on successful HIV/AIDS campaigns that successfully leveraged religious networks, should be developed and funded by a consortium of government, international donors, and religious organisations.



4. Economic empowerment programmes including savings cooperatives, microfinance access, vocational training, and girls' bursaries should be expanded through religious institutions, targeting communities with the highest trafficking vulnerability.
5. Counter-ritual and spiritual healing programmes, developed in consultation with traditional religious authorities in source communities, should be integrated into survivor rehabilitation protocols to address the spiritual dimensions of trafficking-related trauma (Howard, 2017).
6. Survivor-centred programming must be institutionalised across all anti-trafficking initiatives, ensuring that women with lived experience of trafficking are meaningfully engaged in programme design, governance, and advocacy.
7. International and bilateral cooperation frameworks should be deepened, with particular attention to Nigerian diaspora religious communities in Europe who are strategically positioned to provide support to victims in destination countries while channeling resources and advocacy back to source communities in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Women and sex trafficking in Nigeria is a crisis of profound complexity, rooted in structural poverty, gender inequality, cultural patriarchy, institutional weakness, and global demand for exploitable labour. Legislative and law enforcement responses, while necessary, are demonstrably insufficient on their own. This paper has argued that a socio-religious panacea one that harnesses the institutional resources, moral authority, community networks, and spiritual capacity of Nigeria's religious Organisation within a framework of structural socio-economic reform offers the most comprehensive and culturally appropriate response to this crisis. The socio-religious framework advanced in this paper is not a retreat from structural critique but an expansion of it. It recognises that religion in Nigeria is not epiphenomenal to social reality but constitutive of it shaping economic behaviours, gender relations, political culture, and psychological experience. To exclude religion from anti-trafficking responses is therefore to exclude a central dimension of the problem and a central resource for its resolution.

At the same time, religious engagement must be critical and accountable, confronting the complicity of religious institutions in patriarchy and exploitation rather than assuming their benevolence. The women who are trafficked in Nigeria are not merely victims of circumstance but bearers of full human dignity whose capabilities for education, work, health, love, and political participation have been violently suppressed. Any adequate response must be commensurate with the full humanity of those affected, addressing not only their physical and economic needs but their psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. In this, the resources of Nigeria's rich and diverse religious traditions, critically and courageously mobilised, have an indispensable role to play in liberating women in sex trafficking in Nigerian environment.

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