

## DYNAMICS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA.

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### Abstract

Human trafficking, particularly involving children and women for forced labour and sexual exploitation, remains a pressing global issue. Despite international efforts, including the United Nations' Global Program Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GPAT) and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, an estimated 40.3 million people worldwide remain trapped in modern slavery, generating \$150 billion annually. Sub-Saharan Africa, especially West Africa, is severely impacted, with Nigeria being the largest source of trafficked victims. Annually, about 100,000 Nigerians are trafficked for sexual and labour exploitation, often across borders, with the Nigerian and Benin Republic borders serving as hotspots for such activities. This study investigates the root causes and trends of human trafficking along this border, focusing on Oyo State, which shares three recognized international borders with the Republic of Benin. Using snowball and purposive sampling techniques, interviews were conducted with immigration officers, alongside thematic analysis of secondary data from immigration reports and published articles. The findings highlight the role of conflict theory in understanding trafficking, with factors such as border corruption, economic mismanagement, political instability, unemployment, poverty, porous borders, and weak rule-of-law enforcement contributing to the problem. The study underscores gaps in existing policies and calls for coordinated efforts from government authorities, civil society, and international partners to effectively combat modern slavery in Nigeria and Africa.

**Keywords:** Border, human trafficking, forced labour, Oyo State

### Introduction

Human trafficking is a lucrative criminal venture in Nigeria and the African continent in general (Omojola, 2023; Abiodun, Akinlawon, Abah et al, 2020; Chia, 2018). This fact is attested to by sheer value of the criminal act across the globe. According to statistics by Pathfinders Justice Initiative (2023), the trafficking in person crimes stands at over \$150billion. The modus operandi of this dynamic crime is such that while forced labour and sexual exploitation are the core purposes and sources of the financial returns, sexual exploitation which has comparatively lesser victims produces more financial returns (PJI, 2023; Ibrahim & Omoregbe, 2020). This has undermined both international and national efforts to address and curb the spread of human trafficking globally and across nations (EASO, 2021; Hynes, Gani-Yusuf, Burland et al, 2018; Nwogu, 2014; UNODC, 2006). The collaboration and transnational organized criminal networks on which trafficking thrives have also negatively impacted on the efforts of national and international agencies to curb the menace (Nwogu, 2014). According to recent statistics by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), there are over 50million persons trafficked annually for labour or sexual purposes across the globe (PJI, 2023). This number is more staggering considering that many

African and developing countries do not keep current records on the unofficial and irregular migratory patterns of their citizens across international borders. Therefore, the number of trafficked persons who most likely are underage or adolescents from developing countries may be more than what is internationally acknowledged.

In Nigeria, trafficking-in-person or human trafficking has a long history, according to some records, traceable to colonial and immediate post-colonial times (Ayodele, Olawale, Olubayo-Fatiregun & Adeleke, 2020; Chia, 2018; Olasupo & Ile-Ife, 2012). The rationale for this claim is cultural and historical ties that facilitated the forced migration of many Nigerians from different parts of Europe through land and maritime trade routes (Olasupo & Ile-Ife, 2012). From the reports of irregular movements across the African continent and specifically Nigeria, it could be rationalized that these routes have been rejuvenated for irregular cross-border migration especially those involved in trafficking in person. Irrespective of the motivations and patterns of movement for trafficking, existing national and international reports presents very worrying data on the state of human trafficking in the country especially for sexual exploitation (European Asylum Support Office, 2021; Ibrahim &

Omoregbe, 2020). The motivation for this research however aligns more with the patterns of movement than the motivations for engaging these irregular movements and criminalities. The routes engaged for trafficking in persons in Nigeria vary according to purposes and intent and this will be explored in this study.

Southwest Nigeria and specifically Oyo state is one of the important international border regions in southern Nigeria which borders neighbouring Benin Republic and which has been identified as a major smuggling route over the years (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Olasupo & Ile Ife, 2012; UNESCO, 2006). The importance of this region however in driving human trafficking has been scarcely researched in the literature especially considering that smuggling constitutes only one of the several crimes through this international passage. Furthermore, several reports have identified towns and cities in the state as a major destination point for domestic trafficking as well as a source transit and destination points for international trafficking (Olayiwola, 2019; Adeleye, 2017; UNESCO, 2006). This paper intends to examine the prevalence of human trafficking in Oyo state Nigeria

The paper is structured for a coherent study along the following pattern. The rest of the paper presents a brief literature review on trafficking in Nigeria and southwest specifically, the methodology for the research, results and discussion and policy recommendations/conclusion.

### Literature Review

Statistically, there is a dearth of data on the actual rate of human trafficking in Nigeria and this is attested to in several studies and reports (EASO, 2021; Olayiwola, 2019; Oyebanji, 2017). The best on the stats of human trafficking in the country are approximates and projections from international agencies and few arrests by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person (NAPTIP). The reasons are not farfetched. Generally, Nigeria struggles with accurate data on criminalities and demography especially relating to patterns of movements and routes engaged by criminals for criminalities (Oyebanji, 2017; Nwogu, 2014). According to existing data from the UN, the EU and other nongovernmental agencies however, trafficking across Nigeria are generally of two types: domestic and international (EASO, 2021; UNODC, 2006; UNESCO, 2006). The former has to do with the migration or movement of adolescents and vulnerable young persons between the ages of 12 and 18 years from their natural location, mostly rural to urban city centers with the promise of better educational and

economic prospects (Adeleye, 2017; Garba & Nik, 2015). This has been reported mostly for villages in the southeastern and south-southern parts of the country where due to pervading poverty and socioeconomic deprivations, many families, communities and homes are convinced to release their young wards to relatives (close or distant) in cities (Chia, 2018; Aderigbibe & Olaleye, 2018). The destination cities for this kind of trafficking according to extant studies are Abeokuta, Kano, Kaduna, Port Harcourt, Abuja, Lagos, Calabar, and Ibadan while the victims are mostly persons from Kano, Anambra, Bayelsa, Ebonyi, Imo, Cross River, Niger and Kwara (EASO, 2021; Duru & Ogbonnaya, 2012). For this form of trafficking however, reports show that the victims are taken to cities and exploited as child labours or sex workers without their consent or knowledge of their parents and can seldom find their ways back to their home towns or destinations (Abiodun et al, 2020; Oyebanji, 2017; UNODC, 2006).

The latter form trafficking however is more proliferate and delicate often involving some form of consent howbeit deceptive. According to studies across the country, this form of trafficking takes place when trafficking agents approach young men and young women often times engaged in small scale entrepreneurship or employment for better prospects in foreign countries (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Adio-Moses et al, 2020). According to EASO (2021), this pattern of interaction and engagement has resulted in the migration of countless thousands of unsuspecting young Nigerian women and men who pay to embark on the dangerous journey to Europe only to discover the shocking reality of being kidnapped or manipulated by a criminal syndicate. Reports put the number of persons trafficked annually from Nigeria to neighbouring African countries at an uncertain number but while the closest routes to these international travels are identified as Ogun, Oyo, Anambra, Akwa Ibom and Lagos states. But the Global Slavery Index report ranked Nigeria 38/160 with over 1.6million recorded slaves, the majority of whom are women and girls (Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2023). According to NAPTIP, between 2019 and 2022, 61% of human trafficking in Nigeria occurred internally while 39% were cross-border trafficking (PJI, 2023). The scarce literature on international traffic routes from the country places two strategic southwestern states Ogun and Oyo (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Adeleye, 2017; Nwogu, 2014). Other states are however stated in the context of human trafficking both as transit locations and source for victims amongst which are Lagos, Ondo, Ekiti and Osun (EASO, 2021; Garba & Nik, 2015; Hynes et al, 2018).

The place of Ogun and Oyo in the movement of trafficking in persons in Nigeria is not explicitly evident in existing literatures especially as they relate to international trafficking. What is however evident is the fact that by sharing international borders with neighbouring Benin Republic, both states are implicated as obvious routes for illegal international movements especially considering the historical and cultural ties between communities in both states and Beninese communities (Hynes et al, 2018; Adeleye, 2017; Olasupo & Ile-Ife, 2012). Statistics showed that as late as 2003, over 116 children were intercepted from international trafficking and slavery by joint police operations at the border region between Benin and the southwestern states of Oyo, Ogun and Osun (UNODC, 2006). Other studies identify that the majority of child labourers trafficked to the southwest region are used for begging, domestic labour, and farm labours. Interestingly, Ogunniyi and Idowu (2022) posits in his study that of the total number of trafficked persons in the country, 75% are trafficked within states, 23% are trafficked between states and only 2% are trafficked outside the country. Also considering that few studies have identified the southwest states of Ogun and Oyo as destination states for child labours, and prostitutions as well as the international links to cross-border trafficking, there is need to investigate their roles in international human trafficking.

It is established in the literature however that the southern states of Edo and Delta contribute significantly to the population of trafficked persons for sexual exploitation especially to Europe (EASO, 2021; Ibrahim & Omoregbe, 2020; Hynes et al, 2018). But the routes engaged by these Europe-bound trafficked persons have been identified in the southwestern region in Nigeria bringing considerable attention to the region (Ayodele et al, 2020; Olasupo & Ile-Ife, 2012; UNESCO, 2006). A 2006 UNESCO study also reported that women and children were trafficked from Saki, a town in Oyo state to the neighbouring African countries of Benin, Guinea, Mali and Cote d'Ivoire to work as prostitutes, domestic servants and hawkers (UNESCO, 2006). Many years later and this trajectory has not changed although the dynamics of the movement is yet to be properly documented in the literature (Adeleye, 2017).

The dynamics of trafficking in Nigeria and across the globe have been noted to involve a network of criminals working closely but loosely at various strategic points to successfully transport the victims across national and international borders (Chia, 2018; Hynes et al, 2018). This criminal network is strategic in the perpetrating the crimes because as several

authors have noted, it constitutes members of various immigration and border agencies, police authorities, local criminal gangs, traditional authorities and even government officials (Adeleye, 2017). The modus operandi of this network is such that strategic individuals provide necessary information and resources required to easily transport trafficked individuals without getting caught by government security agencies (Aderibigbe & Olaleye, 2018; Adeleye, 2017). According to Nwogu (2014), this syndicate is usually sponsored by very wealthy persons who supply the financial inducement needed to coo the supports of strategic individuals. This concept is engaged as a framework to understand how the movement of cross-border victims are engaged within the Oyo state international border regions.

### **Methodology**

The study is essentially qualitative research and utilized both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through interviews, including in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD), while secondary data relied on existing literature to provide a coherent and concise understanding of the southwest border region's role in driving cross-border trafficking in persons. Findings from the field study were compared with those from reviewed studies and literature on international trafficking in Nigeria, particularly through the border communities of Ogun and Oyo states. The study employed desktop analysis of data, and the findings are discussed below. Participants interviewed for the study were recruited from the study areas, specifically officers of the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) in Ibadan, Oyo State. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with a Deputy Comptroller, a Superintendent, and a Deputy Superintendent. Additionally, a focus group discussion (FGD) was held with one Assistant Comptroller, one Chief Superintendent, one Assistant Superintendent I, and three Assistant Superintendent II officers of the Nigeria Immigration Service, Oyo State Command.

### **Section 4 Results and findings**

#### **Stylistic Facts and trends of Human trafficking in Oyo State**

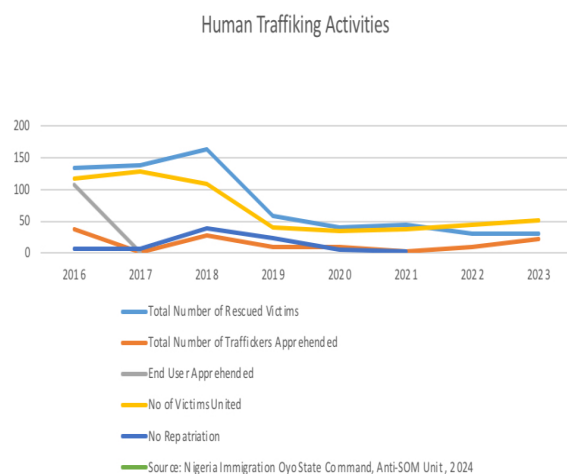
The data provided by the Nigeria Immigration Oyo State Command, Anti-SOM Unit, tracks human trafficking activities over an eight-year period from 2016 to 2023. The table highlights the total number of rescued victims, traffickers apprehended, end users apprehended, victims united, and cases of repatriation.

**Table 1: Human Trafficking Activities**

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Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total Number of Rescued Victims	134	139	163	59	40	44	31	30
Total Number of Traffickers Apprehended	38	1	27	9	10	2	10	22
End User Apprehended	107	1			28			
No of Victims United	117	128	109	40	35	37	44	52
No Repatriation	6	6	39	24	5	3		

Source: Nigeria Immigration Service, Oyo State Command, Anti-SOM Unit, 2024



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The results of this study present a comprehensive analysis of human trafficking activities in Oyo State from 2016 to 2023, as shown in Table 1. This period provides critical insights into the trends and patterns associated with the rescue of victims, apprehension of traffickers, and repatriation efforts. The data reveal a fluctuating yet persistent nature of trafficking cases, highlighting the efforts by law enforcement agencies and the ongoing challenges in addressing the issue. In 2016, 134 victims of human trafficking were rescued, representing a substantial number of individuals affected by this illicit activity. This year also saw 38 traffickers apprehended, indicating active operations by criminal networks within the state. Moreover, 107 end users were apprehended, underscoring the demand side of human trafficking. Efforts to reunite victims with their families were fruitful, as 117 individuals were successfully reintegrated. Furthermore, six cases of repatriation were documented, reflecting efforts to

return victims to their countries of origin, particularly those trafficked across international borders.

In 2017, the number of victims rescued increased to 139, but the number of traffickers apprehended sharply declined to just one, suggesting possible lapses in enforcement or changes in criminal operations that made detection more difficult. Similarly, only one end user was apprehended during this period. Despite these challenges, reunification efforts improved, with 128 victims successfully reunited with their families. Repatriation efforts remained consistent, with six cases recorded, matching the previous year's figures.

In 2018, the number of rescued victims rose to 163, marking the highest figure within the study period. This increase could be attributed to enhanced enforcement measures or heightened awareness campaigns. During the same year, 27 traffickers were apprehended, indicating progress in identifying and prosecuting perpetrators. However, no cases of end users being apprehended were reported, raising concerns about addressing the demand side of trafficking. Efforts to reunite victims with their families remained steady, with 109 individuals reintegrated. Notably, repatriation cases surged to 39, reflecting a significant focus on international trafficking victims.

A drastic decline in rescued victims was observed in 2019, with only 59 individuals freed. According to the Head of the Human Trafficking Unit of the Oyo State Command, this decrease was not due to reduced law enforcement activities or shifts in trafficking operations but was linked to the intensified launch of anti-trafficking operations by the Oyo State Command (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024). There were no recorded apprehensions of end users during this year, raising questions about the prioritization of demand-side interventions. On a positive note, 40 victims were reunited with their families, and 24 cases of repatriation were carried out, demonstrating continued efforts to support affected individuals.

In 2020, the number of rescued victims further declined to 40. Despite this, 10 traffickers were apprehended, suggesting some level of enforcement continuity. End-user apprehensions resumed, with 28 individuals arrested, indicating efforts to address the demand side of trafficking. Family reunifications slightly decreased to 35, while five repatriation cases were recorded, reflecting limited but ongoing efforts to assist victims trafficked across borders. The year 2021 saw a slight increase in the number of rescued victims, rising to 44. However, no end users were

apprehended, raising concerns about the sustainability of efforts to combat the demand for trafficked persons. Family reunifications remained consistent, with 35 victims reintegrated into their communities. Similarly, five cases of repatriation were recorded, reflecting steady efforts to address international trafficking cases.

The total number of rescued victims showed a slight decline in the following years, from 44 in 2021 to 31 in 2022, and further to 30 in 2023. Conversely, the number of traffickers apprehended exhibited a significant upward trend. In 2021, only two traffickers were apprehended, but this figure surged to 10 in 2022 and more than doubled to 22 in 2023. This sharp increase was attributed to improved efficiency, coordination, and enforcement by the Oyo State Command. Meanwhile, the number of victims reunited steadily increased, from 37 in 2021 to 44 in 2022, and further to 52 in 2023. This trend suggests that despite challenges, concerted efforts have been made to prioritize the rehabilitation and reintegration of rescued victims. The rise in reunifications highlights the success of post-rescue processes in restoring victims to their families and communities.

The findings reveal the dynamics of human trafficking in Oyo State. While significant progress has been made in rescuing victims and reuniting them with their families, the study underscores the importance of international cooperation and resource allocation to address cross-border trafficking effectively. By analyzing these trends, it is evident that a holistic approach is needed to combat human trafficking, involving enhanced law enforcement, community awareness, and comprehensive support for victims.

#### **Dynamics of Human trafficking in Oyo trafficking**

The trend in human trafficking activities in Oyo State, as depicted in the table above, reveals notable shifts in the dynamics of trafficking over the years. A respondent stated, "Human trafficking, unlike the trafficking of drugs or goods, is a crime that eludes immediate visibility, making it far more complex to address. The psychological and investigative efforts required to identify victims underline the gravity of this crime" (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024). Foluso Akintola, Assistant Comptroller of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Labour unit of the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS), lamented in 2019 that Oyo State, particularly Ibadan and its environs, has become a hotspot for human trafficking. The annual rise in rescued victims confirms this unsettling trend (Ojoye, 2019).

Nigeria's role as a source, transit, and destination country for trafficking renders Oyo State especially vulnerable due to its strategic location in western Nigeria with three recognized international borders with Benin Republic: Okerete, Anyegun-Wasinmi, and Igbokoko. Despite these vulnerabilities, the intensified operations of the NIS in Oyo State have brought notable improvements, as reflected in the decline in trafficking incidents. This reduction, however, does not signify diminished trafficking activities but rather highlights the effectiveness of the command's counter-trafficking measures.

One officer's reflection on this improvement offers valuable insight: upon returning to Oyo State in 2021 after a previous posting in 2015, the officer observed a significant decline in the number of trafficking victims apprehended during raids (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024). The officer credited this to the continuous sensitization programs and public awareness campaigns conducted by the command. These interventions, aimed at exposing the dangers of human trafficking, particularly at the grassroots level, have contributed significantly to the reduction of the crime (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024).

However, the evolving dynamics of trafficking reveal that child labor has emerged as a major concern, with young children trafficked from neighboring countries like Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Niger Republic for domestic work and hazardous services. Respondents from a focus group interview indicated an alarming rise in child labor activities in Oyo State, both in urban and rural areas. They noted that among the children involved in this form of labor are Oyo State indigenes, where minors are employed as house helps, shop attendants, and hawkers. A respondent blamed this phenomenon on the collapse of socio-cultural values, pointing out that trafficked children are often taken in by influential individuals under the pretense of fostering but are instead exploited for labor. These children, mostly under 18, are supposedly enrolled in schools to "learn English" and communicate with their guardians' children, masking the true intent of their exploitation (FGD/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024).

The findings reveal that the movement of trafficked persons across Oyo State's borders is marked by sophisticated strategies designed to evade detection. According to interviews, traffickers often transport victims in groups, with young boys and girls either coerced or deceived into compliance. Large groups tend to draw the attention of law enforcement, prompting traffickers to bribe corrupt officers to

facilitate passage. Bribes ranging from ₦500,000 to ₦1,000,000 are reportedly offered to immigration officers. A respondent noted that traffickers strategically separate victims across multiple vehicles to avoid suspicion, with designated meeting points at hotels or remote locations. Security officers' vigilance and collaboration are crucial in intercepting such movements (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024).

This pattern illustrates the desperate attempts of traffickers to deliver victims to end users. It was also revealed that when traffickers move single victims, they use threats to silence them during security checks. However, victims can sometimes be identified through careful observation and compassionate interaction by security agents. For instance, offering food or engaging in casual conversation can help children open up about their true circumstances. One officer recounted a strategy involving taking photographs and building rapport with a child to uncover the trafficker's deceit. Such interventions often reveal that the supposed guardian paid the child's parents for custody under false pretenses, exposing the exploitation at hand.

A respondent shared an example:

You tip those boys...give him food, give him time to rest, play with him. I may bring out pictures, snap him...I want to ask him questions. By the time I finish up with him, he will tell me details like, 'that man is not my father o; he only came to snatch me from my father. He gave my father some money, and my father said I should follow him.' When they are coming, maybe he has not bought bread for them. Maybe he was just giving them snacks like *agbado*. When we get to where they want to use you, they'll give you food. When you see them, give them something let them eat. Sometimes ordinary pure water will make them confess. If

you scare them, you will not get any information. You have to be careful with those children" (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer/2024)

### **Transit Locations and Cross-Border Implications**

Saki, a town in Oyo State, has emerged as a known transit hub for international human trafficking. Studies confirm that foreign nationals from Togo and Benin Republic are frequently trafficked through this route for sexual exploitation and other illicit activities (Adeleye, 2017; Olayiwola, 2019; Nwogu, 2014). Oyo State's strategic location as an international trafficking route underscores its role in both the exit of Nigerians and the entry of foreign nationals for exploitation. Criminal networks operating across these borders collaborate with gangs in neighboring countries to facilitate the illegal movement of persons. Reports indicate that girls and children constitute the majority of trafficked individuals, with traffickers targeting them for prostitution and forced labor (Abiodun et al., 2020; Olayiwola, 2019). A respondent provided further context:

Let me mention like 10 routes. They come through Okerete, Sanisala, there is a place in Saki they call Orita. They also come through Abu Gudu and Exit Togo Mbele along Ijo. There is a place along Ijo—I don't know the real name, but they just bust out and enter Nigeria. Many like that because Nigerian borders are very porous. We have Yerawo and many open, and vulnerable borders routes. (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer 2/2024).

### **Another respondent highlighted the covert nature of these movements:**

"It will be difficult for a group of young girls or teenagers or little children to be moved, let's say from Ibadan or Saki, across the border without anybody noticing them, though they will not go through the registered border they will go through the illegal ones" (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer 1/2024).

Ibadan City, Oyo town among other elite towns in Oyo state have also been identified in various studies as destinations for several victims transported from other parts of Nigeria and beyond (EASO, 2021; Okenyodo, 2020; Gabriel & Fayomi, 2012). For cross-border victims smuggled into the country, reports identify Saki as the main entry and exit point (Olayiwola, 2019). The strategic role of Saki is underscored in the literature, which identifies the town as a hub for illegal trade, smuggling, and trafficking in the southwest, connecting Nigeria to the outside world (Adeleye, 2019; Nwogu, 2014). Reports by UNESCO confirm repeated interceptions of traffickers at the Saki border corridor, raising ongoing security concerns about human trafficking in Nigeria (UNESCO, 2006). Border security in this region is therefore vital not only for the safety of Nigerians but also for the local community. While Lagos and Ogun are prominent destinations for internal and international trafficking, the specifics of the criminal networks and the modus operandi of traffickers in these regions remain unclear (Adeleye, 2017; Nwogu, 2014; UNESCO, 2006).

**A respondent emphasized the operational challenges posed by the vastness of Oyo State's borders:**

The borders in Oyo State are a long stretch, and even if we deploy all the officers in Oyo State along with other sister agencies and work together, we cannot cover that stretch. So apart from the Saki border patrol, we have Igangan, Iseyin, Alemiboro, and other strategic border patrol and forward operational bases in the state. These stations discharge their duties and are involved in our counter-trafficking operations" (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer 1/2024).

**Factors Driving Human Trafficking**

Human trafficking in Oyo State is driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic and structural factors. Chronic poverty, lack of economic opportunities, ignorance, and weak border controls collectively fuel this illegal enterprise. Each of these themes highlights the systemic vulnerabilities exploited by traffickers and the socio-economic consequences for victims and their communities.

**Economic hardship**

Poverty is a foundational driver of human trafficking in Oyo State and across West Africa. Families struggling to meet basic needs are more vulnerable to the deceptive promises of traffickers who offer financial security and better livelihoods. Chronic poverty often forces parents and guardians to entrust their children to traffickers under the belief that this will lead to better opportunities. This pattern is

particularly evident in rural areas, where trafficked children frequently end up in forced labor.

**One respondent illustrated this connection:**

"When there is poverty in the land in the underdeveloped countries, i.e., if there is poverty, there will be trafficking to an underdeveloped country where there is no poverty. And that's where we have people going for *Oloshos* (sexual exploitation), to make money."

(IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer 2/2024)

This perspective aligns with research findings (Abiodun et al., 2020; Onifade, 2017), which consistently identify poverty as a significant driver of trafficking. Victims are often trapped in exploitative conditions, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency. The scarcity of economic opportunities serves as a significant pull factor for individuals who fall victim to trafficking. Many victims are lured by promises of better economic prospects abroad or in distant urban centers. This false promise of economic security perpetuates irregular migration and trafficking. Studies corroborate this finding, noting that young Nigerians undertake risky cross-border journeys due to the allure of supposed opportunities (Oyebanji, 2017; Hynes et al., 2018).

Trafficking has become a profitable business for individuals and networks in both Nigeria and neighboring Francophone countries. In some cases, trafficking is perceived as a trade rather than a crime, particularly in areas with limited awareness of its exploitative nature. One respondent noted:

Trafficking has become a lucrative business for some, particularly in areas dominated by Francophone cultures, where the crime is viewed more as a trade than a violation. Nigerians involved in trafficking often disguise themselves as citizens of neighboring countries, such as Benin or Togo, to evade detection (FGD/NIS Oyo/Participant 4/2024).

**Lack of Awareness**

Lack of Awareness plays a central role in the persistence of human trafficking. Despite global and national awareness campaigns, many individuals and communities remain unaware of the deceptive practices and exploitative nature of trafficking. Victims often perceive trafficking as a legitimate avenue for achieving economic mobility. Societal misconceptions and limited understanding of trafficking as a crime exacerbate the issue. One respondent emphasized this:

Most of the problem is knowledge. Most of them are not knowledgeable. They are ignorant. They see this trafficking as doing their legitimate business. Some don't know that it is a crime. So, they see us as harassing innocent people. (FGD/NIS Oyo/Participant 2/2024)

Adeleye (2017) similarly noted that ignorance drives the migration of trafficked Beninese and Togolese girls to cities like Ibadan and Lagos, where they often end up in sex work. For children trafficked from neighboring countries, ignorance exposes them to exploitation in farm labor, street hawking, and other forms of forced labor (EASO, 2021; Ibrahim & Omoregbe, 2020; UNESCO, 2006). Although periodic awareness campaigns are conducted by government agencies and NGOs (Omojola, 2023; Olayiwola, 2019; Nwoju, 2014), their effectiveness is limited, as evidenced by recurring trafficking activities in border communities. Additional drivers of human trafficking include the high demand for cheap labor and paid sex. This facilitates the operations of trafficking networks, exacerbating the problem and undermining border security measures.

### **Recruitment Patterns**

The recruitment of human trafficking victims in Oyo State and across Nigeria is facilitated by a combination of poverty, misinformation, familial trust, and societal norms. These factors allow traffickers to operate unchecked, employing manipulative tactics to lure victims into exploitation. Traffickers often prey on vulnerable individuals, exploiting their economic hardships and lack of access to reliable information. False promises of financial security, better education, and lucrative job opportunities are powerful tools used to deceive victims and their families. One respondent emphasized the role of disinformation in recruitment:

"The patterns of recruitment so far have been information and disinformation. This is a powerful tool they use they make false promises and unrealistic lifestyles. If you notice these days, the Nigeria Immigration Service of this command has been issuing warnings and investigating radio stations promoting free travels and unapproved visa lottery slots to the masses, especially in the Middle East, and they only have one goal: to make them *Shagala* [domestic servants] (IDI/NIS Oyo/Officer 3/2024)

It was also revealed that trafficker make use of local radio stations to advertise fraudulent visa lotteries and free travel opportunities, further enticing victims into exploitation. These advertisements often target poor groups, promising unrealistic paths to prosperity abroad.

Parents or guardians, struggling with financial instability, often play an unwitting role in the recruitment process. Traffickers leverage familial trust, with relatives such as cousins, uncles, and aunts frequently acting as intermediaries. This familial involvement reduces parental hesitation to release their children, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation. A respondent from the focus group discussion highlighted this dynamic:

"Parents or guardians, often struggling financially, are complicit in this process. Many victims are coerced into leaving home under the guise of education or employment. Parents are persuaded to send their children with relatives or acquaintances, believing they will receive better opportunities in cities or abroad. In reality, these children are trafficked for domestic labor or prostitution, with traffickers pocketing the profits. (FGD/NIS Oyo/Officer 3/2024).

Another respondent agreed with the statement above stating that the pattern is particularly prevalent among victims from neighboring countries like Benin and Togo. NIS officers often find themselves rescuing trafficked children and returning them to their home countries. (FGD/NIS Oyo/Officer 5/2024).

The recruitment patterns for human trafficking in Oyo State reveal the manipulative tactics traffickers use to exploit poverty, ignorance, and familial trust. The role of disinformation, particularly through local media, and the complicity of trusted family members highlight the systemic vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit.

### **Conclusion**

The dynamics of human trafficking in Oyo State are deeply rooted in its strategic location, entrenched socio-economic challenges, and the adaptability of criminal networks. While efforts by the Nigerian Immigration Service and other stakeholders have achieved some success in curbing trafficking activities, the persistence of systemic issues such as chronic poverty, widespread misinformation, porous borders, and institutional corruption continues to fuel this illegal enterprise. These factors, combined with familial complicity and the manipulation of cultural and economic vulnerabilities, have entrenched trafficking as a complex and multifaceted problem in the region. To effectively combat human trafficking in Oyo State, a holistic and sustained approach is essential. This requires not only enhanced border patrols and stricter regulatory measures but also the empowerment of communities through targeted sensitization campaigns that educate the public on the



realities and risks of trafficking. Addressing the root causes, such as poverty and lack of economic opportunities, is equally critical. Comprehensive community-level interventions must aim to rebuild socio-cultural values, foster economic resilience, and create viable alternatives for at-risk populations. Ultimately, combating human trafficking demands a coordinated, multi-sectoral effort involving government agencies, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and international partners. By addressing the structural vulnerabilities that enable trafficking and promoting sustainable socio-economic development, Oyo State can take significant steps toward dismantling trafficking networks and protecting its most vulnerable populations.

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