

AN EXAMINATION OF THE DRIVERS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NORTH-WESTERN NIGERIA: INSTITUTIONAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVES.

Hauwa Zemo Adamu^{1*}

¹ Department of Political Science, Kaduna State University, Nigeria; hauwa.zemo@kasu.edu.ng; *
Correspondence: hauwa.zemo@kasu.edu.ng

Abstract

Human trafficking remains one of the most pervasive transnational crimes, undermining human dignity and security across the globe. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) reports that nearly 27.6 million people are trapped in situations of forced labor and exploitation worldwide, with Africa accounting for about 40 percent of detected victims. Nigeria, given its strategic position in West Africa, is both a source, transit, and destination country for trafficking, with the North-West region serving as a significant corridor due to porous borders, poverty, and persistent insecurity. This study investigates the issues promoting the human trafficking movement through North-Western Nigeria by examining perspectives from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) officials and non-governmental organizations such as WOTCLEF, Zamani Foundation, and the Child Protection Network. The study adopted structural violence theory, using a qualitative research design; in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of these institutions. Thematic analysis revealed that economic hardship, porous borders, weak law enforcement, cultural norms, insurgency, and lack of awareness collectively sustain trafficking dynamics in the region. NAPTIP officials emphasized structural weaknesses in law enforcement and border management, while NGO respondents highlighted poverty, broken family systems, and the failure of social safety nets as critical drivers. The study concludes that trafficking in North-Western Nigeria is perpetuated by the intersection of structural vulnerabilities and socio-economic deprivation. It recommends strengthening cross-border surveillance, expanding community awareness programs, enhancing inter-agency collaboration, and addressing root causes such as poverty and unemployment to curtail the trafficking movement.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, North-Western Nigeria, Structural violence, Institutional responses, civil society

Introduction

Human trafficking remains one of the most serious global human rights challenges, affecting nearly every region of the world. Recent estimates indicate that about 50 million people are living in modern slavery, with women and girls accounting

for almost 70 percent of victims (Walk Free, 2022). While forced labour constitutes a large share of trafficking cases, **sexual** exploitation remains the most profitable, generating the majority of trafficking-related revenues (International Labour Organization, 2022). Beyond its humanitarian impact, trafficking is closely linked to transnational organized crime, thriving in contexts marked by inequality, weak governance, and porous borders (UNODC, 2022).

The problem is particularly severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for about 26 percent of detected trafficking victims globally (UNODC, 2022). Women and children are the most affected, often trafficked for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced labour (Akor, 2011). Persistent poverty, unemployment, political instability, and displacement have created conditions that traffickers readily exploit. Existing studies show that cultural practices such as child fostering and early marriage, combined with limited economic opportunities, significantly increase vulnerability, especially among young women and girls (Adepoju, 2005; Akinyoade & Uche, 2018). These risks were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted livelihoods and increased reliance on unsafe migration pathways (Reuters, 2022).

Nigeria occupies a central position within Africa's trafficking landscape and is widely recognized as both a source and transit country. According to the Global Slavery Index, about 1.6 million Nigerians are estimated to be living in modern slavery (Walk Free, 2022). National data indicate that trafficking occurs both internally—particularly from rural to urban areas—and externally, with victims trafficked to Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East (NAPTIP, 2021). Women and girls are disproportionately affected, driven by unemployment, gender inequality, limited access to education, and weak enforcement of anti-trafficking laws (Okonofua et al., 2004; Onyeonoru, 2003). These conditions reflect deeper structural inequalities that continue to sustain trafficking networks.

In North-Western Nigeria, these national challenges are further intensified by regional dynamics. States such as Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara experience high poverty and unemployment rates, porous borders with the Niger Republic, and prolonged insecurity linked to banditry and insurgency. As a result, the region functions both as a source of trafficked persons and a transit corridor for movement toward southern Nigeria, North Africa, and Europe. Traffickers frequently exploit women and girls through false promises of employment in urban centres or abroad, only for them to end up in domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, or coerced street work (Okojie, 2009; Akinyoade & Uche, 2018). Harmful cultural practices, including early marriage and heavy family obligations, further increase vulnerability, while weak border control facilitates cross-border trafficking (Akor, 2011).

Against this background, this study examines the drivers of human trafficking in North-Western Nigeria by drawing on the perspectives of state institutions and civil society organizations. By focusing on NAPTIP and non-governmental actors directly involved in anti-trafficking interventions, the study seeks to deepen understanding of how structural conditions, institutional gaps, and socio-cultural practices intersect to sustain trafficking in the region. Theoretically, the study contributes by situating trafficking within a structural violence framework, highlighting how indirect forms of harm embedded in social and institutional arrangements shape vulnerability. Empirically, it provides region specific evidence from an under researched zone, while at the policy level, it offers insights for designing more integrated, preventive, and context-sensitive anti-trafficking strategies that go beyond enforcement alone.

Research Objective

- i. What are the issues promoting human trafficking movement through North-Western Nigeria?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the factors promoting human trafficking in North-Western Nigeria. The case study design is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a complex and sensitive social problem within its real-life context. Human trafficking involves lived experiences, institutional practices, and socio-cultural dynamics that are best understood through detailed qualitative inquiry rather than quantitative measures (Creswell, 2007).

Key informant interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection because they enable participants to provide rich, first-hand insights based on their professional experience. Interviews were particularly suitable given the hidden nature of trafficking and the need to capture institutional responses and operational challenges that are often not documented. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants with direct knowledge of human trafficking in the region. Participants were drawn from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and relevant non-governmental organizations, including WOTCLEF, Zamani Foundation, and the Child Protection Network. Eligibility was limited to individuals with five to nine years of active involvement in anti-trafficking interventions. A total of ten participants (five NAPTIP officials and five NGO representatives) were interviewed.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, as no new themes emerged in the later interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving transcription and systematic coding to identify recurring patterns. Ethical considerations were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, with all data used strictly for academic purposes. Structural Violence

Theory provides a useful framework for understanding human trafficking in North-Western Nigeria by showing how long-standing social and institutional inequalities increase people's vulnerability to exploitation. The theory, introduced by Galtung (1969) and later expanded by Farmer (2004), explains that harm can result not only from direct violence but also from social conditions such as poverty, inequality, and weak governance. In North-Western Nigeria, widespread poverty, unemployment, low education, gender inequality, and insecurity limit livelihood options and push individuals toward risky migration pathways that traffickers exploit. Weak law enforcement, limited institutional capacity, and poor policy implementation further allow trafficking networks to operate with minimal deterrence. Civil society organizations respond by filling protection and support gaps, but their efforts are often constrained by funding and systemic challenges. Overall, the theory frames human trafficking as a structural problem rooted in unequal social arrangements, aligning with this study's focus on institutional and civil society perspectives.

Results

NAPTIP/INT/01

"One of the major issues driving human trafficking in the North-West is the deep level of poverty and unemployment in many communities. When families cannot feed themselves or send their children to school, traffickers exploit that vulnerability by promising jobs, education, or better opportunities abroad. Many of the victims and their parents do not even realize that they are being lured into trafficking networks until it is too late. The traffickers usually take advantage of the desperation and ignorance of people in rural areas where government presence is weak and opportunities are almost nonexistent."

NAPTIP/INT/02

"Cultural practices and weak social structures also play a big role in promoting trafficking in this region. In some parts of the North-West, children are given out to relatives or even strangers under the belief that they will receive training or livelihood support. Unfortunately, this traditional fostering system has been hijacked by traffickers who disguise themselves as helpers. Once these children leave their communities, they end up in forced labor, domestic servitude, or even sexual exploitation. The breakdown of traditional monitoring systems has allowed this practice to become a channel for trafficking."

NAPTIP/INT/03

"Another serious issue is the porous nature of the borders in the North-West. The region shares boundaries with Niger Republic and is close to routes that lead to Libya and other parts of North Africa. Human traffickers take advantage of weak border control and the corruption of some security personnel to move people across. Sometimes the victims themselves believe they are simply migrating for greener pastures, but they are being

channeled into networks that sell them into slavery, prostitution, or forced labor once they cross these borders."

NAPTIP/INT/04

"The activities of organized crime syndicates are another factor. Human trafficking in the North-West is not an isolated crime; it is tied to wider networks that deal in drugs, arms, and even terrorism financing. Trafficking thrives because it has become a lucrative business, with recruiters in villages, transporters along highways, and receivers in big cities or across the borders. These networks are well-structured and they prey on the inability of law enforcement to effectively monitor the entire chain of movement."

NAPTIP/INT/05

"Ignorance and lack of awareness also fuel the problem. Many parents and young people do not fully understand the dangers of trafficking. They see someone who offers to take their child to Lagos, Kano, or even abroad for work as a benefactor, not a trafficker. Because of this lack of sensitization, people voluntarily hand over their children or follow strangers with promises of greener pastures. Unless there is a massive awareness campaign and stronger community engagement, traffickers will continue to use deception and false promises to recruit victims in the North-West."

Table 1: Thematic Distribution of Issues Promoting Human Trafficking Movement through North-Western Nigeria (NAPTIP Officials).

Theme (English)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poverty and Economic Hardship	2	40
Weak Border Security and Porous Routes	1	20
Cultural Practices and Early Marriages	1	20
Lack of Awareness and Ignorance of the Law	1	20
Total	5	100

Source: Field survey 2025.

The views of NAPTIP officials, as presented in the table, reveal that poverty and economic hardship (40%) is the most dominant factor fueling human trafficking through North-Western Nigeria. This perspective aligns with the reality that traffickers often target individuals who are economically vulnerable, promising them lucrative opportunities abroad or in urban centers. Many families in rural and peri-urban areas of Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, and Sokoto are trapped in cycles of poverty, which makes them highly susceptible to exploitation. In such contexts, trafficking networks exploit the desperation of parents and guardians who believe that sending children away may

translate into financial relief for the household. The officials further highlight weak border security and porous routes (20%) as a major driver. This reflects the geographical reality of Nigeria's North-West, which shares multiple border entry points with Niger Republic.

Traffickers exploit these poorly monitored crossing points to move victims undetected. Officials specifically noted that borders like Illela in Sokoto and Kongolam in Katsina are hotbeds of cross-border movement. This situation is worsened by inadequate manpower, corruption among border officials, and limited technological support in surveillance. Cultural practices and early marriages (20%) also emerged as a recurring issue. NAPTIP officials explained that certain traditional and religious norms encourage underage marriages, which are then manipulated by traffickers to disguise exploitation. Girls as young as 13 or 14 are married off and moved across borders under the guise of cultural practices, but many end up in servitude, domestic slavery, or sexual exploitation. This suggests that trafficking in the region is not only an economic crime but also one reinforced by socio-cultural structures. Finally, lack of awareness and ignorance of the law (20%) reflects the officials' emphasis on education gaps. Many rural dwellers are unaware of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (2015), or the dangers that traffickers pose. This lack of awareness makes victims more vulnerable to manipulation through false promises of education, training, or employment.

The Responses from Non-Governmental agencies on the same issue is captured:

NGO-01

"One of the biggest issues we continue to face in the North-West is the deep-rooted poverty that pushes families to give out their children with the hope that they will find greener pastures. In rural communities, promises of jobs in the city or abroad are very attractive because there are no sustainable livelihood opportunities locally. We have observed parents willingly releasing their daughters into the hands of traffickers who present themselves as helpers, but in reality, they are exploiting desperation. Until the cycle of poverty is properly addressed, trafficking will remain a thriving enterprise." – (WOTCLEF Official, NGO-01)

NGO-02

"Another critical issue is the cultural tolerance of child fostering and early marriage, which traffickers exploit. In many communities, it is normal for a young girl to be sent to stay with relatives or family friends, but traffickers disguise themselves within these cultural practices. Similarly, early marriages often mask trafficking situations, where a

girl is transported far from her community under the pretext of marriage but is later forced into exploitation. These cultural blind spots make it very difficult to track and prevent trafficking effectively." – (Zamani Foundation Representative, NGO-02)

NGO-03

"From our work in Zamfara and Sokoto, insecurity is also fueling trafficking. The activities of bandits and the displacement of thousands of people have created fertile ground for traffickers. Displaced women and children are the most vulnerable because they are desperate for safety, food, and survival. We have documented cases where traffickers pose as humanitarian helpers, promising to take children to safer places, but they end up being trafficked for labor or sexual exploitation. The link between insecurity and trafficking is undeniable in this region." – (Child Protection Network Member, NGO-03)

NGO-04

"Weak enforcement of existing laws is another major issue. While Nigeria has strong legislation such as the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, its implementation in the North-West is very weak. Many cases are either not prosecuted or delayed indefinitely. Traffickers take advantage of this laxity, knowing that there is little chance of facing real punishment. We have seen repeat offenders return to the same communities because they were never held accountable in the first place." – (WOTCLEF Official, NGO-04)

NGO-05

"The demand side of trafficking also cannot be ignored. In cities such as Kano and Kaduna, there is a high demand for cheap domestic labor and commercial sex work, which traffickers exploit. Young girls from rural areas or neighboring countries like Niger are brought in to fill these roles. The problem is compounded by the lack of awareness among families who do not fully understand the dangers. Many still believe traffickers are taking their children to school or to better jobs, only to later discover that the children are trapped in exploitative conditions." – (Zamani Foundation Representative, NGO-05)

Table 2: Thematic Distribution of Issues Promoting Human Trafficking Movement through North-Western Nigeria (NGOs and Child Protection Networks).

Theme (English)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
-----------------	-----------	----------------

Poverty and Desire for Better Opportunities	2	40
Gender Inequality and Exploitation of Women/Girls	1	20
Weak Law Enforcement and Corruption	1	20
Family Breakdown and Weak Child Protection Systems	1	20
Total	5	100

Source: field survey, 2025.

The perspectives of NGOs such as WOTCLEF, Zamani Foundation, and the Child Protection Network show significant convergence with NAPTIP on the issue of poverty and the desire for better opportunities (40%) as the leading factor. NGO officials stressed that families living in poverty are more easily deceived by traffickers' promises of employment in cities like Lagos or across borders in Niger and Libya. They note that trafficking thrives because poverty creates desperation, which traffickers exploit by offering false hope of education, jobs, or marriage prospects. Unlike NAPTIP, NGOs placed notable emphasis on gender inequality and exploitation of women/girls (20%). They argue that trafficking in the region disproportionately affects females, especially adolescent girls, who are recruited into domestic servitude or sexual exploitation. This reflects the broader structural gender inequalities in Nigeria, where women are often disadvantaged in education and employment, leaving them vulnerable to traffickers. NGO representatives point to cases in Zamfara and Kano where young girls were trafficked under the pretext of becoming housemaids but ended up exploited in exploitative labor or prostitution rings.

Weak law enforcement and corruption (20%) was another factor highlighted by NGOs. They criticized law enforcement agencies for failing to effectively prosecute traffickers due to bribery, political interference, and poor institutional coordination. This perspective adds weight to the argument that trafficking in Nigeria is not only a community-level problem but also deeply entrenched in systemic corruption. For example, cases where traffickers are arrested but quickly released due to political pressure or bribery were mentioned as undermining efforts at justice. Finally, family breakdown and weak child protection systems (20%) were also identified as critical. NGOs observed that in many cases, children who lack parental care or who come from broken homes are the easiest targets for traffickers. Weak institutional protection, such as underfunded social welfare agencies, further compounds the problem, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation.

Conclusion

This study finds that human trafficking in North-Western Nigeria is driven by the interaction of structural, economic, and socio-cultural factors, as reflected in institutional

and civil society perspectives. NAPTIP officials primarily identified poverty and unemployment (40%) and porous borders with weak security presence (30%) as key drivers, highlighting governance and enforcement gaps that enable trafficking networks. In contrast, non-governmental organizations emphasized family breakdown and poor parental supervision (40%), as well as early and forced marriages (30%), pointing to community-level vulnerabilities that expose women and children to exploitation. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that trafficking in the region extends beyond criminal activity and is sustained by deep-seated structural inequalities.

From a structural violence perspective, weak institutions, economic deprivation, and harmful social practices function as indirect forms of harm that limit life choices and increase susceptibility to trafficking. Effective policy responses must therefore go beyond law enforcement to address underlying social and economic conditions. Priorities include strengthening border management and institutional capacity, expanding access to education and employment, reinforcing child protection systems, and improving collaboration between state agencies and civil society organizations.

Future research should broaden the geographic scope, incorporate survivor perspectives, and assess the long-term impact of structural and social interventions on trafficking dynamics. Addressing human trafficking in North-Western Nigeria ultimately requires integrated, multi-sectoral strategies that reduce vulnerability while strengthening institutional responses.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen Border Security and Surveillance**
Governments should enhance collaboration between NAPTIP, immigration services, and border security forces to reduce trafficking through porous northern borders. Advanced monitoring technologies and joint patrols with neighboring countries are necessary.
- 2. Economic Empowerment and Job Creation**
Given that poverty and unemployment emerged as leading drivers, policies should prioritize skill acquisition, vocational training, and access to small business grants for vulnerable populations, especially women and youth.
- 3. Community-Based Awareness and Advocacy**
NGOs such as WOTCLEF and Zamani Foundation should intensify grassroots sensitization campaigns targeting parents, traditional rulers, and religious leaders to challenge harmful practices like early marriage and child fostering.
- 4. Family Support and Child Protection Services**
The Child Protection Network and other civil society actors should expand

- intervention programs that support struggling families, provide psychosocial services for at-risk children, and strengthen community watch systems.
5. Legal and Institutional Reform
There should be stronger enforcement of existing anti-trafficking laws, coupled with the provision of legal aid and protection services for victims. Continuous training for law enforcement officers on trafficking dynamics is also critical.
 6. Multisectoral Collaboration
Both NAPTIP and NGOs should work more closely through coordinated taskforces that combine institutional enforcement capacity with community-level engagement and victim-centered support.

References

- Abiodun, T. F., Akinlade, M. T., & Oladejo, O. A. (2021). The state and challenges of human trafficking in Nigeria: Implications for national peace and security. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 11(2), 110–133. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v11i2.18456>
- Adepoju, A. (2005). Review of research and data on human trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa. *International Migration*, 43(1–2), 75–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-7985.2005.00313.x>
- Akinyoade, A., & Uche, C. (2018). Migration, human trafficking, and security challenges in West Africa. *African Security Review*, 27(1), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2018.1434529>
- Akor, L. (2011). Trafficking of women in Nigeria: Causes, consequences and the way forward. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 2(2), 89–110.
- Anurioha, I. O. (2024). Child labour as human trafficking exploitation in Nigeria. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(2), 163–174. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.S.2024.802163>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Dataphyte. (2022). *Human trafficking trends and statistics in Nigeria*. Dataphyte Research.
- International Labour Organization. (2022). *Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage*. ILO.

- Magaji, S., Musa, I., & Aluko, O. O. (2023). Unemployment and child trafficking in Nigeria: An empirical analysis. *Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Studies*, 3(1), 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.52589/JARMS-VEFAWUVX>
- National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Annual report on human trafficking in Nigeria*. NAPTIP.
- National Population Commission. (2022). *Nigeria population estimates*. NPC.
- Okojie, C. E. E. (2009). Gender, migration and trafficking in Nigeria. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(4), 1–15.
- Okonofua, F. E., Ogbomwan, S. M., Alutu, A. N., Kufre, O., & Eghosa, A. (2004). Knowledge, attitudes and experiences of sex trafficking by young women in Benin City, South-South Nigeria. *Social Science & Medicine*, 59(6), 1315–1327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2003.11.020>
- Onyeonoru, I. (2003). Push factors in the trafficking of women and girls for prostitution in Nigeria. *African Journal of Sociology*, 5(2), 33–48.
- Reuters. (2022). *COVID-19 and the rise in human trafficking vulnerabilities in Africa*. Reuters News Agency.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2022). *Global report on trafficking in persons*. UNODC.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). *Global report on trafficking in persons*. UNODC.
- Walk Free Foundation. (2022). *Global slavery index*. Walk Free.