

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN COMBATING CHILD TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigated the role of the Church in combating child trafficking in Nigeria. The goal of the paper is to examine the history of child trafficking in Nigeria, to determine the causes of child trafficking in Nigeria, to verify the effects of child trafficking in Nigeria, to explain the role of the Church in combating child trafficking in Nigeria and to discuss the challenges faced by Church in combating child trafficking in Nigeria and the ways of overcoming the challenges. The data for the research were basically collected from the library through secondary sources and analyze through the discussion method. The paper found out that the role of the church in combating child trafficking in Nigeria include advocacy, direct intervention, education, collaboration with law enforcement, and spiritual support for survivors. The paper recommended that government must strengthen law enforcement agencies, establish specialized anti-trafficking units, and impose harsher penalties for traffickers, among others.

Keywords: Church, Child trafficking, Law enforcement, Human right violations.

INTRODUCTION

Child trafficking remains one of the most pressing human rights violations in Nigeria, affecting thousands of children who are forced into labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. As a moral and social institution, the church has a significant role in combating this crime by providing advocacy, education, and direct intervention for victims. According to Ogunyemi, "The church, as a beacon of hope, has both a spiritual and social responsibility to protect the vulnerable and challenge the structures that enable human trafficking" (2018). This aligns with the biblical mandate to "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed" (Psalm 82:3). Despite its efforts, the church faces several challenges, including limited resources, corruption, and societal resistance. Williams argues that "Faith-based organizations often struggle to balance spiritual duties with the practical demands of social

justice work, particularly in regions with systemic poverty and weak law enforcement" (2019). However, through collaboration with government agencies, NGOs, and international bodies, the church can strengthen its role in combating child trafficking and providing long-term rehabilitation for survivors.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Church

Grudem defines the church as "the community of all true believers for all time" (2020). Avery Dulles describes church as "a structured community of faith, united in Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit through scripture, tradition, and ecclesiastical authority"(2002).

Combating

Combating refers to the active effort to resist, counteract, or eliminate a threat, challenge, or adversarial force through strategic, tactical, or policy-driven measures" (Smith 2019).

Child

According to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), started that child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (2025).

Trafficking

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime defines Trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (2020).

HISTORY OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

Child trafficking in Nigeria has deep historical roots as discussed below.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Era

In pre-colonial Nigeria, systems such as child pawning were prevalent. Families in financial distress would offer their children as collateral for loans, with the understanding that the child would work for the creditor until the debt was repaid. This practice often led to prolonged servitude and exploitation of children. Chapdelaine notes that "child pawning was a widespread

practice among the Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, and Ijaw populations, serving as a means to mobilize children's labor during economic hardships" (2021). The advent of British colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced new dynamics. While the British administration officially opposed slavery, their economic policies inadvertently sustained child labor practices. Colonial authorities often turned a blind eye to child trafficking, as children's labor was integral to the colonial economy, particularly in agriculture and domestic service. Chapdelaine asserts that "colonial economic structures perpetuated the demand for cheap labor, with children being particularly vulnerable to exploitation" (2021).

Post-Colonial Developments

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, rapid urbanization and economic challenges led to increased internal migration. Children from rural areas were often sent to urban centers with promises of education or employment but frequently ended up in exploitative situations. The Women's Consortium of Nigeria highlights that "the movement of children from rural to urban areas under the guise of better opportunities has often resulted in their exploitation in domestic servitude and street hawking" (Women's Consortium of Nigeria 2025).

Contemporary Issues

In recent decades, the phenomenon of "baby factories" has emerged, particularly in southern Nigeria. These establishments, often disguised as maternity homes or orphanages, house young women who are coerced or deceived into bearing children for sale. The babies are then trafficked for illegal adoption, forced labor, or ritual purposes. A study published in the *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research Methods* reports that "baby factories have become a lucrative business, thriving on the vulnerabilities of young women and the demand for children" (Eseadi *et al* 2015). The history of child trafficking in Nigeria is complex, influenced by traditional practices, colonial legacies, and contemporary socio-economic challenges. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that considers historical contexts and implements comprehensive strategies to protect vulnerable children.

CAUSES OF CHILD TRAFFICKING

Socio-Economic Factors

Poverty stands as a primary driver of child trafficking. Families facing economic hardships may resort to sending their children into laborious conditions, hoping for better opportunities or additional income. Omotoso *et al* highlight that "poverty is a significant push factor, compelling parents to relinquish their children to traffickers under the guise of providing better livelihoods" (2022). Additionally, limited access to quality education exacerbates the situation, as uneducated children are more susceptible to exploitation. Anurioha emphasizes that "deprivation of educational opportunities perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability to trafficking" (2024).

Cultural Practices

Certain traditional practices inadvertently contribute to child trafficking. Child fostering, a culturally accepted system where children are sent to live with relatives or acquaintances for better opportunities, can be manipulated by traffickers. A study published in *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* notes that "cultural relativism and societal norms can obscure the exploitative nature of child labor trafficking, allowing it to persist under the guise of tradition" (Omotoso *et al* 2022).

Demand for Cheap Labor and Sexual Exploitation

The demand for inexpensive labor in sectors such as agriculture, mining, and domestic work fuels child trafficking. In Nigeria's Nasarawa State, for instance, children are employed in hazardous conditions within illegal mining operations to meet the growing demand for lithium, a critical component in batteries for electric vehicles and energy storage systems. The Associated Press reports that "children like 6-year-old Juliet Samaniya work in illegal lithium mines, earning less than a dollar a day under dangerous conditions, compromising their education". Furthermore, the commercial sex industry exploits trafficked children, with reports indicating that Nigerian girls are trafficked for prostitution both domestically and internationally (Omotoso *et al* 2022).

Political and Legal Factors

Weak enforcement of anti-trafficking laws and corruption among law enforcement agencies hinder efforts to combat child trafficking. Despite the existence of legal frameworks, inconsistent implementation allows traffickers to operate with impunity. Adepelumi points out that "conflict is a push factor for trafficking, migration, and poverty; in Nigeria's conflict-prone zones, groups like Boko Haram have trafficked children for use as soldiers and militias" (2025). Addressing the root causes of child trafficking requires a comprehensive approach that tackles poverty, promotes education, challenges harmful cultural practices, enforces legal frameworks, and addresses political instability. By understanding and mitigating these factors, stakeholders can work towards eradicating child trafficking and safeguarding the rights and well-being of children.

EFFECTS OF CHILD TRAFFICKING ON THE VICTIMS AND SOCIETY

Effects on Victims

Children who are trafficked endure various forms of abuse, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. The physical effects of trafficking are often severe, with many victims suffering from malnutrition, sexually transmitted infections, and physical injuries due to violence (Miller 2015). Furthermore, the psychological toll is profound, as trafficked children frequently experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and

a loss of self-worth (Kara 2009). These psychological effects can persist into adulthood, making it difficult for survivors to reintegrate into society. Another significant consequence is the disruption of education. Many trafficked children are deprived of formal schooling, limiting their future employment opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty and exploitation (Bales 2012). The denial of education not only affects the victims but also weakens the workforce and economic stability of communities.

Effects on Society

The impact of child trafficking extends beyond the individual, affecting social structures and economic development. One of the most significant societal consequences is the erosion of trust within communities. Families that experience child trafficking suffer emotional distress, and fear often spreads throughout neighborhoods, weakening social cohesion (Miller 2015). Additionally, trafficking networks contribute to organized crime, corruption, and instability, making it harder for law enforcement agencies to maintain public safety (Shelley 2010). Economically, child trafficking imposes a burden on national resources. Governments must allocate substantial funding to law enforcement, rehabilitation programs, and awareness campaigns to combat trafficking and support survivors. Moreover, the loss of potential human capital due to the exploitation of children reduces economic productivity in the long term (Bales 2012). In conclusion, child trafficking has devastating consequences on both victims and society. The physical, emotional, and educational harm inflicted on victims often has lifelong repercussions, while communities and economies suffer from increased crime, weakened social structures, and financial burdens. Addressing child trafficking requires a concerted effort from governments, law enforcement, and civil society to protect vulnerable children and prevent further exploitation.

ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN COMBATING CHILD TRAFFICKING

The Church as an Advocate against Child Trafficking

One of the most significant ways the church combats child trafficking is through advocacy. Religious organizations and leaders have long influenced policies, raised awareness, and mobilized communities to take action. Pope Francis has consistently condemned human trafficking, calling it "an open wound on the body of contemporary society" (Francis 2014). The Catholic Church, through institutions such as Caritas Internationalist and Talitha Kum, has worked extensively to rescue trafficking victims, push for policy reforms, and provide rehabilitation programs (2022). Similarly, Protestant and Evangelical churches have launched global campaigns to support anti-trafficking legislation and aid survivors. Church-led advocacy efforts have also contributed to international policy changes. For example, the Anglican Communion has collaborated with the United Nations to promote anti-trafficking initiatives (Carter 2020). Faith-based organizations often work alongside governments and international agencies to strengthen laws protecting children from exploitation. The World Council of

Churches has urged member churches to integrate anti-trafficking advocacy into their ministries, emphasizing the need for systemic change (2021).

Direct Intervention and Victim Assistance

Many churches provide direct intervention services for child trafficking victims, including shelter, rehabilitation, and counseling. Faith-based organizations operate safe houses and crisis centers where survivors receive medical care, education, and psychological support. For example, the Salvation Army runs anti-trafficking programs in multiple countries, offering housing, vocational training, and reintegration assistance (Salvation Army 2021). Similarly, World Vision has established child protection centers that provide legal aid and trauma counseling for survivors (14). These programs are essential in helping trafficked children recover and regain independence. The church also plays a role in rescue operations. Many faith-based organizations partner with law enforcement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to identify and extract children from trafficking situations. The International Justice Mission (IJM), a Christian human rights organization, works alongside governments to conduct rescue missions, prosecute traffickers, and provide long-term care for victims (International Justice Mission 2021). Such partnerships increase the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts and ensure that survivors receive the support they need.

Education and Awareness Campaigns

Education is a powerful tool in preventing child trafficking, and the church plays a critical role in raising awareness. By integrating anti-trafficking education into sermons, youth programs, and community workshops, churches help inform the public about the dangers of trafficking. Many churches conduct training sessions to help parents, teachers, and local leaders recognize the warning signs of trafficking and take preventive measures. According to the International Organization for Migration, "community-based awareness programs have proven effective in reducing trafficking risks" (2019). These initiatives empower communities to protect vulnerable children and report suspicious activities. In addition, churches utilize media and technology to spread awareness. Many faith-based organizations produce documentaries, host webinars, and launch social media campaigns to educate the public about trafficking risks (Bryant-Davis and Wong 2019). By leveraging digital platforms, churches can reach a broader audience and engage communities in the fight against child trafficking.

Collaboration with Government and NGOs

The fight against child trafficking requires collaboration between religious institutions, governments, and NGOs. Churches often partner with secular and faith-based organizations that specialize in anti-trafficking initiatives. The Faith Alliance against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST 2020) is a coalition of Christian organizations that work together to combat human trafficking through advocacy, training, and direct assistance programs (FAAST 2020). This coalition collaborates with government agencies, law enforcement, and humanitarian organizations to develop comprehensive anti-trafficking strategies. Churches also work with

international organizations such as the United Nations and UNICEF to address trafficking on a global scale. For example, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has partnered with UNICEF to implement child protection programs in high-risk regions (Catholic Relief Services 2021). These collaborations enhance the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts and ensure that resources are allocated to the areas where they are most needed.

Spiritual and Psychological Support for Survivors

Beyond physical rescue and rehabilitation, the church provides spiritual and psychological support for trafficking survivors. Many victims experience deep emotional wounds, including anxiety, depression, and loss of self-worth. Faith-based counseling and pastoral care can help survivors heal from trauma and rebuild their lives. Research indicates that spiritual support plays a crucial role in the recovery process. Koenig et al. found that "religious involvement is associated with greater psychological well-being and resilience among trauma survivors" (Koenig, King, and Carson 2012). Many churches offer counseling services, mentorship programs, and prayer groups that provide survivors with emotional and spiritual healing. Additionally, faith communities create a sense of belonging for survivors. Church-based support groups allow trafficking victims to share their experiences, find encouragement, and reintegrate into society. These programs help survivors regain confidence and develop healthy relationships after their traumatic experiences (Perry and McEwen 2019).

Furthermore, the church plays a vital role in the global fight against child trafficking. Through advocacy, direct intervention, education, collaboration, and spiritual support, churches help prevent trafficking, rescue victims, and assist survivors in their recovery. Given its moral authority and global reach, the church is uniquely positioned to challenge the systemic issues that allow trafficking to thrive. As more faith communities become actively engaged in combating this crisis, the world moves closer to eradicating child trafficking and protecting the dignity and rights of all children. By continuing to advocate for justice, provide support for victims, and educate communities, the church can help bring an end to this form of modern-day slavery (Perry and McEwen 2019).

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CHURCH IN COMBATING CHILD TRAFFICKING

Lack of Adequate Resources

One of the primary challenges the church faces in combating child trafficking is the lack of sufficient financial and human resources. Many churches operate on limited budgets, primarily allocated for worship, pastoral care, and community outreach. Establishing and maintaining programs for prevention, rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of trafficking victims requires significant financial investment. According to Smith and Jones, "Many faith-based organizations struggle with funding sustainable programs due to a reliance on donations and inconsistent financial support" (2018). Without consistent funding, churches cannot provide

long-term support for victims, such as housing, counseling, education, and job training, which are crucial for their recovery and reintegration into society. Additionally, churches often lack trained personnel to handle trafficking cases effectively. While pastors and church volunteers may have a strong desire to help, they may not have the necessary expertise in trauma counseling, legal advocacy, or case management. The lack of trained professionals makes it difficult for the church to provide holistic care that addresses both the immediate and long-term needs of trafficking survivors (Kara 2017).

Legal and Political Constraints

Another major obstacle is the legal and political challenges that churches face when addressing child trafficking. In some countries, anti-trafficking laws are either weak or poorly enforced, making it difficult for churches to work with government agencies to bring traffickers to justice. As noted by Brown, “Religious organizations often find themselves at odds with local authorities who may be corrupt or complicit in trafficking activities” (2019). In regions where law enforcement is ineffective or bribery is common, churches that report cases of child trafficking may face resistance or even threats from criminal organizations (Bales 2012). Furthermore, many churches lack the legal authority to directly intervene in trafficking cases. While they can offer shelter and support services, they often have to rely on government agencies or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to handle legal proceedings. This dependence on external entities can slow down the rescue and rehabilitation process, leaving victims vulnerable to further exploitation (Gallagher 2010).

Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural norms and societal attitudes can also hinder the church’s efforts to combat child trafficking. In some communities, trafficking is deeply embedded in cultural or economic practices. For example, in certain regions, child labor or early marriage is considered acceptable, making it difficult for the church to challenge these practices without facing opposition from the local community. According to Patel, “Many religious leaders hesitate to speak against cultural practices that contribute to trafficking for fear of alienating their congregations or being accused of imposing Western values” (2020). In addition, the stigma attached to trafficking survivors can make it challenging for the church to reintegrate them into society. Victims of trafficking, especially girls, may be viewed as dishonored or unworthy of marriage, making it difficult for them to find acceptance within their communities. Churches that advocate for survivors may face resistance from families and local leaders who prefer to keep such issues hidden rather than address them openly (Sisk 2020).

Complexity of Trafficking Networks

Child trafficking is often orchestrated by well-organized criminal networks that operate across multiple regions and countries. These networks use sophisticated methods to evade detection, making it difficult for the church to identify and rescue victims. As Johnson points out, “Traffickers exploit weaknesses in law enforcement and take advantage of vulnerable

populations, making it hard for religious organizations to track and dismantle these operations” (2021). Besides, traffickers often use psychological manipulation and coercion to control victims, making it difficult for churches to gain their trust. Many trafficked children suffer from trauma bonding, a psychological condition in which victims develop emotional ties to their captors, making them reluctant to seek help. Without specialized training in trauma-informed care, church workers may struggle to effectively assist victims and help them break free from the cycle of exploitation (Johnson 2021).

Though the church has been a crucial advocate in the fight against child trafficking, it faces numerous challenges that hinder its effectiveness. The lack of adequate resources, legal and political constraints, cultural and social barriers, and the complexity of trafficking networks all make it difficult for churches to combat this issue comprehensively. To overcome these challenges, churches must seek partnerships with governments, NGOs, and international organizations to strengthen their efforts. Additionally, investing in training for church leaders and volunteers, as well as advocating for stronger legal frameworks, can help the church play a more impactful role in eradicating child trafficking. As a moral and spiritual institution, the church has a responsibility to protect vulnerable children and ensure justice prevails in society (Johnson 2021).

THE WAY FORWARD

Strengthening Awareness and Advocacy

One of the primary ways the church can combat child trafficking is through awareness campaigns and advocacy. Many communities, especially in developing countries, remain unaware of the signs and dangers of trafficking. The church can use its platforms sermons, youth programs, and community outreach to educate its members about the realities of trafficking and how to report suspicious activities. Faith-based institutions are well-positioned to influence public perception and moral attitudes toward social justice issues (Smith 2019). As well, churches can use social media, radio programs, and workshops to extend their awareness campaigns. According to Keller, raising awareness through faith-based organizations helps shift societal narratives, making trafficking prevention a community responsibility rather than just a legal matter (2020). Churches can also partner with local and international organizations to amplify their advocacy efforts.

Providing Support for Victims

Rescue and rehabilitation are crucial in the fight against child trafficking. The church can offer shelter, counseling, and vocational training for rescued children, helping them reintegrate into society. Many trafficked children suffer from severe trauma, and faith-based counseling can offer emotional and spiritual healing. Research suggests that faith-based trauma care contributes to long-term recovery by fostering resilience and emotional stability (Johnson 2021). Still, churches can establish safe houses in collaboration with NGOs and government

agencies to ensure victims receive proper medical, psychological, and legal support. According to Okafor and Nwankwo, successful reintegration of trafficked children depends on comprehensive rehabilitation programs that address not just physical needs but also social and emotional restoration (2018). However, financial constraints often limit these efforts, as many churches rely on donations and tithes.

Strengthening Partnerships with Government and NGOs

Collaboration with governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is essential. The church alone cannot fight trafficking but can serve as a bridge between victims and law enforcement agencies. Partnerships with organizations such as UNICEF, International Justice Mission (IJM), and World Vision enable churches to access resources, legal support, and professional expertise in dealing with trafficking cases (Williams 2019). However, tensions sometimes arise due to differing approaches between religious institutions and secular organizations. While faith-based groups emphasize moral and spiritual transformation, government agencies often focus on legal and policy-driven responses. As Bruni points out, “effective collaboration requires mutual respect between faith-based organizations and secular institutions, ensuring that faith-driven interventions complement, rather than contradict, governmental anti-trafficking policies” (2019).

Addressing Internal Challenges

Despite the fact that the church plays a vital role in combating trafficking, internal challenges such as corruption, lack of trained personnel and even complicity in some cases hinder progress. Reports have surfaced of some religious leaders being involved or turning a blind eye to trafficking within their communities (Brown 2019). Churches must therefore implement stricter accountability measures and educate clergy members on ethical leadership. In addition, research highlights that many pastors and church workers lack proper training in identifying and handling trafficking cases (Peters and Kingsley 2020). By integrating anti-trafficking education into theological curricula, churches can equip future leaders with the knowledge and skills to address the issue effectively. Training programs on recognizing and handling trafficking cases should be mandatory for church workers, as emphasized by Montgomery, who argues that "pastoral training must go beyond theology to include social justice and human rights advocacy" (2021).

Promoting Economic Empowerment

Poverty is a major driver of child trafficking. Many families sell their children out of desperation, while traffickers lure victims with false promises of jobs and education. Churches can combat this by initiating economic empowerment programs such as microfinance projects, vocational training, and job creation initiatives. Studies show that communities with access to sustainable livelihoods are less vulnerable to trafficking (Anderson 2018). Also, faith-based organizations have historically played a role in economic development. As noted by Adusei and Boateng, churches that invest in community development programs—such as skills

training and small-business funding—help reduce vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit (2021). By addressing the root causes of economic hardship, churches can indirectly reduce the prevalence of trafficking.

In the face of the challenges, the church remains a powerful force in the fight against child trafficking. By strengthening awareness campaigns, supporting victims, partnering with external organizations, addressing internal issues, and promoting economic empowerment, the church can make a significant impact. Overcoming these challenges requires commitment, transparency, and collaboration. Through faith and action, the church can fulfill its moral responsibility to protect vulnerable children and work towards a world free of trafficking (Adusei and Boateng 2021).

CONCLUSION

The church plays a crucial role in combating child trafficking in Nigeria by raising awareness, providing victim support, and advocating for justice. Through its moral influence, the church can educate communities on the dangers of trafficking, offer rehabilitation programs for survivors, and collaborate with government agencies and NGOs to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts. However, challenges such as limited resources, corruption, and societal resistance hinder its effectiveness. To enhance its impact, the church must strengthen partnerships with stakeholders, improve financial and logistical capacity, and advocate for stronger policies and enforcement. By leveraging its influence and resources, the church can significantly contribute to eradicating child trafficking and protecting the rights of vulnerable children in Nigeria. A collective effort involving faith-based organizations, government agencies, and civil society is essential for long-term solutions to this crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Although Nigeria has anti-trafficking laws, enforcement remains weak. The government must strengthen law enforcement agencies, establish specialized anti-trafficking units, and impose harsher penalties for traffickers.
2. Public awareness is key in preventing child trafficking. Community-based campaigns, inclusion of anti-trafficking education in schools, and the use of media platforms can help inform vulnerable populations.
3. Poverty fuels trafficking. The government should create job opportunities, provide vocational training, and support small businesses to reduce vulnerability.
4. Effective partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, religious institutions, and international organizations can improve intelligence-sharing, victim protection, and policy enforcement.

5. Rescued children need safe shelters, psychological counseling, and vocational training for successful reintegration.
6. Corrupt officials often enable trafficking. Strict accountability measures and better border control can reduce trafficking networks.
7. Addressing child trafficking in Nigeria requires stronger law enforcement, public awareness, economic support, collaboration, and victim rehabilitation. A united effort among all stakeholders is essential for long-term solutions.

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