

## A Re-interpretation of the Trafficking of Women and Girls in South-eastern Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>Perpetual Nneka Onuigbo & <sup>2</sup>Asiogu Ugochukwu Chrysantus

<sup>1</sup>Independent researcher, Australia

<sup>2</sup>School of Social and Political Science, University of Glasgow

Correspondence: perpetual.onuigbo@utas.edu.au

### Abstract

*The issues bordering on human trafficking have, over time, attracted much attention from academics, human rights organisations, and law enforcement agencies. Overall, human trafficking has consistently grown and proliferated across national borders of nations. Unfortunately, because it has remained nearly unchecked, especially in Africa, human trafficking has taken form through an illegal network of syndicates that deceive and force vulnerable people into forced labour, prostitution and rampaging criminal activity commonly known as a baby factory. Consequently, human trafficking have always been viewed from an outside-in perspective, forgetting that internal trafficking is equally existent and even more dangerous. This research seeks to re-interpret human trafficking from an inside-out perspective. The research explores the nature, causes and consequences of the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria. It adopts Abraham Maslow's Theory of the Hierarchy of Needs to explain why women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria the worst victims of trafficking are often. Through an ethnography informed by personal and in-depth experience and knowledge of South-eastern Nigeria, coupled with physical interviews of thirty (30) participants, newspaper reports, NAPTIP and NGO reports, we collected relevant evidence that aided the production of this qualitative study. The research finds that ignorance, poverty, unemployment, greed, and lack of parental care are the primary factors that aid the trafficking of women and young girls in South-eastern Nigeria. It calls on the region's people, communities, governments, and stakeholders to collaborate and work together to ensure the curbing of the menace.*

**Keywords:** Human Trafficking, Women, Girls, Syndicates, Security, South-eastern Nigeria.

### Introduction

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2022), human trafficking is a global crime that encourages the commercialisation of humans for profit. It also refers to the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of an individual or a person by such means as threat or use of force or any form of coercion, abduction, fraud, or deception for exploitation. Sadly, it is very worrisome to recount that at a time when the entire world needs peace, harmony and progress, humankind still faces challenging issues bordering on poverty, unemployment, inequality, and human security (Dabla-Norris et al., 2015); Ajodo-Adebanjoko & Ugwuoke,

2014). The compelling magnitude at which this menace hit human civilisation and its frightening and continuous occurrence in society makes one wonder if the true essence of security and global securitisation has been defeated.

Regrettably, many people across the globe, regardless of gender, background, status, geographical location, and age, have, at one time or another, become victims of human trafficking. The perpetrators who engage in the fraudulent and sickening act explore a myriad of procedures and processes involving violence, fake job employment offers, untrue promises and assurances of education and career sponsorships, and others to coerce and trick their victims (UNODC, 2022) (Osondu, 2022); Nwabude, 2022). Furthermore, these traffickers work through a syndicate that collaborates to ensure their vulnerable victims' successful luring, coercing, abduction, and movement from one location to another. In Explaining the nature and processes involved in human trafficking, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons affirms that victims of trafficking can be any age, gender and from any part of the globe. The agency reports that female victims have continued to be the primary target of traffickers. The report further highlights that in 2018, about 46% of detected victims of human trafficking were women, and 19% were girls. While 20% of detected victims were men and 15% were boys (UNODC, 2022). According to the report, girls were trafficked for sexual exploitation, while boys were for forced labour.

It is important to note that human trafficking occurs within and across national borders and transcends local communities, both urban and rural villages. While it occurs across the borders of nations like Italy, the Philippines, Columbia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, and India, it is crucial to note that it also occurs internally within these countries. Internal trafficking is not nascent to the world, and it has always been a global menace right from antiquity.

Historically, intra-trafficking has been the starting point of human trafficking across borders. In Nigeria, internal trafficking is prevalent, with traffickers recruiting vulnerable victims from rural areas in the Southern part of the country for exploitation in forced labour and prostitution (Iheke, 2022).

Incidents of trafficking in Nigeria have been going on as far back as the 1960s. However, it received significant relevance in the country in the 1990s, especially in 1994, when the government raised awareness of the deportation of trafficked persons for prostitution to Europe and the Middle East (Women's Consortium of Nigeria, 2022). A few decades later, reports on the trafficking of children from rural communities in Benue State, Akwa Ibom State, Cross River State and Oyo State to cities like Lagos, Abeokuta, Kano, Port-Harcourt and Calabar were gathered in ranged numbers (Women's Consortium of Nigeria, 2022). The reports revealed that while boys are forced into labour in areas such as street hawking, bricklaying, mining, and fishing, among other harsh and inhumane jobs, the girls are subjected to sex trafficking and domestic servitude. It is critical to know that the internal trafficking of persons in Nigeria is highly neglected and underreported. Characterised by people who are less concerned about the crime (Ohadugha, 2022), people who do not want to speak about the crime (Ikemdi, 2022), to residents of crime scenes who are not bothered about the occurrence of the crime (Nwokejiobi, 2022), to people feigning ignorance of traffickers' identity (Nwokejiobi, 2022).

The government and private individuals have done little to curb the menace. Worse is South-eastern Nigeria, where events leading to the trafficking of women and girls are planned, coordinated, and executed with little or no corresponding opposition and, by extension, the penalty for traffickers. Thus, it is against this backdrop that this research seeks to carry out a re-interpretation of the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria. The research will re-

examine the general notion of human trafficking globally. It will explore the means, patterns, cause(s), and effect(s) of the trafficking of women and girls in the five states that make up South-eastern Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi.

### **Background to Human Trafficking in South-eastern Nigeria**

Laird and Oldfield noted that the Biafra hinterland, which comprises most of South-eastern Nigeria, was a notable slavery area from the 16th century to the mid-19th century. The authors continued that as early as the 16th century, the Jesuit priest - Alonso de Sandoval (1577-1652) commented on the unusual number of slave women and children coming from the Biafra hinterland to Cartagena Colombia (Sandoval, 2008, p.15). From this testimony, it is essential to state that although it is not certain that all these children were from South-eastern Nigeria, it is clear that many of them were shipped from slave ports on the Bight of Biafra. The number of documented children on slave ships aggregated 14% in the years spanning from 1659 to 1702 and 25-40% from 1714 to 1866. It is also on record that many women and children were taken out from the Bight of Biafra during the late 17th and 18th centuries (Chapdelaine, 2014, p. 23).

Chapdelaine (2014) observed that South-eastern Nigeria experienced significant social, political, and economic transformation due to colonialism.

The author continued that the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which lasted for over four hundred years, the expansion of trade in staple commodities like palm oil, and the subsequent need for domestic labour all contributed to the emergence of human trafficking in South-eastern Nigeria. Furthermore, it is worthy of note that the trans-Atlantic slave trade gave impetus to the ways and patterns by which colonial administrators and the community leaders of Igbo land (present-day South-eastern Nigeria) mobilised and sold-out community dwellers into slavery. Women and children became enslaved through capture during raids in different communities across South-

eastern Nigeria. For instance, Chapdelaine (2014, p. 27) cited a scenario where a man captured a fourteen-year-old girl named Mgbeke from Umuoji (a coastal trading town near Onitsha, South-eastern Nigeria) while she and her friends worked on farmland. Investigating the reasons behind Mgbeke's capture reveals that her father owed huge debts. As such, Mgbeke was traded and used as a means of repayment. Mgbeke was sold out to Mkpör, resold at Bende, Oloko, Akwete and finally, to the Chief of Okrika (Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral Histories and Historical Descriptions, 1978, pp. 292-293). During this time, when slavery was a legitimate act, child labour was also supported (Chapdelaine, 2014).

Sadly, Nigeria's economic downturn in the 1920s and 1930s increased '*Child Pawning*' - a family strategy that involved using children's and children's labour as collateral for loans. The practice of child pawning as an institution during the time in question transformed humans from pawns to enslaved people as the purchase and post-slavery exploitation of children became necessary for child labour to thrive. When child pawning was in vogue, male parents in today's South-eastern Nigeria used their girls as pawns to raise the dowry needed for their own (parents') marriage while child dealers stole and sold children for their selfish gains (Chapdelaine, 2014). Over time, *pawnship* became a legal category of social and economic dependency overtly carried out in the presence of witnesses (Lovejay & Falola, 2003, p. 3). This practice continued into the 1930s.

Dominantly, dowry payments and pawns in a bid to secure loans were legal tender during the initial period of colonialism. It was difficult for colonial authorities to arrest and prosecute individuals who took part in child labour. Hence, child dealers and money lenders created a shadow economy where children, especially girls, were married out early by their parents, thus making it difficult to identify, stop and prosecute child dealers. Moreover, most communities in South-eastern Nigeria solely depended on enslaved people, among other dependants, for their labour

needs. Masters often used these dependents as agriculture labourers, potters, personal guards, canoe builders, and repairpersons, amongst other roles. They also held their subjects as a form of wealth, status symbol and for barbaric religious sacrifices (Miers, 1975, pp. 131-134).

In another event, the people of South-eastern Nigeria mobilised juvenile labour during the pre-colonial and colonial eras to care for their families and maintain their economic status (Human Trafficking in Nigeria, 2015, pp. 1-7). The period between 1900 and the 1930s was a moment in the country's history filled with unease. It was a troubled time in Nigerian history during which the people of South-eastern Nigeria experienced the effects of the forced removal of indigenous populations caused by the British during the Aro Expedition of 1901 and 1902. In this era, the people tried to negotiate power over a dwindling labour force in the 1920s and 1930s (Chapdelaine, 2014). As the South-eastern population experienced the influx of Western missionaries who challenged the authenticity of their customs and traditions, as well as the presence of colonial officers who imposed harsh political and economic policies on them, it is essential to note that while some groups enjoyed the opportunities these policies provided, others suffered the effects. These experiences provide evidence that explains how humans, particularly people from South-eastern Nigeria, were enslaved and victimised, thus showing that the issue bordering on human trafficking in South-eastern Nigeria has not recently come into existence. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to examine the nature, causes, patterns and effects of the trafficking of women and girls within and across the five states that make up South-eastern Nigeria, namely: Abia (Abia State), Owerri (Imo State), Enugu (Enugu State), Abakiliki (Ebonyi State), and Onitsha, Mkpor, Awka (Anambra State).

## **Theory and Methodology**

This research adopts Abraham Maslow's Theory of the Hierarchy of Needs in its discourse on the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory that centres on accomplishing innate human needs to the point of self-actualisation. Propounded by an American psychologist, Abraham Harold Maslow, in his paper entitled "A Theory of Human Motivation" in 1943, he designed a pyramid to highlight the levels and relevance of meeting human needs to have greater satisfaction. Comprising five levels from bottom to top, the pyramid includes psychological needs like food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep and breathe; safety and security: social stability, employment, health, and property; love and belonging: intimacy, sense of connection, friendship, and family; self-esteem: respect for others, confidence, and achievement; and self-actualisation: acceptance, creativity, purpose, inner potential and morality (Maslow, 1943).

Relating this theory to human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria, one can comprehend why trafficked victims are lured and manipulated by traffickers. The theory explains that factors such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, homelessness, neglect, abuse, lack of clothing and financial security are the primary causes of human trafficking. According to Hopper (2016), traffickers can either provide or trick their victims into believing they would provide the needs mentioned above, thus luring them (victims) into their trap. In another event, traffickers offer their victims friendships, among other psychological needs, to bond with them, as was evident in cases related to the sex trafficking of minors (Reed et al., 2019).

Furthermore, in addressing the recovery and healing of trafficked victims, community service providers are expected to work in line with the pyramid by first addressing the primary needs of

the trafficked victims like food, clothing, housing and a sense of security and safety from their traffickers (Gezinski & Karandikar, 2013; Hopper, 2016).

Once the basic needs have been met, the psychological needs are usually handled through therapeutic care and a sense of true healing. Overall, survivors – victims who can go through all the pyramid levels will have the opportunity to reach self-actualisation.

The methodology adopted in this research is qualitative. Based on this method, the research will examine the causes, patterns, and consequences of the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria. The authors selected thirty respondents who reside in cities within Abia, Anambra, Imo, Enugu, and Ebonyi States (South-eastern Nigeria). These respondents (twelve males and sixteen females) were duly informed that their views would be used for research purposes only. The respondents conceded to the authors' use of their names for reference purposes in this research. The age bracket of the respondents is between 21 and 51 years, and their profession spans from students, teachers, civil servants, civil society officers, NGO officers and traders. These selected individuals were considered suitable for this research because, over time, they have directly and indirectly witnessed events leading to and or after the trafficking of women and girls in their respective locations.

### **Unbundling the factors that necessitate the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria**

In this research, we observed two critical points. The first point is that human trafficking, whether child or adult trafficking, in South-eastern Nigeria is an unpopular issue with little attention. Therefore, not many whistles are blown against the horrendous act within diverse communities. Trafficking intrinsically interconnects with collective ignorance within communities and fear of being victimised by syndicates or underworld gangs. Over the years, the Nigerian government and



its anti-trafficking agencies have not done much regarding intensive monitoring, apprehending, arresting, prosecuting, and convicting traffickers. Therefore, the rates of trafficking of women and girls have incessantly increased.

The second point is that the factors that necessitate the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria are similar in nature and character across the region's five states. What is obtainable in one state will be the same in another. Be it as it may, this section of the paper aims to explain the reasons behind the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria. These reasons are actively looked into and explained below. According to Okeke (2022), Anagbogu (2022) and Ogaranya (2022), the factors responsible for the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria, precisely Anambra State, can be classified into two: *the Push and Pull factors*. For the Push factors, the interviewees revealed that poverty and greed contribute significantly to why most women and young girls fall prey to trafficking. While discussing poverty, Okeke (2022) stressed that having been engaged in several field works across the twenty-one (21) Local Government Areas of Anambra State as a NAPTIP (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons) officer, she observed that a lot of young girls become victims of trafficking because they are poor, hungry, have no shelter and money to take care of themselves and in some cases, their families.

Considering that they are women and need adequate care, these young ones, having exhausted all other legal means of survival like hawking (which is not a profitable and sustainable business), become desperate to survive at all costs. Moreover, in such a situation, they ignorantly fall prey to the deceptive promises of traffickers who take advantage of their vulnerability. She cited an instance of how poverty enables the trafficking of women and girls. Anagbogu (2022) recounted a case on November 14, 2021, at Ekwulobia, a town in Anambra State. According to her, a

seventeen-year-old girl was thrown out of the house by her elder sister, and she had spent two weeks and six days outside on the street without shelter.

Fortunately, a particular teacher reported to the NAPTIP, Anambra State Command, where she works. After a thorough investigation, the agency found out that the young girl had been moving from house to house in her neighbourhood, begging for food and shelter to lay her head and rest. However, what drew people's attention was when she and other young girls were seen moving about with a man known for his criminal activities within the environment. Furthermore, the agency observed that arrangements had already been made to move the girls to Ogidi, another town in Anambra State, where they would work in a brothel. Based on this appalling situation, Ogaranya (2022) decried the unfortunate condition whereby young people who are supposed to be provided for by their parents and guardians are abandoned or left to suffer.

Concerning *the pull factor*, the NAPTIP officers noted that in the quest to gain freedom from their parents/guardians and avoid lack, hunger, and unemployment, these young girls run into the hands of traffickers who deceive and lure them into prostitution and or domestic slavery. The traffickers promise a better life, quality education, good-paying jobs, and even marriage to politicians and highly revered people in business across the state. Without knowing that these are all lies, the girls willingly give in to the fake promises of the traffickers. In the same vein, Onyekwere (2021) argued that most times, women, and girls who fall victim are not to blame because if their parents and guardians had provided their basic needs, such as food, convenient shelter, and clothing, they would not have bothered looking outside and thinking of how to survive on their own. She concluded that since the effect of poverty is not gender-biased, it pushes young girls into the hands of traffickers.

Additionally, young girls who get unwanted pregnancies are often sent out of their homes by their

parents to avoid shame and embarrassment from the community. In the context of such situations, these helpless girls, not knowing and having where to go, inevitably become victims of traffickers who often offer them some help on the condition that they either sell their babies to them and return to their homes or be trafficked to places where they would gain some employment as domestic servants. The issue of teenage parents occurs worldwide, including in developed Western countries; however, how families and the government support teens in such a situation are directly opposite to how the Nigerian government and families do. The difference is captured in social policy and providing a social security net for citizens.

In the same vein, Okorie (2021) mentioned that there are situations where the parents of these young girls and women secretly reach out to some nurses and doctors with whom they agree to harbour their pregnant children until they give birth. Upon the birth of their babies, their daughters return home while their babies remain in the custody of the nurses who, in most cases, sell them off—giving an example of where such an incident happened. Onyekwere (2022) mentioned that a particular nurse named Magdalene, fondly called 'Megg', used to work at Pieta Hospital, Nwaziki Street, Awada, Onitsha was popularly known for engaging in such deals before she committed suicide out of fear of being apprehended by the Police in 2017. Ifeanyi (2022) highlights the influence of peer pressure as another factor that necessitates the trafficking of women and girls in Anambra State and South-eastern Nigeria. He averred that most young girls fall prey to traffickers due to bad advice from friends who live dubious lifestyles like prostitution, popularly known as 'runs' in Nigeria. In an era where material possessions are increasingly glorified and stand as the yardstick for measuring success, peer pressure from friends becomes inevitable.

Hence, people are in competition and increasingly tempted and influenced to do whatever it takes to acquire material possessions such as cars, shoes, clothes, cosmetics, expensive hair, etc. Thus,

they are deceived and trafficked to find alternatives to making money and acquiring these expensive material possessions. Ifeanyi remarked that the trafficking of persons is increasing in Anambra State because the government has failed to provide jobs for school graduates and an enabling environment that would promote businesses, talent exposition, and overall thriving. He added that unemployment in the state and the inability of business owners to remunerate their workers, especially women and girls, are also why they search for better opportunities, even at their own expense.

Underscoring Abia State, Osondu (2022) stated that the factors responsible for the traffickers of women and girls in the state can be classified into two thresholds. One is the quest for financial security, and two is the traffickers promising to claim to provide help to rescue from poverty. Furthermore, he explained that the young girls who fall victim to trafficking are always desperate for money to live a luxurious lifestyle and appear better than others.

However, he stated that if no traffickers deceived young girls by making fake promises to them, no one would fall victim to their antics. Thus, it is because these traffickers pose and present themselves as helpers to vulnerable young girls that trafficking continues to thrive. Corroborating Osondu's assertion, Onyekozuru (2022) added that the trafficking of women and girls is easier because the girls put their hope and trust in traffickers whom they believed would solve their problems. Taking the discourse to a different dimension with a unique perspective, Chibueze (2023) reconfirms that the fundamental factor responsible for the trafficking of women and girls in Aba, Abia State is ignorance, particularly on the part of those who are involved in the trafficking of these young ladies. He continued that human traffickers in South-eastern Nigeria appear to be naive. They do not care about the consequences of their actions or the long-term impacts and trauma on the victims; instead, they only focus on making money. Most of them are involved in

trafficking to make quick monetary gains and quit afterwards. As such, they do not know the ripple effects of their actions (Chibueze, 2023).

Again, he revealed that in his community - Ngwa, located in Aba- most parents, especially men, see their young daughters as "money sources" and are always willing to see them marry early in exchange for money from their prospective in-laws. Decrying the act, the interviewee noted that parents who give their young daughters up for marriage for material possessions do not care about knowing the family background of the man marrying their daughter as long as they receive the dowry and other gifts attached to it. It is unarguable that in a situation like this one, it can be regarded as trafficking in disguise, necessitated by the overzealousness and parental pressure mounted on young girls by their parents. Explaining the situation in Imo State, Akanihu (2022) mentioned that young girls fall victim to trafficking primarily because most are ignorant of the dangers, especially those between the ages of twelve and fifteen. He continued by explaining that these girls ignorantly concede to the fake promises of traffickers. Using Owerri as an example, he noted that even girls in tertiary institutions in the city like Imo State University (IMSU), Federal Polytechnic Nekede and others (who are supposed to be mature and intelligent) are not excluded; some of them are gullible and fall victim to these ills. Sometimes, these girls willingly accept being trafficked, provided they can make money. Akanihu concluded that although trafficking of women and girls is not rampant in the state, those known are always cases where young girls and women are lured into prostitution and baby-making for commercial purposes (selling one's baby) in the guise of being provided with greener pasture.

Elaborating on the situation in Enugu and Ebonyi States, Chukwuemeka (2022), the Executive Director of the Parent-Child Intervention Centre (PCIC) with branches in Enugu and Ebonyi States, averred that the trafficking of women and girls in these States are as a result of illiteracy

and poverty. She stated that the core of her organisation's mission is to emancipate mentally and financially empower young girls in these States; the interviewee revealed that issues bordering on trafficking of women and girls are very high in Abakiliki, among other towns in Ebonyi State because women and girls in these areas lack exposure and as such, are quickly taken advantage of by human traffickers. Most of them fall for unrealistic promises of good-paying jobs and high positions of authority in their supposed employers' homes. To the victims' understanding, it is an opportunity to leave their poor living conditions and environment for other better places where they would work for wealthy and successful traders, *Ogas* and their madams (Alfred, 2022). Sadly, by gladly believing these promises, they are captured.

### **Nature, pattern, and routes of trafficking in South-eastern Nigeria**

It is important to note that people in South-eastern Nigeria, known as Igbo, are popularly known for apprenticeship. This system lets young people, especially boys, learn a trade from a particular man (whom they refer to as master or *Oga*) for about five to eight years, depending on the agreement. Ultimately, they get settled with a reasonable amount of money and support to start their own business, primarily in the same line of trade (Mefor, 2022). On the other hand, the issue of scouting for, hiring and, in most cases, employing women and young girls for domestic service to different homes is equally prevalent in South-eastern Nigeria. Okoye (2022) posits that hiring and employing young girls as maidservants by the wives of economically buoyant traders is a widespread practice in South-eastern Nigeria. He continued that the essence of this practice is two-pronged. First, it serves as an escape route or alternative for survival for the poor girls and second, it provides their employer with free labour. Given the nature of South-eastern Nigeria, which accommodates the system of domestic servitude, human traffickers often take advantage of this opportunity to carry out their nefarious acts (Okpata, 2022). This section of the population, also

known for their expertise and success in trade and different businesses, often abuses and capitalises on the desperation of women and girls living in rural villages. For example, it is commonly perceived as a good gesture and welcomed development- for young girls living in Abakiliki, Ezza or Ohazara (Ebonyi State) to receive a job promise at Onitsha where she would be employed to work for Nwunye Oga (wife of a wealthy businessperson) is a big joyful thing. To them, this means freedom and better livelihood (Chukwuemeka, 2022).

One can describe the nature of trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria as endemic yet unpopular. In line with the evidence gathered during this research, it is baffling how many women and young girls are being taken advantage of by traffickers under the guise of offering them protection and stability. For instance, Premium Times (2021 December 23) reports a colossal incident where seventy (70) cases of human trafficking were recorded in Abia State in just six months by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) Abia State Command. In the report, the NAPTIP Zonal Commander, Nkemdirim Okafor, explained that the cases were recorded between June and December 2021 and that the victims were primarily women and girls who were also sexually victimised. Describing Abia State as an endemic and transit State, the Commander decried the high rate of sale of babies, especially in Aba (Abia State), as well as the trafficking of young girls between the ages of twelve (12) and thirteen (13) years who are groomed and nurtured for the purpose of childbearing for commercial sales.

In Anambra, Vanguard News (date missing) reported an incident where the Anambra State Police Command rescued thirty-five (35) girls, including four pregnant ones, in a hotel at Mkpok, a suburb of Onitsha (Ujumadu, 2022). According to the report, the girls were sexually assaulted by their employers: Ifeoma Uzu (35 years), Chidiebere Alaka (28 years), and Nweke Chidiebere, who were apprehended and prosecuted. At the exact location, the Police unmasked a hotel at Ghali Ghali

where young girls between the ages of fourteen (14) and seventeen (17) years old are used for prostitution (Ujumadu, 2022). In Imo State, the Guardian News reported that at least ten cases of trafficking of women and girls were recorded in 2022 (Osuji, 2022). Explaining the nature and pattern of trafficking of these young girls, he stated that trafficking within South-eastern Nigeria. However, it is often perceived as local and unsophisticated and consists of a network of undefined syndicates primarily of Igbo origin. These syndicates, from recruiters to collectors, employ various operational tools and strategies such as deception, making fake promises, physical and emotional abuse, threats, and isolation from family (Osi, 2022). According to Amba (2022), those involved in the trafficking of these girls are primarily spouses, friends, and strangers from different States of South-eastern Nigeria. Interestingly, in some cases, these traffickers connive and align with the parents and guardians of the girls trafficked. In contrast, in other cases, they are being forcefully abducted and trafficked within different communities (Ogbogu, 2022). An investigation by the Punch News (**date missing**) uncovered that the easiest and most common way traffickers lure their victims is the promise of high-paying jobs in developed cities like Onitsha, Owerri and Aba. However, upon reaching their destination, they are forced into prostitution (Ojoye, 2018). Reacting to the pattern used by traffickers in carrying out their clandestine activities, Ojoye (2018) noted that at the point of abduction, these women and girls are harboured in rented apartments, from where contacts and connections are to their employers, primarily restaurants, hotels, brothels, and club owners in the cities of Aba, Onitsha and Owerri precisely.

Furthermore, Anagbogu (2022) revealed that in making arrangements to traffick the abducted girls, they are being taken to a shrine where they would be forced to take an oath of allegiance to their new owners. The consequences of breaking the oath are madness and death. They are also forced



to take an oath by their employers, declaring their readiness to be faithful at work and never to abscond. Ojoye (2018) reported an incident where victims of trafficking revealed that they were forcefully taken to an herbalist (witch doctor) who used the hair from their head and private part to make soap with which they bathed with the concoction. Furthermore, these vulnerable victims were threatened with madness if they tried to escape. Mind games are one powerful tool used by these criminal syndicates.

Following the series of observations, the regular hideouts of these traffickers are always in isolated rented apartments, uncompleted buildings, and mushroom (decoyed) prayer houses where their captured prey are often kept in the guise of spiritually sick victims who need deliverance, hospitals like former Ezuma hospital in Okigwe road (Chukwu, 2022), Power hospital in Degema street (Ekeke, 2022), Obohia road, Aba, among other places. The notable routes used by traffickers in South-eastern Nigeria include World Bank Road (Onyekanne, 2022), Obohia Road (Ogbuju, 2022), Ngwa Road and Clifford Road (Ezeagu, 2022) (Abia State); Onitsha et al. (Anambra State); Eziachi et al. town, Orlu and Mgbidi (Imo State); Abakiliki (Ebonyi State) and Enugu (Enugu State).

### **Implications of Trafficking of Women and Girls in South-eastern Nigeria**

Aside from the socio-psychological effects of trafficking of women and girls, the victims suffer a great deal of social segregation, stigmatisation, and trauma consequent upon the horrific experiences they went through in the hands of their enslavers before rescue. This paper also seeks to further focus on an extraordinarily scandalous criminal activity known as '*Baby Factory*', resulting in child trafficking. Ombellet & Johnson (2016, p. 41) describe baby factories as facilities where young females are harboured and groomed to get pregnant and birth children that the illegal business management puts on sale on the illegal adoption market. In addition, the authors added

that it is any place where women and young teenage girls are either voluntarily or forcefully impregnated and harboured until baby delivery. Their innocent babies are sold for a fee, depending on the gender of the baby, and the male babies cost more than their female counterparts in the illegal market. Unfortunately, issues bordering on the institution of the baby factory in South-eastern Nigeria are underreported and are usually swept under the carpet by residents of the area out of fear of being attacked, misjudged, or arrested by law enforcement agents.

According to Nosike (2022), it is evident that the people who live in the areas where these baby factories are located or know about these activities often choose to resort to rumours and gossip instead of reporting them to the appropriate authorities. She continued that in a place like Aba in Abia State, 'baby factories' are fully operational, although in secret, often disguised as orphanages, prayer houses and maternity facilities. Over the years, underground economies such as baby factories have grown in Nigeria to become a multi-million-naira industry.

Regarding the nexus between the trafficking of women and girls and the set-up of baby factories in South-eastern Nigeria, the Zonal Commander, NAP TIP, Anambra State, Ibadin (2022) explains that there are many layers involved in the trafficking of women and girls in the area. One is the part where the victims are sold out directly into forced prostitution, and two is when and where these victims are harboured just for the sake of childbearing for financial purposes. She asserted that the institution of the baby factory is a scandalous business in human trafficking in Nigeria.

She continued that in several places across South-eastern Nigeria like Ghali, Mkpör in Anambra State, as well as orphanages, clinics and rented apartments, pregnant young and adult females are held captive until they deliver their babies. After that, they are compelled, with the aid of threats, to hand over their babies for varying sums of money. Corroborating this assertion with the Aljazeera report in 2020, it has been observed that male children are valued more than female

children; they are sold for higher prices between N700,000 to N1,000,000, while the latter is sold between N500,000 and N700,000 (Obaji, 2022). Furthermore, Obaji (2022) asserts that sometimes to produce babies, women and young girls are kidnapped, raped, and whisked away to unknown destinations where they are kept and harboured until the babies are delivered. Ohadugha (2022) also maintained that orphanage homes and most clinics hire medical professionals like midwives, nurses and sometimes doctors who help pregnant girls deliver their babies. Ohadugha (2022) cited an example of a particular nurse who used to work at Pieta Hospital, Onitsha, Anambra State. She explained that when the hospital staff and people living within the hospital's location noticed that the nurse, fondly called Meg, was into delivering babies for syndicates who operate baby factories, she eventually took her life out of fear of being arrested and jailed. Furthermore, THIS DAY News (2022 July 19) reported that in some cases, these factories hire men to impregnate these girls for a fee, thus increasing the rate of childbirth and trafficking in the area.

In Nigeria, child trafficking ranks as the third most common crime in Nigeria after financial fraud and drug trafficking—at least ten babies are sold daily in Nigeria (THIS DAY News 2022 July 19). Going by the implications of those mentioned earlier, one may not be wrong to describe it as a drastic and dehumanising experience for women and children because children and women trafficked suffer much physical damage, sometimes leading to death. Also, most of the babies sold out end up with strange and dangerous people who could use them for diabolical acts such as rituals. Again, women and young girls sexually abused while trafficked often suffer psychological trauma and stigmatisation. They also risk contracting sexually transmitted diseases and infections like HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, the psychological effect of trafficking on women and girls

could lead to retardation in the victims' lives. They are often depressed and ashamed of themselves and their awful past experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The study examined the nature, causes and effects of the trafficking of women and girls in South-eastern Nigeria. It focused on re-interpreting the concept of human trafficking in Nigeria from an inside-out perspective using South-eastern Nigeria as a case study. Even though the issue is underrated and underreported in South-eastern Nigeria, it is pretty endemic. From the evidence collated, the research uncovered the factors responsible for the act. These include poverty, unemployment, greed, peer pressure, parental pressure, and dysfunctional family. It also accessed the nature, pattern and routes of trafficking and traffickers in South-eastern Nigeria. Regarding the act's implications, the research explored the proliferation of baby factories, which lead to child trafficking and abuse. Overall, the researchers observed a need for immediate government attention on internal trafficking in Nigeria to curb the menace and help save innocent women, young girls, and youth from being victimised, molested, and sexually abused.

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