

NIGERIA'S STRUGGLE AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING: A BATTLE FOR NATIONAL DIGNITY

Amina Ezeife

Department of History and International Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State

NIGERIA

ABSTRACT: This study examines the historical context and implications of the British colonial administration's efforts to suppress the trans-Atlantic slave trade in what later became Nigeria. The suppression of this inhumane trade began with the British military expedition on Lagos territory in 1861, leading to the declaration of the area as a British Crown colony. The first Ordinance specifically prohibiting slave dealing and internal slave trafficking within the Crown colony of Lagos was enacted in 1874. However, it wasn't until August 31, 1916, that a decisive decree was passed, liberating every slave in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria. This decree also unequivocally forbade any recognition of the status of slavery by British or Native courts in these regions. The British colonial administration's anti-slavery laws not only marked the end of slavery as a social institution in Nigeria but also heralded a new era of revolutionary ideals, emphasizing liberty, freedom, and equality among the Nigerian population under British colonial rule.

Keywords: British colonial administration, trans-Atlantic slave trade, Nigeria, anti-slavery laws, social institution, liberty, freedom, equality.

INTRODUCTION

The suppression of trans-Atlantic slave trade in what later became Nigeria began with the British military expedition on Lagos territory and the subsequent declaration of the area British Crown colony in 1861. However, it was not until 1874 that the first Ordinance was enacted prohibiting slave dealing and internal traffic in slaves within the Crown colony of Lagos (Lugard, 1919). On August 31, 1916 the British colonial administration prohibited slavery in Southern Provinces by the enactment of a decree to that effect. By this decree "every slave in the Southern Provinces was liberated". It followed that "no court, British or Native, may in any way whatever recognize the status of slavery in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria" (Lugard, 1919). The British colonial administration's anti-slavery laws marked the end of slavery as a social institution in Nigeria. They also ushered in a modern era of revolutionary ideas of liberty, freedom and equality among Nigerian people under the British colonial state.

By 1960, when Nigeria secured her independence from Britain, slavery as a social institution or socio-cultural practice had virtually ceased to exist. Indeed, it became illegal and vexatious even to raise the issue in reference to an individual or group. In 1980s, however, when Nigeria's economy witnessed serious decline as a result of oil glut, the country began to experience mass poverty manifested by increasing unemployment, soaring prices of essential goods and low wages. Consequently, there was widespread misery and frustration among

the populace especially the large number of unemployed youths who began to believe that their prospect of economic survival lay outside the shores of the country. This encouraged many youths to begin to emigrate from Nigeria in large number and, in most cases, to Europe, Asia and America.

The mass exodus of youths from Nigeria and, indeed, other Sub-Saharan African and Asian countries to the economically advanced nations of Europe and America encouraged the emergence of syndicates who devised methods for enticing would-be trafficked persons. In the case of Nigeria specifically, the syndicates developed very strong and dependable network for effective organization, recruitment and movement of would-be trafficked persons from their local communities to North Africa across the perilous Sahara Desert. Most Nigerian victims of human trafficking pass through Niger, Mali, Tunisia, Morocco or Libya en route to Europe (Ojugbana, 2015:28).

By 1990s the large number of emigrants (victims of human trafficking from Nigeria and other African countries and Asia) roaming the streets of some European countries were considerable. Nigeria was listed among the African countries with the highest number of women trafficked to Europe for commercial sex business. According to Otti (2011:16), about 50,000 Nigerian women were trafficked to Europe every year for prostitution. He stated that trafficking of women and children across local borders in Africa has been on increase despite counter-measures by government agencies and anti-trafficking organizations.

As many of the trafficked persons were without valid traveling documents, they became source of great concern and embarrassment to their respective countries. Many of them were said to have constituted social nuisance in their host countries, for example, the young prostitutes openly soliciting for male clients in the streets of Italy and Amsterdam (Njoku, 2005). The situation created a new global problem involving the trafficking in human persons across national borders for sexual exploitation and other oppressive and dehumanizing purposes. The phenomenon was described as a form of “modern-day slavery”.

The meaning of Human Trafficking

In 1999 the United Nations General Assembly defined human trafficking as

The illicit and clandestine movement of persons across national, international borders, largely from developing countries in transition with the end goal of forcing women, children into sexually or economically oppressive and exploitative situations for the profit of recruiters, traffickers, crime syndicates as well as all other illegal activities related to trafficking such as forced domestic labour (cited in Adoba, 2004).

Also Oloko cited in Okpalakunne (2006) described human trafficking as

the recruitment, transportation, transfer labour receipt of a person through deception, force, coercion to a strange place within or across borders for the purpose of retraining such a person in a situation of enslavement, servitude or debt bondage (cited in Okpalakunne, 2006).

Thus, human trafficking involves carrying human beings particularly women, children and other able-bodied youths from one place to another, at times across national and international borders by the traffickers for the purpose of subjecting the trafficked persons to prostitution, drug peddling or child labour. Some youths were also lured into various crimes such as armed robbery, fraud and membership of violent gangs etc. as they found themselves in foreign countries.

Human trafficking in Nigeria

Although human trafficking has become a global problem, nevertheless, African countries (including Nigeria) serve as major sources of trafficked persons. According to the report which the United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) presented to the Conference of African Ministers in Benin Republic in 2004, human trafficking is prominent in 53 African countries. The report revealed that 89 percent of the 53 nations involved had been trafficking human beings to and from neighbouring countries, but an appreciable volume of the traffic flows to Europe (see Akaigwe, 2004; Njoku, 2005). The African children were said to be “the biggest victims of the complex phenomenon, and are twice as likely to be trafficked as women”. Some are engaged as child soldiers in war-torn African countries, while many others work as domestic servants, farm labourers or sold into prostitution. Awake (June 22, 2002) observed that most ‘modern-day slaves’ are often women and children. The paper noted that they toil against their will either as child labourers or even prostitutes. For instance, the report on child labour released in 2008 showed that an estimated 284,000 child labourers existed in West Africa and many of them worked in coca farms “on slave labour wages or for nothing in order to put chocolate into the mouths of consumers” (The Punch, February 20, 2008).

In Nigeria specifically, human trafficking involving women and children has been going on in several locations and communities. The report on Trafficking in Persons, 2004 cited in Maduagwu (2004) described Nigeria as a source, transit and destination country for trafficked women and children. The report noted that Nigerians were trafficked to Europe, the Middle East and other countries for purpose of forced labour, domestic servitude and sexual exploitation. It also described Nigeria as a destination country for Togolese, Beninese, Ghanaian and Cameroonian children trafficked for forced labour (See Maduagwu, 2004). A recent report on human trafficking and migration to Europe shows that in 2014, 170, 100 arrived Italy by sea, compared to 141, 484 migrants that were ferried through the Mediterranean Sea from Libya in 2013. According to the report, the migrants had come from Syria (42, 323), Eritrea (34, 329), Mali (9,908) Nigeria (9,000), Gambia (8, 691), Somalia (5, 756) and some other nations (4,095). Among the migrants, 64, 625 were said to have applied for asylum (Ojugbana, 2015:29). In the case of Nigeria, most of the migrants were victims of human trafficking hoodwinked by syndicates as a result of their desperation to travel to Europe or Asia for a better life.

Thus, human trafficking is a complex phenomenon of which many people are involved at both family and community levels, as well as at the border or international transactions. The Guardian Opinion (June 29, 2004) observed that Nigeria is a well-known player in human trafficking. According to the paper, the country serves as “a base camp and transit channel for traffickers and their human commodity”. The paper also noted that inside the country and at border areas some locations are known to be target spots for operations.

In a similar view, Oloko cited in Okpalakunne (2006) explained that child trafficking consists of both national and trans-national recruitment and movement of children for the purpose of providing cheap, manipulatable and exploitable labour for domestic and agricultural work, commercial sex work or prostitution, begging, unregulated industrial work and street trading.

The South-east and South-south geo-political zones of Nigeria are noted for active involvement in human trafficking. For instance, several thousands of children are known to have been trafficked from Igbo land, Akwa Ibom and Cross River states to Lagos, Benin Republic, Togo and Gabon for the purpose of engaging

them in child labour, which is akin to child slavery. The high rate of child trafficking became a major source of concern to the

Akwa, Ibom State government that it banned “all forms of trafficking in children from the state to other parts of the country to serve as house-helpers or cheap labour of any form” in 2004. The government also threatened to “deal drastically with parents who persist and promote trafficking in children” (See Solomon, 2004).

The Western part of the country is also involved in child trafficking for the purpose of using them as cheap labour for domestic work, agricultural production, including cocoa and rubber farms. Nwakamma (2004) reported that Asewele, a community in Ondo State is a spot for child slavery. He stated that both males and females were sold at a price of about N25, 000.00 each across the border and there were always prospective buyers. He also noted that despite the efforts being made by the police and immigration officers, Nigerian borders are still vulnerable as far as child trafficking is concerned.

In Benin city, capital of Edo State, there were syndicates who specialized in recruiting and sponsoring young ladies to Europe especially Italy, Amsterdam and Belgium for prostitution. Taire (2004) observed that it was since 2000 that the issue of Nigerian women in general, and ladies from Benin city and its environs in particular going to Europe to work as commercial sex workers had become a real cause for concern. Similarly, *THIS DAY* (May 3, 2004) in a story culled from *Economist* stated that people-trafficking in Benin-city was an organized and lucrative trade. The paper observed that it was riot possible to know how many ladies were shipped out each year, but that “every one in Benin-city knows who has gone”. The paper noted that the girls were recruited by local sponsors “who pay up-front for transport, and the girls therefore start out with thousands of dollars in debt”

By 2004, it was estimated that no fewer than 100,000 young Nigerian women had been sold into sex slavery as prostitutes, servicing ‘top guns’ and ‘big boys’ in Europe’s flourishing underground sex industry. According to an official of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Alhaji Mohammed Babandede out of about 90,000 sex workers of Nigerian origin in Italy 50,000 of them were from Edo State. This, according to Aihaji Babandede, represented 60 percent of prostitutes in that country (See Njoku, 2005). Sequel to this, the United States of America placed Nigeria on her Tier 2-Watch list of countries involved in trafficking in persons. According to Joann Schneider, Deputy Director of the Office to Combat and Monitor Trafficking in Persons, Washington, Nigeria did not comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking though United States recognized that Nigeria was “making significant efforts to do so” (See Emeozor, 2004).

It was as a result of the menace of human trafficking in Nigeria and its increasing damage to the nation’s image abroad that some anti-human trafficking organizations were formed by some patriotic individuals to stem the ugly tide. Among these organizations the most influential, powerful and well focused was the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) founded by Mrs. Amina Titi Abubakar, wife of former Vice President of Nigeria, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. WOTCLEF initiated and sponsored the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Labour bill which was passed by the National Assembly and subsequently signed into law by the former President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo on July 14, 2003 (Njoku, 2005). The legislation (Act) provided for the establishment of the National Enforcement and Administration to be known as National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and other Related Matters (NAPTIP). It gave

the agency sweeping powers to initiate prosecution of barons or syndicates of the illicit trade. The NAPTIP mission statement is the full commitment *to the prevention of all forms of human degradation and exploitation. Through the coordinated use of nation crime prevention and law enforcement resources, we are determined to stamp out human trafficking and to liberate and uplift the vulnerable especially women and children, from dehumanizing exploitative usage, as well as to ensure their rehabilitation and effective reintegration into the society (cited in Adoba, 2004).*

In 2005 the NAPTIP Act was amended which criminalized the keeping of brothels and the use of children as domestic house helps. The properties of the offenders of this amended act have become targets for seizure by government (Olayinka, 2011).

Moreover, the Federal Government has encouraged NAPTIP to establish a National Investigation Task Force (NITF). The NITF has been upgraded to effective coordinating offices in many states of the federation particularly in states with worst human trafficking problems. NAPTIP has also established shelters where victims of human trafficking are taken care of during rescue and rehabilitation period. Those shelters exist in zonal offices located in Lagos, Kano, Benin, Enugu, Uyo, Sokoto and Maiduguri (Olayinka, 2011). Besides, NAPTIP was said to be increasingly making use of the Police, Immigration Service and traditional rulers in its fight against human trafficking in Nigeria. It was also said to have successfully investigated many cases and had also succeeded in securing the convictions of many syndicates involved in human trafficking in the country.

The NAPTIP was also said to be increasingly collaborating with some national and international agencies in its fight against human trafficking. For instance, the NAPTIP was said to be collaborating with International Organization for Migration (IOM), Spanish Police, the Italian Anti-Mafia Bureau and Benin Republic Police etc. The collaboration with these agencies was said to have resulted in the arrests and trial of some syndicates involved in human trafficking and the formal repatriation of some victims of the illicit trade, Okumephana (2004) stated that the collaboration between NAPTIP and other agencies had resulted in the arrests of syndicates involved in 13 different cases of which four had been charged to court by December, 2004. However, the Executive Secretary of NAPTIP, Mr. Simon Chudi Egede has revealed that his agency has secured more than 100 convictions with many of them serving various jail terms ranging from two to 24 years in prison (See Olayinka, 2011).

Above all, NAPTIP was said to have been committed towards the rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking. According to the Executive Secretary of NAPTIP, Mr. Simon Chuzi Egede between 2009 and 2010 the agency spent about ₦50 million on over 100 victims empowering them with trade equipment and seed money to enable them start their own businesses. He stated that so far about 4,934 victims had passed through the agency with 1,884 recorded between 2009 and 2010. Mr. Egede further stated that out of this figure 526 victims had been rehabilitated either by returning to school or assisted to acquire vocational skills (See Olayinka, 2011).

It should be noted that the NAPTIP's figure on victims of human trafficking rescued between 2009 and 2010 shows that the 'modern-day slavery' has not in any way abated. This is particularly when considered in the light of the number of victims rescued by the agency which might probably have been a small percentage of the entire persons trafficked within the period. For instance, *Daily Independent Editorial* (February 25, 2011)

painted a grimmer picture of how “thousands of mostly unskilled Nigerian youths battle their way through the harsh, cold weather of the Sahara desert to Southern Europe” The paper noted that for many of these youths “it was the Devil’s alternative choice”. That is, according to the paper, either “to remain un-catered for by the emergent avaricious political class that has continued to channel state resources for personal aggrandizement or to risk their lives outside Nigeria as factory hands, doing menial jobs or plain prostitution”. The paper noted that many Nigerian youths “took the plunge and died in the process”, while “some of those who survived and succeeded in their chosen careers are now smiling to the bank and even sending valuable money home” (*Daily Independent Editorial*, February 25, 2011).

Similarly, the National Anti-Human Trafficking Campaign report released by its National Co-ordinator, Richard Ossai shows that human trafficking between Nigeria and the world “is taking a worse dimension”. Ossai in his report stated that “besides slave work abuse, the victims are losing their vital parts for a paltry \$150 in return for the permanent damage done to them”. He, however, acknowledged that the federal government in collaboration with various organizations has done more than any other African country in the fight against human trafficking, a feat he noted has resulted in Nigeria moving out of the status of countries with worst cases of trafficking. But the scourge of human trafficking still persists in the country which he (Ossai) described as “a dehumanizing act” (See *Nigerian Pilot*, January 20, 2011).

The major reasons for the persistence of the ugly phenomenon of human trafficking in Nigeria include pervasive poverty in the society especially at the family level; the frightening problem of unemployment among the populace particularly the youths, and ignorance of the prospective victims of human trafficking about their fate in foreign countries. Some other reasons include bad leadership that has failed to improve the welfare of the citizens thereby resulting in mass disillusionment and the urge by many citizens to leave the country in search for better living conditions in other countries; the abuse of traditional method of fostering children and get-rich-quick syndrome in contemporary Nigerian society. There is also the pressures of urban migration which have stretched the demands for house helps and, in turn, induced the internal trafficking of young boys and girls conscripted sometimes into near slave labour (*The Guardian Editorial*, June 29, 2004). Moreover, there is the problem of the existence of powerful and influential syndicates within and outside Nigeria that coordinate and finance the despicable business, and the lure of huge profit that accrue to them annually from it. For instance, it was revealed by Mrs. G.B. Idiodi, the Executive Director of Light Bearers Organization (LBO) that “the perpetrators of human trafficking are believed to be raking in between \$7 billion to \$10 billion dollars annually” (See Nzama, 2004). Besides, there is the alleged complicity of some security personnel in trafficking of persons especially within the borders (See Emeozor, 2004). Thus, although some officials of NAPTIP claim that Nigeria is winning the war against human trafficking, nevertheless, the sordid business still persists (See Godwin, 2014:15). For instance, Ojugbana (2015:29) reported that between January, and March 3, 2015, 463 Nigerians were among 7,882 migrants that arrived Italy by sea from Libya.

Effects of human trafficking on Nigeria’s image

The concept of national image subsumes a mental picture in which a nation-state portrays or projects about herself in her relations with other nation-states in international system. It is a significant factor or an essential element for the perception and assessment of national character. Morgenthau (1949) described national character as those “fundamental intellectual and moral traits which reveal themselves on all levels of thought

and action and which give each nation its unmistakable distinctiveness”. It is in recognition of the need to portray good national image among comity of nations that Nigeria established NAPTIP and as well collaborates with various organizations in the fight against the scourge of human trafficking. Despite these efforts, however, the incidence of human trafficking persists and has continued to create negative effects on the country’s image in the following ways:

1. Human trafficking portrays Nigeria in a bad light. It creates erroneous impression that the country is incapable of providing for her citizens especially in terms of employment and social welfare, hence the exodus of her able-bodied youths to foreign countries.
2. It dents the image of the country as many young prostitutes of Nigerian origin are allegedly often spotted in sex parlours and streets of some European countries (Italy, Holland and Belgium etc) soliciting for male clients. An official of the NAPTIP, Alhaji Mohammed Babandede revealed in 2004 that there were no fewer than 100,000 Nigerian women sold into sex slavery as prostitutes in Europe (See Njoku, 2005).
3. Human trafficking involving Nigerian ladies gives the ugly impression that Nigerian citizens help to sustain the underground sex industry in Europe involving young teenagers.
4. The human trafficking conundrum erroneously portrays Nigeria as a country in throes of political and economic crises. This is despite the fact that the country conducted free, fair, credible and peaceful general elections recently, and is making efforts to improve socioeconomic conditions of its citizens. Human trafficking, therefore, creates wrong impression of the image of the country.
5. It frustrates the efforts of the government towards the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) particularly Education for All. Many of the victims of child trafficking are deprived of the opportunity to acquire formal education. Besides, Ezinma (2010) reported that over 12 million Nigerian children are in the bondage of child labour and more are at risk of joining the child labour condition. He stated in his report that it is quite sad that many years after the goal of International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour work (IPEC) was launched, the prevention and elimination of worst form of child labour (WFCL) is still a mirage in Nigeria. This casts doubts on the commitment of the country towards eliminating child labour which is akin to child slavery.
6. Brain drain which is another dimension of ‘human trafficking’ deprives the country highskilled manpower needed for rapid national development. Ibekwe (2010) summarized the negative effects of brain drain on developing countries, including Nigeria as follows:

Brain drain in developing countries has financial, institutional and social costs: little return from their investments in higher education; increasing dependency on foreign expertise due to dwindling professional sector; diminishing ability of several developing countries to offer basic health care services to their subjects; widening gap in science and technology between the richer and poor countries; crumbling middle class population; failing tax system and disappearance of jobs and society (Ibekwe, 2010).

With particular reference to Nigeria, Professors Wilma Meus and David Sanders, both of the University of the Western Cape’s School of Public Health, South Africa stated in their research report that Nigeria has incurred loss of \$420 million (N53.34 billion) through the loss of 21,000 doctors to the United States of America. Meus and Sanders stated that conservative estimates showed that the United States has saved at least \$3.86 million

(N490.2 million) in training fees by employing doctors from Nigeria (See Bagshaw, 2003). Similarly, thousands of medical experts of Nigerian origin reside and work in United Kingdom.

On the other hand, Nigeria's health care and education sectors have "been in deplorable state partly due to inadequate number of experts as a result of the effect of brain drain." In the case of health sector, for instance, the report on the progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as documented by Anuforo (2010) shows that

Nigeria really still does not have the kind of public health system that the country.... needs. The life expectancy in Nigeria is about 55 years, while in other middle income countries it is about 70, and higher income countries about 80 plus. Nigeria is just not achieving the health and maternal survival of the child befitting a country of its stature (Anuforo, 2010).

It should be noted that Nigerians in Diaspora were said to be over 20 million contributing greatly to the development of their various countries of residence (Nwanunobi, 2006).

7. Human trafficking exposes some Nigerian citizens to all forms of inhuman treatment in foreign countries. These include physical assault, rape, detention and in some extreme cases execution. Many Nigerians are also known to be languishing in prisons in some countries of the world due to the misadventure associated with human trafficking.

8. It gives rise to frequent deportation of Nigerian citizens from foreign countries with its attendant diplomatic implications. The former Head of Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Trafficking Unit, Miss Nnenna Mbagwu revealed that a total of 2,562 Nigerian girls were deported from Europe in 2002. She also stated that 189 minors who were being 'towed out' of the country ostensibly for child slavery were intercepted in the same year. (*Daily Champion*, January 30, 2003).

9. Human trafficking exposes Nigerian youths to the danger of being used as 'guinea pigs' for scientific and medical researches in foreign countries. The National Coordinator of the National Anti-Human Trafficking Campaign (NAHTC), Mr. Richard Osai lamented that human trafficking between Nigeria and the world "is taking worse dimension". He stated that "besides slave work abuse, the victims are losing their vital parts for a paltry \$150 in return for the permanent damage done to them" (See *Nigerian Pilot*, January 20, 2011). This is not only an act of indignity against such victims, but also portrays them as subhumans without protective rights.

10. It impugns on Nigeria's national character. It was partly as a result of the bad image which human trafficking paints about the country that the Federal Government resolved to embark on re-branding Nigeria project.

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking is a form of 'modern-day slavery' which involves the movement of thousands of Nigerian women and children mainly through land routes to some North and West African countries with the ultimate aim of taking them to Europe for slave labour and prostitution. The escalation of the incidence of human trafficking in Nigeria began in 1980s as a result of decline in Nigeria's economy which gave rise to pervasive poverty at family level; frightening unemployment; deterioration of social infrastructure; low wages, soaring prices of goods and consequent social misery among the populace. This situation provoked the urge to

immigrate to foreign countries by many Nigerians to seek for better life and favourable economic opportunities.

Some Nigerian citizens who embarked on the desperate journey did not reach their destinations due to associated hazards, while many of those who got to their destinations found themselves engaging in precarious jobs akin to slave labour, prostitution or crime. This created bad image for the country and necessitated the establishment of NAPTIP, and collaboration with some international organizations to stem the tide. The scourge of human trafficking still persists in the country despite federal government's concerted actions. Indeed, it has become part of the global problem of illegal migration involving hundreds of thousands of people mainly from Africa and Middle East, which presently threaten the social stability of Europe.

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