

# Trafficking in Women for Sexual Exploitation: Socioeconomic and Cultural Perspectives from Edo State, Nigeria

Moonstarlyn Enweremadu

Department of Social and Applied Science, Abertay University, Dundee, Scotland  
Email: moonstarlyn.u.p@gmail.com

**How to cite this paper:** Enweremadu, M. (2025). Trafficking in Women for Sexual Exploitation: Socioeconomic and Cultural Perspectives from Edo State, Nigeria. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 96-103. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.1312008>

**Received:** October 22, 2025  
**Accepted:** December 12, 2025  
**Published:** December 15, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

Trafficking in women remains a widespread human rights violation globally, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations in developing areas. In Edo State, Nigeria, socioeconomic inequality, high unemployment, and family pressures drive the rise of sex trafficking, with traffickers exploiting women and girls through coercion, deception, and ritual practices. This paper explores the causes, effects, and methods of trafficking in Edo State, using survey data, case studies, and secondary sources. Results indicate that poverty, gender discrimination, family breakdown, and cultural practices such as voodoo rituals intensify women's susceptibility. The study highlights the urgent need for coordinated efforts by government bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and communities to reduce trafficking, safeguard victims, and dismantle traffickers' networks.

## Keywords

Human Trafficking, Edo State, Women Exploitation, Voodoo, Nigeria, Modern Slavery

## 1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a contemporary form of slavery that infringes on fundamental human rights, including life, liberty, security, and dignity (OHCHR, 2024). Globally, women and girls constitute most victims, primarily subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labour, and servitude (UNODC, 2022). Traffickers exploit socioeconomic inequalities, unemployment, and family vulnerabilities, luring victims with promises of improved livelihoods abroad while subjecting them to coercion, abuse, and bondage (Abdulraheem & Oladipo, 2010; Okoye et al., 2025).

In Nigeria, Edo State is a significant source of trafficked women destined for Europe, particularly Italy, despite being relatively economically stable. High youth unemployment, family pressures, and certain cultural practices facilitate exploitation, with some families inadvertently or reluctantly allowing traffickers to deceive young women with promises of overseas employment or education (Braitham, 2013). Local government areas such as Egor, Oredo, Etsako West, Ovia Southwest, Esan Central, Ikpoba-Okha, Oria Northeast, Orhionmwon, Uhumwonde, and Esan Northeast have been identified as primary outflows of trafficked women (Braitham, 2013).

Anti-trafficking efforts in Nigeria are coordinated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Initiative for the Development of Indigenous Awareness Renaissance (IDIA), and Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), providing medical care, counselling, and reintegration support to victims (WOTCLEF, 2025). At destination points, traffickers frequently confiscate documents and use physical violence, threats, and coercion to enforce compliance (Helen Bamber Foundation, 2022).

Furthermore, modern slavery persists globally, with an estimated 27 million people subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, and servitude. Its characteristics include loss of free will under threat, economic and sexual exploitation, and coercive control through social, cultural, and psychological mechanisms (Bales, 2023; Wuyah & Mialamba, 2021). Trafficking manifests in sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, and organ trafficking (UNODC, 2022).

In Edo State, spiritual practices such as juju are systematically used to manipulate victims. Traffickers administer oaths at shrines to instil fear of supernatural punishment, conceal identities, and reinforce compliance, making escape or reporting extremely difficult (Ogwezzy, 2022).

Poverty, greed, unemployment, large family sizes, weak governance, corruption, gender inequality, and cultural norms contribute to the prevalence of trafficking in Nigeria. False promises of improved livelihoods deceive vulnerable individuals, while corrupt officials and inadequately trained law enforcement facilitate traffickers' operations (Amune, 2025; Okoye et al., 2025; Khandaker-Mursheda et al., 2024; Broad et al., 2023). This creates an environment where trafficking thrives, and public trust in institutions is eroded.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Various theories of human trafficking encompass choice and strain models, as well as push and pull theories. From a rational choice perspective, trafficking depends on background factors that influence the opportunities available (Omorodion, 2009). Trust in traffickers and the willingness to accept risks also affect vulnerability. Strain theory suggests that community pressures to attain wealth and social status increase the risk, particularly for marginalised groups, thereby prompting

women to exchange their bodies for survival (Omorodion, 2009). Regarding push and pull theory, these are mechanisms that motivate individuals to relocate from one place to another, commonly referred to as the “push” and “pull” factors of migration. Push factors are prevalent in the benefactor’s country. In contrast, pull factors are characteristic of the host country, which are rooted in systemic gender discrimination, rendering women and girls particularly vulnerable, as observed in Edo State (Ogujiuba et al., 2019).

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative secondary research method, systematically reviewing existing scholarly and institutional sources regarding human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation in Nigeria. Literature was identified through academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, connecting papers, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect, as well as organisational repositories such as those of the UNODC, ILO, and WHO. The search included materials published between 2003 and 2025 to encompass both foundational and contemporary perspectives. Keywords included combinations such as “human trafficking in Nigeria”, “women trafficking and sexual exploitation”, “Edo State trafficking”, “voodoo and trafficking”, “institutional response to trafficking”, health and social issues of women trafficking, and “push-pull migration factors”. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, NGO publications, and documents from international organisations that addressed causes, patterns, or interventions related to trafficking in women. Sources lacking an empirical basis, duplications, or unrelated to the Nigerian or African context were excluded. A total of 32 core sources were reviewed and synthesised to identify recurring socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional themes. Data were analysed systematically to highlight causal relationships among poverty, gender inequality, and cultural practices that sustain trafficking networks (Braithair, 2013; UNODC, 2022; Ogwezy, 2023). This approach ensured analytical depth, multiple perspectives, and greater transparency and reproducibility in line with best practices for secondary research (OHCHR, 2024).

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Socioeconomic Factors

The findings identify socioeconomic hardship as a primary driver of human trafficking in Edo State. Factors such as unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education increase vulnerability, particularly among young women seeking livelihoods. Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities by offering false opportunities abroad. This is consistent with international research indicating that individuals eager to migrate but lacking resources are at higher risk (Bogatzki & Dolling, 2025). The ILO (ILO, 2023) highlights that unemployment and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa raise the risk of forced labour and trafficking, especially among young people. Field interviews by Attoh (Attoh, 2009) show that family size and

social structures affect vulnerability; women in large, polygamous households experience more financial stress and are more targeted by traffickers. Participants mentioned cases where parents encouraged migration for economic reasons, illustrating how poverty and cultural norms sustain trafficking routes. Despite active NGOs in the region, many lack adequate government support, including insufficient funding for shelters and rehabilitation programmes, weak legal protections, and inconsistent law enforcement cooperation. These deficiencies hamper prevention efforts and weaken the broader anti-trafficking system. Compared to European countries with well-funded victim support, integrated referral systems, and specialised anti-trafficking units, Nigeria's institutional framework remains fragmented, underfunded, and overly dependent on NGOs, creating major implementation hurdles.

#### 4.2. Institutional Failures and Corruption

Corruption has long been identified as a major driver enabling trafficking networks in Edo State (Agbu, 2003). Weak law enforcement, corruption, and inadequate victim support sustain trafficking activities, with some officials colluding with traffickers. Although NGOs such as NAPTIP, IDIA Renaissance, and WOTCLEF play vital roles in victim rehabilitation, advocacy, and awareness campaigns, their impact is limited due to a lack of government backing. This issue manifests in several ways, including insufficient funding and logistical support, the absence of comprehensive legal protection for victims and frontline workers, and weak coordination with law enforcement agencies (WOTCLEF, 2025). Many NGOs operate independently, heavily reliant on donor funding, which limits their sustainability and scope. Additionally, limited cooperation from law enforcement often hampers information sharing, prompt rescue operations, and the prosecution of offenders (Okoye et al., 2025; European Commission, 2023; European University Institute, 2022; GRETA, 2023).

Conversely, European anti-trafficking systems exhibit stronger interagency collaborations and structured partnerships between government entities and non-governmental organisations, thereby ensuring consistent victim support and efficient law enforcement responses (Helen Bamber Foundation, 2022). It is therefore crucial to enhance these relationships in Nigeria to establish a coherent and effective anti-trafficking framework. Recent surveys in Edo State show changing attitudes: a 2023 study found high levels of awareness of trafficking and positive anti-trafficking attitudes among students (Omoregbe & Aghahowa, 2023). A 2025 survey indicated about 24% know someone trafficked or working abroad in prostitution; 22% believe migration, even for prostitution, supports families. This reflects weak reporting and growing acceptance of trafficking-linked migration as a survival tactic. Earlier data (Agbo, 2003) showed public apathy: 22.3% would ignore trafficked women, 58.5% seek family help, and 70.8% believe women should financially support their parents. The shift from apathy to tacit acceptance results from limited education, weak institutions, cultural norms, and systemic corrup-

tion, all of which make women vulnerable in Edo State.

### 4.3. Cultural and Religious Dimensions: Voodoo and Oath Rituals

Many trafficking cases in Edo State, Nigeria, involve spiritual practices like juju or voodoo used during victim recruitment and control. Traffickers take women to shrines to swear oaths that threaten supernatural punishment or harm to their families, creating strong psychological control and making escape, reporting, or testifying difficult (Ogwezzy, 2023). These rituals remain central in Nigerian trafficking networks; a 2022 study found voodoo practices facilitate trafficking by instilling fear that reduces supervision needs (Ogwezzy, 2022). Trafficking networks in Nigeria commonly use ritual oath control and high-value migration debts to enforce compliance among victims, particularly young women trafficked for sexual exploitation (Ogwezzy, 2023). Such spiritual control is systemic in Nigerian trafficking, especially involving women from Edo, and silences victims, hindering law enforcement and justice. Voodoo reinforces victim compliance and obstructs investigations and prosecutions. Policies must address not only physical and economic factors but also spiritual and cultural control, involving traditional rulers, spiritual leaders, and community groups to demystify rituals and enable victims to seek help safely (Ogwezzy, 2023).

Therefore, the findings show that socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural factors interact dynamically to sustain the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation in Edo State. Economic deprivation and unemployment act as the initial “push” that drives women to seek opportunities abroad, while widespread corruption within law enforcement and weak institutional oversight enable traffickers to operate with impunity (Okoye et al., 2025; Broad et al., 2023). Simultaneously, cultural and religious aspects, such as the use of juju rituals, reinforce psychological control and silence victims (Ogwezzy, 2023). These elements do not act alone but mutually reinforce each other—economic hardship increases vulnerability; institutional failures diminish protection; and cultural manipulation ensures compliance. Together, they create a self-perpetuating system of exploitation where poverty, weak governance, and belief systems collectively uphold trafficking networks (Wuyah & Mialamba, 2021; UNODC, 2022; UNODC, 2023). Addressing a single factor in isolation is therefore insufficient; an integrated policy approach that simultaneously addresses poverty alleviation, institutional reform, and cultural awareness is essential for sustainable anti-trafficking efforts.

### 4.4. Health and Social Problems of Women Trafficking

Women trafficked for sexual exploitation face serious health risks, a priority for public health. WHO urges viewing trafficking as a health issue affecting mental, physical, sexual, and social well-being (WHO, 2022). Early research focused on symptoms such as headaches and infections, but newer evidence suggests a complex health impact. A review of 37 studies found trafficked women experience high violence, with risks of physical issues, STIS/HIV, and mental health condi-

tions (Coffey et al., 2016). European interviews reveal that many arrive with urgent health problems, limited access to care, and social barriers such as shame and fear (Andersson & Örmon, 2024).

In Nigeria and Uganda, trafficked women face systemic violence, with health outcomes affected by migration, coercion, and weak support (Kiss et al., 2022). UNICEF (2023) highlights that inadequate protection systems and limited access to social services further compound the vulnerability of trafficked women and girls in Nigeria. They often lack access to contraception, endure abuse and trauma, worsened by cultural barriers and poor institutional support. Victim services in Nigeria are inconsistent, with limited counselling, medical follow-up, and training, hindering recovery and increasing re-trafficking risks. Comprehensive care is essential to breaking the cycle.

Overall, the patterns identified in this study align closely with the Push-Pull Theory, which explains migration and trafficking as results of intersecting pressures and attractions. In Edo State, push factors such as poverty, unemployment, and limited education drive women to seek opportunities abroad. At the same time, pull factors—promises of prosperity, foreign employment, and social advancement—draw them into traffickers' networks (Ogujiuba et al., 2019; Bogatzki & Dolling, 2025). The findings also reflect the Rational Choice Theory, as both traffickers and victims make calculated decisions based on perceived costs and benefits: traffickers exploit systemic vulnerabilities for profit, while some women, aware of potential risks, proceed out of desperation or ambition for financial gain (Okoye et al., 2025). Similarly, Strain Theory offers insight into how societal pressures and inequality intensify the desire for economic success, often leading women to adopt high-risk strategies, such as irregular migration and transactional relationships with traffickers (Agbo, 2003; Wuyah & Mialamba, 2021). Furthermore, the cultural reinforcement of control through voodoo rituals strengthens the rational and emotional subjugation of victims, demonstrating how social beliefs function as coercive mechanisms rather than mere superstition (Ogwezzy, 2023; Ogwezzy, 2022). Collectively, these frameworks explain the cyclical nature of trafficking, where structural inequality, psychological manipulation, and calculated decision-making converge to sustain exploitation across socioeconomic and cultural dimensions.

## 5. Conclusion

The trafficking of women from Edo State remains a significant challenge that requires action at multiple levels. While factors such as greed, poverty, and unemployment are major causes, cultural norms and institutional weaknesses also contribute to the problem. Many European countries have shown commitment to fighting trafficking through various policies, stricter border controls, and the use of infrastructure and technology to spot trafficking signs. Conversely, Nigeria and most African nations lack sufficient infrastructure and technological support. A coordinated effort among government agencies, NGOs, and international part-

ners is essential to dismantle trafficking networks and protect vulnerable women from exploitation.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References

- Abdulraheem, I., & Oladipo, S. (2010). Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery in Nigeria. *Journal of African Studies*, 8, 45-60.
- Agbo, O. (2003). Trafficking in Women: The Case of Edo State, Nigeria. *African Human Rights Review*, 4, 112-130.
- Agbu, O. (2003). *Corruption and Human Trafficking in Nigeria: A Case Study of Edo State*. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
- Amune, M. S. (2025). Control and Regulation of Human Trafficking in Nigeria: A Legal Framework Analysis. *East African Journal of Law and Ethics*, 8, 27-40. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajle.8.1.2609>
- Andersson, M., & Örmon, K. (2024). Healthcare Providers' Experience of Identifying and Caring for Women Subjected to Sex Trafficking: A Qualitative Study. *BMC Women's Health*, 24, Article No. 149. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-024-02992-6>
- Attoh, E. (2009) Women's Vulnerability to Trafficking in Nigeria: A Socioeconomic Analysis. *Nigerian Journal of Development Studies*, 12, 34-50.
- Bales, K. (2023). *Understanding Global Slavery: Modern-Day Exploitation* (2nd ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Bogatzki, T., & Dolling, J. (2025). *Trafficking as Choice? Evidence from Nigeria: A Representative Survey in Edo State*. WZB Berlin Social Science Centre.
- Braimah, A. (2013). Human Trafficking in Edo State: Patterns and Policies. *International Migration Review*, 47, 59-78.
- Broad, R., Khandaker, M., & Taylor, D. (2023). Corruption and the Enabling Environment for Human Trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of International Development*, 35, 563-580.
- Coffey, M., van Teijlingen, E., Sharma, A., Bissell, P., Poobalan, A., & Wasti, S. P. (2016). Prevalence and Risk of Violence and the Physical, Mental and Sexual Health Problems Associated with Human Trafficking: An Updated Systematic Review. *Epidemiology & Psychiatric Sciences*, 25, 317-341.
- European Commission (2023). *Study on Trafficking in Human Beings in the EU: 2023 Report*. European Union.
- European University Institute (EUI) (2022). *Drivers of Irregular Migration to Europe*. Florence: Migration Policy Centre.
- GRETA (2023). *Report Concerning the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*. Council of Europe.
- Helen Bamber Foundation (2022). *Trafficking Survivors: Practices, Challenges, and Rehabilitation*. HBF.
- ILO (2023). *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*. International Labour Organisation.
- Khandaker-Mursheda, M., Okoye, C. O., Abonyi, A. U., & Okolie, E. Q. (2024). Key Issues in Addressing Trafficking in Women and Children in Nigeria. *Journal of Gender and*

- Millennium Development Studies*, 2, 23-44.  
<https://ojs.aeducia.org/index.php/jgmnds/article/view/166>
- Kiss, L., Fotheringham, D., Kyegombe, N., McAlpine, A., Abilio, L., Kyamulabi, A. et al. (2022). Violence, Abuse and Exploitation among Trafficked Women and Girls: A Mixed-Methods Study in Nigeria and Uganda. *BMC Public Health*, 22, Article No. 794.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13021-2>
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2024). *DRC: Alarming Increase in Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation, Say Experts*.  
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/drc-alarming-increase-trafficking-sexual-exploitation-say-experts>
- Ogujiuba, K. K., Anjofui, P., & Stiegler, N. (2019). Push and Pull Factors of International Migration: Evidence from Migrants in South Africa. *Journal of African Union Studies*, 8, 219-250.
- Ogwezzy, O. O. (2022). Voodoo and Human Trafficking in Nigeria as Impediments to Effective Administration of Justice. *AGORA International Journal of Juridical Sciences*, 1, 38-45.
- Ogwezzy, O. O. (2023). A Critical Examination of Voodoo Phenomenon and Other Control Mechanisms in the Fight Against Human Trafficking in Nigeria. *Journal of Public Law*, 11, 1-16.
- Okoye, C. O., Okolie, E. Q., & Abonyi, A. U. (2025). Key Issues in Addressing Trafficking in Women and Children in Nigeria. *Journal of Gender and Millennium Development Studies*, 2, 23-44. <https://doi.org/10.64420/jgmnds.v2i1.166>
- Omogbe, I. I., & Aghahowa, B. N. (2023). Knowledge and Attitude of Secondary School Students towards Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Research on Children, Parents & Teachers*, 4, 12-22.
- Omorodion, F. O. (2009). Human Trafficking in Nigeria: The Role of the Family and Community. *Journal of Social Policy and Development*, 6, 33-50.
- UNICEF (2023). *Nigeria Country Programme Report 2023: Child Protection and Trafficking Prevention*. UNICEF Nigeria.
- UNODC (2022). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*. United Nations.
- UNODC (2023). *World Trafficking Trends Report*. United Nations.
- WHO (2022). *Addressing Human Trafficking through Health Systems: A Scoping Review*. WHO Regional Office for Europe.
- WOTCLEF (2025). *Annual Report on Anti-Trafficking Efforts in Nigeria*. Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation.
- Wuyah, Y. T., & Mialamba, I. J. (2021). The Role of Poverty in the Prevalence of Human Trafficking in Nigeria. *International Journal of Contemporary Applied Research*, 8, 98-110.