

Beyond Borders, Beyond Protection: A Gendered Analysis of Nigerian Women in Transnational Trafficking Networks

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking is a pervasive form of transnational organized crime that disproportionately targets women and constitutes a critical threat to human security. This article examines the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe for sexual exploitation through a gender studies and human security perspective. Using qualitative library-based research, this study analyzes secondary data from academic literature, international organization reports, policy documents, and institutional publications. The findings reveal that trafficking networks are highly organized and transnational, relying on gendered economic marginalization, restrictive migration regimes, and patriarchal power structures. Control mechanisms extend beyond physical coercion to include debt bondage and spiritual manipulation through juju rituals, reinforcing women's subordination and dependence. The study demonstrates that trafficking produces layered and long-term insecurities, physical, psychological, social, and economic, that persist even after women exit exploitative conditions. By foregrounding women's lived experiences and structural inequalities, this article argues that state-centric and criminal justice approaches remain insufficient. Effective responses must adopt a gender-sensitive, human-centered framework that addresses both the root causes of trafficking and the challenges of post-trafficking recovery and reintegration.

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ABSTRACT

Perdagangan manusia merupakan salah satu bentuk kejahatan terorganisir lintas negara yang secara tidak proporsional menargetkan perempuan dan menjadi ancaman serius terhadap keamanan manusia. Artikel ini mengkaji praktik perdagangan perempuan Nigeria ke Eropa untuk tujuan eksploitasi seksual melalui perspektif kajian gender dan keamanan manusia. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka, penelitian ini menganalisis data sekunder yang bersumber dari literatur akademik, laporan organisasi internasional, dokumen kebijakan, serta publikasi institusi terkait. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa jaringan perdagangan manusia bersifat terorganisir, berkelanjutan, dan lintas batas, serta memanfaatkan kerentanan struktural perempuan akibat kemiskinan, ketimpangan gender, dan rezim migrasi yang restriktif. Mekanisme kontrol tidak hanya dilakukan melalui kekerasan fisik, tetapi juga melalui sistem hutang dan manipulasi spiritual seperti ritual juju yang memperkuat relasi kuasa dan ketergantungan korban. Praktik ini menghasilkan ketidakamanan multidimensional, fisik, psikologis, sosial, dan ekonomi, yang berdampak jangka panjang bahkan setelah korban keluar dari situasi eksploitasi. Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa

pendekatan keamanan yang berpusat pada negara belum memadai, sehingga diperlukan kerangka kebijakan yang berperspektif gender dan berorientasi pada manusia.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, security threats have become increasingly multidimensional, extending far beyond traditional military concerns to encompass complex social, economic, and human dimensions. One of the most salient manifestations of these non-traditional security challenges is the proliferation of transnational organized crime, whose operations and networks transcend state borders and exploit structural inequalities across regions.

Among its various forms, cross-border human trafficking has emerged as one of the most pervasive and rapidly expanding criminal enterprises, widely recognized as the second largest illicit industry globally. Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of individuals for purposes such as forced labor, sexual slavery, commercial sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and the trafficking of organs or tissues. Commonly labeled as “modern slavery,” human trafficking constitutes a grave violation of human rights and a crime against humanity.

Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has become one of the most profitable forms of human trafficking worldwide. It is estimated that approximately 40 million people are victims of human trafficking, of whom 71 per cent are women, underscoring the deeply gendered nature of this crime (Ciupkova, 2020). Beyond its economic motivations, sexual exploitation trafficking is sustained by deeply embedded social, political, and cultural structures that render women particularly vulnerable within global migration regimes.

Nigeria has been identified as one of the largest source countries of victims of sex trafficking globally (Ciupkova, 2020). Many Nigerian women leave their homes driven by aspirations for economic mobility and improved living conditions.

However, these migration trajectories frequently culminate not in empowerment, but in their entrapment within highly organized transnational trafficking networks operating across African and European borders. The migration of Nigerian women to Europe can be traced back to the 1980s, when Europe was widely perceived as a destination offering greater economic opportunities (Ciupkova, 2020). In practice, many women travel using falsified documents and are subsequently coerced into prostitution in major European cities.

The persistence of this trafficking flow is shaped by multiple intersecting factors: the high demand for sex workers in Europe, persistent economic hardship and limited employment opportunities in Nigeria, restrictive European migration policies, and the active involvement of criminal intermediaries. In many cases, families in Nigeria, facing structural poverty, consent to, or actively facilitate, the migration of their daughters to Europe in the hope of improving household economic conditions.

This dynamic has effectively produced a commodification of human mobility, wherein traffickers facilitate the movement of prospective victims to Europe and subsequently transfer them into exploitative arrangements within European sex markets (Ciupkova, 2020).

Upon arrival, victims are typically bound by substantial debt obligations incurred to finance their journey. These debts function as a central mechanism of control, compelling women to remain in the sex industry until their obligations are deemed repaid. Trafficking cartels operate largely underground, enabling them to evade law enforcement while expanding their networks and increasing the scale of victimization to what can be described as epidemic proportions. Crucially, these networks often employ ritualized belief systems, spiritual oaths, and explicit threats of violence to ensure victims' compliance, silence, and psychological subjugation, thereby minimizing the likelihood of escape or reporting to authorities.

This article seeks to examine the organized syndicates involved in the trafficking and sexual exploitation of Nigerian women in Europe, as well as the broader implications of these practices for human security. The central argument advanced is that the trafficking and sexual exploitation of Nigerian women are sustained by highly structured transnational networks composed of multiple actors, each fulfilling specific roles within the trafficking process.

In practice, this system operates through a sequence of interrelated stages: (1) recruitment; (2) payment arrangements and contractual agreements; (3) transnational transportation; and (4) the enforcement of debt bondage.

The article further argues that these practices pose a profound threat to human security by generating sustained violations of human rights throughout the trafficking continuum, during departure, at the destination, and upon return to the country of origin. Victims experience long-term physical, psychological, social, and socio-economic harm, the consequences of which persist long after their formal exit from trafficking networks. As such, the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe must be understood not merely as a criminal or migration issue, but as a systemic threat to human security that undermines human dignity, safety, and survival at multiple levels.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on library-based research to gather relevant data and analytical materials. Data collection relies on an extensive review of secondary sources in order to capture both empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives related to transnational human trafficking and human security.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the data, sources are critically assessed and cross-referenced through a process of source triangulation, allowing the researcher to compare information across multiple materials and minimize potential bias.

The literature examined in this research consists of official documents and reports issued by international organizations and governmental institutions, peer-reviewed academic journals, books, policy papers, electronic databases, and selected mass media reports. These materials provide insights into the structural dynamics, operational mechanisms, and human security implications of the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe.

Data analysis is conducted using qualitative analytical methods, emphasizing critical and interpretive examination of social phenomena embedded within the case study. The analysis seeks to identify patterns, mechanisms, and relationships that explain how transnational trafficking networks operate and how they affect the security and well-being of victims.

The analytical approach involves systematically linking relevant theoretical concepts, particularly those related to transnational organized crime and human security, with observable indicators derived from empirical sources. In this way, the study aims to connect abstract theoretical frameworks with concrete empirical evidence. Secondary data sources employed in this research include government and intergovernmental reports, official statements and speeches, academic publications, working papers, position papers, newspaper articles, and publications from established research institutions and think tanks.

The qualitative analysis relies on the researcher's interpretive assessment of these materials to construct a coherent argument and to address the research objectives and questions guiding the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transnational Organized Crime, Human Trafficking, and Human Insecurity

Human trafficking constitutes a central pillar of transnational organized crime, operating through complex cross-border networks that exploit structural inequalities between states and regions. Each year, more than 800,000 individuals are trafficked across international borders, with the majority subjected to conditions that align with contemporary forms of modern slavery (Koigi & Saif, n.d.). These practices extend beyond isolated criminal acts and instead reflect a systemic and highly adaptive illicit economy that thrives within the gaps of global governance, migration control, and law enforcement cooperation.

Victims of transnational trafficking are commonly forced into sexual slavery, unpaid labor, or hazardous forms of work under coercive conditions. According to the International Labour Organization, in 2016 over 40 million people were living in situations of modern slavery, including approximately 25 million in forced labor and 15 million in forced or arranged marriages (ILO, cited in Koigi & Saif, n.d.). Complementing this, data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicate that women and children constitute approximately 79 per cent of all identified trafficking victims, highlighting the profoundly gendered and age-based vulnerabilities embedded within trafficking networks (UNODC, cited in Koigi & Saif, n.d.).

From a human security perspective, these figures underscore how trafficking disproportionately targets populations situated at the intersection of economic marginalization, weak institutional protection, and high exposure to organized criminal activity. Individuals originating from states characterized by persistent socio-economic deprivation and elevated levels of organized crime face heightened susceptibility to exploitation.

The detection of more than 500 distinct trafficking flows involving victims from at least 137 nationalities further demonstrates that human trafficking is not geographically confined, but rather represents a globalized security threat capable of manifesting across diverse political and social contexts (Koigi & Saif, n.d.).

The consequences of modern slavery extend well beyond the immediate period of exploitation. Survivors frequently endure long-term psychological and emotional harm, rooted in sustained exposure to coercion, violence, and dehumanization. Victims are often subjected to severe physical abuse by traffickers, which not only inflicts bodily harm but also undermines their capacity for social reintegration.

Experiences within sexual slavery frequently involve repeated sexual violence, group rape, forced compliance, and chronic exhaustion resulting from prolonged exploitation. In cases of forced marriage, victims commonly face domestic violence, systemic humiliation, and the erosion of personal autonomy.

Such experiences generate profound psychological trauma, manifesting in depression, chronic anxiety, diminished self-worth, and substance dependency as coping mechanisms for prolonged suffering. In addition to psychological harm, trafficked individuals, particularly those exploited within the sex industry, face elevated risks of contracting life-threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS, often due to unprotected and non-consensual sexual activity. These health consequences further entrench victims' vulnerability and complicate post-trafficking recovery processes.

Viewed through the lens of human security, transnational human trafficking constitutes a multidimensional threat that compromises not only personal safety, but also health security, economic security, and human dignity. The harm inflicted upon victims persists during recruitment, transit, exploitation, and even after formal exit from trafficking networks, revealing the deeply entrenched and long-lasting nature of insecurity produced by these practices. Consequently, human trafficking must be understood not merely as a criminal or migration-related issue, but as a systemic violation of human security that erodes the foundational conditions necessary for individuals to live free from fear, want, and structural violence.

Nigerian Women, Human Trafficking, Slavery, and Sexual Exploitation

Over the past several decades, local and international media, as well as reports by international organizations, have increasingly documented the systematic trafficking of Nigerian women for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labor. These narratives frequently intersect with accounts of female migrants trapped in transit zones, most notably in Libya, where they endure severe abuse and inhumane conditions while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in pursuit of entry into Europe. Such cases illustrate how trafficking is embedded within broader migration routes and irregular mobility systems, rather than operating as an isolated criminal phenomenon.

Empirical evidence indicates that trafficked Nigerian women predominantly originate from economically marginalized backgrounds, often coming from large families facing chronic poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education. These structural vulnerabilities create conditions in which migration is perceived not merely as an option, but as an economic necessity.

A key driver of trafficking from Nigeria to Europe is the persistent demand for low-cost and highly exploitable labor within European economies, particularly within the sex industry. This demand is reinforced by significant disparities in income and employment opportunities

between Nigeria and European states, positioning Nigerian women at the lower end of a transnational labor hierarchy shaped by global inequality.

Beyond economic push-and-pull factors, the expansion of trafficking networks is further facilitated by restrictive European migration regimes, which limit legal avenues for mobility and inadvertently increase reliance on illicit intermediaries. Corruption within transit and origin countries, alongside the continued influence of traditional belief systems and ritual practices, particularly within certain Nigerian communities, also plays a critical role in sustaining trafficking operations (EASO, 2015).

These belief systems are frequently instrumentalized by traffickers as mechanisms of control, reinforcing victims' compliance through fear of spiritual or social consequences.

The scale and persistence of the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe are reflected in official estimates. In 2009, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that between 3,800 and 5,700 women were trafficked annually from West Africa, with Nigeria identified as the primary country of origin (UNODC, cited in EASO, 2015). As reported in UNODC Human Trafficking global report:

"Trafficking of young women from Nigeria to Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation is one of the most persistent trafficking flows. During the 2007-2012 period, Nigerian victims constantly accounted for more than 10 per cent of the total number of detected victims in Western and Central Europe, making this the most prominent transregional flow in this subregion" (UNODC in EASO, 2015).

This pattern has demonstrated remarkable continuity over time. The *Global Report on Human Trafficking* (2014) highlights that trafficking flows involving young Nigerian women constitute one of the most enduring transregional trafficking routes, with Nigerian victims accounting for more than 10 per cent of all detected trafficking victims in Western and Central Europe between 2007 and 2012 (UNODC, cited in EASO, 2015).

Italy and Spain have consistently emerged as primary destination countries within this trafficking network, although Nigerian women are also trafficked to Northern, Central, and Eastern European states (EASO, 2015). Recruitment processes are geographically concentrated within specific regions of Nigeria, including Abia, Anambra, Akwa Ibom, Ebonyi, Enugu, Lagos, Ondo, Osun, Imo, and surrounding areas. The concentration of recruitment in these regions suggests the existence of well-established local networks that operate in coordination with transnational actors across migration routes and destination countries.

From an analytical standpoint, the durability of these trafficking networks can be attributed to a convergence of factors: high profitability, weak law enforcement, limited cross-border cooperation, and the organizational sophistication of Nigerian trafficking syndicates. The normalization of prostitution in certain European contexts, combined with narratives of economic success disseminated by returned victims or intermediaries, further reinforces the social legitimacy of migration through illicit channels. As a result, trafficking persists not only because of coercion, but also because it is embedded within broader social expectations and survival strategies.

When examined through the lens of human security, the trafficking and sexual exploitation of Nigerian women represent a systemic form of gendered insecurity, wherein economic deprivation, migration governance failures, and organized crime intersect to undermine individual safety, dignity, and autonomy. The Nigerian, European trafficking corridor thus exemplifies how transnational criminal networks exploit global inequalities and

institutional weaknesses, producing sustained patterns of human insecurity that transcend national borders.

Modus Operandi and Stages of Sex Trafficking in Nigeria

Nigerian trafficking organizations involved in transnational sex trafficking vary considerably in size, structure, and operational sophistication. The degree of organizational complexity is largely determined by the scale of operations, the number of women trafficked, the financial capacity of the group, and the strength of its connections with criminal syndicates operating in transit and destination countries. Despite this variation, existing evidence indicates that many Nigerian trafficking networks are highly structured, durable, and strategically coordinated, rather than temporary or opportunistic criminal groups (UNODC, cited in EASO, 2015).

These networks typically involve a wide array of actors performing specialized roles across borders, including recruiters, travel agents, document forgers, financiers, corrupt law enforcement officials, transport facilitators, and exploiters operating in destination countries. UNODC reports emphasize that Nigerian trafficking groups often exhibit a high degree of organizational resilience, enabling them to adapt to changing law enforcement strategies while maintaining continuity in operations (UNODC, cited in EASO, 2015). In Europe, Nigerian trafficking networks are frequently linked to secretive criminal fraternities such as *Black Axe*, *Vikings*, and *Supreme Eiyé Confraternity*, which provide social cohesion, protection, and transnational coordination.

The Koolvis case in the Netherlands offers a clear illustration of the organizational sophistication of Nigerian trafficking networks. The identification of Nigerian trafficking victims in this case prompted a large-scale international law enforcement operation between 2007 and 2008 (EASO, 2015). Subsequent arrests revealed a complex organizational structure involving Nigerian “madams” who exercised direct control over trafficked women, individuals responsible for housing victims, Nigerian travel agents supplying falsified documents, and key leaders operating from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States (EASO, 2015).

UNODC further noted that the network was managed by a tightly coordinated smuggling ring originating from Edo State, Nigeria, whose leader operated a travel agency that functioned as a legal front for criminal activities. Europol has similarly observed that Nigerian trafficking groups often employ cellular organizational structures, allowing them to operate autonomously while remaining embedded within extensive personal and transnational networks. Within this structure, the *madam* occupies a pivotal position, overseeing the trafficking process from recruitment through exploitation and debt enforcement.

The trafficking and sexual exploitation of Nigerian women typically unfolds through four interrelated stages: (1) recruitment; (2) payment and agreement; (3) transportation; and (4) debt bondage. These stages form an integrated system of control that progressively constrains victims’ autonomy and deepens their vulnerability.

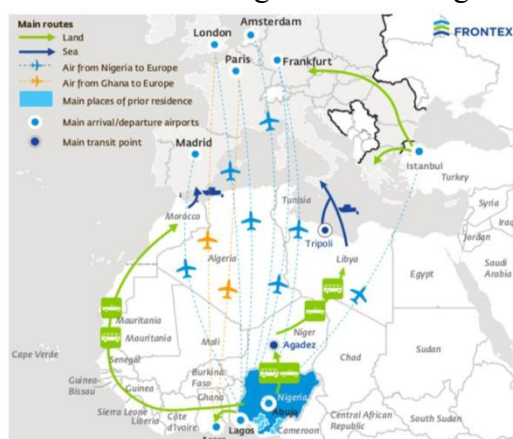
First, their recruitment strategies, recruitment often begins at the local level, frequently within the victim’s immediate social environment. Many women actively seek information about opportunities to migrate to Europe, driven by economic hardship and limited prospects at home. In Benin City, for example, women may visit specific nightlife venues known as

contact points for individuals facilitating migration to Europe (Pascoal, 2012). Initial connections are commonly established through family members, relatives, acquaintances, or trusted intermediaries, reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of the opportunity.

Recruiters typically promise access to employment or education in Europe, often framing migration as a pathway to social mobility. Parents may also be approached directly and encouraged to support their daughters' departure. In several cases, recruiters assure families that the women will work in sectors such as beauty salons, childcare, or domestic services. Once initial contact is established, prospective victims are usually introduced to a *madam*, who plays a central role in the Nigerian trafficking network and often serves as the financial sponsor of the journey (Carling, 2005). At this stage, the asymmetry of power between the traffickers and the recruited women becomes increasingly pronounced.

Second, payment arrangements and ritualized agreements. Following the decision to migrate, logistical arrangements and financing are negotiated. For most Nigerian women, irregular migration represents the only viable option, as access to legal migration channels is severely constrained. Nigeria is widely categorized as a “high-risk” country for document fraud, limiting access to Schengen visas and reinforcing reliance on illicit migration pathways (Skilbrei & Tveit, 2007). Traffickers often contact the families directly, offering to facilitate the migration process in exchange for future repayment.

Picture 1. Human Trafficking route from Nigeria to Europe



Source: Frontex (2015)

In Benin City and surrounding regions, borrowing money outside formal banking systems is common due to limited access to financial institutions (Skilbrei & Tveit, 2007). To ensure compliance with the terms of the agreement, traffickers frequently require women to participate in ritualized oath-taking ceremonies conducted in shrines or temples. These rituals function as powerful mechanisms of psychological control, binding victims to their traffickers through fear of spiritual retribution and social stigma should they violate the agreement.

Third, transportation and transit. The journey from Nigeria to Europe is often prolonged and fragmented. Kastner (2014) identifies two primary migration patterns. In the first, women travel independently with limited or no financial assistance, sometimes through interest-free loans. In the second, and far more common, scenario, women migrate under severe financial constraints, relying on sponsors who impose high-interest debt obligations (Kastner, 2014).

Along the route, responsibility for the women is frequently transferred between traffickers, reflecting the deeply networked nature of the trafficking system.

Transit through North African countries, particularly Libya, represents a critical phase of extreme vulnerability. Migrant camps in transit countries are often shared by multiple trafficking groups, with local actors facilitating trafficking operations. Women may remain in these camps for months or even years while awaiting opportunities to cross into Europe. Living conditions are often harsh, and many women are coerced into exchanging sex for food or protection (Kastner, 2014). Isolation, violence, and lack of communication with families contribute to long-lasting psychological trauma during this stage.

Fourth, debt bondage and exploitation, Upon arrival in Europe, the full extent of the debt obligation is typically disclosed to victims for the first time (Ladinfor, 2006). Many women initially believe their debt is denominated in Nigerian naira, only to discover that it is calculated in euros, often at amounts far exceeding their expectations. Limited understanding of currency exchange rates and repayment timelines further exacerbates their dependency (Ladinfor, 2006). Debt levels may increase as punishment for perceived disobedience or slow repayment.

Travel by air generally entails higher costs due to forged documents, passports, visas, and airfare, with estimated expenses ranging between USD 6,500 and USD 12,000 (Ladinfor, 2006). Overall debt amounts continue to escalate upon entry into Europe due to high interest rates and additional living costs. By June 2015, the total cost of migration from Nigeria to Europe ranged between EUR 40,000 and EUR 60,000, depending on the mode of transportation (Ladinfor, 2006). Debt thus becomes the primary mechanism through which women are coerced into prolonged sexual exploitation.

The Reality of Human Trafficking and Threats to Human Security

Transnational human trafficking networks constitute a profound and sustained threat to human security, particularly for women subjected to sexual exploitation and forced labor. Beyond its criminal dimension, trafficking systematically undermines fundamental human rights and exposes victims to extreme forms of physical, psychological, and structural violence. This section examines how trafficking practices generate pervasive human insecurity across the entire trafficking continuum, from transit to exploitation and post-trafficking reintegration.

The trafficking journey itself is characterized by severe human rights violations. Victims frequently report exposure to death, physical assault, sexual violence, extortion, theft, and prolonged deprivation of food and water during transit. For many Nigerian women, arrival in Europe, particularly in Italy, does not signify safety or liberation. Instead, victims are often transferred to reception centers operated by non-governmental organizations, while trafficking syndicates retain possession of their personal documents and detailed information about their identities and family members. This asymmetry of information and control severely constrains victims' ability to escape or seek protection.

One of the most effective mechanisms of control employed by Nigerian trafficking networks is the use of ritualized spiritual oaths, commonly referred to as juju. Through these rituals, women are compelled to swear spiritual allegiance, pledging to repay their debts and to refrain from fleeing or cooperating with authorities.

Violating these oaths is believed to result in misfortune, illness, or death, not only for the victims themselves but also for their families. While such beliefs may appear irrational within European rational-legal frameworks, empirical evidence demonstrates that *juju* functions as a highly effective system of psychological coercion, often more powerful than physical violence. The ritual embeds fear at a deeply internalized level, transforming spiritual belief into a transnational governance mechanism that disciplines victims' behavior across borders.

Within destination countries, trafficked women are reduced to commodified objects within the sex economy, where repayment of debt does not necessarily equate to freedom. Even after debts are settled, survivors face profound structural barriers to social integration. Whether or not they possess legal documentation, access to stable employment and social inclusion remains extremely limited. As a result, some formerly trafficked women become *madams* themselves, either in Europe or upon returning to Nigeria, reproducing the very system of exploitation from which they once suffered. This cycle reflects the deeply entrenched nature of trafficking as a survival strategy within contexts of persistent socio-economic insecurity.

Testimonies from survivors indicate that exploitation commonly involves forced prostitution and various forms of coerced labor, accompanied by systematic physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Many women report being compelled to undergo forced abortions without access to medical care, pain relief, or post-abortion treatment.

Madams routinely force women to engage in sexual activity for extended hours without rest, requiring them to serve clients while ill, menstruating, pregnant, or immediately following childbirth or abortion. In some cases, women are forced to insert non-sterile materials, such as mattress foam or tissues, into their bodies to conceal menstrual bleeding or post-abortion *hemorrhaging*, enabling continued sexual exploitation. Threats of violence against the women or their families are consistently used to maintain compliance.

Reproductive coercion constitutes a central dimension of human insecurity within trafficking systems. Survivors report being forced to engage in unprotected sex, often at the insistence of clients who refuse condom use. Even when *madams* provide contraceptives, women possess little power to enforce their use. Access to reproductive healthcare and protection from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is extremely limited in destination countries. Women who become pregnant through forced prostitution are frequently compelled to undergo unsafe abortions, with no access to antibiotics or follow-up care, significantly increasing the risk of infection, infertility, and long-term reproductive damage.

Crucially, the harm inflicted by trafficking does not end upon rescue, identification, or return to the country of origin. Many survivors report persistent post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, chronic pain, and recurring flashbacks, which severely impair their daily functioning. Upon returning to Nigeria, survivors often encounter family rejection, social stigma, and blame, particularly when they return without financial resources. Rather than receiving support, many women face ridicule, isolation, and moral condemnation within their communities, exacerbating psychological distress and reinforcing social marginalization.

Post-trafficking economic insecurity further compounds these vulnerabilities. Many survivors experience a deterioration in their financial situation following trafficking, leaving them unable to meet basic household needs. Long-term physical and mental health consequences, including pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, vaginal fistula, chronic

infections, and severe psychological disorders, are frequently reported. Despite these needs, access to adequate medical and mental health services remains severely constrained. High exposure to unprotected sexual violence places survivors at elevated risk of contracting STIs, including HIV/AIDS, which can have fatal consequences if left untreated.

From a human security perspective, the trafficking of Nigerian women constitutes a multi-layered and enduring threat encompassing personal, health, economic, and community security. The cumulative effects of violence, coercion, stigma, and structural exclusion reveal that trafficking is not a temporary disruption, but a systemic condition of insecurity that persists across time and space. Addressing human trafficking therefore requires approaches that move beyond criminal justice responses to incorporate long-term protection, health care, social reintegration, and economic empowerment for survivors.

CONCLUSION

The trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labor represents a persistent and complex threat to human security that extends far beyond the act of trafficking itself. As demonstrated throughout this discussion, human trafficking operates as a transnational system sustained by structural inequalities, economic deprivation, restrictive migration regimes, organized criminal networks, and deeply embedded cultural and psychological mechanisms of control. Nigerian women, often originating from economically marginalized backgrounds, are positioned at the intersection of these vulnerabilities, making them disproportionately exposed to exploitation.

This study highlights that trafficking is not merely a criminal activity, but a profound violation of human security encompassing personal, health, economic, and community dimensions. The journey from Nigeria to Europe is marked by extreme violence, deprivation, and coercion, while arrival in destination countries does not equate to safety. Instead, victims remain entrapped within exploitative systems through document confiscation, debt bondage, and psychological manipulation, most notably through the use of *juju* rituals. These practices demonstrate how non-material forms of power can function as highly effective instruments of transnational control, often surpassing physical violence in their capacity to restrict victims' agency.

The findings further reveal that sexual exploitation within trafficking networks systematically strips women of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. Forced prostitution, unsafe working conditions, reproductive coercion, lack of access to healthcare, and exposure to sexually transmitted infections create long-term physical and psychological harm. Importantly, the conclusion of exploitation does not signal the end of insecurity. Survivors continue to face enduring trauma, social stigma, economic marginalization, and limited access to health and psychosocial services upon return to Nigeria. In many cases, the absence of meaningful reintegration support perpetuates cycles of vulnerability, sometimes leading survivors to re-enter trafficking networks as a means of survival.

From a human security perspective, the trafficking of Nigerian women underscores the limitations of state-centric and security-focused approaches that prioritize border control and criminal prosecution while neglecting the lived realities of victims. Effective responses must

therefore adopt a comprehensive human security framework that prioritizes protection, dignity, and long-term well-being. This includes addressing structural economic inequalities, strengthening survivor-centered rehabilitation and reintegration programs, expanding access to healthcare and mental health services, and challenging social stigmatization within communities of return.

Ultimately, human trafficking must be understood as both a symptom and a consequence of global inequality. Without sustained efforts to address the root causes of vulnerability and to support survivors beyond rescue, trafficking will remain a persistent and evolving threat to human security. Ensuring the safety, agency, and dignity of trafficked women is not only a moral imperative but a critical requirement for advancing human-centered security in an increasingly interconnected world.

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