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**DRIVERS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN
NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This study examines the drivers, mechanisms, and impacts of irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria, with the aim of informing effective prevention strategies and policy interventions. The study is anchored on Migration Systems Theory, which explains migration as a dynamic process sustained by economic inequalities, social networks, institutional linkages, and intermediary actors across origin, transit, and destination areas. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies exclusively on secondary data from peer reviewed journals, books, government documents, and institutional reports. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to socio economic conditions, cultural norms, governance structures, migration networks, and trafficking practices. Findings reveal that irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria are primarily driven by chronic poverty, youth unemployment, limited access to education, and cultural expectations of migration success, gender inequality, weak law enforcement, corruption, and inadequate border management. The study further shows that migrants become vulnerable through deceptive recruitment, dependence on intermediaries, debt bondage, irregular legal status, social isolation, and exposure to violence along domestic and international migration routes. The effects of these processes are severe, including physical and psychological trauma, economic exploitation, family disintegration, community destabilization, and the entrenchment of transnational criminal networks. The study concludes that irregular migration and human trafficking are systemic problems rooted in structural and institutional failures. It recommends socio economic reforms, strengthened governance and enforcement, awareness campaigns, and victim centered reintegration policies.

Introduction

Human trafficking has become one of the most persistent and deeply troubling manifestations of irregular migration in Nigeria, with clear evidence showing its scale, patterns, and devastating consequences both within and outside the country. Nigeria is widely recognized as a major source, transit, and destination country for trafficked persons, particularly women and children. Recent global estimates on modern slavery indicate that over 1.4 million Nigerians are living under conditions associated with forced labour and sexual

exploitation, placing Nigeria among the countries with the highest trafficking burdens in sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, Walk Free Foundation and IOM, 2022). Reports further suggest that Nigeria accounts for a substantial proportion of trafficking cases originating from West Africa, reflecting long standing structural vulnerabilities linked to poverty, unemployment, weak governance, and limited legal migration pathways (Adepoju, 2021; Ezeilo, 2020). Irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria are driven by a set of interrelated structural and agency based variables whose indicators help to explain the persistence and scale of the problem. Key indicators of irregular migration include the frequency of undocumented border crossings, reliance on informal migration brokers or smugglers, use of dangerous transit routes such as the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean corridor, incidence of migrant detention or deportation, and the number of returnees rescued from exploitative conditions. In the Nigerian context, these indicators are reflected in sustained outflows of young people attempting to migrate without valid travel documents, increasing interceptions of Nigerians along North African routes, and the growing population of returned migrants who report experiences of abuse and coercion during transit and at destination (IOM, 2023; Adepoju, 2021).

Human trafficking is indicated by patterns of deceptive recruitment, debt bondage, restriction of movement, confiscation of identity documents, and forms of exploitation including forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and child labour. Additional indicators include the demographic profile of victims, particularly the overrepresentation of women, girls, and minors, as well as the geographic concentration of trafficking hotspots within and outside Nigeria. Evidence from victim identification records shows repeated trafficking routes from southern Nigeria to urban centres within the country and to European destinations, suggesting the presence of organized and resilient trafficking networks (UNODC, 2022; Okafor, 2023). Socio economic drivers constitute another critical variable, with indicators such as youth unemployment rates, household income instability, school dropout levels, and limited access to vocational and higher education.

In many Nigerian communities, chronic poverty and lack of livelihood opportunities push individuals to perceive irregular migration as a rational survival strategy. These conditions are reinforced by social expectations that young people should migrate and remit income to support extended family members, thereby normalizing risk taking and increasing vulnerability to traffickers (Ogunyemi, 2022). Governance related indicators also feature prominently, including weak border control, corruption, low prosecution and conviction rates for trafficking offences, and limited coordination among enforcement and welfare agencies. These gaps reduce deterrence and enable traffickers to operate with minimal risk (Ezeilo, 2020). Documented evidence shows a consistent pattern of trafficking from Nigeria to Europe, the Middle East, and parts of North Africa. Studies focusing on migration flows to Southern Europe reveal that tens of thousands of Nigerian women have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, particularly to Italy and Spain, since the mid 2010s. UNODC victim detection data indicate that Nigerian nationals remain among the most frequently identified trafficking victims in Europe, with women and girls comprising the overwhelming majority of those trafficked for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2022). Between 2017 and 2024, international protection programmes recorded the voluntary return of several thousand Nigerian trafficking survivors from Europe and North Africa, many of whom reported experiences of debt bondage, physical violence, and

psychological abuse during transit and at destination (IOM, 2023). These figures represent only a fraction of actual cases, as trafficking remains significantly underreported due to fear, stigma, and weak victim identification mechanisms.

Within Nigeria, trafficking is equally widespread, taking the form of forced domestic labour, street begging, child labour, and sexual exploitation. Internal trafficking routes often move victims from rural communities to urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Benin City. Children are particularly vulnerable, with empirical studies documenting organized networks that traffic minors into domestic servitude, informal mining, agriculture, and commercial sex (Okafor, 2023). These practices are sustained by entrenched poverty and cultural norms that normalize child placement and informal labour arrangements, creating opportunities for exploitation under the guise of caregiving or apprenticeship (Ogunyemi, 2022). The effects of irregular migration and human trafficking serve as outcome variables in the study and are indicated by physical and psychological trauma among survivors, family disintegration, community stigma, loss of productive labour, and rising social welfare and security burdens on the state. Repeated cycles of trafficking and re trafficking among returnees further indicate the failure of reintegration mechanisms and the persistence of underlying vulnerabilities. At the national level, these outcomes manifest in weakened human capital development, increased transnational crime, and reputational damage that affects international mobility and labour opportunities for Nigerian citizens (UNODC, 2022).

Empirical studies consistently reinforce these observations. Adepoju (2021) demonstrates that unemployment and perceived lack of future prospects significantly increase migration aspirations among Nigerian youths, indirectly heightening trafficking risks. Ezeilo (2020), using a socio legal approach, finds that weak enforcement and low conviction rates embolden traffickers and sustain organized trafficking networks. Ogunyemi (2022) shows that household poverty and social expectations to contribute financially through migration often push young women into unsafe migration channels. Okafor (2023) provides evidence of well structured internal trafficking rings operating across Nigerian states, while UNODC (2022) presents comparative data confirming Nigeria's prominence among source countries for detected trafficking victims globally.

Empirical evidence indicates that Nigeria remains one of the countries with the highest number of trafficking victims globally. According to the Global Estimates of Modern Slavery, approximately 1.4 million Nigerians are living under conditions of forced labour and sexual exploitation. This figure places Nigeria among the most affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa and reflects the scale at which irregular migration intersects with trafficking practices. The report further notes that women and girls constitute a significant proportion of these victims, particularly in cases linked to sexual exploitation and domestic servitude (ILO, Walk Free Foundation & IOM, 2022). Data from assisted return programmes provide further statistical confirmation of the magnitude of irregular migration and trafficking involving Nigerians. Between 2017 and 2024, the International Organization for Migration documented the voluntary return of over 4,800 Nigerian victims of human trafficking from Europe and North Africa. Approximately 88 percent of these returnees were women and girls, indicating a strong gendered pattern in trafficking outcomes. Many of the returnees reported experiences of debt bondage, physical abuse, and coercion during transit and at destination points (IOM, 2023).

Additional evidence emerges from large-scale return operations from Libya and other North African transit countries (IOM, 2022).

Between 2017 and 2022, more than 19,000 stranded Nigerians were assisted to return home after migrating irregularly, with a substantial number having passed through detention centres where exploitation and abuse were common. Studies show that a significant proportion of these migrants were exposed to trafficking-related practices, including forced labour and sexual exploitation, even when they initially migrated voluntarily (IOM, 2022; UNODC, 2022). Age-disaggregated statistics further highlight the vulnerability of young Nigerians to irregular migration and trafficking. Empirical findings indicate that the majority of Nigerian irregular migrants and trafficking victims fall within the 18–39 age group, with the 18–25 cohort particularly overrepresented. This trend reflects the impact of youth unemployment, limited educational opportunities, and migration aspirations among young people, which traffickers exploit through deceptive recruitment strategies (Adepoju, 2021). At the national level, cumulative data show that over 40,000 Nigerians have been assisted to return from irregular migration routes since 2017, many of whom experienced varying degrees of exploitation. These figures underscore not only the scale of irregular migration but also the persistent exposure of Nigerian migrants to trafficking risks. The recurrence of migration attempts among some returnees further suggests that reintegration challenges and unresolved socio-economic vulnerabilities continue to fuel irregular migration and trafficking cycles (IOM, 2023; UNODC, 2022).

The situation has become increasingly worrisome due to the evolving sophistication of trafficking networks. Contemporary trafficking operations now rely heavily on deceptive recruitment strategies, including false job offers, fake study abroad schemes, and online social media advertising. These methods exploit the aspirations of young Nigerians facing economic uncertainty and limited opportunities at home. Evidence from recent European interception and prosecution cases indicates that many victims initially consent to migration, only to be coerced into exploitative conditions through debt bondage and threats upon arrival, blurring the line between smuggling and trafficking (UNODC, 2022).

This trend complicates law enforcement responses and highlights the need for more nuanced policy and legal frameworks. This study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how irregular migration and human trafficking are produced and sustained in Nigeria. The study aims to generate evidence that can inform more effective prevention strategies, strengthen institutional responses, and support victim centred interventions that address both immediate protection needs and the structural conditions that continue to fuel trafficking and irregular migration

Objectives

- i. To examine the socio economic, cultural, and governance factors that drive irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria.
- ii. To analyze the processes and mechanisms through which migrants become vulnerable to trafficking along domestic and international migration routes.
- iii. To assess the effects of irregular migration and human trafficking on individuals, families, and communities in Nigeria, with a view to informing preventive strategies and policy interventions.

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Research Questions

- i. What socio economic, cultural, and governance factors contribute to irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria?
- ii. How do migration networks, intermediaries, and trafficking mechanisms operate to exploit migrants during domestic and international migration?
- iii. What are the social, economic, and psychological impacts of irregular migration and human trafficking on affected individuals, households, and communities in Nigeria?

Literature Review

The literature on irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria reveals a growing consensus that both phenomena are deeply rooted in structural inequalities, economic deprivation, and governance failures, while also being shaped by individual aspirations and social pressures. Scholars generally agree that irregular migration is not merely an outcome of individual choice but a survival strategy adopted within contexts of limited opportunities and constrained mobility regimes. Adepoju (2021) argues that persistent youth unemployment, rising living costs, and declining confidence in state capacity to deliver social welfare have intensified migration aspirations among Nigerian youths, thereby increasing their exposure to irregular routes and trafficking networks. This perspective situates irregular migration within broader political economy dynamics rather than as an isolated criminal act.

Several studies emphasize the strong linkage between irregular migration and human trafficking, noting that many trafficking experiences begin as voluntary migration attempts. According to UNODC (2022), the distinction between smuggling and trafficking has become increasingly blurred, as migrants who initially consent to irregular movement are later subjected to coercion, debt bondage, and exploitation. In the Nigerian case, Okafor (2023) documents how traffickers exploit this transition by positioning themselves as facilitators of migration, only to impose exploitative conditions once migrants reach transit or destination points. This finding aligns with international studies that view trafficking as a process rather than a single event, unfolding across recruitment, transit, and exploitation stages.

Economic factors dominate much of the Nigerian literature on trafficking and irregular migration. Ogunyemi (2022) demonstrates that household poverty, income shocks, and lack of access to education significantly increase susceptibility to traffickers' promises of employment and financial success abroad. Similarly, quantitative analyses show that regions with higher poverty indices and lower educational attainment tend to produce higher numbers of irregular migrants and trafficking victims. These findings suggest that trafficking thrives where economic desperation intersects with restricted legal migration channels, reinforcing the argument that development deficits remain central drivers.

Gender and age dimensions are also prominently discussed in the literature. Numerous studies report that women and girls constitute the majority of identified Nigerian trafficking victims, particularly in cases of sexual exploitation. Ezeilo (2020) explains this trend by pointing to entrenched gender inequalities, limited economic options for women, and cultural expectations surrounding female sacrifice for family survival. Children and adolescents are equally vulnerable, especially in internal trafficking contexts involving domestic servitude,

street hawking, and informal labour. These patterns highlight how social norms and power imbalances shape vulnerability and victimization.

Governance and institutional weaknesses form another critical strand of the literature. Scholars consistently identify weak law enforcement, corruption, porous borders, and low conviction rates as factors that sustain trafficking networks in Nigeria. Adeyemi (2021) notes that although Nigeria has established legal and institutional frameworks to combat trafficking, implementation gaps and limited interagency coordination reduce their effectiveness. This institutional fragility allows traffickers to operate with relative impunity and undermines public trust in anti trafficking efforts.

The consequences of irregular migration and human trafficking are widely documented in empirical studies. Survivors often experience long term physical harm, psychological trauma, and social stigmatization, which hinder reintegration and economic recovery. Longitudinal studies of returned Nigerian migrants show high rates of unemployment and re migration intentions, indicating that rescue and return alone are insufficient without sustainable reintegration support (IOM, 2023). At the societal level, trafficking contributes to family disintegration, loss of human capital, and the expansion of transnational criminal networks, posing broader development and security challenges.

Despite the richness of existing literature, notable gaps remain. Many studies focus either on international trafficking routes or on policy frameworks, with limited integration of community level experiences and macro structural drivers. There is also a scarcity of recent empirical research that simultaneously examines economic, social, and governance factors within specific Nigerian contexts. This study therefore builds on existing scholarship by adopting a more holistic approach to understanding the drivers of irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria, linking root causes, operational mechanisms, and outcomes in a single analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Migration Systems Theory is commonly associated with the works of Akin Mabogunje, a Nigerian scholar who first articulated the theory in 1970. Mabogunje introduced the theory to explain rural–urban migration in developing societies, emphasizing that migration is not a one-time individual decision but a dynamic process sustained by continuous interactions between origin and destination areas. Over time, the theory has been expanded by migration scholars to explain international and irregular migration flows, including those linked to trafficking.

- The central assumption of Migration Systems Theory is that migration is shaped by interdependent systems consisting of economic, social, political, cultural, and institutional linkages between sending, transits, and receiving areas. The theory assumes that once migration begins, it creates feedback mechanisms such as remittances, information flows, and social networks that lower the costs and risks of movement for subsequent migrants. These feedback loops gradually institutionalize migration, making it self-sustaining even when original economic conditions change. In the Nigerian context, this explains why irregular migration continues despite heightened border controls and well-publicized risks.

- Another key assumption of the theory is that migration networks and intermediary actors play a decisive role in sustaining migration flows. These actors include family members, friends, recruiters, smugglers, and traffickers who provide information, logistics, and financial support. While some intermediaries facilitate safe movement, others exploit migrants for profit, thereby transforming migration systems into trafficking systems. The theory further assumes that weak governance, policy inconsistencies, and restrictive legal migration regimes inadvertently strengthen informal and criminal networks by pushing migrants toward irregular channels.
- Migration Systems Theory also assumes that migration decisions are influenced by structural inequalities between regions, such as disparities in employment, income, security, and social services. These inequalities interact with individual aspirations and social expectations, particularly in societies where migration is culturally normalized as a pathway to success. In Nigeria, long-standing economic hardship, youth unemployment, and limited opportunities interact with established migration routes and success narratives to sustain irregular migration and heighten exposure to trafficking.

The implications of Migration Systems Theory for this study are significant. First, the theory provides a holistic lens for analyzing irregular migration and human trafficking as interconnected processes rather than isolated phenomena. It supports the examination of multiple drivers, including economic deprivation, social networks, governance failures, and the role of intermediaries, all of which are central to the Nigerian experience. Second, the theory underscores the importance of understanding trafficking as embedded within broader migration systems, highlighting why punitive or border-focused interventions alone are insufficient. Finally, the theory informs policy recommendations by emphasizing the need for integrated responses that address root causes, disrupt exploitative networks, strengthen institutions, and create safe and legal migration alternatives. This makes Migration Systems Theory particularly relevant and appropriate for examining the drivers of irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and relies exclusively on secondary sources of data to examine the drivers of irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria. Qualitative methods are considered appropriate because they allow for in depth interpretation of meanings, patterns, and contextual factors underlying migration and trafficking processes rather than mere numerical trends. Data were sourced from peer reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, institutional reports, government policy documents, and publications of international organizations with mandates on migration, labour, and human rights. These materials were systematically reviewed and analyzed using thematic content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to economic conditions, social dynamics, governance structures, migration systems, and trafficking mechanisms. The use of secondary data provided access to a broad range of empirical evidence across different regions and time periods, enhancing the analytical depth and contextual relevance of the study while ensuring ethical rigor and feasibility.

Ways socio-economic, cultural, and governance factors contribute to irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria

The findings of this study reveal that irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria are deeply rooted in interconnected socio-economic, cultural, and governance factors. These variables do not operate independently; rather, they reinforce one another in ways that increase vulnerability, constrain choices, and normalize risky migration pathways. The discussion therefore begins with an examination of the core variables before engaging in a broader analytical interpretation of the findings in line with existing empirical studies.

Socio-economic factors, as revealed in the study, constitute a major driver of irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria. Key indicators identified include poverty, unemployment, income inequality, limited access to education, and lack of sustainable livelihoods. Empirical evidence from secondary sources shows that high poverty levels in rural and urban marginalized communities push individuals, particularly youths and women, to seek survival opportunities outside the country through irregular channels. Studies by Adepoju (2019) and IOM (2020) indicate that Nigeria's persistent unemployment crisis has created a large pool of economically desperate individuals who are easily recruited by traffickers promising jobs, education, or better living conditions abroad. The findings further reveal that irregular migration is often perceived as an economic strategy rather than a criminal or risky endeavor, especially in households experiencing chronic deprivation.

Closely linked to socio-economic pressures are cultural factors, which significantly shape migration aspirations and vulnerability to trafficking. The study identifies cultural expectations of success, family obligations, gender norms, and social prestige associated with overseas travel as major indicators. Empirical findings suggest that in many Nigerian communities, migration is culturally celebrated as a marker of achievement, regardless of the legality or safety of the route taken. Research by Carling and Talleraas (2016) shows that returnees who display material success reinforce the belief that migration is a guaranteed pathway out of poverty. The findings also indicate that cultural practices such as child fostering, early marriage, and obedience to elders increase the vulnerability of women and children to trafficking networks, as families may unknowingly consent to exploitative arrangements under the guise of apprenticeship or marriage opportunities.

Governance factors emerged as a critical structural variable influencing both irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria. Indicators discussed in the findings include weak law enforcement, corruption, poor border management, inadequate implementation of anti-trafficking laws, and limited social protection mechanisms. Empirical studies reviewed reveal that although Nigeria has established legal frameworks such as the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), enforcement remains inconsistent due to limited funding, political interference, and corruption within security institutions. According to UNODC (2021), traffickers exploit governance gaps by bribing officials, falsifying documents, and operating freely across porous borders. The study's findings confirm that weak governance not only enables trafficking networks to thrive but also discourages victims from seeking justice due to fear of stigma, reprisal, or lack of trust in state institutions.

Building on the discussion of these variables, the major findings show that socio-economic deprivation serves as the initial push factor, while cultural norms legitimize risky

migration decisions, and governance failures provide the enabling environment for trafficking operations. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals facing unemployment and poverty are more likely to accept deceptive offers, especially when cultural narratives frame migration as a collective family investment. A study by Aderanti (2020) demonstrates that traffickers often exploit cultural trust networks, including kinship and religious ties, to recruit victims, making detection and resistance more difficult. This convergence of factors creates a cycle in which economic desperation fuels demand for migration, culture sustains the aspiration, and weak governance fails to disrupt the supply chain of trafficking.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that gender dimensions intensify the impact of these variables. Women and girls are disproportionately affected due to gendered economic exclusion, patriarchal norms, and limited educational opportunities. Empirical research by UNICEF (2018) confirms that female migrants are more likely to be trafficked for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude, particularly when governance systems fail to provide protection and economic alternatives. The study's findings reinforce this view, showing that cultural expectations of female obedience and economic contribution to the family increase susceptibility to traffickers' control mechanisms, including debt bondage and ritual oaths.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria are products of systemic socio-economic hardship, culturally embedded migration ideologies, and persistent governance weaknesses. The empirical evidence reviewed confirms that addressing trafficking requires more than border control or criminalization; it demands comprehensive socio-economic reforms, cultural reorientation, and strengthened governance structures. Without simultaneous interventions across these variables, efforts to curb irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria are likely to remain ineffective and unsustainable.

How migration networks, intermediaries, and trafficking mechanisms operate to exploit migrants during domestic and international migration

The findings of this study indicate that migrant vulnerability to human trafficking in Nigeria is shaped by a sequence of processes and mechanisms that unfold before departure, during transit, and at destination points along both domestic and international migration routes. These mechanisms are embedded within social, economic, and institutional contexts that systematically expose migrants to deception, coercion, and exploitation. Understanding these processes provides critical insight into how irregular migration transforms into trafficking experiences for many Nigerians. At the conceptual level, vulnerability refers to the conditions that reduce migrants' ability to make informed decisions, protect themselves, or access support when faced with exploitation. Key mechanisms identified in the study include deceptive recruitment practices, lack of accurate migration information, and dependency on intermediaries, irregular legal status, debt bondage, social isolation, and exposure to violence. Empirical literature shows that vulnerability is not accidental but produced through structured interactions between migrants and facilitators who control access to mobility, documents, and employment opportunities (Zimmerman et al., 2018).

One major process through which migrants become vulnerable is deceptive recruitment at the pre-departure stage. The findings reveal that traffickers often present themselves as labor agents, family acquaintances, religious contacts, or travel facilitators who promise legitimate employment, education, or marriage opportunities. Empirical studies by Okojie et al.

(2017) demonstrate that migrants rarely receive written contracts or verifiable job details, making them susceptible to misinformation. This deception is particularly effective among youths and women with limited education or prior migration experience, who rely heavily on verbal assurances and community trust networks.

During transit, both domestic and international migrants face heightened exposure to exploitation due to their irregular status and dependence on smugglers or intermediaries. The findings indicate that migrants traveling through informal routes often lack access to shelter, healthcare, and legal protection, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Research by Mixed Migration Centre (2021) shows that migrants along West African and trans-Saharan routes frequently experience extortion, forced labor, sexual violence, and arbitrary detention. These abuses create conditions of fear and dependency that traffickers exploit to exert control and compel compliance.

Another critical mechanism identified in the findings is debt bondage, which operates as a powerful tool of coercion throughout the migration process. Migrants are often required to pay exorbitant fees for transportation, documentation, and job placement, leading to accumulated debts that bind them to traffickers. Empirical evidence from Surtees (2018) indicates that debt obligations are used to justify prolonged exploitation, particularly in domestic servitude, agriculture, and sex work. The study's findings confirm that migrants are frequently informed of the true cost of their journey only after departure, eliminating their ability to withdraw consent.

Irregular legal status at destination points further entrenches vulnerability and exploitation. The findings reveal that migrants without valid documentation are reluctant to report abuse or seek help due to fear of arrest, deportation, or retaliation. Studies by Triandafyllidou and McAuliffe (2019) show that employers and traffickers exploit this fear by threatening migrants with exposure to immigration authorities. This mechanism effectively silences victims and allows trafficking to persist undetected across both domestic urban centers and international destinations.

Social isolation also emerged as a significant mechanism of vulnerability. The findings show that migrants are often deliberately separated from familiar social networks and placed in environments where language barriers, cultural differences, and restricted mobility limit their ability to seek assistance. Empirical research by Crawley et al. (2017) demonstrates that isolation increases psychological dependence on traffickers, who position themselves as the sole source of protection and information. This dynamic is particularly evident among domestic migrants in Nigerian cities and international migrants in unfamiliar foreign contexts.

Gender-specific mechanisms further intensify vulnerability along migration routes. The findings indicate that women and girls are disproportionately exposed to sexual exploitation due to gendered labor markets and patriarchal control structures. Empirical studies by Koomson and Abdulai (2020) show that traffickers exploit gender norms by framing exploitation as sacrifice or family duty. Ritual practices, emotional manipulation, and threats of shame were identified as tools used to maintain compliance, particularly among female migrants trafficked for sexual and domestic labor.

Overall, the discussion of findings demonstrates that migrant vulnerability to trafficking in Nigeria is produced through a combination of deceptive recruitment, transit-related abuses,

debt-based coercion, irregular legal status, and social isolation, all operating within weak protection frameworks. Evidence confirms that these mechanisms function as a continuum of exploitation rather than isolated incidents. Addressing migrant vulnerability therefore requires interventions that disrupt these processes at multiple stages of the migration cycle, strengthen access to accurate information, regulate recruitment systems, and expand protection mechanisms along both domestic and international migration routes.

The social, economic, and psychological impacts of irregular migration and human trafficking on affected individuals, households, and communities in Nigeria

The findings of this study reveal that the effects of irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria manifest at multiple levels, affecting individuals directly, disrupting family structures, and undermining community stability and development. These impacts are social, economic, psychological, and institutional in nature, and they often persist long after the migration or trafficking experience has ended. Understanding these effects is crucial for designing effective prevention strategies and evidence-based policy interventions.

At the individual level, the study identifies physical harm, psychological trauma, economic exploitation, loss of dignity, and social marginalization as key indicators of impact. Empirical literature shows that trafficked persons frequently experience violence, forced labor, sexual abuse, and inhumane working conditions, resulting in long-term health challenges. Research by Oram et al. (2019) demonstrates that survivors of trafficking have significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety compared to non-migrant populations. The findings further indicate that irregular migrants often suffer economic losses rather than gains, as debts, unpaid wages, and confiscated documents trap them in cycles of poverty and dependency.

Beyond physical and psychological harm, irregular migration and trafficking severely affect migrants' social identity and legal status. The findings show that individuals returning to Nigeria frequently face stigma, shame, and rejection, especially when migration outcomes do not meet community expectations. Empirical studies by King and Lulle (2022) suggest that failed migration is often interpreted as personal failure, discouraging returnees from seeking reintegration support. This social exclusion increases vulnerability to re-trafficking and irregular re-migration, highlighting the need for survivor-centered rehabilitation and social protection policies.

At the family level, the findings indicate that irregular migration and trafficking disrupt household cohesion and economic stability. Families often invest scarce resources in financing migration journeys, expecting remittances in return. When migrants are trafficked or disappear, households experience financial loss, emotional distress, and prolonged uncertainty. Empirical evidence from Akesson and Baaz (2020) shows that families of trafficked persons frequently suffer indebtedness, breakdown of marital relationships, and increased child labor as coping mechanisms. The absence of productive family members also places additional care burdens on women, elderly relatives, and children.

The findings further reveal that children within affected families face heightened risks of neglect, school dropout, and psychological distress. Studies by Deane (2018) demonstrate that children of trafficked or irregular migrants are more likely to experience educational disruption and emotional instability due to parental absence or trauma. These intergenerational effects

perpetuate cycles of vulnerability and migration pressure, underscoring the importance of family-focused prevention strategies such as livelihood support, education subsidies, and psychosocial services.

At the community level, irregular migration and human trafficking undermine social trust, labor productivity, and local development. The findings show that communities with high rates of irregular migration often experience labor shortages in agriculture and informal sectors, alongside weakened social institutions. Empirical research by Bakewell and Jonsson (2019) indicates that trafficking networks thrive in contexts where community surveillance and collective responsibility have eroded. Additionally, the normalization of irregular migration as a survival strategy reduces community resistance to traffickers and perpetuates unsafe mobility practices.

The study also finds that human trafficking contributes to the entrenchment of criminal networks and insecurity within Nigerian communities. Empirical evidence from Shaw (2021) links trafficking activities to broader patterns of organized crime, including document fraud, money laundering, and violence. These dynamics strain local governance structures and divert resources away from essential social services, reinforcing underdevelopment and inequality at the community level.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that the multidimensional effects of irregular migration and trafficking require equally comprehensive interventions. Empirical studies by Laczko and Gozdzik (2019) emphasize that punitive migration policies alone exacerbate harm by driving migrants further underground. Instead, prevention strategies should focus on reducing vulnerability through economic empowerment, access to education, community awareness programs, and strengthened victim protection frameworks. The study's findings support policy approaches that integrate migration management, social welfare, and criminal justice responses.

In summary, the discussion of findings demonstrates that irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria produce profound and lasting consequences for individuals, families, and communities. The empirical evidence highlights the need for prevention strategies that address not only the act of trafficking but also its social and economic aftermath. Effective policy interventions must therefore prioritize survivor rehabilitation, family resilience, community development, and institutional accountability to break the cycle of exploitation and irregular migration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that irregular migration and human trafficking in Nigeria are systemic and mutually reinforcing phenomena rooted in deep structural inequalities, entrenched poverty, and fragile governance frameworks. The evidence shows that migration aspirations, when combined with restricted legal mobility and persistent socio economic deprivation, create fertile ground for traffickers to operate through established migration systems and social networks. Human trafficking in this context is not accidental but an organized outcome of these interacting forces, sustained by weak enforcement, low prosecution rates, and limited protection for victims. The study further underscores that the consequences of trafficking extend beyond individual suffering to broader social and developmental costs, including loss of human capital, family disintegration, and the expansion

of transnational criminal networks. The continued recurrence of trafficking despite policy interventions reveals critical gaps between legal commitments and practical implementation. Addressing the problem therefore requires a comprehensive and coordinated response that tackles root causes, disrupts exploitative migration systems, strengthens institutional capacity, and prioritizes victim centred reintegration. Without such an integrated approach, irregular migration and human trafficking will remain enduring challenges to Nigeria's social stability, human security, and sustainable development.

Recommendations

- i. First, there is a need for sustained socio economic interventions targeted at high migration and trafficking source communities. Government and development partners should prioritize job creation, vocational training, and access to quality education for youths and women, particularly in regions with persistent unemployment and poverty. Improving local livelihood opportunities will reduce the economic desperation that drives individuals toward irregular migration and increases their vulnerability to traffickers.
- ii. Second, institutional and legal frameworks for combating human trafficking should be strengthened through improved enforcement and coordination. This includes enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies, border officials, and the judiciary to investigate, prosecute, and secure convictions against traffickers. Stronger interagency collaboration and reduced corruption are essential to dismantling organized trafficking networks and restoring public confidence in anti trafficking institutions.
- iii. Third, preventive awareness and community based strategies should be expanded to address misinformation and risky migration narratives. Comprehensive public education campaigns involving schools, community leaders, faith based organizations, and civil society groups can improve awareness of the realities and dangers of irregular migration and human trafficking. Community engagement is critical for early identification of recruitment patterns and for challenging social norms that normalize unsafe migration.
- iv. Fourth, victim protection and reintegration mechanisms should be enhanced and adequately funded. Survivors of trafficking require access to psychosocial support, healthcare, legal assistance, and sustainable livelihood opportunities to prevent re trafficking. Reintegration programmes should be community oriented and gender sensitive, ensuring that returnees are not stigmatized but supported to rebuild their lives and contribute productively to society.

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