

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA: TRENDS AND EXPERIENCES OF VICTIMS IN IMO STATE**AZUBUIKE, B.O.****DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT****CHObA, PORT HARCOURT****&****EKPENYONG OTU, PhD.****DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT****CHObA, PORT HARCOURT****Abstract**

This phenomenological study examined the menace of human trafficking from the perspective of trafficked victims in Imo state. It explored recent trends in human trafficking in Imo state and documents the lived experiences of trafficked victims. The study was conducted amongst 70 trafficked victims who were purposively sampled through the snowballing technique. The study relied on both secondary and primary sources of data, with In-depth Interviews as the primary method of data collection. The study adopted a mixed approach of data analysis as secondary data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, while it relied on the content and thematic analysis for primary data. Findings from the study revealed that more women are trafficked than men and mostly younger women between the ages of 14 to 35 are most vulnerable to trafficking largely as a result of economic hardship, quest to travel abroad and search for employment opportunities. More so, victims were trafficked into sexual exploitation, slavery and prostitution across cities in Nigeria and overseas. More specifically, with regards to the lived experiences of victims, the themes that emanated from the study include abuse, objectification and disempowerment of victims by their traffickers and clients as well as predominance of substance abuse amongst victims. In concluding, the study posits that the structural socio-economic conditions such as economic hardship that creates the enabling environment for human trafficking to thrive in Imo state should be addressed by the relevant authorities while the need for victims' to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into normal functioning should be ensured to avoid relapse and possibly re-trafficking.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Victims, Lived Experiences, Phenomenology, Imo State.

Introduction

Human trafficking has increasingly become a social problem in our world today as its prevalence is manifest across the globe. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2013) classified human trafficking as the second largest criminal industry in the world amounting to about 32 billion dollars. According to the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC, 2008) human trafficking refers to the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat, use of force or other means of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the receiving or giving of payment... to a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation".

The definition above reflects that human trafficking describes the process of forcefully recruiting others into several forms of involuntary servitude such as sex trafficking, child soldiering, child labour, forced labor, domestic labour, bonded labour, and debt bondage (Wilson & Butler, 2014). Drawing from the foregoing, human trafficking consists of three elements including acts of human trafficking (involving abduction, recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, and receipt of victims), means of human trafficking (including threat or use of force, coercion, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, giving payments or benefits) and purpose of human trafficking (including all forms of human exploitation). Human trafficking hence can be classified into two major types which includes sex trafficking and labour

trafficking; more so coerced organ donation is a rare and emerging form of trafficking.

Human trafficking is unceremoniously regarded as the most dominant form of human exploitation in contemporary times (Faulkner, Mahapatra, Cook Heffron, Nsonwu, & Busch-Armendariz, 2013) and its prevalence is global in nature as it permeates geographical regions, race, ethnicity, age, or gender lines (Zhang, 2009). Trafficking of people may be done within the borders of their own country or outside the borders of their country to other countries or regions. The global nature of human trafficking is evident as almost every country in the world is affected by human trafficking, either as an origin, transit, or a destination country. The reality of human trafficking across the globe is worsening as estimates from a non-governmental organization (NGO), Free the Slaves, suggests that there are 27 million slaves in the world currently, with 1.3 million people enslaved in Latin America and the Caribbean, about 1 million in Africa and Middle East and 24 million in Asia (UNICEF, 2013). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2005) in its estimate reported that human trafficking has accounted for no less than 2.5 million people enslaved in forced labour and sexual exploitation. With Asia and the Pacific accounting for 1.4 million, industrialized countries 270,000, Latin America and the Caribbean 250,000, Middle East and North Africa 230,000, countries with economies in transition 200,000 and Sub-Saharan countries 130,000.

More specifically, within the Sub-Saharan sub-region, Nigeria has increasingly become the epicenter for trafficking in persons and other trans-border crimes. The 2018 report of the U.S State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Person placed Nigeria on the tier 2 watch list. According to the report, Nigeria is a source, transit, and destination country for trafficked victims who are mostly women and children subjected to forced labour and sexual exploitation. The report suggests that the scourge of human trafficking is disproportionately felt in Southern Nigeria and most victims are recruited from rural

areas. More so, in most Southern states, traffickers operate "*baby factories*" where young girls are forcefully held, raped and delivered of babies which traffickers sell to willing buyers. In Northern Nigeria, the Quranic schools alias "*Almajiri*" system is reported to recruit young boys who are trafficked into street begging. More so, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-Eastern part of the country has worsened the incidences of trafficking in the region, as young boys and girls are kidnapped by insurgents to be child soldiers, while young women and boys are trafficked from IDP camps to neighboring West, Central and North African countries, the Middle East and Europe.

The prevalence of human trafficking in Nigeria has generated scholarly concerns as several studies have been conducted to address the menace. Some scholars have traced the problem of human trafficking to the historic Trans-Atlantic slave trade and its re-emergence as a new variant in the form of trafficking in 21st century Nigeria (Okeshola and Adenugba, 2018; Emanemua, 2016; Osimen, Okor & Ahmed, 2014). More so, while scholars like Ola (nd.) has addressed the problem of human trafficking from a socio-economic perspective with regards to its causes and effects mainly the harsh economic realities in the country such as pervasive poverty and mass unemployment, other scholars such as Ajagun (2012) has focused more on the human rights implications of trafficking in persons. Drawing from the foregoing, while existing studies have paid more attention to the structural and macro causative factors and impacts of human trafficking, little has been researched on the micro level analysis with the actual victims of trafficking in perspective. It is in the light of this that this phenomenological study documents the nature of human trafficking in Nigeria from the lens and lived experiences of trafficked victims in Imo state. The study hence sought to address the following research questions:

- i. What are the recent trends in human trafficking in Imo state?
- ii. What are the lived experiences of trafficked victims in Imo state?

Materials and Methods

The study adopted the descriptive phenomenology approach to enable the researcher understand the phenomenon of human trafficking through the experiences of trafficked victims. Phenomenology is appropriate to examine the lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998) as it allows in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under investigation. The choice of the descriptive phenomenology is predicated on the fact that it allows the lived experiences of participants to emerge without any influence from the researcher or existing literature. In this instance, trafficking in persons is a subjective personal phenomenon and the study approach allows an exploration of this largely personal phenomenon (Lopez & Hills, 2004). The study adopted the purposive sampling technique through snowballing to reach out to the target respondents. This involved the identification of a victim who in turn introduces the researcher to other victims in a continuum. In total 70 victims were sampled in the study and data was collected through In-depth Interviews (IDI) with victims and other secondary data sources including the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) official annual reports. Data analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics for secondary data, and the application of content and thematic analysis for primary data involving the transcription of interviews, coding, and emergence of categories and themes of meanings from the data. Ethical considerations in research were ensured as participants' consent to participate in the study was well sought, as well as

the participants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed.

Results and Discussions

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Participants in the study were comprised of 70 trafficked victims, and all 70 participants were females. This tends to show that more women are trafficked than men in the study area. The gender disparity in trafficking in persons is corroborated by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) that 95% of trafficked victims in Nigeria are women (NAPTIP, 2017). More so, the 70 participants are between 12 and 35 years of age and this imply that mostly younger girls and ladies who are largely inexperienced are more vulnerable to trafficking than older ladies. In addition, none of the respondents are married and none of them have attained tertiary education, while 53 have attained secondary education, and 17 have attained primary education.

Trends in Human Trafficking in Imo State

The findings from the study revealed that the problem of human trafficking in Imo state is becoming worrisome as the state has one of the highest levels of trafficking in South Eastern Nigeria. Relying on secondary data provided by the NAPTIP annual statistical report between the periods of 2011 to 2017, findings as indicated in figure 1 revealed that a total of 303 victims were rescued within the period under review. While 42 victims were rescued from traffickers as at 2011, the figure increased to 59 by 2012, which imply that incidences of trafficking in 2012 were far higher than the previous year.

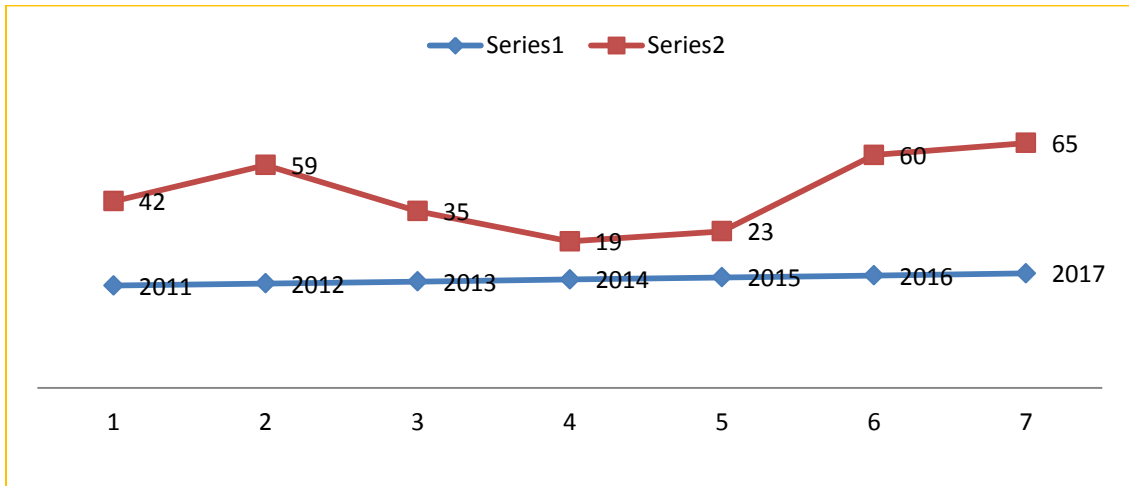


Figure 1: Trends in Human Trafficking in Imo State (2011-2017)
 Source: Author’s Computation Based on NAPTIP Annual Reports

However, by 2013 the figure reduced to 35, with further reduction to 19 by the year 2014. The data indicates that the year 2014 recorded the lowest number of rescued victims and this could imply it has the lowest rate of incidence in human trafficking within the period under review. More so, by the year 2015, the figure increased mildly to 23 victims while it astronomically increased to 60 by 2016 and 65 by 2017. Drawing from the foregoing, it becomes deducible that that last two years (2016-2017) have the highest number of victims reported to have been rescued while the years

2013-2015 recorded the lowest incidences of trafficking in Imo state.

Further investigation was conducted to ascertain the gender distribution of trafficked persons in Imo state in recent times. Relying on the data provided by NAPTIP (2017), the findings of the study showed that for the year 2017, out of the 65 rescued trafficked victims, who hail from Imo state, 95% of them are men, while only 5% are women (figure 2). Drawing from the foregoing analysis it is evident that women are most vulnerable to trafficking than their male counterparts.

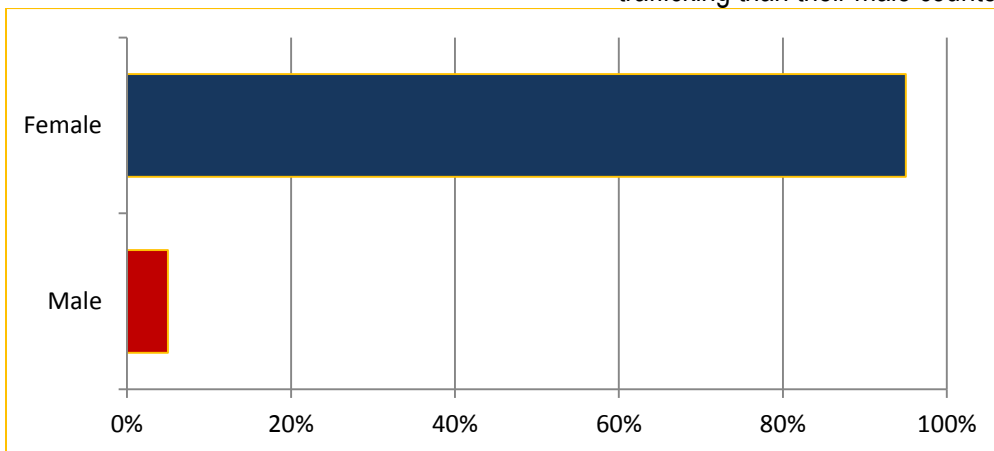


Figure 2: Distribution of Trafficked Victims by Gender
 Source: Author’s Computation Based on NAPTIP Annual Report (2017)

Further investigation into the causes of trafficking amongst victims was conducted and as shown in figure 3 below while 20% of the respondents reported that they fell victims to trafficking

because of their quest to travel abroad, 7% argued they were trafficked because of the notion that there is an increasing demand for foreign domestic workers both in Nigeria and overseas.

More so, while 10% were trafficked because they have the perception of availability of employment opportunities in their destination places, 3% reported they were trafficked because of social marginalization and gender discrimination in their communities. In addition, while 15% reported they were ignorant of the conditions in their destination places and countries which made it easier for

them to be trafficked, a majority of the respondents 45% reported that poverty and economic hardship were the major factors that made them vulnerable to being trafficked. The findings derivable here suggest that poverty and economic deprivation are the major causes or drivers of human trafficking in Imo state.

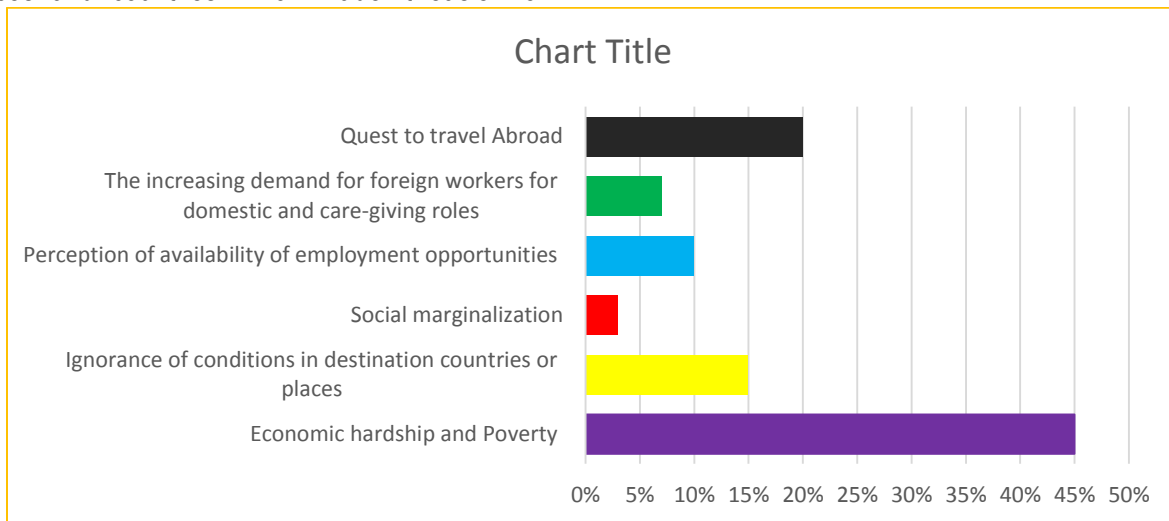


Figure 3: Distribution of Trafficked Victims by Causes of Trafficking

Source: Fieldwork, 2018

In addition to the foregoing, investigation into the nature of trafficking victims were involved in was conducted. Findings from the study as shown in figure 4 indicate that while 8.6% of the respondents were trafficked as illegal migrants who were smuggled outside the country in search of greener pastures, 2.8% of the respondents were trafficked into slavery outside the shores of the country especially in Lybia. More so, while 11.4% of the respondents reported that they were trafficked into forced labour outside of the country, 2.9% were recruited into pornography and online exploitation, while 5.7% were trafficked into forced labour within the country.

Furthermore, 22.9% of the respondents were trafficked through procurement for foreign travel which usually ends in prostitution, 27% were specifically trafficked for procurement in prostitution outside the shores of the country, while 18.6% of them were trafficked for procurement for prostitution within Nigeria. The foregoing data suggests that a majority of the respondents were trafficked into prostitution, slavery and all forms of exploitation within and outside the country on initial pretext of search for greener pastures and better sources of livelihoods elsewhere within and outside the country.

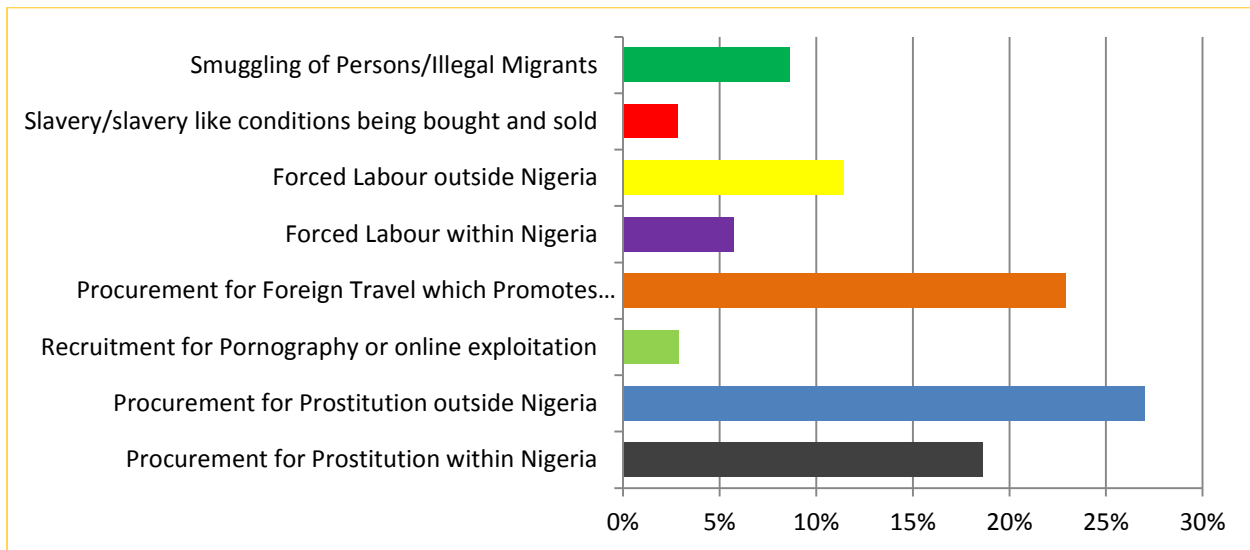


Figure 4: Distribution of Victims by Nature of Trafficking
Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Furthermore, the study investigated the locations where trafficked victims were rescued from. Findings as shown in figure 5 reveals with regards to international trafficking, Libya tops the list as 22.9% of the victims were rescued from Libya. This is followed by Italy and Benin Republic with about 5.7% of the respondents reporting to have

been rescued from Italy, and another 5.7% rescued from Benin Republic. More so, while 2.9% were rescued from Ghana, another 2.9% were rescued from Niger Republic. In addition, 1.5% of the respondents were rescued from Suadi Arabia; the other 1.5% was rescued from United Arab Emirate.

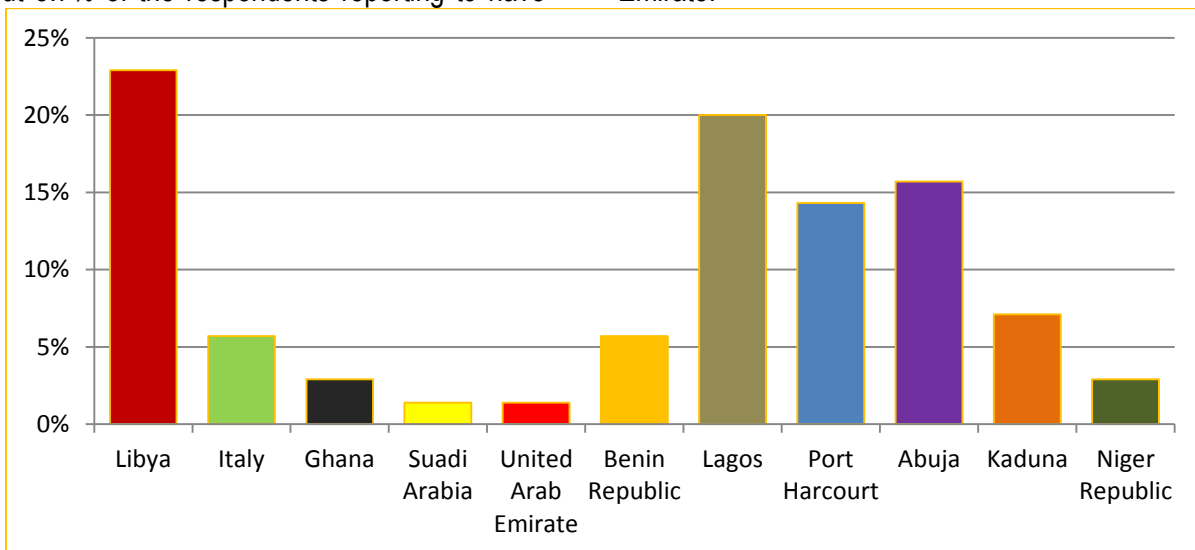


Figure 5: Distribution of Respondents by Location of Rescue
Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Furthermore, with regards to internal trafficking within the country, the findings from the study indicate that Lagos tops the list as 20% of the respondents were rescued and repatriated from

Lagos. This is followed by Abuja with 15.7%, Port Harcourt with 14.3% and Kaduna with 7.1%. In view of the foregoing analysis, it is deducible that most trafficked victims from Imo state are moved

outside the shores of the country especially to Lybia, Italy Niger Republic and Ghana. Those who were trafficked within the country are usually moved to Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kaduna.

Lived Experiences of Trafficked Victims

The personal narratives of the lived experience of the victims of trafficking were analyzed and four themes were identified: *Abuse, Objectification, Disempowerment and Substance Use*. These themes summarize the experiences of participants while they were trafficked and in relation to the people they were forced to interact with. The participants described being mistreated, humiliated, abused, and controlled by the individuals involved, as well as how those treatments impacted them.

i. Abuse

This theme describes victims' experiences to different kind of violent acts during the period they spent in the trafficking industry. More precisely, it is often used as a means of introduction to sex trafficking and prostitution as well as a way of keeping them in check and under control. More so, as a way of initiation into the industry at the beginning, the participants especially females were abused mostly by gang members, clients and even by their recruiters, what is referred to as pimp in the industry. Addressing this, Victim 25 recounted her experience as thus:

"I will never forget that first night; I was raped by a group of men for over five hours. They came in one after the other. In fact, looking back on that day makes me think that it was a way of testing me in order to see if I can be a loyal and good prostitute"(KII, Victim 25).

Furthermore, emotionally abusing the victims was also another method of maintaining order and keeping the victims loyal. The victims were constantly being threatened by the sex traffickers, threatening to hurt their families and close ones. As stated by Victim 2:

"My madam threatened me and my family, I had no choice than comply" (KII, Victim 2).

This therefore suggests that these fear-stricken methods has aided sex traffickers in creating an environment of submission and control, an environment where victims constantly live in fear and despair as a result of the frequent threats on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Victim 32 described her experience as thus:

"The owner of the hotel instructed our madam to flog me every day. I was locked in a room and got flogged for several days without food and water. I still have the marks on my body till date. What got me through it was telling myself that I was on dry fasting" (KII, Victim 32).

Victim 62 stated that a usual form of abusing them was through constant punishing. She recounted how she almost died from the cruel treatment:

"Our madam and her boys stripped me naked and flogged me using a plank. There was nothing they did not do to me that day. They even electrocuted me and poured water that has pepper in it on the wounds I sustained from the beating until I fainted. And the sad part of it was that I didn't do any of the things I was being accused of. I dare not talk back or defend myself; hence I would be raped and insulted. I wished I had died and never woke up when I fainted" (KII, Victim 62).

From the forgoing, one can clearly understand the various kinds of abuse that these victims or participants have to endure.

ii. Objectification

Objectification deals with how victims were reduced and seen as well as treated only as an object of sex-sexual pleasure to clients or customers. They are more or less treated less than a human being. They dare not dream or hope of being more or having a better future for themselves. As pointed out by some of the victims:

"There was one particular man who brought me back after I was almost fainting and then continued

having anal sex with me then making me give him a blow job nonstop (oral sex). There was nothing they didn't do to me; these men (customers) are ruthless" (KII, Victim 55)

Similarly, victim 1 recounted her experience as thus:

"Clients treat us like we are purchased commodities to be used and thrown away at that particular point in time when they need to be pleased" (KII, Victim 1).

These accounts tend to show how these victims are being degraded and treated more like an object than human in the hands of their bosses and clients, which further leads a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness in the victims and subsequently promote an atmosphere of submission and dependability among the participants.

iii. Disempowerment

A major part of the experiences faced by the victims is the loss of power and control in the industry. A major form of initiating the participants into the industry is through taking away their power and control. That way they lose all form of control both physical and emotionally as well as the loss of their self-esteem hence giving their traffickers power and control over them and right to profit from their body.

For example, the victims' boss usually uses threat as a means of gaining control over the victims. Most of the time they go as far as threatening to harm the loved ones of the victims if/when they fail to follow instructions. For victims that were trafficked outside of the country, their papers are usually seized. In that way, they are constrained and stranded with nowhere to go, hence forced to live under such dehumanizing conditions in order to survive. Victim 15 recounted her experience reported thus:

"My Oga in Italy seized all my documents and always threatened

me that I was brought into the country illegally. The fear of being arrested for not having legal papers scared me from running or seeking for help" (KII, Victim 15).

Subsequently, they are left with nowhere to go but to remain with their traffickers and be used as sex-slaves. For these reasons, the victims are prone to the feeling of hopelessness and the fear of losing their lives makes them more prone to abiding by the rules and regulations of their traffickers, which further makes it difficult for the victims to leave the industry. The respondents identified various strategies adopted by their traffickers to ensure perpetual control over them:

- i. Taking of oaths of secrecy and loyalty with "Juju".
- ii. Confiscation of victims' identification documents, visas or passports.
- iii. Total control of victims' money or possessions.
- iv. Threaten victims with imprisonment or deportation for immigration violations
- v. The use of debt bondage to manipulate victims (i.e., enormous financial obligations or undefined/increasing debt).
- vi. The use or threat to use violence toward victims and/or family members;
- vii. Isolation of victims from the public, family members, friends and associates

iv. Substance Use

In order for victims to cope with the trauma they face in the hands of their bosses and clients, they have to resort to substance use which further leads to increase in substance abuse. It is however, sad to state here that most of the coping strategies victims resort to in order to relieve the trauma and pain from their daily experiences are nothing short of dangerous and life threatening. Some of which include attempting suicide, cutting their wrists, drinking excessive amounts of alcohol and administering drugs to themselves.

More so, the fact that these victims are restricted and secluded reduces their chances of making connections and building social capital as well as resources. This limits the possibilities of having and accessing a better coping mechanism. Furthermore, the participants describe their experiences in the use of various substances as a means of meeting the standard set by their bosses and clients. For example, victim 23 stated that:

"Sometimes I use drugs and take hot drink before servicing the men because it helps me feel less pain and because when I am high I barely think or feel what is happening until it is over" (KII, Victim 23).

Similarly, victim 67 stated that:

"I used to take drugs to help me last longer because most of our customers are insatiable and some of them have dangerous fantasies so to help reduce the pain also, I have to use drugs" (KII, Victim 67).

More so, traffickers use addictive substances as a way of controlling their victims. They constantly administer these substances on their victims because according to the participants, it serves as a way of preventing them from escaping.

It can be deduced from the forgoing that the use of substances plays a major part in the trafficking industry either as a coping strategy to the victims or a controlling device in the hands of the traffickers. In all, the use of substance poses great risk to these victims because it tends to increase life-threatening actions ranging from contacting deadly diseases due to unprotected drug administration, committing suicide, addiction to diverse substances, and self-afflicted injuries.

Conclusion

The study explored the menace of human trafficking, its trend and nature from the lived experiences of victims in Imo state. Going by the findings of the study, it has been established that incidences of human trafficking is on a hike in Imo

state. The study has also revealed that the nature of human trafficking is rather dehumanizing as victims are subjected to diverse forms of physical, emotional and psychological abuse, and objectification which results in exploitation and disempowerment. In the light of the above, the study posits that the structural conditions inherent in the society such as economic hardship which creates the enabling environment for human trafficking to thrive in Imo state should be addressed by the relevant authorities through poverty reduction and job creation interventions, while the need for victims' to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into normal functioning should be ensured to avoid relapse and possibility of being re-trafficked.

References

- Ajagun, S.O. (2012). Implications of Human Trafficking for Human Rights: The Case of Nigeria. *Global Journal of Human Social Sciences*, 12 (6), 29-35.
- Creswell, J.W (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Emanemua, A.B (2016). Human Trafficking: A Variant of the Historic Slave Trade in Contemporary Nigeria. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 5 (3), 255-262.
- Faulkner, M., Mahapatra, N., Cook Heffron, L., Busch Nsonwu, M., & Busch-Armendariz, N.(2013). Moving Past Victimization and Trauma Toward Restoration: Mother Survivors of Sex Trafficking Share Their Inspiration. *International Perspectives in Victimology*, 7 (2),46-55.
- Free the Slaves, Map of Slavery Worldwide (www.freetheslaves.net).
- International Labour Organization (2005). *A Global Alliance against Forced Labour* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2005).
- Lopez, K.A., & Willis, D.G (2004). Descriptive Versus Interpretive Phenomenology: Their

- Contributions to Nursing Knowledge. *Qual Health Res* 2004; 14:726.
- National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) Annual Reports, 2011-2017
- Okeshola, F.B., & Adenugba, A.A (2018). Human Trafficking: A Modern Day Slavery in Nigeria. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 8 (2) 40-44.
- Ola, K.O (nd). Human Trafficking and Social Economic Impact on the Households.
- Osimen, G.U., Okor, P. & Ahmed, T.M (2014). Human Trafficking and Interface of Slavery in the 21st Century in Nigeria. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4 (21), 10-19.
- UNICEF. (2013). *Infographic: A global look at human trafficking*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/mission/protect/trafficking/infographic-global-lookhuman-trafficking/7518>
- UNODC (2008). *Human Trafficking: An Overview*. United Nations office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2008.
- U.S State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Person (2018). *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2018.
- Wilson, B., & Butler, L. D. (2014). Running a Gauntlet: A Review of Victimization and Violence in the Pre-entry, & Peri-/Post-Exit Periods of Commercial Sexual Exploitation. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, & Policy*, 6(5), 494-504.
- Zhang, S. X. (2009). Beyond the "Natasha" Story: A Review and Critique of Current Research on Sex Trafficking. *Global Crime*, 10 (3), 178-195.