

Assessment of Residents' Perception of Child Trafficking in Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Child trafficking is a societal problem which threatens the productive and leadership potential of children, who are seen as the hope of the future. This study has assessed the drivers, impacts and strategies for curbing child trafficking in Oredo LGA of Edo State, based on SDG 3, which specifies 'Good Health and Well-being'. Good health and well-being play a critical role in the growth and development of children. Primary data for the study was derived from a field survey of residents in the study area based on the projected population size of 604,975 persons and a sample frame of 204 persons. The data for this study were collected through the administration of a structured questionnaire to 204 household heads in four communities (Urubi, Ugbague, Eguadase and Etete) of Oredo LGA. Descriptive statistics such as averages and percentages were used in analysing the data. The results of the study indicate that female children were mostly trafficked, instigated mostly by social factors which include poverty (61.8%), parental neglect (18.6%) and poor governance/ social insecurity (10.3%). The predominant motives for child trafficking were prostitution, child labour and organ harvesting. The social health impacts of child trafficking include disruption in the education of children, poor mental and physical state of health, an increase in societal vices, non-inculcation of family values in children, unwanted childhood pregnancies and death in some cases. The study recommended measures to curb child trafficking to include free basic and secondary education for children, sensitisation of the public on the ills of child trafficking, implementation of policies against child trafficking and violations of child rights, prosecution of individuals involved in child trafficking and access to quality healthcare and social welfare for children.

Keywords: Child trafficking, Child labour, Childhood pregnancy, Organ harvesting, Poverty, Social Welfare

Introduction

Human trafficking is a major problem that exists both in developed and developing countries around the world. It has been described as a modern type of slavery, which has become more prominent in the last two decades as a result of the socioeconomic downturns characterising most developing countries, especially in the African continent (Ngwe & Elechi, 2012; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - UNODC, 2020). Human trafficking comes in third place behind arms trading and drug smuggling, which are the two most lucrative criminal activities (UNODC, 2013). According to Akor (2011), trafficking in persons is the movement of persons from one destination to another, most time for forced labour, sex exploitation or both. It is an act that takes away the free will of people in exchange for coercion. The UNODC (2015) define trafficking in persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons using threat or use of force. It involves the use of not only coercion but also extortion, fraud and deception, as well as a person having control over another person for exploitative purposes.

The victims of human trafficking include both adults and children. Generally, the age of an individual defines them as either a child or an adult. Biologically, a human being is considered to be a child from birth till the onset of puberty, which is the age spanning from birth to 13 years in the average child (Britannica, 2024). Legally, the term '*child*' may refer to anyone below the age of majority or a specified age limit. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines *a child* as "a human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (United Nations, 1989). Studies indicate that children who are regarded as minors have fewer privileges than adults and are considered incapable of making important choices; hence, they are the most vulnerable in the human population (Bagattini, 2019; Herring, 2023). Legally, they must always be under the supervision of a responsible adult or have a guardian, in the form of biological parents (whether single, divorced or married), foster parents or relatives. Responsible supervision of vulnerable children is important in securing a good future for them. When such supervisory roles are neglected or misused by supposed guardians, children are usually at risk of being trafficked (Nnama-Okechukwu & Erhumwunse, 2021).

Child trafficking is a type of human trafficking, which is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring and kidnapping of a child for adoption, exploitation, forced labour or slavery (UNODC, 2015). Child trafficking involves forcibly removing children from their secure environment and taking advantage of their helplessness to exploit them. Although no precise figures exist, the ILO (2005) estimated that 980,000 to 1,225,000 children globally are in a forced labour situation as a result of trafficking. It is considered a violation of a child's rights and the exploitation of trust. However, despite efforts by the international community to curb or stop child trafficking activities, there have been limited results, especially in the West African region. This region is still recognised as the hub of human trafficking (UNODC, 2013).

Due to the severity of the societal ills associated with the trafficking of individuals, previous studies have brought to recognition the social factors which instigate trafficking in persons, including the nature of its impact. Adepoju, (2010); Attoh, (2009); and Eghafona, (2009) highlighted the role of family settings, poverty, cultural biases, inequality and illiteracy, amongst others, as social factors which place women more at risk of being trafficked. Other factors described as 'push' and 'pull' factors have been identified by Sabella (2011) and Plambech (2014) which include an increase in population, lack of job opportunities, women maltreatment, political unrest, armed conflict or natural disasters which lead to physical and economic insecurity contributing to increase in trafficking. Previous studies also reveal the trends and factors precipitating human trafficking, which include economic and cultural intricacies which are inimical to upholding the dignity of every member of different societies (Akor, 2011; Omoaregbe et al., 2012; Ndifon *et al.*, 2012; Salihu & Chutiya, 2016; Osezua, 2016; Ikhimwin & Obarisiagbon, 2020; Olubukola, 2020; Adepitan, 2020). The study by Kiss et al. (2022) highlighted the violence, abuse and exploitation that trafficked women and girls are exposed to in Nigeria and Uganda. Most of these studies are focused on the adult population, mostly women who are comparatively more vulnerable than men. This study fills the research gap by focusing on children, who are most vulnerable, due to their inability to make the right choices for themselves. The study emphasises the connection between child trafficking and the exploitation of children for sexual abuse and forced labour. The study evaluates child trafficking in the Oredo Local Government area in Edo state, with the following objectives: to examine the social factors instigating child trafficking in the study area, the consequences of child trafficking in the study

area and ascertain the measures applicable in reducing child trafficking and reintegrating back to society recovered trafficked children in the study area.

Study Area

Oredo is a Local Government Area in Edo State, Nigeria, located within Longitude 5°27', 5°39' East and Latitude 6°6', 6°22' North. It shares a boundary with Ikpoba-Okha LGA in the East, Egor LGA in the North-West and Ovia North East LGA in the West. Its headquarters is Benin City, which is also the capital city of Edo State, Nigeria (Figure 1). It has an area coverage of 249 km² and a projected population of 604,975 for the year 2024, based on the population size of 374,671 recorded in the 2006 census report (National Population Commission, 2010). Oredo LGA is home to many Edo indigenes and migrants, including members of diverse ethnic groups from different parts of the country, such as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Esan, etc. The Bini and English languages are commonly spoken in the local government area, while the religions of Islam, Christianity and African Tradition are practised in the area. The socio-economic activities in the area include transportation, small-scale trading, artworks (such as bronze casting and bead making), market gardening, artisanship, automobile repairs, sawmill operations, etc. The choice of the study is an appropriate one following the report by the European Asylum Support Office, which identified Benin City, the capital of Oredo LGA, as one of the major central hubs for human trafficking in Nigeria (EASO, 2021)

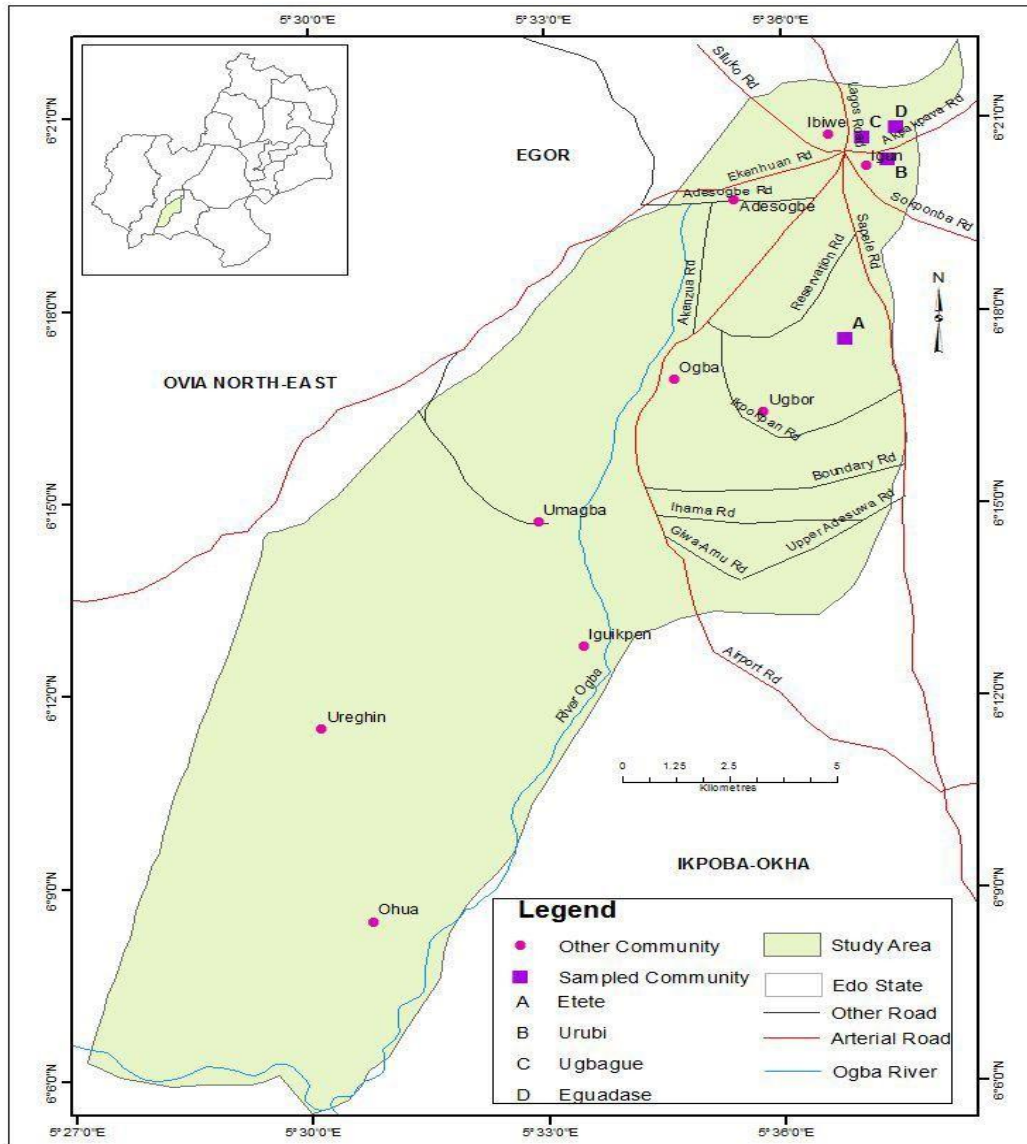


Figure 1: Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State

Compiled by the Authors (2022)

Methodology

The primary data was obtained through personal interviews and the administration of a structured questionnaire carefully designed to elicit information on child trafficking from adult household heads in the study area. The population of interest in this research comprised residents of Oredo Local Government Area. From a projected population size of 604,975 persons for the year 2024, a sample size of 204 persons was derived. Purposive and systematic sampling techniques were

used in this study. Four communities within Oredo LGA were purposively selected because these areas constitute the core of socio-economic activities within Oredo LGA, which would likely attract more incidents of child trafficking. These communities include Urubi, Ugbague, Eguadase and Etete (Figure 1). Within these communities, the respondents for this study were selected using systematic sampling, which involves the selection of respondents from every third house along the major routes in each community. The respondents were the heads of each household. However, if the head of a household was not available, an adult representative of the household head was interviewed. The study involved descriptive statistical techniques, which include averages and percentages, which were used to represent the perceptions of the respondents on child trafficking. The key Informant Interview (KII) method was also employed in eliciting information from an undisclosed member of an NGO monitoring child trafficking in Edo State.

Results and Discussion

The Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The findings of the study show that 46.1% of the respondents were male, while 53.9% were female. All adult age groups were represented in the sampling pool; however, there were more respondents (69.6%) in the early adult age group of 18-34 years. In terms of religion, more of the respondents (80.4%) were Christians, who make up the majority of the population. Also, the majority of the respondents (43.6%) had secondary-level education as their highest qualification. The majority of the respondents (52%) were self-employed, relying on small-scale trading and servicing for income. The findings in Table 1 also reveal the representation of individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds, having varying experiences, as the context for eliciting information on child trafficking in the study area. All respondents of different demographic backgrounds shared similar opinions on the abhorrence of child trafficking in the study area.

Table 1. The Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variables	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Gender		
Male	94	46.1
Female	110	53.9
Total	204	100
Age		
18-34 Years	142	69.6
35-54 Years	50	24.5
55 Years and Above	12	5.9
65 Years	4	2.0
Total	204	100
Religion		
Christianity	164	80.4
Islam	38	18.6
African traditional religion	2	1.0
Total	204	100
Highest Educational Qualification		
No formal education	29	14.2
Primary school	56	27.5
Secondary school	89	43.6
Tertiary/higher educational degree	30	14.7
Total	204	100
Occupation		
Civil servant	23	11.3
Self-employed	106	52.0
Retired	09	4.4
Unemployed	13	6.4
Student	53	26.0
Total	204	100

Knowledge of Child Trafficking Incidents

The results in Table 2 show that all respondents knew of child trafficking incidents in Oredo LGAs through formal education (81.4 %), personal experiences (2.5 %), narratives from family, friends and acquaintances (6.4 %), social and mass media (9.8 %). However, only 52 % of the respondents had witnessed one or more child trafficking incidents, while 48 % had not witnessed any child

trafficking incidents. The fact that most of the respondents had witnessed child trafficking incidents points to the prevalence and regularity of such crimes against children in the communities studied. Respondents who had not witnessed child trafficking incidents confirmed from their responses that they had heard from various sources of its occurrence in the study area.

Table 2: Knowledge and Witnessing of Child Trafficking Incidents in Oredo LGA

Source of Knowledge on 'Child Trafficking' Incidents	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Through Formal Education	166	81.4
Personal experiences	5	2.5
Narratives from family members, friends and acquaintances	13	6.4
Social/mass media	20	9.8
Witnessing of Child Trafficking Incidents in the Study Area		
I have witnessed child trafficking incidents in my area of residence	106	52.0
I have NOT witnessed child trafficking in my area of residence	98	48.0

Perceptions on the Demographics of Trafficked Individuals

The perceptions on the demographics of trafficked children in Table 3 indicate which category of the population below 18 years of age is at a higher risk of being trafficked. The results show that 93.6 % of the respondents agreed that female children are more trafficked, compared to 6.4% of the respondents who agreed otherwise. This fact was similarly reported by Elezi (2011), indicating that females were the more trafficked gender in society and thus run the risk of suffering from a myriad of societal challenges. In terms of age, the findings in Table 3 also show that children (below 18 years of age) were more at risk of being trafficked. A higher proportion (67.6 %) of respondents affirmed that trafficked individuals were mostly children between the ages of 0 and 17. A lower proportion (32.4%) of the respondents reported that trafficked individuals were mostly adults, who are 18 years of age or older.

Table 3: Demographics of Trafficked Individuals

Responses on the Demographics of Trafficked Individuals	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
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Male children are more frequently trafficked	13	6.4
Female children are more frequently trafficked	191	93.6
Total	204	100
Age Group of the Majority of Trafficked Individuals		
Children (0 – 17 years) are more frequently trafficked	138	67.6
Adults (18 years and above) are more frequently trafficked	66	32.4
Total	204	100

Social Environmental Instigators of Child Trafficking

The findings in Table 4 show the responses of the respondents on the time of the year with the highest trafficking activities. Most of the respondents (77.0%) opined that most child trafficking activities took place in the fourth quarter of the year, which comprises the months of October, November and December. Fewer respondents (9.8%, 8.3% and 3.9%) reported that most child trafficking activities took place in the second quarter, first quarter and third quarter of the year respectively. The fact that most of the respondents affirmed that most child trafficking activities occur in the fourth quarter of the year is tenable because such a period is associated with the end-of-year festivities. Most times, child victims and their parents are given false promises of an enjoyable custodianship, hyped up by the year-end celebratory mood. The Tactics or methods adopted by child trafficking individuals are also shown in Table 4. The findings indicate that most (48.5%) of the victims are obtained through payments made to their parents or relatives. Other means through which children were obtained included kidnapping (22.5%), a form of payment for debts owed (17.2%) and the use of charms and swearing of oaths (11.8%).

Table 4: Social Environmental Instigators of Child Trafficking

Responses on the Social Instigators of Child Trafficking	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Period of highest Child Trafficking Activities		
The first quarter of the year (January – March)	17	8.3
Second quarter of the year (April – June)	20	9.8
The third quarter of the year (July – September)	8	3.9
Fourth quarter of the year (October to December)	159	77.9
Total	204	100
Tactics used mostly in Securing Victims for Child Trafficking		
Kidnapping	46	22.5
Payment to parents/relatives	99	48.5
Through the use of charms/swearing of oaths	24	11.8

Payment for debt owed	35	17.2
Total	204	100
Individuals involved mostly in Child Trafficking		
Unknown persons to the victims and their family	138	67.6
known individuals to the victims and family	44	21.6
Family members, friends and Community members	21	10.3
Trafficking without the involvement of others	1	0.5
Total	204	100
Predominant motive for Child Trafficking		
Child slavery/labour	69	33.8
Prostitution	118	57.8
Harvesting of organs	17	8.3
Total	204	100
Major Socio-economic Instigators of Child Trafficking		
Poverty	126	61.8
Parental neglect	38	18.6
Lack of access to social services	6	2.9
Death of parent(s), marriage dissolution or absconding of spouse	9	4.4
Unwanted child pregnancies	3	1.5
Peer group pressure	1	0.5
Poor governance and social insecurity	21	10.3
Total	204	100

The majority (67.6 %) of the respondents reported that children were trafficked mostly by people who were unknown to the victims while 31.9 % of the respondents opined that children were mostly trafficked by persons known to the victims and their family members, friends and community members. The predominant motives for trafficking children in the study area in Table 4 show that most of the respondents (57.8%) affirmed that prostitution was the major motive for child trafficking, followed by child slavery/labour (33.8%) and organ harvesting (8.3%). The findings (Table 4) also show that poverty is the major instigator of child trafficking, as affirmed by 61.8% of respondents in the study. This is in line with the findings of Sabella (2011), who identified poverty as one of the significant contributors to trafficking. Eghafona (2009) similarly identifies factors necessitating child trafficking to include greed, ignorance, illiteracy, lack of opportunity, inequality, cultural bias, persistent unemployment, poverty (basic driving force),

large family size, high demand for cheap labour, inadequate political commitment and human deprivation.

The Consequences of Child Trafficking

The consequences of child trafficking are far-reaching in the study area. The report of a key informant interview (KII) of personnel of an NGO within Edo State indicates that the consequences range from disruption in the education of children, poor mental and physical health, increases in societal vices, non-inculcation of family values in children, unwanted childhood pregnancies and death in some cases. This assertion has further been buttressed by the respondents' views, indicating that trafficked children, if returned, are usually in a poor state of health and not easily reintegrated into society (Table 5). The majority (71.1 %) of the respondents opined that most trafficked children continue with their education when they return, while 28.9% of respondents opined otherwise. In addition, the majority (93.6 %) of the respondents reported that trafficked children returned are in poor or deteriorated health, while 6.4% of respondents opine that trafficked children are returned with a clean bill of health. The findings also indicated that the majority (77.5 %) of respondents reported that returned trafficked children were not easily reintegrated into society, while 20.6% of the respondents opined that returned trafficked children were rarely reintegrated into society.

Table 5: The Consequences of Child Trafficking

Responses on the Consequences of Child Trafficking	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Disruption in the Education of the Child Victim		
Trafficked Children usually continue with their education when returned	145	71.1
Trafficked Children do NOT usually continue with their education when returned	59	28.9
Total	204	100
Health Challenges of the Child Victim		
Trafficked children are usually returned with a clean bill of health	13	6.4
Trafficked children are usually NOT returned with a clean bill of health	191	93.6
Total	204	100
Ease of Reintegration of Trafficked Children into Society		

Trafficked children are very rarely reintegrated into society	42	20.6
Trafficked children are not easily reintegrated into society	158	77.5
Trafficked children are seamlessly reintegrated into society	4	2.0
Total	204	100

Measures to Curb Child Trafficking

The measures suggested by respondents to curb the trafficking of children in the study area are shown in Table 6. These suggested measures were seen as being either effective or very effective and include sensitization on the negative effects of trafficking (40.7% and 52.0%), international and local funding of anti-trafficking organizations (54.4% and 35.8%) government partnership with major players such as religious bodies and NGOs (48.5% and 42.2%), implementing and enforcing laws against trafficking crimes (50.0% and 40.2%), improving access to quality healthcare and social welfare (50.5% and 33.8%), prosecution of people involved in child trafficking (56.4% and 25.0%) and access to free or affordable education (43.6% and 39.7%). The responses from KII conducted in this study supported similar measures suggested by respondents, which may have varying levels of effectiveness, given the level of societal support, governmental and organisational funding and sustenance of such projects, when put in place.

Table 6: Measures to Stop Child Trafficking

Measures to curb or reduce Child Trafficking	Very effective	%	Effective	%	Not effective	%	Total
Sensitisation on the negative effects of trafficking	106	52.0	83	40.7	15	7.3	100
International and local funding of anti-trafficking organisations	73	35.8	111	54.4	20	9.8	100
Government partnerships with major players such as religious bodies and NGOs	86	42.2	99	48.5	19	9.3	100
Implementing and enforcing laws against trafficking crimes	82	40.2	102	50.0	20	9.8	100
Improving family access to quality healthcare and social welfare	69	33.8	103	50.5	32	15.7	100
Prosecution of people involved in child trafficking	51	25.0	115	56.4	38	18.6	100

Access to free or affordable education	81	39.7	89	43.6	34	16.7	100
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Strategies for Reintegration of Recovered Trafficked Children

The results in Table 7 show suggestions given by respondents to aid the reintegration of recovered trafficked children. Suggested measures include psycho-social support and counselling (51.0%), vocational training/acquisition of life skills (18.1%), provision of economic support to the children/families (13.7%), provision of free education and social welfare (11.3%) and provision of mentors/life coaches (5.9%).

Table 7: Suggested Strategies for Reintegration of Trafficked Children

Strategies for Reintegration of Trafficked Children	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Provision of economic support to the children/families	28	13.7
Provision of free education and social welfare	23	11.3
Through psycho-social support and counselling	104	51.0
Provision of mentors/life coaches	12	5.9
Vocational training/Acquisition of life skills.	37	18.1
Total	204	100.0

Discussion

The results of the study have shown that child trafficking is a significant problem in Nigeria, with Edo State being more affected. Edo State, located in the southern part of Nigeria, has gained notoriety as a hub for child trafficking due to several factors, including poverty, high unemployment rates and a lack of social infrastructure. This fact is supported by Omoaregba et al. (2012), who examined human trafficking among women in Benin City. The study similarly portrays poverty as a significant factor contributing to the vulnerability of children to trafficking. Many families in Edo State live below the poverty line and traffickers exploit this desperation by offering promises of better lives for their children. Omoaregba et al. (2012) similarly indicated that most victims of trafficking were from low-income families, indicating that poverty drives parents to consider trafficking as an option for their children.

In addition, the study has shown that children are trafficked mostly for labour and sexual exploitation. This corroborates findings by Olasupo (2014), whose study was based on the challenges impeding the implementation of child rights, with child trafficking in focus. The study similarly reported that the most common reasons for trafficking children were sourcing for cheap labour, sexual exploitation and child marriage. Child labour involved children being forced to work in hazardous conditions, such as domestic servitude or street hawking. Child sexual exploitation involves the trafficking of children for sexual purposes, including prostitution and pornography. Child marriage involves the trafficking of girls to older men, often resulting in them being trapped in abusive and exploitative relationships.

The study also assessed the consequences of child trafficking in Edo State, which were severe and far-reaching, such as disruption in the child's education, poor mental and physical health, unwanted childhood pregnancies and even death. These consequences have been similarly reported by Popoola & Oluwafemi (2018), who examined the psychological and social consequences of trafficking on the survivors. The study reported that survivors experienced a range of psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse. These mental health issues often persisted even after the survivors were rescued from trafficking situations. Additionally, survivors faced social stigma and difficulties reintegrating into society, hindering their chances of leading normal lives.

The study identifies strategies towards preventing and mitigating the social problems emanating from child trafficking in Edo State. These include awareness programmes, economic policies to reduce poverty, free primary and secondary education for the indigent, humanitarian policies and programmes for homeless and abandoned children, execution of child protection rights and reintegration programmes for trafficked children, etc. These suggestions are supported by Fakpor et al. (2016), who examined the effectiveness of a community-based reintegration program called "Pathfinders" in rehabilitating survivors of trafficking. The study reported that such reintegration programmes could successfully provide survivors with socio-economic empowerment, including skill acquisition and educational opportunities. The same programmes were also focused on community mobilisation to raise awareness about child trafficking, resulting in increased reporting and prevention of trafficking incidents. The study summarily advocates that combating child

trafficking in Edo State should begin by addressing the root causes. Intervention programs should focus on poverty eradication and economic empowerment of families. This could involve providing financial support, vocational training and business opportunities to parents and guardians to reduce their vulnerability to traffickers. Additionally, comprehensive awareness campaigns should be implemented to educate communities about the dangers of child trafficking and the importance of reporting suspicious activities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has investigated child trafficking with a particular focus on Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State, demonstrating that young children, especially females, are particularly more likely to be victims of such activity, making them suffer irreparable damage to their overall well-being. To protect children from being trafficked, it becomes imperative to tackle this problem by first addressing the root cause of poverty. So many trafficked children would not be in such situations if the financial status of their families were sustainable. There is a need for increased public sensitisation by appropriate agencies to reinforce abstinence from this activity. Furthermore, the government at all levels should do more towards enforcing and implementing punishments for perpetrators of child trafficking to serve as a deterrent to the general public.

Based on the findings from this research, the study recommends the renewal of the commitment of government institutions at all levels towards curbing the trafficking of children, by empowering human trafficking control agencies, through policies and funding to enable the identification, tracking, rescuing of victims and prosecuting of offenders. Also, various forms of economic and social support should be provided to poor communities to alleviate poverty, which has been noted to be a fundamental cause of trafficking. There is a need for the Government and other international agencies to support the local NGOs in Edo State in curbing child trafficking. This support should include capacity building, funding and collaborative activities to strengthen efforts to reduce trafficking in children. The social and mass media should revive efforts in reporting and following cases of trafficking, especially among children. The media should also be empowered to educate the public on child trafficking and its associated effects. Also, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and other partners should raise awareness of the dangers of trafficking

among parents and caregivers and how they should watch out for traffickers in order not to let their children fall prey to their victimisation. The study suggests the need for further research to clearly understand the spatial pattern of child trafficking in the context of their source and destination areas, to assist regulatory agencies in tracking the perpetrators of child trafficking crimes.

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