

MENACE OF TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN PERSONS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ERADICATING TRAFFICKING

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ABSTRACT

Trafficking in persons is another name for the commodification of persons or modern-day slavery where human beings are sold like a piece of property and where there is a price tag placed on persons, depending on race, gender, age, and other physical features. Domestic violence, socio-political or ethnoreligious conflicts are major push factors for trafficking in persons. Social networking sites are facilitating transactions of persons and exacerbating trafficking as traffickers in persons social media among other means to get in contact with potential victims, creating an online marketplace for trafficking. A way of mitigating these practices is the use of faith-based organizations in the following ways.

1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to raise awareness about the causes and methods of trafficking in persons and point out ways in which faith-based organisations are fighting the crime. In limiting the scope of a broad topic such as this, the article focuses on the internal trafficking in Nigeria and how conflicts and insecurity contribute to the menace of trafficking in persons. Besides, the article concentrates on social media as among the communication media that facilitate trafficking and discusses the role of the Catholic Church, as one of the faith-based organisations fighting against trafficking in persons.

The article is in six major sections: the first section (this section) introduces the topic, the second section identifies the causes of trafficking in persons, the third section discusses some of the communication media through which this crime is committed and the fourth section points out the role of faith-based organisations, especially the Catholic church in mitigating this social evil. The fifth section consists of

recommendations and the last section is the conclusion. These sections seek to answer the following four basic questions:

1. What is human trafficking?
2. What is the connection between trafficking in persons and conflicts?
3. How are social media facilitating trafficking in persons?
4. What concrete measure can faith-based organizations take in tackling this menace of trafficking?

Just type the words 'Trafficking in Persons in Nigeria' on google and see how many results you get. Typing these words on 3rd February 2022 on an online University library portal brought out 26,000 results and on the same day the same words typed on Google search came out with 5,090,000 (5 million and ninety-thousand results). This is to say so many scholars, reporters, and commentators have written on this topic. Most of the literature on this topic show there is an exponential growth in the rate of trafficking in persons in the world and particularly in Nigeria.

Human trafficking is a global problem that has many implications. Merriam-Webster defines trafficking as "illegal or disreputable... commercial activity." Trafficking in persons includes child trafficking, trafficking for labour, and sexual exploitation. It is also called modern-day slavery. UNODC (2012) defines trafficking in human persons as the "Act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving a person through the use of force, coercion or other means, to exploit them." Trafficking in persons exploits vulnerable people, especially youth, women, children, and those living in poverty. A report from Women Consortium in Nigeria (WOCON) shows that children (especially girl-children) and women in Nigeria are the most affected victims of trafficking in persons. There is transborder trafficking in persons where vulnerable people are shipped to other African countries, and other continents, particularly Europe and Asia.

Human trafficking started thousands of years ago. There are ancient and modern stories about trafficking in persons. An ancient story is the biblical story of Joseph in

the book of Genesis chapters 37-50. Joseph was sold as a slave by his jealous brothers. Jacob his father loved Joseph more than his other children, because Joseph was born during his old age by his favourite wife, Rachael. His brothers hated him and could not speak any kind word to him. They hated him all the more when he shared his dream with them. He told them what his dream was "We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it" (Genesis 37:7). His brothers questioned him after he narrated his dream. "Do you intend to reign over us? Will, you rule us?" they asked (Genesis 37:8). He narrated another similar dream. His brothers were jealous and angry with Joseph that they wanted to kill him. Later, they decided to get rid of him by selling him to the Ishmaelites. There was a pleasant turn of events when Joseph found himself working in the palace of Pharaoh and through another twist of events, he became the second in command of all Egypt. His dream turned to reality and later he saved his brothers from starvation. In the end, Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:19-20). Surely, not every victim of trafficking will be as lucky as Joseph. There are few victims whose stories have a happy ending, there are many who have a tragic ending.

An interesting story of trafficking in modern times is that of Josephine Bakhita. Every year, on 8th February, the church celebrates this woman who has been declared the patron of victims of trafficking. Josephine was born in Olgossa in the Darfur region of Southern Sudan. She was kidnapped by Arab slave traders at the tender age of 7 and sold into slavery five times in the markets of El Obeid and Khartoum. She was given the name Bakhita which means, fortunate. In 1883 She came into the hands of Callisto Legnani who was Italian Consul in Khartoum, Sudan who took her to Italy and handed her to Augusto Michielli. It was the first time she experienced kindness and peace as a slave. There she became a babysitter and was responsible for taking Mimmima for catechetical instruction in an institute run by the Canossians sisters in Venice. She was attracted to the Catholic faith and was baptized and confirmed with a new name Josephine in 1890. She remained in Venice and was freed from slavery and there she

joined the Canossian sisters in 1896.

The stories of the biblical Joseph and modern Josephine did not end the crime of trafficking in human persons. Even in this century, the targeted people for trafficking are adults and children. Usually, the mention of trafficking in persons or human trafficking takes the minds of listeners into transborder trafficking where vulnerable people are forced or lured overseas for cheap labour and prostitution. Often, society pays less attention to the internal or domestic trafficking taking place in the locality, or within the country. Internal or domestic trafficking occurs when relations, family friends, or some middle-class or wealthy people come from urban centres to villages to collect children who would come and live with them as housemaid, nanny, or houseboy (boyi-boyi). Many years ago, people who were looking for maids or houseboys were asked to go to states in the North Central region (Middle-Belt), Cross River, Akwa-Ibom, and Ebonyi.

About two decades ago, a priest of Sokoto Diocese (now in Onitsha Diocese), Very Rev. Fr. John Sigo began a noble project of empowering marginalized people in the rural areas of Southern Katsina State where he worked for many years and where there is a concentration of indigenous Hausa people who are Catholics. He sought to improve their educational level for the children who were out of school or could not afford to go to school. He conceived a plan of connecting these children to guardians in the South East who were willing to train these children in school and consolidate their Catholic faith. About three hundred children were taken into this programme. After a few years, there were signs of success as well as indications of some weaknesses of the programme. Some of the children were lucky to be in family homes where they easily blended with the families, spoke the Igbo language, excelled in their educational pursuit, and deepened their faith. Some of these children today are lawyers, doctors, and priests. Nevertheless, some of the children fell into the wrong hands of families who used them as pawns in their business and domestic chores. In short, some of the families in which these children were entrusted failed to fulfil their promise of sending them to school; some of the children were abused and came back home worse than they were. A feature article soon appeared in a National Daily that reported the weaknesses of the

project without stating the gains. The newspaper stated how the guardians ill-treated these children painted the project as trafficking. This article, negative as it was, became a catalyst for re-organising the project, making those who accepted the children sign an undertaking that will bind them to take proper care of the children assigned to them. Fr. Sigo had to take stringent measures for the safety of the children by employing an inspector who went round regularly to inspect the condition and progress of the children. This story goes on to say that anyone who gives a child out to another person has the responsibility to inspect the condition and progress of that child regularly.

2. The Causes of Trafficking in Persons

There are many causes (push factors) of trafficking in persons. Trafficking is common in countries that are enmeshed in profound and violent conflicts, whether it is war, ethnoreligious conflict, and political instability. Another cause of trafficking in person is poverty which is induced by some conflict or exacerbated by the economic recession, natural disasters, or climate change (Okpara, 2020). Other researchers have pointed out that poverty is the root cause of the trafficking pandemic. Research conducted about trafficking in persons in Vietnam, Albania, Nigeria, and the UK shows that:

"The causes or drivers of human trafficking appeared to be multiple, intertwining and overlapping. Stakeholders highlighted multiple vulnerabilities to trafficking across the different levels of the Determinants of Vulnerability model. These included poverty, unemployment, lower levels of education and literacy, corruption, conflict, the lack of social safety nets, abuse of traditional fostering practices, cultural or religious norms that support exploitation, the erosion of values, and limited options for safe and legal migration. Increasing demand for sex and cheap labour were considered an integral part of this" (the University of Bedfordshire..., 2018, p.6 in EASO, p.18, 2021).

Other push factors are family pressure, peer pressure, ignorance, and greed. It is not surprising therefore that the research conducted by the University of Bedfordshire reveals that many victims of trafficking were those who dropped out from primary and secondary schools.

Just as peace and development are deeply connected so is the nexus between conflict

and social retrogression. Trafficking in persons is common in places where there is chaos such as civil war, insurgency, banditry, and all kinds of security challenges. in Nigeria and there are reported cases of trafficking in conflict zones from among internally displaced people in the northeast, north-central, and north-west. About 12 million children are involved in forced labour and most of them are victims of domestic trafficking in persons (WOCON, c.2021). Trafficking in persons takes different forms in Nigeria which include recruitment of children as child soldiers during violent conflicts. This crime of recruiting child soldiers happened during the Nigerian civil war and in recent years it has been perpetrated by Boko Haram in the North East where children are seen holding guns or wielding sophisticated firearms. Another form of trafficking is subjecting children especially boys to "Forced and bonded labour in street vending, domestic service, artisanal mining, stone quarrying, agriculture, textile manufacturing, begging, and in the tie-dye sector in the northwest and southwest of the country" (Trafficking in Persons, 2021). What is also common in Nigeria is the recruitment of girls for sexual exploitation and these girls are taken from rural areas to urban cities in Nigeria such as Abeokuta, Ibadan Kano, Kaduna, Calabar, and Port Harcourt (EASO, 2021, p.13). There are several cases where Boko Haram kidnapped young girls, sold them into slavery, and forcefully married them (Ibrahim & Omoregbe, 2020, p.132) Yet another dimension of trafficking in persons is the establishment of the so-called baby factories for the trafficking of babies. The 2021 trafficking in person report exposes how this illicit activity is carried out in places that are disguised as orphanages, maternity homes, and even religious or prayer houses. Girls are held hostage, raped, and forcefully carry pregnancies to deliver babies (trafficking in person report, 2021). These babies delivered under duress are usually seized by the traffickers and sold to prospective buyers at exorbitant costs. Generally, the girls and boys who are trafficked are usually forced to live in subhuman conditions and dirty accommodation where they sleep on the floor in poorly ventilated buildings and then pushed into forced labour and all forms of slave-like exploitative activities. They are hardly sent to schools and are paid a meagre amount of money for menial jobs which include farming, hawking, cooking, cleaning, baking, and other unskilled labour.

3. The Use of Social Media in Trafficking

Traffickers devise different means of reaching potential victims through digital technology, particularly websites. Studies reveal how traffickers in persons openly use Facebook and other social media platforms. Millions of Nigerians, especially the youth access the internet and by extension, social media through their mobile phones, and these technologies give traffickers easy access to potential victims.

BBC uncovered an international modern slave market that uses social media platforms such as Instagram and other applications for buying and selling domestic workers such as 4sale which are available on google play and apple store. The pictures of the victims are on display and categorized by their race and availability. They come from different parts of the world to Kuwait and other parts of the Gulf region where domestic servitude is legal (BBC, 2019).

According to Premium Times (Nigeria), "The largest share of the audience that advertisers reach on social media is young people between 18 and 34. About 19.0 percent and 14.1 percent of males and females respectively between 18 and 24, and 19.9 percent and 12.8 percent of males and females respectively between 25 and 34 can be reached via social media advert" (Jacob, 2021). Another way in which traffickers recruit potential victims is through advertisements on social media and personal chats. An ex-victim shared her experience on Facebook with a trafficker who is a woman. According to the ex-victim: *My (trafficker) "Saw my update on the Facebook page (pictures) and noticed that I am now in school. She was telling me that I will need the money. This woman even tried to convince me to look for new 6 young ladies, telling me that she will pay me sixty thousand naira (60,000) for each girl. Because I still have respect for myself, I warned her off, telling her that if she does not stop disturbing me, I will set her up. It was then she left me alone"* (Benson-Idahosa et al, 2020, pp.37-38). In 2021, the Director-General of the National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) acknowledged a trend of using social media for trafficking in persons

(Falaju, 2021). Furthermore, research conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) gives further details on how social media platforms facilitate trafficking in persons. Traffickers consider social media to be effective tools for their nefarious activities because they can use these technologies to get personal information, location, and a video of the surrounding of targeted persons and easily elude law enforcement agents; they use fake websites that deceive and lure potential victims through job advertisements and online dating. These platforms have live chats through which the traffickers can obtain personal information, including passport details. More still, having obtained the sensational photos and videos of their victims they blackmail their victims by threatening to expose the photos and videos if the potential victims delay or refuse to cooperate (UNODC). In addition, these traffickers and victims have a way of attracting potential victims through false information and beautiful pictures of their future destinations or locations (Ukachi and Attoh, 2020, p.119). Victims who have been taken to major cities in Nigeria or foreign countries use social media to also send beautiful images of their location to show how successful they are and added to these are the remittances they send home as a sign of the instant wealth they have acquired (*Benson-Idahosa et al, 2020, p.20*).

4. The Role of Organisations and the Catholic Church

On the global level, religious leaders of different religions (Catholic, Anglican, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Orthodox) signed a joint declaration against modern slavery. The declaration was made in 2014 on a significant date, 2nd December the U.N. Day for the Abolition of Slavery. They committed to work together towards the eradication of modern slavery. This joint declaration and commitment by religious leaders are practical ways of engaging in a dialogue of action. The dialogue of action is a term used in interreligious dialogue to describe a form of dialogue in which religious organizations come together to deal with common social issues such as "social justice; human rights; terrorism; defending the sanctity of human life; the special place of family in community..." (Musa, 2020, p.94).

In Nigeria, several organizations are fighting against trafficking in persons and these

include the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP); Coalition Against Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children (CAHTSEC); Devatop Centre for Africa Development (DCAD); Edo State Task Force Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT); Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS); Pathfinders Justice Initiative (PJI); Viable Knowledge Masters (VKM); Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON); Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF).

More still, faith-based organisations are playing crucial roles in the fight for the eradication of trafficking in persons. Faith-based organisations wield influence in Nigeria because most Nigerians are affiliated with the three major religions in the country – Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Religions. These religious groups are obliged to speak with a loud voice against the vile trade of trafficking in persons. Every religion should be distressed about the inhuman condition to which children and vulnerable people are subjected. In the same manner, every religion should be concerned about members of the society who are forced into cheap labour, rings of prostitution, street hawking, begging, and other crimes. If religious organisations neglect the evils of society, they become irrelevant and could be accused of the conspiracy of silence.

The Catholic Church draws inspiration from the story of Josephine Bakhita because her story gives inspiration and hope to all victims of trafficking. The annual celebration of her memorial allows all to reflect on the role of faith-based organisations and especially the Catholic Church in raising awareness about this modern-day slavery, participating in the efforts towards eradicating human trafficking, and supporting victims in any way possible. As the patron of the victims of trafficking, the death anniversary of St. Josephine Bakhita, Feb. 8, has turned out to be International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking.

The story of St. Josephine Bakhita demonstrates the existence of internal and external trafficking in persons. The fact that she was sold in her native country Sudan several times implies she underwent the pains of internal and local trafficking. Her forceful

movement to a foreign country, Italy shows how she suffered from the challenge of external trafficking. Thus, she suffered the humiliation and trauma associated with internal and external trafficking. During her days as a slave in Sudan, she suffered grievously. A family in Sudan flogged her every day till she bled and she bore about 144 scars on her body. She was so traumatized when she was taken into slavery that she forgot her name, which explains why another name was given to her.

The Church is involved in preventive, proactive, and positive measures against trafficking in persons. Nigerian women religious (reverend sisters) are very involved in the fight for the eradication of trafficking in persons. Sisters of St. Louis in Nigeria are involved in creating awareness, advocacy against human trafficking, and empowering victims of trafficking through different forms of empowerment, including education and skill acquisition. The agency is called BAKHITA VILLA (St. Louis Empowerment Network) in Lagos, and they have been involved in this campaign against trafficking since 1996. Other women's religious congregations such as the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus (HHCJ) are getting more involved in the campaign against trafficking through the African Network against Human Trafficking (ANAHT) and the Global Network of Consecrated Persons Against Human Trafficking (TALITHAKUM). There is also a rehabilitation centre for trafficked men called John Bosco Centre in Lagos. Other Catholic organisations that are making frantic efforts for the eradication of trafficking in persons are CARITAS Nigeria, Justice, Development and Peace Commission in various dioceses.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations apply to faith-based organisations, especially organization working under the aegis of the Catholic Church:

Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding Efforts: Since conflicts are among the push factors for trafficking in persons, the Church can engage

more in interreligious dialogue c to work together with other religious groups towards peacebuilding, reconciliation, conflict prevention, and management.

Use the Pulpit and Organise Seminars: Preachers and pastoral agents have a strong influence over society and they have the power to set the agenda, just as media organizations do. Agenda setting in mass media is about 'identifying and selecting' and influencing to think and talk about given issues. This is to say that preachers have to select relevant themes, topics, and ideas for the congregation. A well-informed religious leader, priest, or pastoral agent would always challenge and speak about the dangers of trafficking in persons and unsafe migration.

Use Social Media Platforms to Tackle Trafficking in Persons: Social Media are identified as among the means through which victims are trapped by traffickers. Considering the power of social media and the population of the youth who use the media, faith-based organizations could use the same media to reach out to youth and use it to raise awareness about modern-day slavery. In as much as printed messages are effective, audio-visual messages make a great impact and are suitable for both the educated and uneducated (literate and non-literate) viewers. Through social media content, faith-based organizations can educate their members on how to identify potential traffickers.

Providing Vocational Training for Victims: The Church can assist in sending victims of trafficking into institutions of vocational training to help them in their rehabilitation process. Many of those trafficked victims who are deported are jobless, unskilled, and need assistance to reintegrate themselves into society. A major challenge that anti-trafficking agencies observe is that those who were deported still try to find their way back into the cities or countries from where they were deported or to other countries. Nevertheless, some never wish to return to foreign countries.

Pastoral Care for the Survivors: Those who survived trafficking also need pastoral care and counseling to get over or manage their post-traumatic

stress disorder.

Collaborate with trafficking agencies: The church can work with other anti-trafficking agencies such as NAPTIP to raise awareness about the dangers and ills of trafficking in persons, targeting youth and women (mothers) organisations in the Church and Catholic schools. They can do this by identifying the motivational influences (socio-cultural or economic) that make people take such risks and carry out such commercial activities.

Traffickers Need Pastoral Care: Faith-based organizations, especially in the Church, campaigning against the trafficking of persons, should also pay attention to the traffickers who are perpetrating this crime. They too need to be educated to know how much they poison society and destroy the lives of people through their illicit trade. Traffickers and other people whose source of wealth is dubious must not be celebrated in Churches. Closely associated with this evil of trafficking in persons is the culture of get-rich-quick which prompts many Nigerians to be involved in any kind of sordid and inhuman activity for the sake of making quick wealth. The church and other religious groups must raise a voice to denounce any evil means of making money.

6. **Conclusion:** In summary, this paper raised awareness about the crime of trafficking and discussed some of the communication media used by traffickers, and suggest ways in which faith-based organisations, especially the Catholic Church, can continue to fight against the crime of trafficking in persons. This paper is limited in scope because of the broad nature of the topic. There are still many other aspects of trafficking in persons that can be dealt with by faith-based organisations, including the church. One of such areas is how domestic violence

and broken homes contribute to making children more vulnerable, making them potential victims of trafficking. The scriptural injunction from the book of Psalm should motivate the Church to continue the fight against all forms of modern slavery. The Psalmist says, "Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:4).

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