

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN IKWERRE TRADITIONAL SOCIETY OF NORTH-EASTERN NIGER-DELTA IN THE LIGHT OF THE UNITED NATIONS (UN) DECLARATIONS

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Abstract

This study examined human trafficking in the light of United Nations (UN) declarations as it concerns Ikwerre society of North Eastern Niger-Delta. Human trafficking is viewed as a menace and the most endemic source of human dehumanizing in every society. Human trafficking has become a menace and a major epidemic in Nigeria. This accentuates the issue of victimization, mistreatment and merchandizing of its victims who are mostly women and children that are exposed to exploitative sexual and commercial labour. It is tantamount to lifetime of waste, underdevelopment, underachievement and regrets. The methodology adopted includes the use of books, journals, unpublished works, internet sources and other available literature. The study revealed that Ikwerre Society is patriarchal in nature which accounts for women's disposition to totally succumb to the authority of men. This has promoted gender imbalance and made women to see themselves as inferior to men. On the other hand, the patriarchal nature of the culture of Ikwerre societies has made men to develop a master-servant relationship with the womenfolk, thereby promoting gender-based violence, with women at the receiving end. There are certain stereotype roles women play in Ikwerre Society, which make them subordinate to men and constrain their ability to exercise their rights. There is a high-level illiteracy among most of the victims of human trafficking in Ikwerre Society that has fueled the ignorance that trafficking is modern day slavery and should be stopped. It has been observed that the UN, in an attempt to eradicate human trafficking and its negative tendencies recommended, through the United Nations Human Rights and Human Trafficking Commission (UNHRHTC), a number of conventions and declarations through its Articles that guarantee everyone's right to life, liberty, absence of discrimination, security and protection of fundamental human rights. Unfortunately, these declarations/conventions/articles are not domesticated in Ikwerre traditional society. Thus, this paper is of the view that these laws, if domesticated in Ikwerre Society and at the federal, state and local government levels, will help eradicate human trafficking in our society. The paper, therefore, recommends that the government, in line with non-governmental organizations, should promote strategies towards eradicating human trafficking which is still rife in the guise of modern day slavery in Ikwerre Society. The paper also recommends, among others, that in making laws and policies that promote the status of women towards self-actualization, efforts should be made in ensuring their enforcement even in rural areas like the Ikwerre Traditional Society.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Modern Day Slavery, United Nations, NAPTIP, Ikwerre, Rivers State.

Introduction

The quest for improving the economic fortunes of families has led to children, women and men working assiduously to assume new roles, trades, professions, associations, and even beliefs. Meeting these targets and dreams which they are desperately inclined to, leaves individuals and their unsuspecting parents or unscrupulous guardians vulnerable to the antics and deceits of the perceived “would be fortune changer” turned traffickers. Human trafficking (in the form of sexual trafficking and labour trafficking), is a global form of victimization which surpasses all geographical boundaries. It is also a form of objectification that strikes at core values of human dignity, protection for the vulnerable, and accountability for the exploiter (Leary, 2015). Nigeria has gained notoriety for this menace of human trafficking, especially in this era of globalization that has fostered the setting up of sophisticated channels and networks for the easy and undetected flow of trafficked persons (Akor, 2011).

The UN Trafficking Protocol defines the term “Trafficking in persons” as:
the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (UN, 2014).

This implies that human trafficking is a form of modern slavery whereby humans are traded for the purpose of sexual slavery, forced labour or money-making sexual exploitation for the trafficker. These trafficked persons include men, women and children who are deceived, transported and delivered into the hands of those who exploit them for profit. Among this group, the most vulnerable are women and children. This corroborates the stance by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime as a form of extreme exploitations for sexual and labour purposes, including other forms of marginalization, a vast majority of victims mostly women in local or foreign lands (UNODC, 2006). Human trafficking is triggered apparently by the unequal power play and relations that fosters the continued subjugation, dominance, exploitation and eventual trafficking, which is likely to exist in tandem with disregard to anti-trafficking and anti-discriminatory policies in the society.

The United Nations Human Rights and Human Trafficking Commission (UNHRHTC) Fact Sheet No. 36 of 2014, noted key features about human trafficking to include: trafficking affects women, girls and children, and involves a range of exploitative practices. Trafficking can be internal (within a single country) as well as cross-border (in

foreign countries). It is not the same as migrant smuggling. Trafficking does not always require movement, and it is not possible to “consent” to trafficking. International human rights law recognizes that the fundamental inalienability of personal freedom renders consent irrelevant to a situation in which that personal freedom is taken away (UNHRC, 2014).

Furthermore, it is regrettable to note that human trafficking is sometimes perpetrated by close family members like parents, guardians or relatives who may have been deceived, remunerated, paid, compensated or coerced by the merchant or dealer (who could be a friend, relative, sibling, kinsman, colleague or acquaintance) to unsuspecting victims. These merchants operate directly or indirectly through agents, partners or accomplices. They traffick victims from mostly rural areas to states (like Rivers, etc.) within the country's borders to engage in involuntary domestic servitude, housemaids, nannies, hair platters, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation (for women and girls), and forced labour in the form of street vending, domestic servitude, mining, begging, and apprenticeship for men and boys (Akor, 2011).

Regrettably, the Ikwerre traditional society of northeastern Niger Delta is not exempted from this human trafficking as it also serves as the source, transit, and destination for human trafficking in the form of modern day slavery in Nigeria, hence, this research.

WHO ARE THE IKWERRE?

The Ikwerre Society, with over 1,390, 895 people (2006 and 2008 censuses), is one of the major tribes in Rivers State. They proudly address themselves as *Iwhuruonha*, meaning: proper natives, to differentiate themselves from the overwhelming strangers living in their society. The Ikwerre Society is bounded in the north by Imo State, north-east by the Etche, Eleme and Tai, in the north-west by the Ogba, Egbema, Ekpeye and Abua and in the south by the Kalabari or Ijaw (Tasie, 2008). Furthermore, the Ikwerre Society is made up of 29 clans.

Additionally, the Ikwerre people are generally well informed, good looking, strong, intelligent and clean (Tasie, 2008). They are religious people as there are practising Christians, Muslims, and Traditionalists, all paying their allegiance to God Almighty, in the manner specified by the teachings and contents of their respective faiths. Deductively, the upland and urban nature of Ikwerre Land accounts for the Ikwerre Society area playing substantial role in contributing to the economic, educational and social potentials and viability of Rivers State, thereby justifying Rivers State’s acronym: “The Treasure Base of the Nation”

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN IKWERRE SOCIETY IN THE LIGHT OF UN DECLARATIONS

Human trafficking in the traditional Ikwerre Society is associated with the movement or migration of women, girls and men from mostly close or far communities, states or international borders for the purpose of meeting the domestic servitude (like housemaids,

nannies, hair platters, etc.), economic activities (like farming, apprentices, trading, etc.) and social status needs of the privileged trafficker. This trafficker, according to Akor (2011) deceitfully or forcefully lures or compels the trafficked victims and their parents to align with the better job placement promise. But in reality, they are cajoled into forced labour and sexual exploitation for the social and economic benefits of the trafficker and his agents at the expense of the victims and their families. The victims are denied their freedom, security, integrity and dignity against in the course of this.

Both men and women can be affected by sexual exploitation in different ways and under many circumstances, yet sex trafficking is an issue that almost entirely involves women or young girls (Mere, 2017). Although, no one can say with exactitude when the trafficking of women began, the phenomenon can be said to have gained prominence in Nigeria in the early 1990s when drug trafficking and advanced fee fraud (419) became commonplace. Trafficking in women and girls became prominent in Ikwerre Society when women began to take up white collar jobs away from the usual farming that they are well known for.

Incidentally, trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation has also taken its toll on Ikwerre Society. Due to unemployment and high standard of living, a lot of young girls and women are easily lured into any offer of job that promises to lift up the burdens of economic hardship from them. Whether free or forced into the act of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, the fact still remains that this aspect of trafficking is one of the most perverse, dangerous, dehumanizing and widespread international criminal activities confronting would-be mothers and supposed nurturers and should be stopped by every means possible whether in Ikwerre Society and elsewhere.

CAUSES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN IKWERRE SOCIETY

The factors that cause human trafficking in Ikwerre Society may not vary much from factors that lead to it in other societies around Nigeria. Some of them include:

1. **Lack of employment opportunity:** The present economic system of Nigeria has left many people jobless. Those that are desperate such as the young ones in Ikwerre Society get lured and deceived by traffickers because they want to get out of the country by all means.
2. **Extreme greed for wealth:** Some Ikwerre young men and women, who are tired of menial labour, characterized by farming (the major occupation of Ikwerre people), want to amass great wealth or get rich quickly at all cost. Little wonder they end up in the hands of traffickers.
3. **Poor economic system:** In a country with an unstable economy like Nigeria, it becomes commonplace for its citizens like the men and women in Ikwerre Society to want to travel abroad for better standards of living.
4. **Low self-esteem:** Some individuals have no self-esteem. Considering especially the high level of school dropouts in rural societies like the Ikwerre of our discourse here, some end

up leaving the country by all means possible to other countries where they feel they can get jobs without certificates.

5. **The search for greener pasture:** Most young people, even in Ikwerre Society, have been brain-washed to believe that traveling abroad is the only way one can make ends meet in all aspects of life.
6. **Poverty:** There are so many families with large number of children who are poor in most rural societies like the Ikwerre Society. They are not able to cater for the needs of their children, so they end up giving out some of them to people as maids who might be treated badly by their masters. Some of them even fall into the hands of traffickers.

This is why UNICEF (2007), emphasized that: widespread poverty, large family size, rapid urbanization, with deteriorating public services, low literacy levels, high school-dropout rates and the demand for cheap commercial sex workers in countries, states or communities of destination accounts for the diverse reasons why many Nigerians are vulnerable to human trafficking. This finding is consistent with the views of Akor (2011) who stated that victims of human trafficking, including their parents or guardians (often overburdened with enormous family care) are painted with the picture of paradise about the conditions in Europe and America by the traffickers. This deceit for a better social and economic life as reasons for giving up their children, eventually expose victims to all sorts of degrading works like housemaids, nannies, hair platters, apprentices, street traders, other forced labour and prostitution in foreign lands.

Forms of Human Trafficking in Ikwerre Society

The criminal act of human trafficking that affects women and children as seen in Ikwerre Society appears in different forms like:

1. Child Labour:

This refers to the employment of children in any work or business that is illegal and exploitive. These deprive them of their freedom and childhood and interfere with their ability to attend regular school. Such acts are mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful. This scenario is not uncommon in Ikwerre Society as well as most Nigerian societies. Children who are of primary school age are sent out by parents and other family members to serve as maids in other people's homes where they are most times treated badly. Others are made to hawk goods either for their parents or guardians on the streets at the detriment of their safety.

2. Sex Trafficking:

Thousands of women and children are lured, sold or kidnapped for the purpose of sexual exploitation in hotels, night clubs, brothels, massage parlors and private residences. They are on sex tours annually. Sex trafficking has devastating consequences for both minors and adults especially those who were forced into the ugly act. These consequences include long-lasting physical and psychological trauma, diseases (like HIV/AIDS), drug addiction, unwanted pregnancy, malnutrition, social ostracism and, sometimes, death.

3. Debt Bondage:

This is similar to slavery, because it involves a person's pledge of labour or services as security for the payment of a debt that cannot be paid off in a reasonable time. The painful thing about this form of slavery is that, most times, it is usually not the one that owes that pays back the debt. The employer/enforcer inflates the amount of debt, often adding exorbitant interest or charges for living expenses, deducting little or nothing from the debt and increasing the amount of time the individual must work. It is a cycle of debt where there is no hope for freedom. This type of slavery has been the case in the traditional Ikwerre Society and it is still happening in this contemporary time.

4. Involuntary Domestic Servitude:

This happens when a domestic worker becomes ensnared in an exploitative way such that they are unable to escape. Typically, in private homes, it is a situation where individuals are forced to work for little or no pay while confined to the boundaries of their employers' property. Often times, the victim is kept in isolation and is forbidden from communicating with family members or anyone who can offer them help or link them to any type of support network, thereby increasing the psychological, physical and sexual abuse. All these forms of trafficking-related practices are prohibited under the UN laws as stated in Convention No. 29–Forced or Compulsory Labour of the International Labour Organization (ILO). This includes “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily”. Other forms are: slavery, servitude, child sexual exploitation, forced marriage, servile forms of marriage, child marriage, enforced prostitution and the exploitation of prostitution. These forms of trafficking-related practices are prohibited both under local and international human right laws.

Measures undertaken by Government to End Human Trafficking

Over the years, the government of Nigeria, in line with UN policies to mitigate the scourge of human trafficking in Nigeria, has taken some steps in the positive direction. The government of Nigeria has, during former President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, created the NAPTIP (National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons), to tackle the scourge of human trafficking, prosecute its perpetrators and offer a range of protection services to its victims. The same administration, through the wife of the vice-president, Mrs. Titi Abubakar, created WOTCLEF (Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation) to eradicate trafficking in persons, child labour and violent abuses of the rights of women and children, with interventions for the HIV/AIDS scourge. In the same vein, Edo State government, in conjunction with religious leaders and an NGO (the Initiative for Youth Awareness on Migration, Development and Reintegration, IYAMIDR), brainstormed on how to end the scourge of human trafficking (variously described as a crime against God and humanity) in the state and society (Ebegbulem, 2017). They asserted that their commitment and collaboration will help them gather intelligence which will assist in uncovering and dismantling the operations and strategies

of illicit trade cartels whose inhuman and criminal activities have led to the death of many Nigerian youths on the Mediterranean Sea and in the Sahara Desert.

Furthermore, Ebegbulem (2017) stated that the coalition of human trafficking cartels across Europe and America raises funds transmitted to their partners in Nigeria (sometimes, the clergy, organizations, etc.). This is in order to scuttle different forms of empowerment, capacity building, and reintegration programmes for the youths (especially women) who are meant to see only the painting of hopeless and gloomy or miserable pictures of the state of affairs in Edo State and Nigeria. Hence, with this mindset and orientation, deliberate or conscious governments (local government, state and federal) efforts at empowerment, job creation and capacity building for the youths are ignored and rejected for wild goose chase, adventure and job promise in a skill-demanding, globalized and developed countries like Italy, Germany, USA, France, Spain, Austria, etc. where they encourage and explore skills-based legal migration.

The Roles Played by United Nations in Combating Human Trafficking

The United Nations have made considerable efforts at enacting laws to checkmate and eradicate the issue of human trafficking and other forms of economic, social, domestic and cultural deprivations in Nigeria and Ikwerre Society. These include:

Article 27(1) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which recognizes and reaffirms faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women. It is obligatory for the parties to the International Covenants on Human Rights to ensure the operation and sustenance of equal rights of men and women to enjoy all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. Document 18 Article 2(1) of CEDAW states that: any person who keeps or manages, or knowingly finances or takes part in the financing of a brothel shall be punished. (2) Any person who knowingly lets or rents a building or other place or any part thereof for the purpose of the prostitution of others shall be punished. This provision was instituted to protect women from forced prostitution and sexual trafficking.

Similarly, Article 8 of the UN resolution: 46 of 2004 empowers women to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Document 14, Article 3 of the Convention on the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of Prostitution (COSTPEP) of 1949 is another bold step in this direction. Everyone has right to life, liberty and security of person and discrimination/violation of fundamental rights are objectionable. Similarly, Document 14 Article 16(1) states that "Men and women are entitled to equal rights during marriage". By this, men are not obliged or permitted by any reason (economic, social or otherwise) to subject, cajole, intimidate and coerce their wives into forced labour or prostitution. This is because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international human rights instruments abhor

reasons or considerations upon which women are forced into modern-day slavery in whatever form (be it culture, economic, educational, etc.).

Furthermore, the UN Commission on Human Rights Resolution 46 of 2004 reaffirms that discrimination on the basis of sex is contrary to the Charters of the United Nations. Yet, there are myriads of cultural practices often meted out on Ikwerre women and the girl-child who have been confronted with numerous oppressive, degrading and discriminatory cultural practices that grossly impede their constitutionally-guaranteed rights (Section 42, 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria).

Document 14, Article 4 of COSTPEP of 1949 states that: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude, slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in their forms. However, in our contemporary Ikwerre Society, the treatments meted to women seems somewhat a resemblance or another form of modern-day slavery and discrimination where the supposed God-given rights, freedom and interest of the woman is expressly alienated, restricted and denied for the interest of the man or husband. Corroborating this view, Ifemeje (2008) observed that the form of discrimination against women (likened to modern- day slavery) includes: domestic servitude, housekeeping, baby-sitting, street vending, and so on.

Obstacles Encountered by United Nations Covenants and Religious Bodies in Curbing Human Trafficking

The Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs (FMWA-2006) stated that the continued existence of various forms of discrimination against women despite the concerted efforts by international bodies (like the United Nations), the federal and state governments and gender machineries/advocates in either instituting or supporting legislative provisions that have been incorporated towards ensuring gender equality in all sectors is worrisome. These challenges are mainly attributable to patriarchy, deep-rooted traditional beliefs and customs. Low level of male involvement and participation in creating change has contributed immensely to perpetuating or fuelling the occurrence of gender inequality in the country.

However, contemporary laws and cultural practices undermine the attainment of "equality in dignity and rights of both men and women" despite the provisions of Document 14, Article 3 of COSTPEP, which provides for the right to life, liberty and security of persons. Abdullahi (2016) stated the legislative and constitutional empowerment of women rights advocacy groups to mobilize resources and capacity for altering the power dynamics that keep women in disadvantage, a wider offer of victim support and protection services, providing orientations, legal advice, educative and work training.

It is important to state that Ikwerre Land, like any other traditional society in Nigeria or African setting, has a culture that is patriarchal in nature (synonymous with male preference and dominance). This patriarchal nature of Ikwerre culture accounts for women disposition to totally and inevitably submit or succumb to the authority of men. This could,

consequently, be adduced to stimulate, fuel or breed issues and grounds for the existence of discrimination and violence against women in an environment with an inherent, integral or characteristic culture of communal or collective living.

i. The patriarchal nature of the culture of the Ikwerre people has promoted gender imbalance and made women to see themselves as being inferior to men. On the side of the men, the patriarchal nature of the culture of the Ikwerre people has made them to develop a master-servant relationship with the womenfolk and promote gender-based violence with women at the receiving end (Okemini & Adekola, 2012). This fosters the occurrence of human trafficking in Ikwerre Land which is mentally depressing and demeaning to humanity or womanhood. This is consistent with the views of Wotogbe (2011) who emphasized that in patriarchal cultures a woman has no say in her home. She is expected to adhere to all the dictates of the man (her husband), as she is at his beck and call. Ironically, this cultural position, which deprives women of certain political and educational attainments in the society, is still perceived as a form of socialization in the family setting.

ii. Traditional Practices: The traditional attitudes of Ikwerre men toward women help to perpetuate violence. Stereotype roles in which women are seen as subordinate to men constrains women's abilities to exercise their choices that would enable them end abuses. This worsens the issue of human trafficking in Ikwerre Society.

iii. The level of illiteracy fueled by ignorance among most Ikwerre women makes them unaware that trafficking and other forms of modern-day slavery against them should not be accepted as a norm. This assertion aligns with the submission of Henkin (2010): that the education of women has become a very powerful and potent tool in re-engineering social change, protecting women's rights (whether they are rural or urban-based).

Emphatically, the extent of the viability and sustainability of any attained or meaningful accomplishment, development and transformation of women's (that form about half the world population) divinely assigned roles of nurturing the family and society are not factored in, nor acknowledged and appreciated is demoralizing on their part. However, Okemini and Adekola (2012) emphasized that culture as a dynamic process literally confronts with intervening parameters in the area of educational, social, political and economic development. In other words, without deliberate policies to galvanize the patriarchal nature of the Ikwerre Society to the benefit, protection, freedom and equality of women, there is likely to be superficial or no meaningful development in the Ikwerre Society.

Conclusion

The world of human trafficking is particularly complex and challenging. A long-standing actor against human trafficking has been the United Nations Organization. However, certain factors are hindering the full domestication and implementation of these laws in Ikwerre Society. Notwithstanding this resistance, policy-makers, NGOs, and members of the international community have shared values. The primary shared value is a desire to end human trafficking because its very existence offends human dignity. The reality is

that the United Nations have successfully produced results in prevention, protection, and partnership approaches to human trafficking and any organization interested in ending human trafficking will respond to these results.

This expertise, combined with the structural capacity, will respond in a global way to end organized criminal network in the fight against human trafficking.

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