



Journal of Frontiers in Multidisciplinary Research

Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Nigeria: A Legal, Institutional and Policy Review

Obikeze Onyinyechukwu Chinedum ^{1*}, Ochin Ngozika Gabriella ², Nwakoby Chidinma Blessing ³

¹⁻³ Independent Researcher, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author: Obikeze Onyinyechukwu Chinedum

Article Info

E-ISSN: 3050-9726

P-ISSN: 3050-9718

Volume: 02

Issue: 02

July - December 2021

Received: 22-05-2021

Accepted: 15-06-2021

Published: 09-07-2021

Page No: 360-374

Abstract

Nigeria has long been recognized by international monitoring bodies as one of the top countries of origin, transit and destination for women and girls trafficked both internally and across its borders, primarily for purposes of sexual exploitation (International Organization for Migration [IOM] n.d.; U.S. Department of State 2024). Nigeria has a relatively strong law package, such as the Child Rights Act 2003, the violence against persons (prohibition) act 2015 and the trafficking in persons (prohibition) enforcement and administration act 2015, but implementation has been weak and thousands of women and girls are still recruited, transported, and sexually exploited domestically and internationally, especially from Edo, Delta, and Kano States and the conflict affected North-East. The review brings together the legal, institutional, and empirical literature on trafficking and sexual violence in Nigeria, and outlines the legal framework, the institutional response by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and the socio-economic, cultural, and belief-system factors that contribute to the persistence of the trade. The review identifies that despite the existence of federal statutes that bind the Federal Capital Territory, there is a patchwork of protection across the thirty-six States with low prosecution rates and conviction rates when compared to the scale of the problem; that survivors are still experiencing stigma, lack of adequate psychosocial support, and increased risk of re-trafficking upon reintegration; and that those identified and prosecuted are receiving inadequate treatment from Justice. The review establishes that despite federal statutes binding the Federal Capital Territory, there is a patchwork of protection across the thirty-six States, with low prosecution rates and conviction rates when compared to the scale of the problem, and that survivors are continuing to experience stigma, lack of adequate psychosocial support, and increased risk of re-trafficking upon reintegration, and that those identified and prosecuted are receiving inadequate treatment from Justice. The review ends with recommendations for the harmonisation of legislation, survivor-centred and trauma-informed practice, improved data systems, and continued community-based prevention in high-prevalence States.

Keywords: human trafficking, sexual violence, Nigeria, NAPTIP, Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, Child Rights Act, victim protection

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights that disproportionately affects women, girls, and other vulnerable groups, with sexual exploitation remaining one of its most widely reported forms worldwide (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025) ^[25, 39]. In Nigeria, the trafficking of women for prostitution abroad became more prominent after the economic hardship and unemployment associated with the Structural Adjustment Programme of the 1980s, which pushed many young women in southern Nigeria toward increasingly exploitative labour markets (Women's Health and Action Research Centre, 2002; Osakue & Okoedion, 2002, as cited in UniProjectMaterials, n.d.) ^[27]. Today, trafficking is closely connected to irregular migration, meaning that routes such as Kano–Agadez–Libya may involve overlapping experiences of migration, coercion, sexual exploitation, and, in some cases, sex slavery.

Nigeria has strengthened its response through legal and institutional measures. After ratifying the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Palermo Protocol in December 2000, the country established the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) in 2003 to coordinate prevention, prosecution, and victim protection efforts (NAPTIP, n.d.-a) ^[19]. Additional safeguards were introduced through the Child Rights Act 2003, the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015, and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015. Despite these developments, Nigeria remained in the U.S. Department of State's "Tier 2" category in the 2024 and 2025 Trafficking in Persons Reports, indicating that it is making significant efforts to meet the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking but has not yet fully complied with them (U.S. Department of State, 2024, 2025) ^[38, 39].

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the expansion of Nigeria's statutory framework, a considerable gap remains between the existence of laws and their practical enforcement. Although the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 has legal effect in the Federal Capital Territory, it does not automatically apply across all 36 states; each state must domesticate the Act or adopt equivalent legislation before it can be enforced within its jurisdiction (Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.) ^[28]. Consequently, protection varies from one state to another, while limited funding, weak institutional capacity, inadequate public awareness, and inconsistent enforcement continue to hinder the effective implementation of the law. Likewise, the Child Rights Act 2003 is not domesticated, in part or full, in some northern States, thereby depriving countless children of the statutory safeguards against sexual abuse and exploitation that the Act was meant to provide (The Conversation, 2023; Ogunniyi, 2018) ^[32, 26]. The lack of accountability for official complicity has been historically uncommon; as recently as 2024, the United States Department of State (U.S. Department of State 2024) ^[38] reported that Nigeria had punished "complicit government officials" for the first time in four years. Sexual violence associated with displacement, such as in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Borno State, has also been reported, including reports of sexual exploitation by members of security-related groups (U.S. Department of State, 2024) ^[38]. This review questions the ways the law and institutions are failing to respond to these challenges and investigates what structural, cultural, and institutional issues remain to be a barrier to the protection of trafficked and sexually violated persons in Nigeria.

1.3. Objectives and Scope of The Review

This review aims to achieve four main goals. First, it outlines the legal and constitutional framework, as well as institutional structures, in Nigeria for trafficking and sexual violence. Second, it provides documentary evidence of the magnitude, geography and typologies of trafficking and sexual violence, specifically focusing on the trafficking corridor of Edo State, the country's most studied trafficking corridor. Third, it determines the economic, socio-cultural,

belief-system and institutional drivers that sustain the trade. Fourth, it analyzes the institutional response, its investigation, prosecution and victim protection and the main gaps that remain to hinder its effectiveness. The review is limited to Nigeria but comparative reference is made to the overall Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region and the tier ranking system of the United States Department of State that positions Nigeria's performance relative to the rest of the region.

1.4. Significance of The Study

This review is important because it brings together and condenses in one document the disparate legal, institutional, and empirical literature on trafficking and sexual violence in Nigeria. A systematic narrative of the current state of the law, its institutional implementation, areas where it has failed and potential reforms that will most effectively address the protection gap will benefit policy makers, state and federal legislators, law enforcement, civil-society organisations, and researchers. The review comes at a time when there is still debate on the law in parliament with a bill currently in the National Assembly to either repeal or make significant changes to the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.) ^[28] and the ongoing advocacy by civil society around the full domestication of the Child Rights Act in all the thirty-six States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

2. Methodology

This review adopted a doctrinal and narrative-synthesis approach. It examined Nigeria's constitutional and statutory framework, institutional reports, policy documents, legal debates, and relevant academic scholarship. The primary legal materials included the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, the Child Rights Act 2003, the Criminal Code Act, and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015. Secondary materials comprised publications from NAPTIP, the United States Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Reports, the International Organization for Migration, the European Union Agency for Asylum, and peer-reviewed studies on trafficking, child protection, and gender-based violence in Nigeria.

Relevant literature and documents were identified through searches of institutional websites, legal databases, and academic search engines using terms such as *human trafficking in Nigeria*, *sexual violence and Nigerian law*, *NAPTIP*, *Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act*, *Child Rights Act domestication*, and *Edo State trafficking*. Sources were assessed according to their relevance to Nigeria's legal and institutional context and their credibility, with priority given to government and intergovernmental publications and peer-reviewed research. The findings were organised thematically around the legal framework, institutional structures, the scale and geographical patterns of trafficking, vulnerability factors, and institutional responses, and were used to develop the review's conclusions and recommendations.

3. Conceptual and Definitional Framework

3.1. Defining human trafficking under international and Nigerian law

The internationally recognised meaning of human trafficking is provided in Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol. It refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through force, threats, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or the abuse of power for the purpose of exploitation. Such exploitation includes, among other forms, sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude, and organ removal.

Nigeria has incorporated this international standard into the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015. The Act establishes a legal framework for preventing, investigating, prosecuting, and punishing trafficking-related offences, while also providing measures for the protection and rehabilitation of victims and cooperation among relevant institutions. It criminalises several forms of trafficking, including exploitation, forced labour, organ trafficking, and the operation of unregistered recruitment or placement agencies. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is responsible for administering and enforcing the Act (Wikipedia, n.d.-a) ^[42].

3.2. Defining sexual assault, rape and defilement under Nigerian law

Sexual offences in Nigeria are regulated by different legal instruments, reflecting the country's pluralistic legal system. Earlier provisions under the Criminal Code and Penal Code adopted a narrower understanding of rape, generally limiting the offence to penile-vaginal penetration involving a man and a woman. However, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 expanded this definition by recognising penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth with the penis, another body part, or an object, regardless of the sex of the victim or offender (LawPavilion, 2019; Partners

West Africa Nigeria, n.d.) ^[18, 28].

The Act also criminalises various forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including spousal battery, stalking, economic abuse, harmful traditional practices, isolation, and incest. Incest is punishable by imprisonment for up to ten years without the option of a fine. In addition, the Child Rights Act 2003 strengthens the protection of children by prohibiting unlawful sexual intercourse with a child and criminalising other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation under sections 31 and 32. These provisions are particularly relevant where children are subjected to sexual violence in the context of trafficking.

3.3. Distinguishing trafficking from smuggling and voluntary migration

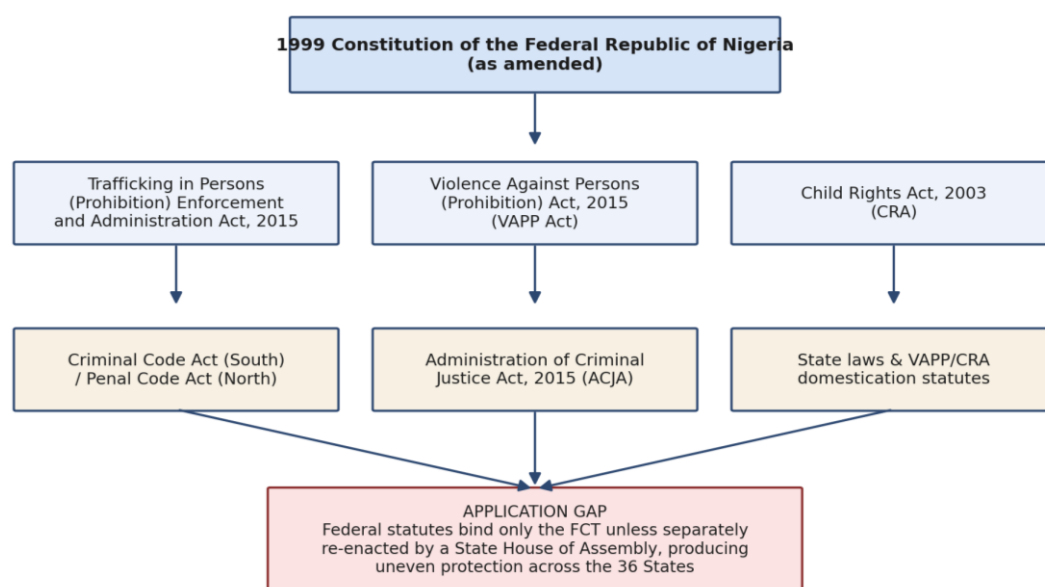
One of the common challenges to analysis in the Nigerian context is the lack of clarity between trafficking, migrant smuggling, and apparently voluntary economic migration. Smuggling occurs when someone is facilitated to cross an irregular border with their consent for a financial or material gain and usually ceases upon crossing. Trafficking does not require an actual crossing of a border, and is characterized by the continued exploitation of the trafficked person through any form of coercion, deception, or abuse of vulnerability, even if the initial trip was voluntary. The distinction between the two is not always clear in the Nigerian context and especially along the Edo-Libya-Italy route – many women who start out intending to work as domestic workers, hairdressers or traders in Europe discover, when they arrive, that they have been sold into debt bondage and forced into prostitution through threats, violence and in some reported cases, spiritual oath-taking rituals (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA] 2021; CNN 2017) ^[13, 4]. The ambiguity is addressed by Nigerian and international law which deems the victim's initial consent as irrelevant once the deception, coercion, or abuse of a position of vulnerability has been found, as provided in Article 3(b) of the Palermo Protocol.

Table 1: Conceptual Distinctions Between Trafficking, Smuggling and Sexual Assault Under Nigerian and International Law

Concept	Core defining feature	Consent of victim	Governing Nigerian/international instrument
Human trafficking	Recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a person by coercion, deception, or abuse of vulnerability, for exploitation	Legally irrelevant once coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability is shown	Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015; Palermo Protocol, Art. 3
Migrant smuggling	Facilitation of irregular border crossing in exchange for payment	Present; relationship typically ends at the border	Immigration Act and allied border-control legislation; UN Smuggling Protocol
Sexual assault / rape	Non-consensual sexual penetration or contact, by force, threat, or fraud	Absent or vitiated by force, threat, fraud, or incapacity	Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015; Criminal Code Act; Penal Code Act
Defilement	Sexual intercourse with a person below the statutory age of consent	Legally irrelevant; a child cannot in law consent	Child Rights Act 2003, s. 31; Criminal Code Act; Penal Code Act

Table 2: Key Legal Instruments Addressing Trafficking and Sexual Violence in Nigeria

Instrument	Year	Territorial scope	Principal provisions relevant to trafficking / sexual violence
Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria	1999 (as amended)	Federal	Chapter IV guarantees the right to dignity of the human person and freedom from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, forming the constitutional foundation for anti-trafficking and anti-violence legislation.
Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act	2015 (re-enacting 2003 Act, amended 2005)	Federal, nationwide	Establishes NAPTIP; criminalises recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons for exploitation; provides for victim protection, asset forfeiture, and prosecution in State and Federal High Courts.
Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP)	2015	Federal Capital Territory (requires State domestication)	Redefines rape to include anal/oral penetration and penetration with objects; criminalises incest, spousal battery, forced isolation, harmful widowhood practices, and stalking; establishes a public sex-offender register.
Child Rights Act (CRA)	2003	Federal (requires State domestication)	Defines a child as any person under 18; section 31 criminalises unlawful sexual intercourse with a child as rape (life imprisonment); section 32 criminalises other sexual abuse and exploitation of children.
Criminal Code Act (Cap C38, LFN 2004)	Consolidated 2004	Southern States	Defines rape, indecent assault, and related sexual offences applicable in southern Nigeria prior to VAPP domestication.
Penal Code Act (Cap P3, LFN 2004)	Consolidated 2004	Northern States	Defines rape and sexual offences applicable in northern Nigeria; interacts with Sharia-influenced State legislation in several States.
Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA)	2015	Federal (mirrored by several State ACJ Laws)	Introduces timelines for trial, protective measures for vulnerable witnesses, and procedural reforms relevant to the prosecution of trafficking and sexual-offence cases.

**Fig 2:** Hierarchy of Nigeria's legal framework on trafficking and sexual offences, showing the federal-state domestication gap.

Nigeria's federal structure is a mediating force in the practical effect of anti-trafficking and sexual violence federal laws, as shown in Figure 2. Since criminal law in respect of children and, to an extent, gender-based violence is within the residual legislative competence of the States, a Federal Act like the VAPP Act 2015 will only be binding on the Federal Capital Territory unless a State House of Assembly re-enacts it, which has happened unevenly in Nigeria (Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.)^[28].

4. The Legal Framework Governing Trafficking and Sexual Violence in Nigeria

4.1. Constitutional and international treaty foundations

Although the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria does not expressly address human trafficking or sexual violence as separate offences, its protection of human dignity, together with its prohibition of torture, slavery,

servitude, and degrading treatment, provides an important constitutional foundation for combating such abuses. These principles have informed the development and interpretation of subsequent legislation on trafficking and sexual violence. Nigeria's obligations are further reinforced by its participation in international and regional instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, all of which require protection against exploitation and abuse. Nigeria's accession to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Trafficking Protocol in December 2000 also contributed to the enactment of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003, which established the country's initial comprehensive legal response to human trafficking (NAPTIP, n.d.-a)^[19].

4.2. The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015

Nigeria's main anti-trafficking law was enacted in 2003 and amended in 2005, and fully re-enacted in 2015 by the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, which reflected new developments in trafficking typologies and the need to increase the institutional capacity supporting NAPTIP (NAPTIP, n.d.-a; Wikipedia, n.d.-a) ^[19, 42]. The three main goals of the 2015 Act are to set out a comprehensive legal framework for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution, and punishment of trafficking-related offences; to safeguard trafficked victims; and to encourage cooperation between Nigerian authorities and national or international partner organisations. The Investigating and Monitoring Department (section 12 of the Act) is established for the purpose of preventing and detecting offences, coordinating cross-border operations with the Nigeria Immigration Service and tracing and confiscation of proceeds of trafficking, and the Legal and Prosecution Department (section 12(2) of the Act) is responsible for prosecution in any State High Courts, Federal High Courts and, where labour issues arise, the National Industrial Court (NAPTIP, n.d.-b, n.d.-c) ^[21, 20].

4.3. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015

Enacted by the National Assembly and assented to by President Goodluck Jonathan on 25 May 2015, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act provides a broad legal framework for preventing and addressing violence in both private and public settings. It criminalises various forms of abuse, including rape, sexual violence, domestic and psychological abuse, economic abuse, harmful traditional practices, and female genital mutilation, while also promoting protection, compensation, and other remedies for victims. Although the Act establishes important federal standards, its effective application across Nigeria depends largely on its adoption and implementation by individual states (End GBV Africa, 2024) ^[12]. In addition to redefining rape, the Act also brings several firsts to the Nigerian federal law: It creates a publicly accessible register of convicted sexual offenders; It empowers courts to declare repeat offenders 'dangerous sexual offenders'; It obligates courts to award compensation to victims as they will deem it appropriate in the circumstances (LawPavilion, 2019) ^[18]. However, the territorial scope of the Act is its main weakness. It was passed because the National Assembly has legislative powers for the FCT, which means that its provisions automatically apply to the FCT, but that the States must enact something like it, which has not been done uniformly across the federation, and which thus does not apply automatically to its citizens (Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.) ^[28]. The debate on the Act has also continued, and in 2022, a bill was presented to the Senate to either repeal the Act or substantially amend it because of the strict-liability offences under it and to create a Victims' Support Fund for better compensation, indicating that the Act is still controversial and unsettled 10 years after its enactment (Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.) ^[28].

4.4. The Child Rights Act 2003 and the domestication controversy

The Child Rights Act 2003 incorporates the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in the national laws and regulations,

thus giving the same rights that are guaranteed to adults in the human-rights section of Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution to children – a person under the age of 19 years (Wikipedia, 2003; Grokipedia, n.d.) ^[44, 14]. The outlawing of unlawful sexual intercourse with a child as rape and a maximum life imprisonment sentence, as provided in section 31 of the Act, and the criminalisation of sexual abuse and exploitation of children under section 32 of the Act, which include sexual assault, indecent exposure and the procurement of children for sexual purposes, clearly show that children are a priority in the law (Grokipedia, n.d.; Edo State Judiciary, n.d.) ^[14, 11]. Child sexual exploitation and the importation or distribution of harmful publications about children are additionally criminalised in the sections 33, 35 and 36.

As children are included in the residual legislative list of the federal constitution of Nigeria, the Child Rights Act as a Federal Act does not automatically have effect in any State until it is separately enacted by the House of Assembly of the State, (Access to Justice, n.d.) ^[1]. By the mid-2020s, just 25 out of the 36 States in Nigeria have domesticated the Act, with about 11 States, mostly in the North, having not enacted any laws to prevent or curb sexual child marriage, primarily because of disagreement with its provisions, more particularly the minimum marriage age of 18, which is contrary to their religious and cultural norms (The Conversation, 2023) ^[32]. Ogunniyi (2018) ^[26] situates this domestication challenge in the context of Nigeria's plural legal order, where the different conceptions of childhood held by the common-law, customary and Sharia-influenced legal orders make achieving national consensus on child-protection legislation difficult, and suggests that sectoral legislation addressing child labour and child trafficking, in particular, may provide a partial (though not exhaustive) substitute for a national child-rights law in States where it has not yet been domesticated.

4.5. The Criminal Code, Penal Code and Administration of Criminal Justice Act

Before the VAPP Act, sexual offences in Nigeria were regulated, primarily, by the Criminal Code Act (southern States) and the Penal Code Act (northern States). Traditionally, both rape codes have been very narrow, involving only penetration of the vagina by the penis, and almost exclusively a male perpetrator of rape. Outside the federation, the older codes, in conjunction with any relevant Sharia Penal Code provisions in the State, remain in force, resulting in significant differences in the definitions, evidential burden and remedies for sexual offences. The Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 and its state-level counterparts, along with its accompanying rules of procedure, have also made changes of direct relevance to trafficking and sexual-offence trials, including establishing timelines to minimize pre-trial delays, limitations on the ability of victims to be present in court, and plea bargaining to secure convictions in cases involving trafficking that may not be proven beyond reasonable doubt.

5. Institutional Architecture: NAPTIP and Allied Agencies

5.1. Mandate, history and strategic pillars of NAPTIP

On 14 July 2003, the Federal Government of Nigeria created NAPTIP as its key response to trafficking in persons to honour its international commitments as member of the Palermo Protocol and the United Nations Convention against

Transnational Organized Crime (NAPTIP, n.d.-a). Amina Titi Atiku Abubakar (then wife of the Vice-President of Nigeria) pledged to establish the Agency and the Act passed by the National Assembly on 7 July 2003, was assented to by the President of Nigeria a week later. The Agency's initial mandate was based on a 4-pronged strategy: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership, which was later extended to a 5-pronged strategy, adding Policy as a fifth pillar (NAPTIP, n.d.-a). After the amendment and re-

enactment in 2015 with a comprehensive effort, NAPTIP's activities were restructured into several departments namely, Investigation and Monitoring Department which focuses on the identification of offences and tracing of assets recovered from trafficking; Legal and Prosecution Department which handles trafficking cases before the courts; and other connected units for victim counselling, rehabilitation, and public enlightenment (NAPTIP, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

Table 3: NAPTIP's Five-Pronged Strategic Framework

Pillar	Description	Lead department / mechanism
Policy	Development and periodic review of the National Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons and the Agency's Strategic Plan	Office of the Director-General; National Action Plan process
Prevention	Public enlightenment, community sensitisation, school-based awareness campaigns, and border monitoring in high-prevalence States	Public Enlightenment Unit; Investigation and Monitoring Department
Protection	Victim identification, medical and psychosocial support, temporary shelter, and rehabilitation/vocational training	Counselling and Rehabilitation Department
Prosecution	Investigation, evidence-gathering, asset tracing and forfeiture, and trial of offenders in State and Federal High Courts	Legal and Prosecution Department; Investigation and Monitoring Department
Partnership	Collaboration with State task forces, civil-society organisations, and international agencies including IOM, UNODC and ICMPD	International Cooperation Unit; inter-agency task forces

5.2. Complementary agencies: police, immigration, judiciary and civil society

NAPTIP is not a standalone project. Much of Nigeria's trafficking trade is cross-border in nature and Section 12(1) of the 2015 Act specifically mandates the Investigation and Monitoring Department to work in partnership with other agencies of the Nigerian government that are tasked with controlling entry and exit, such as the Nigeria Immigration Service (NAS) (NAPTIP, n.d.-c). The Nigeria Police Force (NCF) through its specialised units on gender and sexual offences in various States and the judiciary (National Industrial Court, State High Courts, and Federal High Courts) serve as forums for prosecution and adjudication. Civil-

society organisations have documented involvement in community sensitisation, survivor assistance and in some cases direct resistance to trafficking networks at great personal risk to their staff, such as CLEEN Foundation, Pathfinders Justice Initiative, and many other State- and community-based non-governmental organisations, especially in Edo State (The Correspondent, 2019) [33]. Technical assistance, training and, in a few instances, co-implementation of NAPTIP programming is provided by international partners such as the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (NAPTIP, n.d.-a) [19].

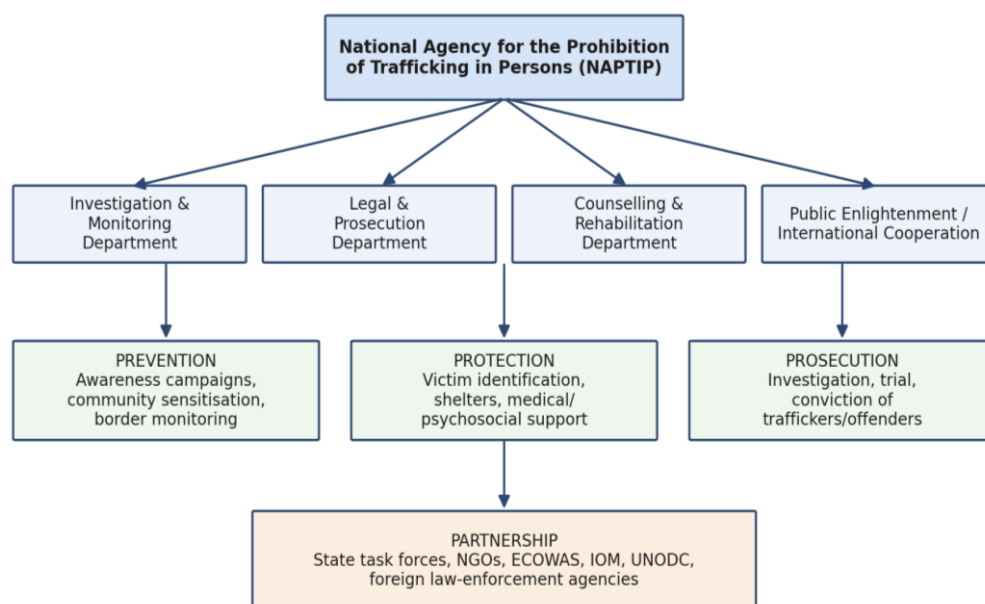


Fig 1: Institutional structure and strategic pillars of Nigeria's anti-trafficking response.

Figure 1 shows the link between the departmental structure of NAPTIP and the five strategic pillars. The activities of the three Departments – the Investigation and Monitoring Department, the Counselling and Rehabilitation Department, the Legal and Prosecution Department – are anchored in the

pillars of prevention, victim protection, and prosecution, respectively, with the pillar of partnership cutting across all three through collaboration with State task forces, civil society organisations, and international agencies.

Table 4: Principal Institutional Actors in Nigeria's Anti-Trafficking and Sexual-Violence Response

Actor	Type	Principal role
National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)	Federal statutory agency	Investigation, prosecution, victim protection, rehabilitation, prevention, and international partnership on trafficking and, increasingly, online sexual exploitation.
Nigeria Police Force (Gender/Sexual Offences Units)	Federal law-enforcement	First-response investigation of sexual-offence complaints; referral to prosecutorial and medical services.
Nigeria Immigration Service	Federal law-enforcement	Border monitoring, detection of irregular cross-border movement associated with trafficking.
State High Courts and Federal High Courts	Judiciary	Trial and adjudication of trafficking and sexual-offence cases under the TIPPEA Act, VAPP Act and CRA.
State Ministries of Women Affairs / Gender-Based Violence Response Teams	State government	Coordination of State-level VAPP Act domestication, survivor referral, and shelter provision.
International Organization for Migration (IOM)	Intergovernmental organisation	Victim identification abroad, voluntary return and reintegration support, and research on trafficking routes.
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	Intergovernmental organisation	Technical assistance, capacity-building, and global reporting on trafficking patterns.
Civil-society organisations (e.g., CLEEN Foundation, Pathfinders Justice Initiative, community NGOs in Edo State)	Non-governmental	Community sensitisation, survivor support, advocacy for legislative reform and monitoring of official compliance.

6. The Scale and Geography of Trafficking and Sexual Violence in Nigeria

6.1. National indicators and Tier classification trends

The United States Department of State's annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report evaluates Nigeria's response to human trafficking by examining its prevention strategies, victim-protection measures, law-enforcement efforts, and prosecution of offenders. Using the minimum standards established under the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the report places countries in different categories according to the level of their compliance. Nigeria has experienced fluctuations in its classification, attaining Tier 1 status between 2009 and 2011 but later returning to Tier 2

and, in some years, the Tier 2 Watch List. In the 2024 report, Nigeria remained on Tier 2, indicating that although it had not fully satisfied the required standards, it was making significant efforts to improve its anti-trafficking response. Nigeria remained in Tier 2 in the 2023, 2024 and 2025 reports (U.S. Department of State, 2023, 2024, 2025) ^[37, 38, 39]. The 2024 report pointed to the government's conviction of two traffickers for trafficking offences for the first time in four years, and highlighted worries regarding the situation of women and children in IDP camps as well as the susceptibility of Nigerian labour migrants to being recruited overseas to defrauded of their identities. (U.S. Department of State, 2024) ^[38].

Table 5: Nigeria's Tier Classification Under the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report Framework, Selected Reporting Years

Reporting year	Tier classification	Key reported development
2017	Tier 2 Watch List	Nigeria identified among sub-Saharan African states with significant or increasing victim numbers and limited evidence of increasing government effort (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017).
2021	Tier 2 (upgraded)	Government credited with increasing efforts relative to the previous period, accounting for the operational impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of State, 2021).
2023	Tier 2	Government efforts assessed as increasing; COVID-19-related operational constraints continued to be acknowledged (U.S. Department of State, 2023).
2024	Tier 2	First conviction of complicit officials in four years reported; continued concern over sexual exploitation in IDP camps and fraudulent overseas labour recruitment (U.S. Department of State, 2024).
2025	Tier 2	Increase reported in investigations, prosecutions, convictions, victim identification and funding for protection and prevention (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

6.2. Edo State and the Benin City migration-trafficking corridor

Edo State, and specifically its capital of Benin City, is a sub-national geography that has been mentioned in numerous independent sources in the empirical literature on the trafficking of women to Europe for sexual exploitation (IOM, n.d.; CNN, 2017; EUAA, 2021) ^[16, 4, 13]. In recent years, the European Union Agency for Asylum estimates that roughly a quarter to a half of women from abroad in prostitution in Italy are Nigerians, of which the majority, according to

independent analysis of Nigerian asylum applications in Europe, come from Edo State, with the bulk from Benin City (The Correspondent 2019) ^[33]. This corridor has been traced to the economic crisis of the 1980s when Italy's business interests, which had previously been established in Edo State, and the ripple effects of Structural Adjustment, caused many families to rely on the remittances of family members who migrated, albeit precariously, to Europe (Grokopedia, n.d.; The Correspondent, 2019) ^[15, 33].

One of the most characteristic features of the Edo trafficking

model is the establishment of an enforceable financial and frequently spiritual bond between the trafficked woman and the trafficker before the woman leaves her country, a bond which requires her to return a debt, often worth about half a million euros, even if a lot of hardship has taken place on her way to her destination, while the trafficker agrees to let her keep some profits when the debt is paid back (IOM, n.d.; North Atlantic Organization for Cooperation [NAOC], n.d.)^[16, 23]. There is also some ambivalence in the community in part of Edo State of the trafficking trade, as visible remittance-funded prosperity has in some accounts also created a normalisation effect related to trafficking, making prevention messaging more complex (EUAA, 2021)^[13]. In March 2018, however, traditional, and religious leaders took a stance in opposition to this development, with the Oba of Benin

placing a curse on traffickers and instructing traditional priests to remove the spiritual oaths previously given to trafficked women, a move that has been credited as having helped to reduce traffickers' departures (The Correspondent, 2019)^[33].

State government interventions have also been attributed to over the years to have brought outflows from Edo State to its lowest value. The Edo State Government has publicly indicated its actions to reduce the number of people trafficked for migration to Libya and subsequently to Europe since 2016, which include investments in education and youth empowerment programming, and stated that over 30,000 youths were recorded to have arrived from Edo to Libya in an attempt to cross to Europe during 2016 and 2017 alone (Edo State Government, n.d. as reported in Kolaking, n.d.)^[17].

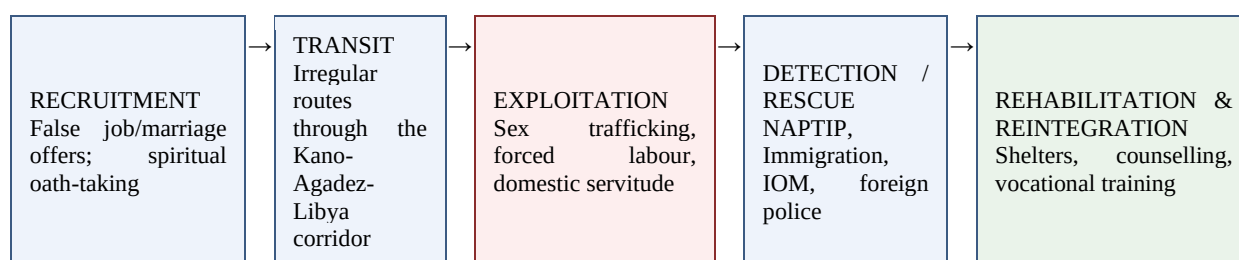


Fig 3: Typical trafficking and exploitation pathway reported among Nigerian victims.

The trafficking process experienced by victims from Nigeria, as illustrated in Figure 3, usually passes through five recognisable phases: recruitment, transit, exploitation, detection and/or rescue, and rehabilitation and reintegration (if services are provided). Sexual violence, including by smugglers, security officials, and migrants themselves is most prevalent at the exploitation stage, though it is also a risk at the transit stage (EUAA, 2021)^[13].

6.3. Conflict, displacement and sexual exploitation in the North-East

A unique but related geography of vulnerability has developed in Nigeria's North-East which has been subject of over ten years of conflict between Boko Haram and affiliated armed groups, resulting in large scale IDPs and vulnerability to SXT. The 2024 TIP Report includes continued concerns that children held in detention for alleged involvement with armed groups were sometimes detained with adult prisoners alleged to have been involved in sex-trafficking rings in prison, and earlier allegations that women were subject of sexual exploitation by soldiers in a military run detention facility in Borno State (U.S. Department of State, 2024)^[38]. The report also says that IDPs moving towards urban locations like Gombe and Kano, and towards neighbouring Niger are still at risk of forced labour, including trafficking for sexual exploitation. The results suggest that, while the North-East is not as much a trafficking destination as the predominantly economically-motivated trafficking in Edo State, conflict-induced displacement, lack of family and community protective mechanisms, and in some reported cases, alleged involvement by state-security related actors are important drivers of trafficking and sexual violence in the region.

6.4. Emerging typologies: online sexual exploitation and sextortion

In recent years, Nigerian anti-trafficking bodies have increasingly faced new typologies of trafficking and sexual exploitation not specifically envisioned when the key laws were enacted. NAPTIP's leadership has recognised the increased prevalence of online sexual exploitation and sextortion, without an explicit reference in law to gender-based violence (GBV) through online or technology, and has sought to address such exploitation via the provisions of the 2015 Trafficking in Persons Act, Sections 15-18 (End GBV Africa, 2024)^[12]. This gap, in turn, has led to legislative proposals, including a bill before the National Assembly for 2022 to amend the VAPP Act to explicitly criminalise image-based sexual abuse, which was part of a call to action for the bill due to high-profile cases of victimisation, such as the 2012 killing of Cynthia Osokogu, who was lured to her death by acquaintances she met through a social networking platform, a case still referenced in Nigerian gender-based-violence policy work as an early example of image-based sexual abuse (End GBV Africa, 2024)^[12].

7. Drivers and Risk Factors

7.1. Economic drivers: poverty, unemployment and the feminisation of migration

The most consistently reported factor contributing to the vulnerability of trafficking in Nigeria in the literature is economic deprivation. The early researches on trafficking from Edo State identified the causes of the trafficking trade mainly as the economic downturn that ensued following the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which brought down formal employment opportunities, thus pushing many households into the survival strategy of migration (UniProjectMaterials, n.d., citing Women's Health and

Action Research Centre, 2002; Osakue & Okoedion, 2002)^[27]. High levels of poverty and unemployment, and many hopes of people moving overseas to find work or marry, that may not be matched by legal migration opportunities, remain the key structural factors that traffickers exploit where their opportunities are presented as a job or a marriage abroad, superficially convincing but ultimately bogus (NAOC, n.d.). Scholars have also noted the feminisation of migration and the feminisation of poverty as related concepts, in which women are targeted for recruitment because of the family pressures they feel to earn income through any means necessary (especially when they become the primary breadwinner or eldest daughter with greater familial responsibilities) (IOM, n.d.; UniProjectMaterials, n.d.).

7.2. Socio-cultural drivers: patriarchy, gender norms and harmful practices

In addition to economic disadvantage, a significant strand of Nigerian scholarship explains trafficking and sexual violence in the context of broader issues of gender inequality and patriarchal social organisation. According to the literature on trafficking in the Edo State, patriarchy and the deep-rooted gender role expectations are structural factors which not only render women economically vulnerable, but also naturalise their commodification in migration and sex markets (UniProjectMaterials, n.d.)^[27]. Child marriage and forced marriage, described as harmful traditional and customary practices, are also largely confined to certain areas, and are directly linked to the sexual-violence and trafficking landscape; for instance, some have suggested that child marriage is prohibited by the Child Rights Act 2003, but is not necessarily in accordance with Sharia-influenced legislation, which has been argued to conflict with the minimum age protections of the Child Rights Act 2003 in certain instances (Grokikipedia, n.d.)^[14]. For the case of FGM, although it was banned as a harmful traditional practice under the VAPP Act, it remains a practice in some parts of the southern Nigeria, even after being domesticated in the relevant States, meaning that formal legal prohibition is not always effective when it comes to deeply rooted customary practice (The Conversation, 2023)^[32].

7.3. Belief-system drivers: spiritual coercion and oath-taking

One aspect of the trafficking model with Edo State that has

been well documented and uniquely Nigerian is the use of “juju” or oath taking as a form of victim control. Before leaving, trafficked women are coerced into making an oath before a traditional priest, interpreted by the victim to mean that she must pay her debt to the trafficker and keep her relationship secret or face their supernatural wrath against her and/or her family (EUAA, 2021; CNN, 2017)^[13, 4]. Field research has shown that this is an effective mechanism to get victims to comply even when there is no physical restraint and that the psychological control exerted by this mechanism has been found to last long after the victims had ostensibly been brought to safe locations in Europe (EUAA, 2021)^[13]. It is generally thought that the Oba of Benin's intervention in 2018 in which the spiritual force of these oaths was nullified and the traffickers were cursed by the Oba, complemented formal law enforcement efforts, thus playing a role in weakening, rather than eradicating, this form of control (The Correspondent, 2019)^[33].

7.4. Institutional drivers: weak documentation, porous borders and corruption

In addition to the above economic, cultural and belief-system drivers, institutional weaknesses also exacerbate. Nigeria's overall civil-registration system was incomplete, making it difficult to establish the age and identity of victims of trafficking, which in cases involving child-trafficking and defilement, is one of the elements of the offence that is contested. Despite the statutory responsibilities of the Nigeria Immigration Service to work with NAPTIP on enforcement across the borders (NAPTIP, n.d.-c)^[21], porous land borders are provided, especially on the borders between Nigeria and Niger and Chad and, more distant, Libya, which further allows trafficked persons to move on without much possibility of counter-trafficking action. In addition, corruption in the judiciary and immigration system has consistently been a major concern raised by independent monitors, the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report reporting that the number of suspected traffickers prosecuted by officials declined from the previous year, and that corruption continued to be a major concern in the judiciary and immigration system (U.S. Department of State, 2021)^[36]. In some urban centers abuses against children are reported to have led to institutional corruption and the extortion of children's families seeking justice (Grokikipedia, n.d.)^[14].

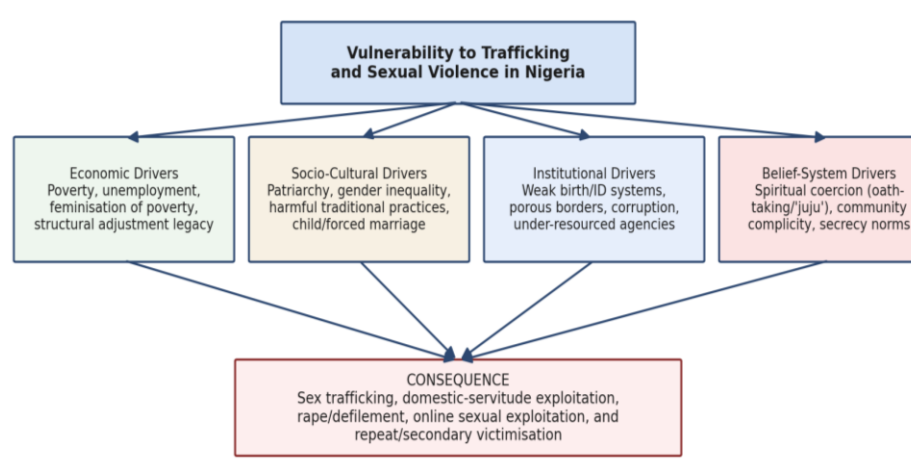


Fig 4: Interacting economic, socio-cultural, institutional, and belief-system drivers of trafficking and sexual violence.

The four interacting clusters of drivers identified in the literature reviewed are summarised in figure 4. In practice, these drivers are seldom interdependent; for instance, a young woman from a poor material background in Edo State might experience patriarchy to support her family financially, a

trafficker who can negotiate an oath-bound travel pact, and the lack of a viable institutional route to regular, safe migration, with her ultimate exploitation being the result of all four categories of drivers.

Table 6: Root Causes and Risk Factors of Trafficking and Sexual Violence in Nigeria

Driver category	Specific factors	Illustrative source
Economic	Poverty; unemployment; feminisation of poverty and migration; legacy effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme	UniProjectMaterials (n.d.); IOM (n.d.)
Socio-cultural	Patriarchy; gender inequality; child and forced marriage; female genital mutilation; family pressure on eldest daughters	UniProjectMaterials (n.d.); Grokipedia (n.d.); The Conversation (2023)
Belief-system	Spiritual oath-taking ('juju') binding victims to traffickers; community normalisation of remittance-funded migration	EUAA (2021); CNN (2017); The Correspondent (2019)
Institutional	Weak civil registration; porous borders; judicial and immigration corruption; under-resourced enforcement agencies	U.S. Department of State (2021); NAPTIP (n.d.-c); Grokipedia (n.d.)
Conflict-related	Displacement from Boko Haram-affected areas; breakdown of family protective structures in IDP camps	U.S. Department of State (2024)

8. Institutional Response, Prosecution and Victim Protection

8.1. Investigation, rescue and referral pathways

Usually, the cases of trafficked persons and those of sexual offenders in Nigeria are investigated through one of the following channels: by a complainant or family member, by referral from the Nigeria Police Force, by IOM or another Foreign Law Enforcement agency identifying a child abroad and bringing him/her back to Nigeria and handing him/her over to NAPTIP. NAPTIP's Investigation and Monitoring Department (IMD), as the statutory body to gather evidence, trace assets, and coordinate with the Legal and Prosecution Department (LPD) to decide on the filing of any cases, is also tasked with the investigation and monitoring of trafficking cases (NAPTIP, n.d.-c) ^[21]. The person identified in this process, in principle, has the right to medical examination and/or psychosocial support and temporary shelter placement while awaiting the resolution of their case in accordance with the National Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons (Niamey Declaration Guide, n.d.) ^[22].

8.2. Prosecutorial trends and conviction outcomes

The gap between Nigeria's legal framework and implementation is one of the most tangible measures that can be measured by looking at the outcome of prosecutions. According to the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, the government of Ecuador has for the first time in four years convicted two officials of complicity in human trafficking – a national immigration service official sentenced to five years' imprisonment for trafficking and a member of the Civilian Joint Task Force sentenced to two years' imprisonment for sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2024) ^[38]. Prosecutions are pending for an additional member of the Civilian Joint Task Force and a member of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps for alleged sex trafficking at the time of reporting, the same report says. In contrast, in the 2021 report, officials prosecuted fewer suspected traffickers in that year than in the previous reporting period, partly because of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and longstanding corruption concerns in the judiciary and immigration services (U.S. Department of State, 2021) ^[36]. The last one, the 2025 report, reports that the situation is improving, with the government conducting more investigations and prosecutions of trafficking cases and more

trafficking victims identified and referred to services than the previous report (U.S. Department of State, 2025) ^[39].

8.3. Victim identification, shelters, and psychosocial rehabilitation

The Counselling and Rehabilitation function of NAPTIP is designed to provide lodging, medical attention and psychosocial counselling and eventually vocational training for identified victims prior to reintegration into their communities. However, concerns over conditions of this support have been raised independently several times. The 2024 TIP Report specifically calls on Nigerian authorities to ensure victims in NAPTIP shelters are free to move and that their care is victim-centred and trauma-informed, suggesting that in some cases existing practice is not yet meeting these expectations, and that movement of victims in NAPTIP shelters is restricted, potentially exacerbating rather than mitigating the trauma of their exploitation (U.S. Department of State, 2024) ^[38]. The formal recognition of a victim is also said to be contingent – formal access to NAPTIP's protective services requires a victim to be formally recognised as a trafficked person under the criteria set out in the Trafficking in Persons Act 2015 and the National Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons, which may not include some individuals whose experiences do not align with the legal definition (Niamey Declaration Guide, n.d.) ^[22].

8.4. International cooperation and cross-border partnerships

International cooperation is an essential element of the institutional response, particularly for the essentially transnational nature of Nigerian sex trafficking. NAPTIP works with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) on the voluntary return and reintegration of Nigerians identified in destination countries; with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) on capacity development and public awareness programming; and with law enforcement agencies in the destination countries in Italy, Netherlands and other major countries across Europe in joint investigations to combat the transnational trafficking criminal networks that operate along the Edo-Libya-Italy corridor (NAPTIP, n.d.-a; IOM, n.d.) ^[19, 16]. According to 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report Nigeria's continued Tier 2 designation is in large part due to

the Nigerian government's increased efforts to cooperate with foreign governments on anti-trafficking law-enforcement

efforts, the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report (U.S. Department of State, 2024) [38].

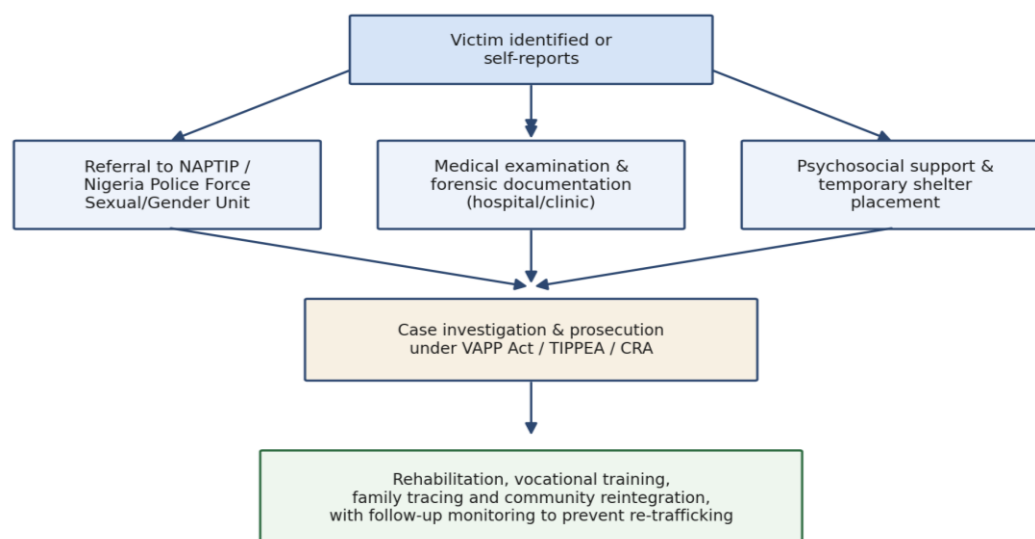


Fig 5: Victim referral, protection, and reintegration pathway in Nigeria's response system.

A victim's journey from detection to documentation (medical care), psychosocial assistance, prosecution of the perpetrator, and finally reintegration, is illustrated in Figure 5. As already discussed, victims' access to shelter often is limited, access to movement is hindered and follow-up monitoring is limited after formal reintegration, all of which can lead to re-trafficking.

9. Gaps and Constraints in the Nigerian Response

9.1. Legislative fragmentation and incomplete State domestication

The most recurring shortcoming in Nigeria's institutional responses to trafficking in persons and sexual violence identified is the fragmentation caused by the federal constitutional structure of the country. The protections available to a survivor of sexual violence or trafficking are largely dependent on her State of residence as every State

House of Assembly must domesticate both the VAPP Act 2015 and the Child Rights Act 2003 to be effective outside the Federal Capital Territory. As the mid-2020s approach, eleven States are still to domesticate the Child Rights Act, mostly in the North, while the VAPP Act has been domesticated more widely (though not uniformly), with some States adopting considerably modified versions of the federal template) (The Conversation, 2023; Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.). This fragmentation is not only an administrative hurdle, but is also a product of the genuine normative dissension that exists within the plural legal order in Nigeria regarding the boundaries of childhood and how the state ought to intervene in family life, suggests Ogunniyi (2018), and this can only be attained through concerted advocacy and consensus-building at the State level, not federal fiat.

Table 7: Illustrative State-Level Domestication Status of the Child Rights Act 2003 and the VAPP Act 2015

Domestication status	Child Rights Act 2003	VAPP Act 2015	Illustrative implication
Domesticated with substantial fidelity to federal template	Approximately twenty-five of thirty-six States, concentrated in the South and Middle Belt	Majority of southern States, with variable enforcement capacity	Statutory protections broadly mirror federal standard, though enforcement resourcing still varies by State
Domesticated with significant modification	Small number of States adopting amended provisions (e.g., differing minimum-age thresholds)	Some States adopting narrower definitions of covered offences	Protection gaps persist even where nominal domestication has occurred
Not yet domesticated	Approximately eleven States, concentrated in the North	Remaining States without an enacted equivalent	Federal-level protections have no direct legal force; survivors rely on older Criminal Code, Penal Code or Sharia Penal Code provisions

Note. Figures are illustrative and derived from secondary reporting (The Conversation, 2023; Partners West Africa Nigeria, n.d.); the precise domestication status of individual States is subject to periodic legislative change and should be verified against current State Gazette publications.

9.2. Resource, capacity and corruption constraints

Where relevant laws have been successfully domesticated, there is a continuous problem of enforcement capacity in States. Funding, personnel, and resource constraints continue to be a recurring problem for NAPTIP to fully carry out its mandate and the Agency's institutional reporting as well as the successive TIP Reports reflect this issue. Corruption

exacerbates these resource limitations: Immigration and security officials have been reported as complicit in trafficking and/or sexual exploitation, such as security guards at a girls' boarding school in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who allegedly took part in sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2024) [36, 38], and in some urban centres allegations of police extortion of families seeking justice for child sexual-

abuse cases highlight that the institutions that are supposed to be implementing the law are not necessarily free from corruption and criminal practices.

9.3. Stigma, secondary victimisation and access-to-justice barriers

Stigma and societal condemnation of survivors of trafficking and sexual violence, especially when sexual exploitation occurs, remains a barrier to reporting and a challenge in reintegration. Reintegration into Edo State communities where the benefits of trafficking have been normalised in certain contexts can result in a combination of resentment, suspicion, and pressure to keep their stories hidden from others or to turn a blind eye to it, and to not seek justice (EUAA, 2021) ^[13]. In the formal justice system, sexual violence survivors often experience secondary victimisation, such as when they are subjected to invasive or insensitive questioning during investigation, their case takes a long time to process, and they have to repeat traumatic events in court, and in some documented cases, they are subjected to restrictive shelter conditions, which is effectively a re-victimisation (U.S. Department of State, 2024) ^[38]. Combined, these barriers create a situation in which formal legal protections, no matter how thorough in theory, are not fully realised in practice for survivors' experiences of seeking safety, accountability, and reintegration.

10. Comparative and Regional Perspectives

10.1. Nigeria within the ECOWAS anti-trafficking architecture

The anti-trafficking framework in Nigeria is embedded in its overall regional architecture, through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has its own regional plan of action against trafficking in persons (PAP), in addition to the Palermo Protocol obligations that Nigeria and its neighbours share as States parties. Although the free movement of persons within ECOWAS is a very positive development for legitimate labour migration and trade, it also poses practical challenges for trafficking interdiction as traffickers can take advantage of the freedom-of-movement protocols designed to facilitate ECOWAS' economic integration when moving victims across the shared ECOWAS' largely open borders. An important, although not well documented aspect of Nigeria's cross-border response is its cooperation with neighbouring States along the Kano-Agadez-Libya trafficking corridor, especially Niger.

10.2. Lessons from the Tier-ranking system across West Africa

Nigeria's placement in Tier 2 in the TIP Report suggests that the country is among the more compliant governments in sub-Saharan Africa, given its current issues, when compared with other regions' conclusions. According to the Council on Foreign Relations analysis, it has never been an African nation to have ranked at the top of the Report's Tier 1 classification, and as of the mid-2010s, the countries on the Watch List (Tier 2), which Nigeria was then in, included nineteen African countries, with thirteen more in the lowest Tier 3 classification, frequently indicating countries undergoing an active conflict or its immediate aftermath (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017) ^[9]. The upgrade and continued retention of Tier 2 status during the 2021 to 2025 reporting cycles indicates a relatively strong institutional

response to date, relative to a number of regional peers, despite the fact that Nigeria remains in Tier 2 classification, not Tier 1, which continues to signal significant further reform is required for the country to be considered to fully meet international minimum standards (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2023, 2024, 2025). ^[36, 37, 38, 39]

11. Recommendations

11.1. Harmonising legislation across the federation

The most significant reform that Nigeria's policy makers can make is the domestication of the VAPP Act 2015 and the Child Rights Act 2003 at the national level. Where States do not have the Child Rights Act in place, sustained advocacy by the National Assembly, State Houses of Assembly, traditional and religious leadership and civil-society organisations should be targeted at the eleven States and domestication efforts should focus on provisions that can be negotiated around broadly – either across religious or cultural lines or politically – for example, protection from trafficking and violent sexual abuse, while other more contested provisions should be negotiated separately, incrementally.

- National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly should establish a standing joint committee to monitor and report annually on domestication progress across all thirty-six States.
- Traditional rulers and religious leaders, following the model demonstrated by the Oba of Benin's 2018 intervention against oath-based trafficking control, should be formally engaged as partners in both domestication advocacy and community-level prevention.
- Legislative reform of the VAPP Act should explicitly address emerging typologies, including online sexual exploitation, sextortion and image-based sexual abuse, closing the interpretive gap that currently requires NAPTIP to apply older statutory provisions analogically to new forms of harm.

11.2. Strengthening survivor-centred, trauma-informed practice

The institutional practice of NAPTIP shelters and allied victim support services needs to be changed so that when providing protection, it does not, in practice, re-traumatise the victims as it has already done by their traffickers. In line with the recommendations contained in the 2024 Trafficking in Persons report, Nigerian government authorities should ensure victims living in shelters within NAPTIP have freedom of movement, and frontline staff such as investigators, prosecutors and NAPTIP shelter workers are provided with regular training on trauma-informed interviewing and care (U.S. Department of State, 2024) ^[38].

- Develop and implement a national trauma-informed care protocol, mandatory for all NAPTIP and allied shelter staff, prosecutors and investigating police officers handling trafficking and sexual-offence cases.
- Establish independent oversight mechanisms for NAPTIP shelters, including periodic, unannounced monitoring visits by civil-society and human-rights bodies, to verify compliance with freedom-of-movement and dignity standards.
- Expand access to survivor-led support groups and peer-mentorship programmes, drawing on the documented effectiveness of community-based organisations in Edo State.

11.3. Investing in prevention, data systems and technology

Investment in strengthening data collection and case management systems that can trace a victim from initial identification, prosecution, and long-term reintegration, would represent a major asset in Nigeria's response to trafficking in persons and ensure a more accurate estimate of where a victim is lost along the journey, from case withdrawal to re-trafficking or poor follow-up. In line with the growing importance of social media and digital platforms in recruitment (as demonstrated in the case of Cynthia Osokogu) and exploitation through sextortion the investment in digital-forensics capacity at NAPTIP's Investigation and Monitoring Department is also justified (End GBV Africa, 2024) ^[12].

- Develop a centralised, interoperable case-management database linking NAPTIP, the Nigeria Police Force, the judiciary and State Ministries of Women Affairs to reduce case attrition.
- Invest in digital-forensics and cybercrime-investigation capacity to address online sexual exploitation, sextortion trafficking recruitment conducted through social-media platforms.
- Strengthen civil-registration and birth-registration systems to improve age verification in child-trafficking and defilement prosecutions.

11.4. Deepening community-based prevention in high-prevalence States

Last, and most important, there is a need to invest in the prevention of trafficking specifically in certain geographies because of the high level of vulnerability in these areas which includes Edo State, Delta State and the conflict-affected North-East where most cases of trafficking are concentrated. The Edo State Government's own narration of its youth-education and empowerment initiatives that helped reduce outflows after the spate of departures in 2016 and 2017 provide a blueprint that could be customised (with contextual adaptation) for application in other States with high outflows (Kolaking, n.d.).

- Scale successful Edo State-style youth education, vocational training and economic-empowerment interventions to Delta, Kano and other high-prevalence States, adapted to local economic and cultural context.
- Expand family-tracing, community-reintegration and long-term follow-up monitoring programmes to reduce the documented risk of re-trafficking among returned survivors.
- Support locally rooted, survivor-informed community organisations, particularly in Edo State, recognising their demonstrated capacity for sensitisation and advocacy even under conditions of local resistance and personal risk.

12. Conclusion

In conclusion, the review has provided a brief historical mapping of the legal, institutional and empirical context of human trafficking and sexual violence in Nigeria, from the constitutional and international treaty basis of Nigeria's anti-trafficking and anti-sexual violence response, to the key statutory measures such as the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 and the Child Rights Act 2003, and the institutional framework, with

the National Commission on Human Trafficking (NAPTIP) at the front of the response. The evidence reviewed indicates that Nigeria has a well-developed statutory instruments framework, but its application is significantly limited due to the country's federalism, which mandates domestication at State level, which for many of the key State-level instruments, has not happened and as such, leaves their application dependent on the States concerned. The empirical literature also showed that trafficking and sexual violence in Nigeria are not homogeneous nor randomly distributed; that trafficking through the decades-long migration-trafficking corridor to Europe is a phenomenon of Edo State; that the conflict driven vulnerability of populations of IDPs has its roots in different regions of Nigeria, and that the new typology of online sexual trafficking requires different, geographically and contextually tailored institutional responses to Nigeria as a whole and not a single undifferentiated national strategy.

Sustained progress will depend on the completion of legislative harmonisation across all thirty-six States, meaningful investment in survivor-centred, trauma-informed institutional practice, strengthened data and technological capacity, and continued, deepened engagement with the traditional, religious and community structures, exemplified by the Oba of Benin's 2018 intervention against trafficking-related oath-taking, that have already demonstrated a capacity to shift entrenched local norms. Only through the combined action of formal legal reform and legitimate community leadership is Nigeria likely to move beyond its current Tier 2 classification toward fuller compliance with international minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and the protection of survivors of sexual violence.

References

1. Access to Justice. Nigeria's Child Rights Act [Internet]. Nigeria: Access to Justice; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.accesstojustice-ng.org/Child%20Right%20Act%202003.pdf>
2. Nigeria. Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 2015.
3. African Union. African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Addis Ababa: African Union; 1990.
4. Cable News Network. The sex trafficking trail from Nigeria to Europe [Internet]. Atlanta (GA): CNN; 2017 Dec 4 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/04/africa/nigeria-benin-city-sex-trafficking/index.html>
5. Nigeria. Child Rights Act, 2003. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 2003.
6. Nigeria. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended). Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 1999.
7. United Nations. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. New York: United Nations; 1979.
8. United Nations. Convention on the Rights of the Child. New York: United Nations; 1989.
9. Council on Foreign Relations. The U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report and Sub-Saharan Africa [Internet]. New York: Council on Foreign Relations; 2017 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-state-departments-annual-trafficking-persons-report-and-sub-saharan>

- africa
10. Nigeria. Criminal Code Act, Cap C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 2004.
 11. Edo State Judiciary. Child Rights Act 2003: The imperative of the Nigerian child [Internet]. Benin City: Edo State Judiciary; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://edojudiciary.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Childs-Rights-Act-2003.pdf>
 12. End GBV Africa. Nigeria: GBV factsheet [Internet]. [place unknown]: End GBV Africa; 2024 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://endgbv.africa/mapping/nigeria/>
 13. European Union Agency for Asylum. Nigeria: Trafficking in human beings—country of origin information report [Internet]. Valletta: European Union Agency for Asylum; 2021 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/>
 14. Grokipedia. Child sexual abuse in Nigeria [Internet]. [place unknown]: Grokipedia; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: https://grokipedia.com/page/Child_sexual_abuse_in_Nigeria
 15. Grokipedia. Human trafficking in Edo State [Internet]. [place unknown]: Grokipedia; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: https://grokipedia.com/page/human_trafficking_in_edo_state
 16. International Organization for Migration. Human trafficking from Nigeria to Europe [Internet]. Geneva: International Organization for Migration; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.iom.int/news/human-trafficking-nigeria-europe>
 17. Kolaking. Human trafficking: Edo tackles illegal migration with improved education system [Internet]. [place unknown]: Kolaking; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://kolaking.substack.com/p/human-trafficking-edo-tackles-illegal>
 18. LawPavilion. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 [Internet]. Lagos: LawPavilion; 2019 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.lawpavilion.com/blog/the-violence-against-persons-prohibition-act-2015>
 19. National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. About NAPTIP [Internet]. Abuja: NAPTIP; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://naptip.gov.ng/about/>
 20. National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. Legal and Prosecution Department [Internet]. Abuja: NAPTIP; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://naptip.gov.ng/legal-and-prosecution-department/>
 21. National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. Investigation and Monitoring [Internet]. Abuja: NAPTIP; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://naptip.gov.ng/investigation-and-monitoring/>
 22. Niamey Declaration Guide. Nigeria country profile [Internet]. [place unknown]: Niamey Declaration Guide; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.niameydeclarationguide.org/countryprofile/s/nigeria>
 23. North Atlantic Organization for Cooperation. From Benin City to the shores of Italy: A new hub of human trafficking [Internet]. [place unknown]: North Atlantic Organization for Cooperation; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://natoassociation.ca/from-benin-city-to-the-shores-of-italy-a-new-hub-of-human-trafficking/>
 24. Odinkalu AC, Chiemeka UR. Victimology and the criminal justice system in Nigeria. *J Hum Rights Law Pract.* 2014;(3).
 25. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Rape as a grave and systematic human rights violation and gender-based violence against women [Internet]. Geneva: OHCHR; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.ohchr.org/>
 26. Ogunniyi D. The challenge of domesticating children's rights treaties in Nigeria and alternative legal avenues for protecting children. *J Afr Law.* 2018;62(3):447-470.
 27. Organized crime and trafficking research summary. Menace caused by human trafficking: A case study of Edo State [Internet]. [place unknown]: UniProjectMaterials; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://uniprojectmaterials.com/education/project-topics/menace-caused-by-human-trafficking-a-case-study-of-edo-state>
 28. Partners West Africa Nigeria. Factsheet on the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015 [Internet]. Abuja: Partners West Africa Nigeria; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.partnersnigeria.org/factsheet-on-the-violence-against-persons-prohibition-act-2015/>
 29. Nigeria. Penal Code Act, Cap P3, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 2004.
 30. Rape is a Crime. Laws impacting sexual violence in Nigeria [Internet]. [place unknown]: Rape is a Crime; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.rapeisacrime.org/portal/laws-impacting-sexual-violence-in-nigeria/>
 31. SOTIN Programme, ALIGN Platform. How migration and trafficking from Edo State happens [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/how_migration_and_trafficking_happens_research_final_report.pdf
 32. The Conversation. Why the Child's Rights Act still doesn't apply throughout Nigeria [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-childs-rights-act-still-doesnt-apply-throughout-nigeria-145345>
 33. The Correspondent. Want to make sense of migration? Ask the people who stayed behind [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://thecorrespondent.com/136/want-to-make-sense-of-migration-ask-the-people-who-stayed-behind>
 34. Thrillets. Statutory prohibitions against all manners of sexual offences in Nigeria [Internet]. 2024 Oct [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.thrillets.com.ng/2024/10/statutory-prohibitions-against-all.html>
 35. Nigeria. Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 2015.
 36. United States Department of State. 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of State; 2021 [cited 2026 Aug 31].

- Available from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria>
37. United States Department of State. 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of State; 2023 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria>
 38. United States Department of State. 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of State; 2024 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria/>
 39. United States Department of State. 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of State; 2025 [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria/>
 40. United Nations. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. New York: United Nations; 2000.
 41. Nigeria. Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015. Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria; 2015.
 42. Wikipedia. Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015 [Internet]. [place unknown]: Wikimedia Foundation; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trafficking_in_Persons_\(Prohibition\)_Enforcement_and_Administration_Act,_2015](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trafficking_in_Persons_(Prohibition)_Enforcement_and_Administration_Act,_2015)
 43. Wikipedia. Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 [Internet]. [place unknown]: Wikimedia Foundation; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence_Against_Persons_\(Prohibition\)_Act_2015](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence_Against_Persons_(Prohibition)_Act_2015)
 44. Wikipedia. Child Rights Act in Nigeria [Internet]. [place unknown]: Wikimedia Foundation; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_Rights_Act_in_Nigeria
 45. Wikipedia. Human trafficking in Nigeria [Internet]. [place unknown]: Wikimedia Foundation; [cited 2026 Aug 31]. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_trafficking_in_Nigeria