

POROUS BORDERS AND CROSS-BORDER WOMEN TRAFFICKING BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BENIN REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

The economy of a state serves as the foundational pillar upon which all other superstructures such as governance, law enforcement, and public institutions are built. A resilient and thriving economy not only enhances the standard of living but also strengthens the operational efficiency of governmental bodies and security agencies. Conversely, economic instability has been closely linked to a range of societal issues, including malnutrition, rising crime rates, and human trafficking. In contexts such as Nigeria and the Benin Republic, economic fragility acts as a significant pull factor that facilitates the recruitment of human trafficking victims, undermines effective border control, and creates conditions conducive to trafficking networks. This study explores the relationship between economic instability and human trafficking in both countries. Grounded in Failed State Theory, DeLanda's Assemblage Theory, and Social Complexity Theory, the research employed a mixed-methods design. It drew on data from a sample of 56 trafficking victims and supplementary documentary evidence from global human trafficking reports. The findings reveal that persistent economic instability in Nigeria and Benin Republic contributes significantly to human trafficking by weakening institutional capacity, encouraging cartel activity, increasing the vulnerability of citizens, and hampering border management. The study recommends that combating human trafficking must begin with a comprehensive economic reform agenda, one that prioritizes job creation, strengthens institutional frameworks, and enhances border security mechanisms.

Key words: Economic instability, Human Trafficking, Porous Border, Recruitment

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, human trafficking in Nigeria and the Benin Republic has witnessed a significant surge, with women and children constituting the majority of victims, alongside a growing number of men. Scholars across various disciplines have proposed multiple theories to explain the causes and nature of this phenomenon, as well as national and international strategies to curb it. Environmental scholars, for instance, argue that climate change, particularly the shrinking of Lake Chad in northern Nigeria, has contributed to the rise in trafficking. The lake, once a primary water source for local communities, has drastically diminished, undermining the livelihoods of predominantly farming populations. This economic disruption has left many vulnerable to exploitation, with some individuals resorting to aid dependency, joining trafficking networks, or being recruited by insurgent groups such as Boko Haram.

Security scholars, including Ojo, Oyewole & Aina (2023) and Onuoha (2013), attribute the increase in trafficking to the operational strategies of Boko Haram, which reportedly relies on human trafficking and other cross-border criminal activities for sustenance. Others in this field, like Ibeagha and Mgbemena (2018), emphasize that persistent security challenges at Nigeria's borders have weakened the capacity of institutions mandated to monitor and control trafficking.

In another vein, researchers such as Eselebor (2019) have pointed to the porous nature of the Nigeria-Benin border as a significant enabler of human trafficking. Nigeria and Benin reportedly share over 250 unmanned border points, which have become vital transit routes for trafficking operations (Oladopo, Aladejebi & Opeyemi, 2021). These perspectives collectively suggest that weak border control is a major driver of the trafficking crisis between the two countries.

While these scholarly positions offer valuable insights, they do not fully explain the complexity of human trafficking in Nigeria and Benin. Notably, the porous borders between the two nations have existed since independence, yet human trafficking has only become a prominent issue in recent years. Similarly, while climate change and security threats are emerging contributors, they are not unique to Nigeria and Benin. Other regions facing similar challenges have not experienced comparable increases in trafficking (Adewoyin, 2019).

It is within this context of theoretical gaps that this study examines economic instability as a central enabler of human trafficking between Nigeria and the Benin Republic. This approach views the economy as the foundational structure upon which other elements such as security, border control, and environmental resilience are built. As argued by Achumba, Ighomereho, and Akpor-Robaro (2013), the failure to strengthen economic foundations exacerbates the effects of insecurity, climate change, and border weaknesses. Manifestations of economic instability, such as widespread unemployment, make citizens more susceptible to being recruited into trafficking cartels or becoming victims themselves.

By focusing on economic instability as the underlying cause, this study offers a broader framework for understanding the interconnectedness of other contributing factors. Studying both Nigeria and Benin together is essential, given their shared borders but divergent legislative and institutional responses to trafficking. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design to bridge existing methodological gaps, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to produce a more comprehensive empirical analysis. It builds on the Marxist premise that the economic base determines the strength and effectiveness of the state's superstructure, including its institutions and capacity to uphold law and order.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Numerous studies have examined the phenomenon of human trafficking, each contributing unique insights into its causes, victims, recruitment methods, and socio-economic implications. This study builds on existing literature by focusing on these thematic areas to better understand the complex dynamics at play. In analyzing the root causes of human trafficking, Miraglia, Ochoa, and Briscoe (2012), in their work *"Transnational Organized Crime and Fragile States,"* conducted a systematic review highlighting the correlation between state fragility and the rise of organized criminal networks engaged in drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the illicit trade in human organs. The authors noted that many West African nations, including Nigeria and Chad, exhibit characteristics of fragile states, creating an environment conducive to the proliferation of non-state actors such as Boko Haram. These groups rely on illicit economies, including human trafficking, for survival. This perspective aligns with Cockayne's (2011) arguments in *"State Fragility, Organized Crime, and Peacebuilding: Towards a More Strategic Approach,"* which posits that fragile states often lack the capacity to maintain territorial integrity, especially through border control mechanisms. Cockayne emphasizes that effective border policing demands substantial financial and technological resources—gaps that traffickers exploit in fragile state contexts.

While some scholars argue that economic instability underpins illicit cross-border activities, others stress the role of inadequate border security. For instance, Eselebor (2019), in *"Porous Borders and Human Trafficking in Nigeria,"* contends that the inability to effectively secure Nigeria's borders is a major enabler of trafficking. The study revealed that Nigeria possesses over 250 unmanned border points, with 197 human trafficking cases between 2020 and 2023 linked to these vulnerable areas. Similarly, Adeleye (2017), in *"Victims, Actors, and Violence: Human Trafficking and Prostitution in Communities Along the Nigeria–Benin Republic Border,"* identified porous

borders as a key factor facilitating trafficking in the region. A related report presented to the U.S. Congress titled *"How Porous Borders Fuel Human Trafficking in the United States"* echoed these concerns, linking weak border management and irregular migration to trafficking cases in the U.S.

Further insights are provided in a paper by Leah de Haan, Aghedo, and Eaton (2022), published by Chatham House, titled *"Tracing the 'Continuum of Violence' Between Nigeria and Libya: How the Movement of People from Edo State Fuels the Libyan Conflict Economy."* Using a survey-based research design, the study traced the motivations behind irregular migration from Nigeria to Libya. The authors argued that economic hardship is a primary driver exploited by traffickers to lure or coerce individuals into migration, despite the known risks.

The United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT, 2020) also reported that the most vulnerable victims in West Africa are youths under 18 and young girls. These individuals are trafficked for forced labor, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, or organ trade across Africa and Europe.

In evaluating legal frameworks addressing trafficking, this review considered key instruments such as the Palermo Protocol, Nigeria's NAPTIP Act, and Benin's *Brigade de Protection des Mineurs* (1999). While over fifteen West African countries have ratified the Palermo Protocol, challenges in domesticating and implementing its provisions persist due to economic fragility and political instability. Nigeria's NAPTIP Act offers a comprehensive legal definition of human trafficking, recognizing both internal and cross-border dimensions and listing various forms of abuse and exploitation. However, insecurity in border communities—particularly in Boko Haram-affected areas—has significantly undermined its enforcement. Similarly, Benin's 1999 law fails to adequately address abuses against underage girls within its borders.

Finally, Ogunniyi and Idowu (2022), in their work *"Human Trafficking in West Africa: An Assessment of the Implementation of International and Regional Normative Standards,"* employed a systematic review methodology to assess anti-trafficking frameworks across Africa. Despite more than two decades since the ratification of the Palermo Protocol, their study found that human trafficking remains prevalent in West Africa due to poor implementation, limited economic resources, and weak political will.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theoretical frameworks: the Failed State Theory and Delanda's Assemblage and Social Complexity Theory. The Failed State Theory, initially conceptualized following the collapse of governance in Somalia in 1991, underscores a government's inability to provide essential services and maintain territorial integrity. Siad Barre's observations on the Somali crisis, along with scholarly interpretations by Rotberg (2002), define failed states as those that lack the capacity to ensure basic security, governance, and socio-economic welfare. Rotberg emphasized that failed states are characterized by institutional paralysis, the inability to enforce laws, and the erosion of legitimacy and sovereignty. Supporting views by Jackson (1990), Englebert (2000), and Menkhaus (2004) further associate failed states with economic collapse, territorial loss to insurgent groups as seen in Nigeria's confrontation with Boko Haram— inadequate border control, and social disintegration.

Rotberg (2002) also stressed that failed states often exhibit unregulated power struggles among elites, attempts to undermine governance through unconstitutional means, and escalating internal violence. These conditions are compounded by deteriorating living standards, the collapse of infrastructure, and leadership driven more by personal gain than by public welfare.

Complementing this perspective is Delanda's Assemblage and Social Complexity Theory (2006), which conceptualizes social entities as composites of heterogeneous components that interact to produce systemic effects. Assemblage theory posits that these components while independent can, when interconnected, determine the behavior and capacity of the whole. Applied to social systems, this framework illustrates how various societal dysfunctions coalesce to produce complex challenges, such as human trafficking.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for examining the intersection of economic instability and human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of underage girls in Nigeria and the Benin Republic. While economic instability is identified as the primary driver, associated conditions including porous borders, rampant unemployment, and institutional dysfunction are symptomatic of broader state failure. The Failed State Theory captures the inability of the state to provide essential services, enforce laws, and secure borders, all of which directly contribute to national insecurity.

Assemblage Theory aids in conceptualizing how these individual failures interact. For instance, economic hardship makes individuals more vulnerable to trafficking, as agents exploit their desperation by offering false promises of education, employment, or upward mobility. Inadequate border security further facilitates the trafficking process, allowing victims to be transported across borders with minimal risk of interception. Corruption, another hallmark of state failure, significantly undermines enforcement efforts. Reports indicate that while Nigeria and Benin officially recognize 86 legal border points, there are over 1,400 illicit crossing points (Idris et al., 2024). In the Seme-Krake axis alone, there are over 56 illegal border posts, many of which operate with little oversight. Security personnel at these locations are frequently motivated by bribery, further compromising border control efforts. The integration of Failed State Theory and

Assemblage Theory offers a nuanced understanding of how economic instability—when compounded by institutional weakness and systemic corruption—creates a conducive environment for human trafficking. These theoretical frameworks guide this study's exploration of the complex, interwoven factors enabling trafficking across Nigeria and Benin.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to maximize the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, especially in contexts where a single method would limit the scope and depth of data collection. As noted by Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri (2021), mixed methods involve the integration of multiple data collection and analysis strategies within a single study, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of complex social phenomena.

The decision to employ a mixed-methods approach is grounded in its ability to capture the multifaceted nature of human trafficking across Nigeria and the Benin Republic. As Feters (2016) asserts, mixed methods draw upon both post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms, enabling the researcher to combine empirical measurements with nuanced, contextual understanding. This approach allows for methodological triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. Maxwell (2016) also emphasizes the logical coherence, adaptability, and capacity of mixed methods to provide deep insights, especially when investigating underexplored or sensitive topics. Similarly, Enosh, Tzafrir, and Stolovy (2014) argue that this design empowers researchers to address research questions with both breadth and depth.

In this study, data will be collected through a combination of surveys and interviews involving key stakeholders. These include victims of human trafficking, convicted traffickers, and officials working in anti-trafficking agencies in both Nigeria and the Benin Republic. Specifically, senior

personnel from Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) will be interviewed to gain institutional perspectives on the challenges and dynamics of combating trafficking.

In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as newspaper articles, official reports from NAPTIP and immigration services, and peer-reviewed journal publications addressing human trafficking will be reviewed. The analysis of the collected data will employ content analysis, a method that facilitates the systematic coding and interpretation of textual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. This analytical approach will be applied to both qualitative interviews and documentary sources to determine the relevance, consistency, and implications of the information in relation to the study's objectives.

Economic Instability and Human Trafficking

The post-COVID economy of most West African states has been characterized as highly unstable. Major economies in West Africa, such as Nigeria, Ghana, and the Benin Republic, are struggling to keep inflation and unemployment rates low, while also managing exchange rate fluctuations.

The link between economic instability and human trafficking has been demonstrated through document analysis and surveys involving victims of human trafficking. The assumption that economic factors contribute to human trafficking is built on the premise that the economy forms the foundation upon which state institutions are built, and these institutions, in turn, support the socio-economic and political needs of the population. According to Busza et al. (2018), the economy plays a significant role in human trafficking, as economic factors drive migrants to make employment choices, such as choosing to work in brothels despite the high risks involved. The author expanded on this assertion, noting that promises of economic incentives, the desire to

migrate, and structural unemployment are linked to the economy and influence human trafficking. Furthermore, those seeking to change their livelihoods, particularly migrants from the agricultural sector, are often victims (Howard, 2014).

It has been observed that the majority of West African migrants migrate for economic reasons. This is linked to rising unemployment in West African states, such as Nigeria, where the unemployment rate is around 65%, and the lack of local opportunities. In a survey conducted by Howard (2014), labor migration was seen as an economic activity and a means of earning a living. Supporting this assertion, parents willingly give their children to unknown agents or relatives for financial returns (IOM, 2022). In a study conducted by Goz'dziak (2016), involving 140 youths trafficked to the United States for sexual exploitation and forced labor, the economy was identified as one of the main drivers of human trafficking. Similarly, a study by Arhin (2016), which analyzed 72 court cases of trafficking, found that victims' testimonies showed they were lured through promises of economic rewards. In Sierra Leone and Senegal, economic reasons have also been major contributors to irregular migration. Like Sierra Leone and Senegal, other African countries face similar scenarios when it comes to transborder crimes, especially human trafficking.

Socio-Political Instability and Human Trafficking

The economy serves as a foundational pillar supporting state institutions, the implementation of public policies, and, critically, the sovereignty and legitimacy of the governing elite. A stable economy is vital for the development of robust institutions, the provision of employment, and the maintenance of security, all of which are necessary for effective governance across sectors (Aning

& Lartey, 2019). The 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the essential role of economic stability in sustaining state functions and resilience.

In Nigeria and the Benin Republic, widening economic disparities and escalating inflation have produced two significant outcomes (Aucoin & Yahia, 2019). First, they have contributed to a rise in trans-border crimes; second, they have heightened citizens' vulnerability to exploitation by transnational criminal networks. As Aziz and Monzini (2015) explain, economic hardship creates fertile conditions for illicit activities to flourish, as individuals facing financial desperation may be drawn into illegal trade or recruited by organized crime syndicates. For instance, Nigeria's 2014 economic downturn and the 2016 spike in inflation were accompanied by a notable surge in cybercrime, particularly among the youth. Economic strain not only fuels criminal participation but also increases the pool of potential victims vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

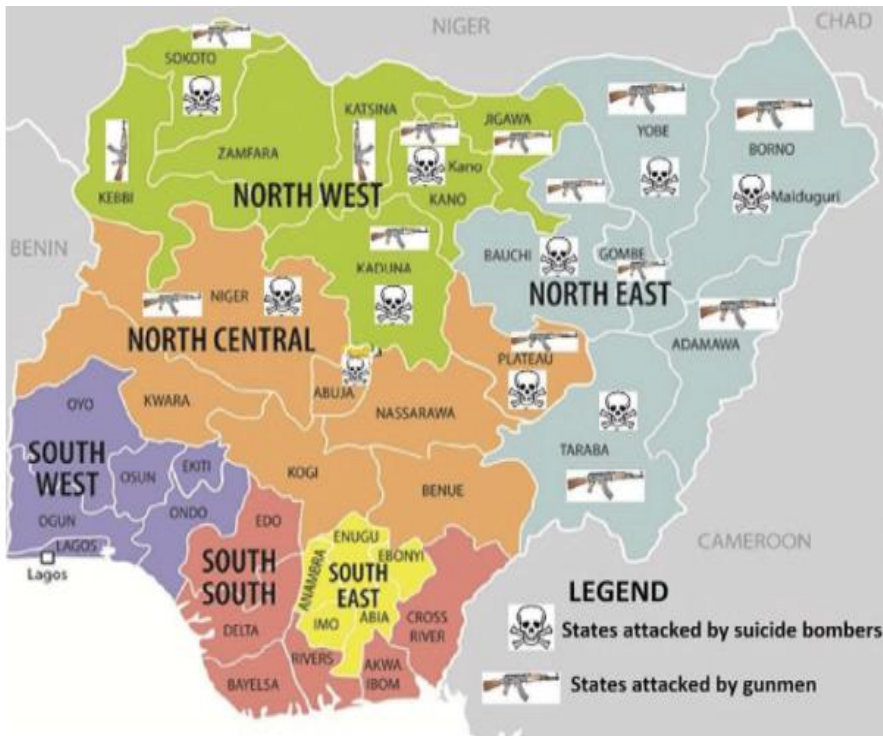
Moreover, fiscal constraints undermine the capacity of government institutions to function effectively. One notable consequence is the inability to adequately police Nigeria's borders with the Benin Republic. This is not merely a security issue, but also a financial one—stemming from limited resources to recruit personnel or invest in advanced surveillance technologies such as drones and satellites. Nigeria currently has over 250 unmanned border points, a staggering figure considering its population of over 200 million, including an estimated 70 million unemployed youth. The federal government struggles to pay its existing 70,000 border security staff, raising the critical question: how can additional personnel be recruited or existing operations expanded amid severe economic constraints?

The economy, therefore, must be viewed as a key enabler in addressing prolonged insecurity and human trafficking. While economic instability offers breeding ground for trafficking syndicates

and other transnational crimes, it simultaneously erodes the security architecture necessary to counter these threats (Broad & Turnbull, 2019). The ongoing economic challenges in Nigeria and Benin hinder both countries' abilities to respond effectively to mounting security crises. Since 2012, Nigeria has grappled with the Boko Haram insurgency, which has displaced more than 10,000 individuals and forced many into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. This insecurity has contributed to a visible increase in street begging, underage domestic labor, and sex trafficking.

The northern regions of Nigeria, in particular, have become hotspots for kidnappings and violent attacks. According to Onuoha (2013), "Since the start of 2024, civilians have faced intensified violence across Nigeria, with near-daily attacks by armed groups. At least 580 civilians have been kidnapped since January, with incidents reported in states such as Borno and Kaduna." These realities underscore the pressing need for a stable, well-funded economic framework to undergird security interventions and counter the proliferation of criminal and trafficking networks.

Figure 1: Insecurity and Human Trafficking



Source: Onuoha (2023)

Recruitment and Abuse of Victims of Human Trafficking

The recruitment methods of human trafficking victims are highly dynamic. This is largely due to local, regional, and international pressures on trafficking syndicates, as well as global awareness campaigns aimed at exposing their activities. A survey of fifty-six (56) human trafficking victims in Nigeria revealed over eight (8) related strategies used by traffickers. This aligns with oral evidence provided by an employee of NAPTIP, who confirmed that syndicates employ various methods to evade border checkpoints, immigration controls, and other enforcement measures at borders and ports.



Source: Researcher Field Work

The data illustrated in the bar chart above reflects findings from a survey conducted with 56 victims of human trafficking in Nigeria. According to the responses, 5% of the victims reported being trafficked out of the country after syndicates provided them with counterfeit travel documents. These individuals successfully passed through immigration checks at land borders but later discovered, upon arrival in the destination country, that the documents were invalid and unusable for legal employment. Consequently, many were compelled to work in brothels or factories to survive.

Additionally, 9% of respondents were deceived with fake employment offers, while 13% were recruited into non-existent companies. One respondent recounted being directed to apply for jobs advertised online. The entire recruitment process, including interviews, was conducted virtually through platforms like Google Meet. Upon arrival in the supposed host country, however, they

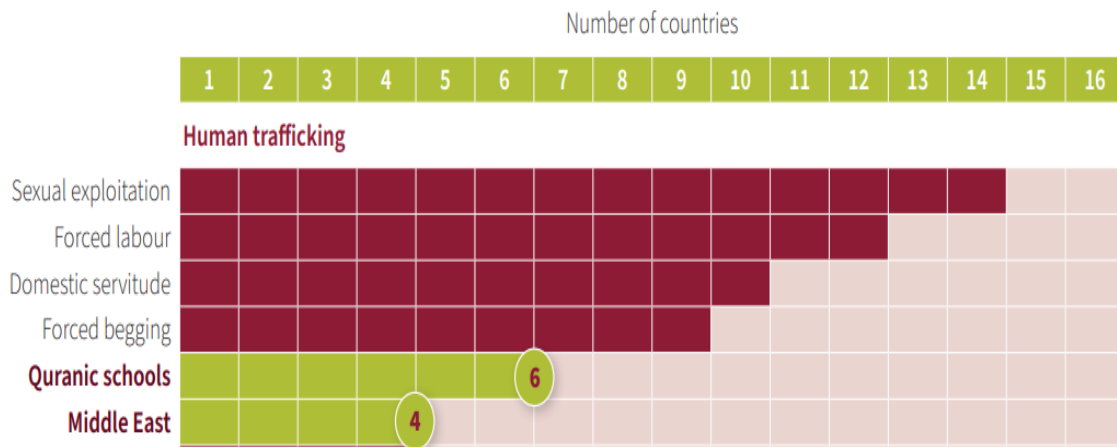
found that the promised jobs did not exist. These victims were subsequently coerced into exploitative labor such as domestic servitude or commercial sex work.

A significant proportion of respondents 39% were lured through romance-related schemes. Within this category, 23% were deceived by individuals met via matchmaking apps or social media platforms, while 16% were enticed by false promises of meeting romantic partners. Another tactic involved offering fraudulent educational opportunities: victims were presented with fake university admission letters and scholarship offers found online. These offers appeared credible, often involving application procedures and documentation. However, the victims only realized they had been misled after traveling abroad and discovering the institutions did not exist.

Sixteen percent (16%) of the victims reported being kidnapped, while 7% were recruited through referrals from friends or relatives—individuals they trusted.

Further insights from NAPTIP (2023) reveal that trafficking syndicates often exploit vulnerable populations within Quranic schools. Children and young adults in these settings were reportedly forced to beg on the streets for their masters, engage in domestic work for which their wages were confiscated, or coerced into prostitution.

Victims of trafficking are subjected to diverse forms of abuse. Tagziria and Lucia (2023) identified four primary categories of human rights violations routinely experienced by trafficked individuals. Similarly, Udoka (2024) emphasized that traffickers often impose forced labor on victims as a form of debt repayment. Agents who finance travel arrangements frequently confiscate victims' documents and compel them to work under exploitative conditions until they have "repaid" the cost of their relocation.

Figure 3: Abuses Suffered by Victims

Source: Tagziria & Lucia (2023)

Tagziria & Lucia (2023) noted that depending on the country where the victims were trafficked, most victims of human trafficking are subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, forced begging, and, in some cases, are admitted into Quranic schools in the Middle East.

Free Movement in West Africa and Human Trafficking

Porous borders are a major contributor to human trafficking in Nigeria and the Benin Republic. Victims are often smuggled through unmonitored and unsecured entry points. The rising levels of insecurity in Nigeria have made these porous borders a common route for traffickers transporting victims to their final destinations.

Another significant contributor to cross-border trafficking is the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement. The four supplementary protocols, adopted between 1985 and 1990, commit member states to:

1. Provide their citizens with legitimate travel documents;
2. Allow community members to reside in, seek, and engage in income-generating employment.
3. Ensure that individuals facing expulsion are treated humanely.
4. Prevent mass expulsions and restrict individual expulsions to issues of national security, public safety, public order or morality, public health, or failure to meet residency conditions (Clark, 2014).

Thousands of people have migrated from failing economies to more stable developing countries due to the ease of entering ECOWAS member states without a visa. As a result, each member state now hosts a significant number of unskilled or semi-skilled workers who are either unemployed or underemployed. Human traffickers exploit this reality, taking advantage of the growing economies of West African nations as both transit and destination points. Desperate laborers in search of better opportunities are particularly at risk, often ending up as sex workers, agricultural laborers, or participants in other illicit enterprises after being misled with promises of well-paying jobs in emerging economies (Hughes, 2004).

While the free movement protocol aims to promote economic activity and regional integration, traffickers have misused it to further their criminal operations—posing serious threats to regional security. When trafficking activities go unchecked, human security is compromised. Despite its intended benefits, the protocol has not led to a decline in human trafficking within the subregion. ECOWAS, though celebrated as the first African bloc to implement a free movement initiative, struggles with poor execution. Rather than advancing trade and economic growth, the protocol—

when inadequately enforced—has facilitated trafficking and weakened border security (Olonisakin, 2008).

ECOWAS currently lacks an adequate mechanism to monitor undocumented migration. This institutional gap allows traffickers to exploit the privileges of free movement with minimal resistance (Sawadogo, 2012). Rather than promoting integration, the protocol has exacerbated both national and human security challenges. Unrestricted movement within the subregion contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. It also encourages the trafficking of small arms and narcotics, which further threaten public order in member states (Okeke et al., 2014).

According to Article 2(d) of the ECOWAS Treaty, member states are obligated to eliminate obstacles to the free movement of persons, goods, capital, and services. This includes dismantling administrative barriers imposed by national laws, immigration authorities, customs, and law enforcement agencies (Agyei & Clotey, 2008). However, the removal of such barriers has also emboldened traffickers to expand their networks across the region's more prosperous economies (Mohammed, 2005).

Since the 1980s, political and administrative challenges have hindered the full realization of the convention on the free movement of people and goods. For example, Ghanaian law requires ECOWAS citizens to register businesses with a minimum capital of USD 30,000 before they can legally operate. While this policy was intended as a safeguard, it has inadvertently turned Ghana into a trafficking transit hub, as traffickers typically cannot meet this financial requirement. Without such regulations, Ghana could have become a long-term destination for trafficking networks (Mashil, 2005).

Border officials have also played a role in facilitating trafficking. Numerous individuals have crossed regional borders without proper documentation by bribing immigration authorities. In many cases, traffickers pay as little as 100 Naira or 200 CFA (less than \$1) to secure unauthorized passage.

West African nations have historically experienced civil wars, unrest, and political violence. These conflicts have contributed to widespread poverty and instability across the subregion (Rima, 2001). As a result, many citizens of struggling states prioritize migration to neighboring countries in search of better living conditions. This dynamic increases their vulnerability to trafficking. Victims, desperate for a better life, are able to travel freely due to the weak border surveillance accompanying the ECOWAS free movement protocol (Fitzgibbon, 2003).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Fragile economic conditions often create environments where vulnerable individuals can be easily recruited by traffickers. Simultaneously, such instability hampers the capacity of governments to implement and sustain effective counter-trafficking measures—particularly in areas such as border surveillance, national security, and job creation. In Nigeria and the Benin Republic, although anti-trafficking policies and frameworks are in place, their enforcement is often undermined by persistent economic challenges.

Recommendations

1. Develop and implement a robust economic recovery and development plan aimed at reducing unemployment, improving living standards, and strengthening public institutions.

Such a plan should prioritize increased funding for agencies responsible for securing borders and combating human trafficking.

2. Address terrorism and insecurity in border regions. The continued presence and influence of extremist groups like Boko Haram, who occupy and control strategic territories, facilitate illicit cross-border activities, including trafficking. Effective coordination between the Nigerian and Beninese governments is critical to enhancing joint border security operations and reducing the operational reach of these groups.

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