

TYPICAL HINDRANCES TO ERADICATION EFFORTS OF ANTI HUMAN TRAFFICKING AGENCIES IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

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Abstract

Human trafficking remains a serious socio-economic contemporary problem world over. Through human and sex trafficking, for example, a substantial population of many developing countries across the world are believed to be exploited with nations losing needed man power to ensure national development and growth. In other words the consequence of human trafficking means significant disturbing implications for development especially for third world source countries like Nigeria in Sub Sahara Africa where a large number of young girls, women and boys are trafficked from for sex work and other forms of enslavement in Europe annually. Tackling the problem of trafficking has naturally become of major concern in recent years. This becomes more worrisome as there seem not to be concrete achievement in this direction. This paper therefore uses qualitative research methods to explore the typical hindrances that response agencies face while trying to check the problem of human trafficking in south-south Nigeria, a region known to be endemic regarding the spread of the practice of trafficking.

Key Words: Human trafficking; South-south Nigeria; Response Hindrances; Response Agencies

Introduction

Cross border human trafficking is seen as widespread in Nigeria (Aronowitz, 2001; Onoiribholo, 2008). The South-South of Nigeria is believed to be the region where much of the trafficking activities occur. Official reports posit that the region accounts for a substantial percentage of the number of victims of cross border trafficking from Nigeria and indeed the entire West Africa (UNESCO 2006; Carling, 2005; Okonofua, 2004). Scholars have also argued that that the situation in the area underscores the realities of normalisation of the practice in the region with individuals and families taking pride in getting involved in the activities (Okojie et al). Some hypothesis have been put forward that the people get involve in trafficking for international prostitution easily because the dominant tribe (Binis) of the area in the sub region that are reported to be more involved in the practice are known to be used to local prostitution (ibid). Contrary to this argument, Aghatise (2012) however contended that this assertion is untrue, that the Binis are a quite traditional people who are averred to prostitution, adding that the practice is strongly abhorred among the people. However, authors and state actors have continued to emphasize the negative consequences of the practice of human trafficking especially as it affects individual victims and the sending nations in general. Apart from infringing on the fundamental human rights of the victims, they believed the practice also denied the attainments of their full potentials (see, Nwanene, 2015; UNODC 2019). On the part of the nation as a whole, its reputation is not only seen to be bastardised, the economy is also argued to suffer great damage as young people that represent the work force are hugely depleted.

To eradicate the problem of human trafficking in Nigeria particularly, state and non-state actors have been making efforts to either stop or reduce the prevalence of the practice. Following the alarming reports of the practice in the country, the government enacted the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement Administration Act 2003. This gave birth to the establishment of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Human Trafficking and other related offences (NAPTIP) in 2003 (See Egede 2014). The establishing of the agency was argued to have come late as it was seen to have been long overdue prior to when it was eventually constituted. The government is believed to only ensure this after a lot of international pressure according to reports. However, the agency since establishment has been active while trying to respond to activities of trafficking syndicates and the menaces that trafficking activities pose in the country. Following the emergence of the official anti-trafficking agency other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also sprang up joining in the response

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efforts especially in South-south Nigeria. Although some international authorities still argue that the country is not doing enough to check the problem. For instance, the United States Trafficking Project (US TIP, 2018) asserts that Nigeria's efforts in the direction of meeting concrete response with the seriousness of the problem in the country has not been seen. But NAPTIP argues that they are doing their best within the circumstance they are operating (Nwanene, 2016).

Focus of the Paper

This paper attempts to explore the typical challenges faced by state and non-state agencies operating in order to check the wide spread of the activities of human trafficking in South-south Nigeria. The paper in the process specifically x-rays the peculiar hindrances encountered by the main official response body NAPTIP and a few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the region. It also indicates the impact of these hindrances on the overall policy and practice regarding the eradication of human trafficking in Nigeria

Methodology

This study is a qualitative exploration. Face to face in-depth interviews with unstructured open-ended questionnaires were used to gather data from the field work. A focus group discussion session was also conducted. The purposive method was used to identify key informants as participants. Key officials of NAPTIP and two visible non-governmental organisations(NGOs) operating in response to human trafficking in South Nigeria were selected. This is because they are the only agency representatives that are knowledgeable regarding the subject matter in the region. The two selected NGOs are Girls Project Initiative (GPI) and Idia Renaissance. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data from the field exploration. Pseudonyms were used. For example, HTP-NGO1, HTP-GovtAgency1 etc were used in the place of the real names or official designation of the participants. This was to protect the identity of the participants. Ethical considerations were ensured while gathering the data.

Findings/Discussion

The Plights of Response Agency and NGOs

NAPTIP and NGOs as found face response hindrances. Apart from contending with attitudes of government in terms of funding and other discouraging political disposition, they also face uncooperative behaviours from victims, relatives, and people in the local communities. Also, NAPTIP and local NGOs report that they lack in many other aspects. Many of the victims were

often unwilling to be supported and helped (HTP-GovtAgency1). There were cases where agencies had trained returnees on skills and set them up with equipment and tools and yet the victims had abandoned the business and traveled back abroad, quite possibly to be re-trafficked (HTP-NGO1).

Some victims do not report to the main agency when they are back in the country as a case of trafficking (HTP-GovtAgency1). This makes support efforts difficult for the agencies and NGOs. Also, relatives especially some parents of rescued returnee victims, always want to find ways to re-send their daughters to Europe (HTP0-NGO1). This category of families, as referred to by HTP0-NGO1, are those —who have given up on the country”, Nigeria and see no prospect of surviving without sending their children abroad even if they are to be exploited over there. This thinking, as found, generally makes reintegration efforts challenging for response organisations who contend with this seemingly resistant disposition.

It takes a long period of counseling and persuasion before most parents will want to accept their daughter back when repatriated against their consent (HTP0-NGO1). As discovered, many of such returnee victims do not often want to return to their homes because their parents will be hostile to them while at home. This adds to worsening returnee victims’ mental health conditions and troubles making rehabilitation work more frustrating for response officials.

Response officials, findings indicate get affronts from parents. “We even receive insult from parents...When I go to prepare the parents... to put them in a good position to receive their child, it is a battle for me” They will say, “So, you are the one wanting to return my child, you don’t want my child to make it {‘make it’ means to become rich} over there.” So they see you as an enemy(HTP09-FGD1). Also, response field officials on prevention programmes like public sensitisation against community support for trafficking of girls often encounter barriers. “We have challenges doing our work of prevention of trafficking and re-trafficking because of the mind-set of the generality of the people (HTP0-NGO2)”. This mind-set of the people in the larger society arguably bears overarching negative implication on the spread of sex trafficking across the region.

Uncooperative Local Community

The issue of the lack of cooperation from local communities (victims, relatives and people in the communities), is a serious matter in response attempts by the main agency and NGOs in the region. Particularly, with returnee victims often unwilling to petition the main response agency for arrest and prosecution of offenders the fight against the phenomenon faces some degree of set-backs, as

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found. This is considered as a serious limitation by the response agencies because arrest and prosecution of traffickers will be difficult without a victim or relative of a victim coming up with a complaint or petition (HTP0- GovtAgency1). Also, when the main agency and other law enforcement agencies make an arrest based on third party complaints, the victims are in many cases reluctant to testify (HTP0-GovtAgency1). Proceeding on prosecution in such a situation, as found, becomes difficult for the response body.

Many victims and their families are found to hesitate from petitioning against offenders for reasons which include the fact that those responsible for their trafficking could either be a close relative, a distant relative or a close friend. At this point, the victim or the family tries to avoid being blamed for the jailing of the trafficker as a relative or a close friend (HTP0- GovtAgency1). This situation regarding victim's relationship with traffickers often poses a major challenge to response authorities especially in terms of the prosecution of the offenders. As found, this is the case in many instances in the region as the trafficking of many victims usually involve the connivance of family members, siblings, aunties, nieces, cousins, close family friends and other close relations (HTP0-GovtAgency1; Okojie et al., 2003).

Victims and families often opt for a sort of non-formal settlement and resolution of the skirmish that may emerge from trafficking issues, from what was found (HTP0- GovtAgency1). Even when the victim dies the family is likely going to settle for informal resolution of the issue and probably accept some form of financial compensation for the loss believing that 'the dead is already dead', jailing the trafficker (culprit) will not bring her back to life (HTP0-GovtAgency1). With this, traffickers operate freely knowing full well they face no serious threat of a successful official arrest and prosecution.

Defiance of Cartels

As found, because traffickers are unyielding and resistant to fighting the practice in the area response agents face difficulty in stopping the spread of the practice. Broad networking of traffickers and their defiance, despite official condemnation, is seen in the trafficking activity in the area. The trafficking cartel seems to be deeply entrenched in the social network system of the region, the country and internationally. The network is so widespread that the traffickers operate from different locations within and outside the region. Findings indicate that the practice is still going on till tomorrow despite arrests (HTP0-GovtAgency1). Some traffickers are said to resist arrest and prosecution. Those who resist arrest are believed to have some sort of 'God-father' backing among

people in top political offices. Such traffickers operate with boldness not minding the implications of their action against the law. A case relating to a recalcitrant trafficker who dared constituted authorities was recounted by one of the participants. It involved a trafficking couple who told a relative of the victim they trafficked without their consent to go and report to government that nothing will happen trafficked by a couple without their knowledge (HTP-GovtAgency 1). Some of the traffickers are reported to have links with highly influential and power wielding individuals in the region and in the country. Certain individuals in the sex trafficking practice in the region are considered as the – ‘untouchables’ (HTP-NGO2). Similar to this response hindrance is the inability of the political, community and religious leaders of the area to publicly speak against the practice as indicated by this participant quoted below.

I think it is the encouragement they are getting from the government... {...} Let me be specific, the government of the place has not really come out... condemn trafficking in strong terms...Ummm...If you watch the recent campaign for the last election, none of the parties mentioned it as their area of focus... (HTP03-GovtAgency1).

As hinted above, it was found that the political class does not honestly fight the challenge for some reasons. The politicians believed the activity of traffickers make the area boom economically (HTP0-GovtAgency1). The politicians may also be afraid that condemning the practice may affect their electoral fortunes.

Lack of Political will and Inadequate Funding by Government

The negative attitudes of national and regional government regarding partnering with the NAPTIP and NGOs in perfecting response measures is an issue discovered as a challenge to responses in the area. Suggestions and ways that response practice programmes, including in areas of rehabilitation and reintegration, can be effective by the agencies have been discountenanced by government from what was found. This has left the response organisations often demoralised. One participant noted that it is their duty to initiate a roadmap for response programmes but that it is the government’s duty to take it from there (HTP-NGO1). The absence of this synergy limits their capacity to replicate ideas and projects capable of helping to check the spread of sex trafficking in the area (HTP0- NGO1).

As also found, the government appears unable to deal decisively with the challenge of human and sex trafficking in the region due to lack of political will and failing political leadership in the country. This is partly manifested in the

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unsupportive disposition of government towards helping the official response agency and supportive organisations in the fight against the problem. This likewise informs their approach to funding and managing whatever response organ (e.g. NAPTIP) they may have established in the country. As discovered, they do not only starve such organisation of funds, they refuse to work with it for honest solutions to identified problems. Research findings' documents have been forwarded in the past to the Federal government on the need to alleviate poverty if trafficking was to be checked (HTP0-GovtAgency1). Our public affairs department has also drew government attention to the need to create employment for the teeming youth to reduce the growing rate of human trafficking in the country (HTP03-GovtAgency1). But, from what was found, nothing has come out of this.

The political elites seem to deliberately avoid the facts concerning the reasons why the people migrate into exploitation. The government approach, from field findings, indicates that the fight against trafficking is targeted at the level of its symptoms, leaving the fundamental contributory factors. This also connects the misconstruing of contributory factors regarding human and sex trafficking by political authorities in the area. The consequence of this is the implementation of resolutions which might not be ideal for effective response (also see, Brunovskis and Surtees 2008).

Like the main response agency, other organisations also helping to respond to sex trafficking find it hard to fund their activities (HTP0-GovtAgency1; HTP0-NGO2; HTP0-NGO1). Apart from in the area of rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee victims, there is the need to fund campaigns and awareness creation. This is considered as vital as both a preventive and reduction measure. For an effective awareness raising activity, the process is said to run continuously so that as the younger girls (who often targets, for example) grow up they will constantly be informed about the activities of sex trafficking and protected against the deceit of the cartels (HTP- NGO1). Also, though the government is supposed to build on whatever template response agencies may have produced for them (ibid), the case is to the contrary.

It was found the main agency cannot get electricity for their offices in some of the commands, and unable to fuel the few vehicles they have for the purpose of carrying out activities like going for arrest of offenders, following up cases, going for campaigns and sensitisation and others. Also, response organisations find it difficult to afford recent information technology facilities to ensure up to date strategy and programming towards checking the activities of traffickers.

...You know the technology does a lot in disseminating information and producing information material ...producing this information and getting to reach the people in all forms of technology that is available is still a very big challenge. The advocacies are still done very crudely... {HTP- GovtAgency1).

The overarching advantage of the use of information technology and other technological innovations around the world, which the sex trafficking cartels latched on to advance their activity (US TIP 2016; Hamilton-Smith, 2013), has also, in a way, seen international counter-responses tailored along the application of technological innovations. But the issue with responses at the local south-south Nigeria level and in the entire country (as illustrated above) is that the main government agency and the NGOs are lagging behind as they cannot afford even common basic technological gadgets and human resources required to counter trafficking syndicates.

Another response challenge discovered is the lack of enough well-organised rehabilitation schemes and facilities like skills development programmes, interest free loans, vocation centres, and jobs (HTP0-GovtAgency1), needed to engage the returnees. Revelations from the field work show that only one major vocational centre is operated by the government of Edo state (which covers the studied area) (HTP-NGO2). The outfit like many other government infrastructures is not well maintained (HTP-NGO2). NAPTIP and NGOs, as found, rely on their limited facility and that of some faith-based organisations for the purpose of rehabilitating the returnees.

NAPTIP, manage with a mini shelter where they house the returnees while waiting to reunite them with their families. They usually rely on a few privately-run centres for long term rehabilitation shelter as indicated by HTP-NGO. "We work with a sister firm...called COSUDOW... they have a hostel facility. {...} ...It is a catholic outfit run by sisters... Like the fifteen that we trained we trained recently, they were housed in that shelter because, we have already donated our shelter to NAPTIP"(HTP-NGO2). Despite relying on additional shelters from private bodies, housing facilities available to NAPTIP are usually not sufficient as they are meant for a very limited number of persons, (HTP-GovtAgency1). With this situation, it becomes more difficult for the response organisations generally to handle the responsibility of keeping them for effective counseling and rehabilitation purposes.

NAPTIP operations in the south-south region, specifically, appears to face basic challenges ranging from inadequate funding, logistics, manpower training, economic conditions, to lack of technological facilities (information technology support) etc.

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“We need good economy...we need good facilities, we need cars. We need trainings, they should employ more hands, train them, empower them, and make the offices habitable. We need steady power. The bus we have cannot go beyond Edo and Delta (Edo and Delta are two of the six states in the south-south region). Above all we need to create awareness. Some relevant other government organisations that are supposed to collaborate with us don’t even know what we stand for (HTP03-GovtAgency1).”

In essence, just like the critical role it plays in explaining the spread of trafficking, the country’s poor economic situation wakens response efforts in the region. The implication of this is that inadequate funding caused by poor economic condition which the country grapple with as a third world nation is a key hindrance to the attempts by agencies to carry out their response and tackle the problem of trafficking in the region.

Inadequacy of Anti-trafficking Policies and Legislations against the Practice in the Region

Although international human and sex trafficking activities had been on in Nigeria since the early 80s until around 2000 there was no known definite laws against the practice (HTP- NGO1; HTP0-NGO2; Carling, 2005; Olujuwon 2008). The recent enactment of anti- trafficking laws in the country appears to be the aftermath of pressure from various international, local organisations and activist groups as well as adoption of the Palermo protocol in 2000 (HTP-NGO1; HTP-NGO2) as noted earlier in the introduction section of this paper. The country’s unserious disposition towards pursuing laws and action against trafficking activities had attracted sanctions from the US TIP (US TIP yearly reports). My findings revealed that NGOs in the state also helped in pushing for legislations against trafficking during the early days of the surge of the practice in the area. Idia Renaissance was the first to lobby with the Edo state house of Assembly for an anti-trafficking bill to be passed in the state which was eventually passed on September 2000. This makes it illegal for people to be trafficked abroad (HTP-NGO2).

According to findings, the government, both at the national and state levels, have in place some anti-trafficking and other gender-based laws in Nigeria (HTP-GovtAgency1). As noted in the previous paragraph, some of them date back to 2000, but have never been effective (HTP-NGO2). Legislative assemblies of states in the south- south region, particularly in Edo state as discovered, recently attempted a consolidation of such laws. Some of the laws in Edo state, as found, were adapted and localised from existing federal laws prohibiting

trafficking in persons (HTP0-GovtAgency1). The Federal government, as found, has such laws to protect women, like laws against genital mutilations, trafficking of women for commercial sex, inhuman treatment of women etc. Edo state has also, on their own passed bills against trafficking and other gender issues. According to one of the participants: the state ministry for women affairs, initiated some laws against human trafficking, genital mutilation. Even the child right law and law against inhuman treatment of women, they were all initiated to protect women (HTP-NGO2).

Despite these laws, it was discovered there is lack of awareness of their existence and ineffective application on the part of authorities. This calls into question the viability of the laws as they appear inexistent. Some participants expressed a lack of faith and trust in the strength of the laws and their enforcement to help solve the problem (HTP0-NGO1; HTP0-NGO2). As found, citizens and mostly sex trafficking victims and their relatives who hope to seek for redress and protection against traffickers do not know what to do in many cases. Follow-ups to the legislation are lacking as the enforcement agencies themselves are handicapped (HTP-GovtAgency1) and, as a result, become complacent at some point. From revelations, until recently, following the Libya sales of humans in the open market which drew global attention, the government in the area was seen to be indifferent to the practice and fails to honestly invoke these existing laws against offenders (HTP-GovtAgency1).

As confirmed, prior the enactment of specific anti-trafficking laws and the establishment of NAPTIP in the country, the police and immigration service handled issues relating to human trafficking as a criminal conduct and immigration violation. There was also the challenge of corruption among the police and the immigration system. The police officers are known to have compromised cases. The country's police are seen to be generally corrupt with bribery and corruption usually associated with the institution (Nwaguma, 2019). Many of them collect bribes and work with the cartels, from what was found, as the cartel members are never prosecuted when arrested. This could also be a function of the condition of economic hardship in the country which has also been linked to wide spread of corruption among the people in in existing literatures.

Many of the immigration officers on their own were also found to have become part of the cartel network. Many of them where responsible for helping the syndicates to produce fake travelling document with which many, especially the early victims, were transported to their destination by air (Okojie et al, 2003). Immigration officials who are part of the syndicate are often responsible for

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preparing victims travelling document (HTP-NGO2). They are also argued to help the syndicates pass victims at local Airport check-points on their way to their destination.

Conclusion

The accounts given by participants, in terms of tackling the practice in the region show case that the country's main response agency (NAPTIP) collaborates with international organisations to respond to the problem but not without some challenges. Hindrances inherent in the disposition of the local communities were highlighted. This was put within the framework of the normalization of the practice in the area and the deep involvement of local institutions in some cases. Also, it was clear that response legislations and measures exist at national and local government levels but there is the challenge of implementations. Most importantly it was noticed that there is a misconstruing of core factors leading to the problem; or seemingly a lack of understanding of the basic root causes of prevalence of the practice. This is seen to have seriously affected effective response thereby negatively impacting the overall policy and practice in the area of responses towards eradication of the problem.

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