



# Trafficked Women, Patriarchy and Social Media: The Case of Benin City, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Trafficking in women remains a global concern despite the local and multilateral efforts to curb it. This work explores a classic case of Benin City, Nigeria, by examining the role that social media and family pressure play in stoking the problem. A cross-sectional analysis of the relevant variables, interviews with government officials, and discussions by victims on the issue show that women are trafficked as a result of the patriarchal tradition that places a little premium on females. The patriarchy of human trafficking is well established in literature. What is surprising in this case is that the networking and interactive characteristics of social media have escalated the problem and emboldened the actors. Unless the authorities take adequate measures to monitor online job advertisements to determine their authenticity, and stock up public libraries with anti-trafficking materials to enlighten vulnerable persons, the problem may become compounded. It may also be more than what the traffic can bear if inter-government agencies do not put in place robust cross border policies to checkmate the activities of traffickers.

**Keywords:** Human trafficking, women, social media, patriarchy, Benin City, Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is witnessing enormous changes in the way information is created, shared, and disseminated as a result of the adoption of mobile technologies, with the internet as the core of the communication processes. These technologies, which provide the platform for social networking using social media tools, have emerged with both positive and negative ramifications. While they enable effortless, quick, and wide circulation of useful information, on the one hand, they have also been found to facilitate the circulation of catastrophic or useless information on the other.

Before the social media came into the equation, news on women trafficking had been limited to the traditional media, which would report it with the narration on how patriarchy had been the main driver of the illegal activity (Omojola, 2014). Patriarchy in the context of this work simply means a scenario whereby the male child is accepted, recognized, empowered, and seen to be superior to the female counterpart. The patriarchal societal structure provided a platform for gender discrimination and the empowerment of men over women. The upshot, which is the feminization of poverty, now impels trafficking in women as more and more young women seek

a better livelihood in the industrialized countries. They do this with the connivance of families and trafficking syndicates (Vieson, 2017). Osuigwe (2017) states that millions of Nigerian young women and girls are at risk of human trafficking due to gender imbalance, poverty, high rate of unemployment, gender-induced cultural bias, human deprivation, and other factors, a fact the media regularly reported.

However, indulgence and participation in trafficking are further influenced by social media or social networking, thereby paving the way for the widespread circulation of trafficking information (Folayan et al., 2018; Omojola, 2009; Okorie, Loto & Omojola, 2018). According to Johnson (2013), the latest battlefield of women trafficking is not on the streets or in a massage parlor, but now on social media. He asserts that girls are caught in the web of traffickers who do a few taps of the keyboard of their laptop computer, a tablet, or a cell phone to invite them to parties, or just to become friends and after that start manipulating them. Social media platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, and the like, have made countless ideas, groups, organizations, and causes visible. One of those groups comprises

women traffickers as well as their victims. Social media do significantly facilitate the environment to recruit naive girls from less industrialized cities and towns such as Benin City in Edo State, one of Nigeria's 36 states. These assertions need to be established, hence this study on the influence of social media and patriarchy on the trafficking of young women in Benin City, Nigeria.

### **Historical anchorage**

The historical antecedent of Benin City concerning the phenomenon of trafficking in women relates to its prolonged pre-colonial contact with Mediterranean Europe, especially Portugal, Southern Italy, and Spain. This historical contact explains the migratory pattern of modern Benin City called *Igodomigodo* Kingdom many years ago. It was a conglomeration of small towns that developed and spread hinterland over the years. According to Wikipedia (2015), *Igodomigodo* was known for its healthy spiritual, philosophical, and organizational development. When Europeans came in contact with them in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they had established an administrative system that baffled Europe and earned the kingdom the appellation of 'Benin City' The interaction with Europe which began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century

resulted in the exchange of ambassadors between it and the Kingdom of Portugal. The Oba of Benin City sent an envoy to the palace of the King of Portugal during this period. This development was the origin of the interaction between Benin City and Europe, which has endured to date, albeit with a negative connotation.

Benin City has a preponderance of Edo speaking people (Bini, Esan, and Afemai) with a population of 1,495,800 persons, according to Nigeria's Population Commission. Of this number, women account for 543,122, which is over 50 percent of the population of Benin City. Okonofua (et al., 2004) asserts that young people of 10 to 25 years old account for 40 percent of the population. The city is poorly industrialized and lacks income-generating opportunities. He stresses that although the state has the highest rates of school enrolment in the country, it also has the highest rates of youth unemployment.

The migration of young women out of Benin City began in the 1980s as a result of the economic recession in the period and the marginalization (following the hierarchical family structure) they suffered in their families, including being used for domestic chores. The women were compelled to emigrate because they were not

recognized as valuable contributors to the formal economy. Education opportunities were few, vocational skills were not accessible, and there was family pressure on the women. Lately, peer influence through social media interaction has added to the list. When they eventually arrive at the foreign countries, they are often employed in the sex industry where their labor and earnings are turned over to the trafficker or the ‘madam’ who facilitated their travel. These trafficked women must make remittances to their families back home in Benin City and these traffickers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Female trafficking, which became apparent since the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the military dictatorship of Babangida in 1986, is on the rise. The reason is that SAP, a so-called blueprint of the World Bank and IMF, meant to improve the economic situation in the countries, brought about untold hardship and rationalization of public service, leading to massive unemployment. The loss of employment by many males during the period pushed them into the informal economy, which hitherto was the domain of women, thereby depleting the income-generating opportunities for women. This

development caused an increase in female poverty and joblessness.

The patriarchal societal structure, which accords the girl child a less significant position in the family, made the situation worse as many experienced a transfer of their means of livelihood to their male counterparts. The consequence of intense suffering of the female gender and the systematic ostracization of women from white and blue-collar jobs triggered a race to seek other means of livelihood. Commercial sex service turned out to be one of the means.

The ease of communication brought about by social media use is spurring a more significant number of women to engage in the trafficking business, the inherent dangers notwithstanding. It is worthy to note that several efforts have been made both at the national and international stages to avert trafficking. Such includes the signing of the Palermo Protocol in 2000 to combat the phenomenon. Nigeria is a signatory to the protocol and has equally domesticated it through an Act of Parliament in 2003, which culminated in the setting up of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffick in Persons (NAPTIP) and other related bodies. Unfortunately, the sex trafficking trade still thrives, and it appears

that the efforts of these bodies are not bearing fruits. The conjecture that social media have been the force driving the trade is gaining scholarship traction and is a significant justification for the conduct of this study.

Literature search on this subject revealed that available studies concentrated on its causes and solution, the establishment of the relationship between trafficking in persons, human smuggling, and organized crime, trafficking migration information sources and the roles of the internet in trafficking (Ellis and Okpala, 2011., Braimah, 2013., Attoh, 2013., Johnson, 2013., Kigbu and Hassan 2015., Osuigwe, 2017 and Vieson, 2017). None of the studies linked the variables of social media influence and patriarchal behavior in their equation. This study does not only cover this gap but also zeros in on Benin City, regarded by observers as the epicenter of the problem in Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to establish the influence of social media and patriarchy on the trafficking of young women in Benin City, Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to;

1. Find out the nexus between patriarchy and trafficking of women in Benin City

2. Establish the influence of social media on the trafficking of women in Benin City
3. Find out measures that could be adopted to curb sex trafficking among Benin City women.

### **Research questions**

The paper seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the nexus between patriarchy and the trafficking of women in Benin City?
2. What is the influence of social media on the trafficking of women in Benin City?
3. What measures could be adopted to curb sex trafficking among Benin City women?

### **The Rationale for the Study**

The findings of this study can be of immense benefit to young women who are vulnerable to trafficking, the government, public libraries, and researchers. It should sensitize young women on some of the deceptive methods adopted by the traffickers in luring innocent females into the trade via social media. The findings of this study are expected to serve as knowledge and information sources that can empower victims to resist the traffickers.

The government would find this study very relevant as it would reveal factors that had continued to influence the escalation of this ill.

The outcome of this study will present the government with practical information on the nexus between patriarchy and sex trafficking, likewise social media, thereby widening their knowledge base on this subject area. The recommendations made in the study would also help the government in the fight against trafficking in Nigeria.

### **Literature Review**

Trafficking, according to Muskat-Gorska (2011), is the process through which an individual is brought into a situation of exploitation that can amount to forced labor. Sex trafficking, on the other hand, is seen by Hamdan (2019) as the action of illegally transporting people from one country or one area to another for commercial sexual exploitation. This situation is usually triggered by poverty and unemployment (Igbinoba et al., 2020). Sex trafficking in Braimah's (2013) terms, means the trafficking that involves moving people within and across local or national borders for sexual exploitation. Gender discrimination in Africa and specifically in Benin City has feminized poverty; hence, young women in a desperate search for greener pastures constitute the vulnerable group. Latonero (2011) affirmed that human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery and the

grim reality of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century global landscape in developed as well as developing countries. It opens up the labor market for women who are more or less seen as commodities to be traded and re-traded in the global sex industry.

Some factors already listed as culprits include poverty, patriarchy, lack of empowerment for women, and globalization (Adeleye and Okonkwo (2010) cited by Braimah (2013) and Ojoh, 2012). In addition to this, Tapinos (2000) identifies the worsening economic inequality between the countries of the Global North and South, which exacerbates illicit migration. Nirmala (2014) submits that the significant complex factors that lead women to be trafficked are; poverty, illiteracy, lack of risk awareness, unjustified adventure craze for settling in the developed culture, value system, and negative impact of the media. The submissions of the above authors imply that most of these young ladies accept to be trafficked because they see prostitution in the developed nations as glamorous and a means of liberating themselves from poverty.

Similarly, Okonofua et al. (2004) and Onyeonoru, (2004) observe that in the context of Nigeria, unemployment, low socio-economic status of women, especially in parts of Edo and Delta

states, are responsible for trafficking in young women. This assertion is buttressed by (Adepoju, 2006), who opines that poverty and ignorance force parents to traffick their children, hoping to benefit from their wages to sustain a deteriorating family income. Such parents tend to ignore the social stigma attached to prostitution and concentrate on the financial success stories told by families whose daughters had engaged in trafficking.

Another important trigger is the impact of remittances on the economies of source countries. It has been argued that remittances from nationals of Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Egypt, Eritrea, Lesotho, Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana have been on the increase and now equal Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) (Cross, Gelderblom, Roux & Mafukidze, 2006). Globally, it is estimated that \$93 billion are remitted through official channels (IOM - UN Migration, 2018). Such remittances provide lifelines to low-income family members who use them to pay for essential services and education of siblings of the trafficked person. For Benin City, remittances from those trafficked are used to build family houses, provide boreholes for water, educate younger male siblings, invest in transportation

businesses, hotels, and boutiques (Attoh, 2009). The investments are visible through the improved well-being of family members of those trafficked.

Traffickers use various channels to reach their victims. While traditional channels of trafficking, which include family, relatives, and friends remain in place, online technologies such as social media tools give traffickers the unprecedented ability to exploit a higher number of victims and advertise their services across geographic boundaries in an unsuspecting manner. Shekhar (2017) emphasizes that social media has turned into a happy hunting ground for sex traffickers as they can fly under the radar of authorities and prey on unsuspecting minors as well as job-seeking women under the garb of virtual anonymity. In affirming this assertion, Dixon (2013) explains that the techniques used by the traffickers to gain trust include the expression of love and admiration of the victim, promising to make the victim a star, and providing a ticket to a new location away from the victim's home.

Polaris (2019) reported that social media is being used by traffickers to recruit victims, proliferate their trafficking operations, and to control victims

through restricting their social media access and impersonating them. Eze (2012), cited by Omekwu, Eke and Odoh (2014), noted that social media and networking have become perilous as a result of the activities of criminals. The unlimited opportunities provided by social media elicit a reaction from Whiting (2012) who laments that traffickers can now reach out thousands of potential victims via Instagram, Facebook, Kik, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Snapchat. It is recorded that the rapid increase in the use of social media among college students and youths between the ages of 18 and 29 makes them vulnerable to this attack (Griego, 2019; Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013)).

### **Theoretical Anchorage**

Two theories are anchoring this study. They are the Radical Feminism Theory and the Social Penetration Theory

#### ***Radical Feminism***

Radical feminists view women's oppression as the most fundamental form of oppression. This oppression is anchored on patriarchy, which organizes society into a complex network of relationships based on the assertion that the male gender is superior. Radical feminists posit that due to

patriarchy, women have come to be viewed as the "other" to the male. As a result, they have been systematically oppressed and marginalized. They assert that the way to deal with the unequal power relations is through a reordering of the social structure as men are the primary beneficiaries of this oppression. They contend that men use social systems and other methods of control to subjugate women. The theory emphasizes the patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, views patriarchy as dividing rights, privileges, and power primarily by gender, and as a result, oppressing women and privileging men (Lewis, 2017). This theory relates to this study, considering that in Benin City, the female gender is portrayed as a commodity (a non-person) owned by the family. Culturally she is inferior as society assigns her the twin roles of procreation and nurturing babies. The inferiority of the female gender is further reinforced in modern times through trafficking as young females are impelled by family heads to travel to Italy, Spain, The and Netherlands, among others, to prostitute and earn money to improve the family income and well-being.



### ***The Social Penetration Theory***

Irwin, Altman, and Taylor propounded the Social Penetration Theory in 1973. It submits that relationship and penetration goes through some stages, and that, as relationships develop, interpersonal communication moves from relatively shallow, non-intimate levels to deeper, more intimate levels. This theory states that relationship development is systematic and predictable and could expose vulnerabilities. This submission captures the relationship and interaction that take place between the traffickers and the victims via social media platforms. A trafficker can start a shallow relationship with a potential victim on the social media platform and nurse it to an intimate one such that personal and private discussions could take place between them. They usually start with liking a potential victim's page, sending friends' requests, making comments on her posts, and then graduate to having personal chats with her, which usually end up in invitation for physical visits and other offers.

### **Methodology**

This study employed cross-sectional and qualitative research methods in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of the situation presented by the trafficked victims.

Benin City was selected owing to its notoriety in the women trafficking saga. The cluster and snowball sampling systems were adopted respectively in identifying and selecting the respondents. The study sample comprised of 235 young women aged 15-25 years who were trafficked but deported. Due to the clandestine nature of the phenomenon, ten individuals, made up of immigration officers and NAPTIP officials, community leaders, and NGO officials, were identified and interviewed. These informants were selected based on their relevance to the study. The data collection methods were the Key Informant Interview (KII) and the Focus Group Discussion (Omojola, 2016; Omojola, Odiboh & Amodu, 2018). The interview items were semi-structured, with open-ended questions.

Twelve focused discussion groups made up of those who had spent a minimum of ten years abroad were conducted. Each focused group was made up of between 18 to 20 young women trafficked but deported. The researchers requested them to be truthful in the discussions as the study was aimed at making recommendations that could help in addressing the issues that pushed them into trafficking. The interviewees expressed their willingness to participate in the

discussions. The interview period with each participant lasted an average period of forty-five minutes. Data collected were analyzed using both thematic and descriptive analysis.

**Results and Discussion of Findings**

**Destination countries for the trafficked persons**

During the FGD with the trafficked persons, the researchers tried to

find out the trafficked persons’ destination countries. They requested the respondents to be in groups based on their destination countries, after which members of each group were listed. This process was repeated during the entire twelve FGDs to be able to arrive at the exact total figure. The outcome is presented in Table 1 below.

*Table 1: Respondents Distribution by Destination Countries*

<b>Destination Countries</b>	<i>f</i>	%
Italy	135	57.4
Spain	78	33.2
Others	22	9.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>100</b>

The information in Table 1 shows that the favorable destination country is Italy, with 57.4 percent, followed by Spain with 33.2 percent. The remaining 9.4 percent of the respondents were trafficked to other countries in Europe. The attraction for European countries as their preferred destination could be connected to their prolonged pre-colonial contact and interaction with Europe, which started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Confirming this result, Carling (2005) proclaimed that it was Italy’s demand for low skilled labor in agriculture that sparked the migration of Nigerians, particularly, from Edo State. Cole

and Booth (2007) support this opinion, stressing that women from Edo State were among the first generation of prostitutes in Italy. He explains that this first initially went to conduct legitimate businesses but later became compromised owing to living condition issues and started looking for ways to augment their meager earnings. Prostitution provided an opportunity. The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI, 2004) has established this as a fact and noted that Turin and Verona are two cities with a large community

of Nigerians and a strong presence of Nigerian prostitution.

### **Nexus between Patriarchy and Trafficking of Women in Benin City**

The researchers also examined the roles played by victims' families to determine the nexus between society's patriarchal nature and the trafficking of women from Benin City. The victims were asked if their families linked them up with the traffickers. If otherwise, they should mention the level of support and encouragement received from their families. Their responses are captured under the following two sub-headings showing their areas of convergence and divergence.

#### **Areas of convergence**

- About 54 percent of the respondents stated that their channel of contact with their traffickers was their family members. They emphasized that the girls were not as valued or taken to be as important as the boys. As a result, their parents usually did not hesitate to accept the offer to traffic their female children whenever there was one.
- Another 37 percent stated that their families supported and encouraged them to follow the

traffickers even though they did not initially link them up with them. They explained that the family support was evident in the oath swearing that the family members supported them to embark on before being flown to Europe by the traffickers.

- Surprisingly, the discussion with the trafficked persons revealed that every family in Benin City has a family member involved in trafficking either as a trafficked person, sponsor, or 'madam.'
- The ostentatious display of the properties acquired through the remittances from their trafficked daughters drove 84 percent of the young women into trafficking.

The entire 100 percent stated that the patriarchal cultural system in Benin City, coupled with the economic situation in the country which has left most young women hopeless, pushed them into trafficking. They emphasized that the knowledge and understanding that female children could never have any inheritance from their families, unlike their male siblings, compelled the females to accept trafficking as a way out of the quagmire.

### **Areas of Divergence**

The areas of divergence are the following:

- The assertion that the patriarchal cultural system in Benin city made the young females accept trafficking as a legal business was not accepted by about 61 percent of the respondents
- About 56 percent of the respondents objected to the view that their families rejected women or girls who refused to join trafficking.

The result of the KII correlated with the outcome of the discussion with the trafficked persons. It revealed that many families supported their daughters and sometimes persuaded them into trafficking by emphasizing and pointing to houses, cars, boreholes, and other material things acquired through the remittances from their age and school mates.

### **Influence of Social Media on the Trafficking of Women in Benin City**

Findings revealed that social media is having a significant influence on the trafficking of females in Benin City. It enables easy access between the traffickers and the potentially trafficked persons. Some of their statements are presented below under the areas of

convergence and divergence, respectively.

### **Areas of Convergence**

- The remaining respondents who were not linked to the traffickers by their families unanimously stated that social media chats, especially Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, made it very easy for them to connect with the traffickers. Sometimes too, their friends and relatives abroad also give their phone numbers to the traffickers to chat them up.
- About 71 percent of the respondents indicated that social media had contributed massively to escalating trafficking activities. They agreed that the motivation came via seamless and regular communication with the traffickers using social media platforms.
- They admitted that social media is influencing trafficking by serving as a platform that the traffickers use in circulating enticing false information that lured some of the trafficked persons. For instance, some people were initiated into the trade through frivolous online job advertisements

- Beautiful pictures of the environment and streets of the destination countries posted by already trafficked victims on social media also attracted the potential victims.

### **Area of Divergence**

- There was a disagreement that social media advertisements for job opportunities was the main reason victims connected with the traffickers

The findings from KII also corroborate the statements made by the trafficked victims. They strongly show that social media is escalating trafficking activities by enabling easy access to potential victims and providing the platform for the traffickers to circulate false information lure young women and girls.

### **Measures towards Curbing Sex Trafficking among Benin City Women**

The response generated on measures to be adopted to curb trafficking of women centers on the empowering of girls and the provision of sustainable means of livelihood for them. The summary of their responses are;

- Since the patriarchic tradition debars girls from family inheritance rights, the government should empower them by training them to acquire

skills in different areas of their individual choices or provide them gainful employment.

- The government should build functional factories in Benin City so that the educated ones could be employed. Such a move, according to them, could dissuade families from prostitution.

### **Discussion of the findings**

The research outcome on the nexus between patriarchy and trafficking of women in Benin City gives a clear picture of the influencing and supporting roles played by the family. It buttresses the assertion in extant literature that migration in whatever guise is never an individual decision. In the context of Benin City, it establishes that patriarchy influences the trafficking of women. This result agrees with the findings of Braimah (2013) that despite the existence of criminal syndicates, most traffickers were loose networks of family members. The revelation that families take pride in having at least a daughter in Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands is an indication that families without daughters in any of those European countries are considered inconsequential. The work of Ohonba and Agbobitaen-Eghafona (2019) also validates the findings of the study by revealing that many families in Benin City take pride in

the projects executed from the remittances received from their trafficked daughters.

Regarding the influence of social media on the trafficking of women in Benin City, the study has established that social media significantly influence trafficking by enabling information access between the traffickers and potential victims. This finding is in agreement with Whiting (2012) and Richmond (2017) affirmation that traffickers which were once limited to luring victims in the street, can now reach thousands of people through social media tools such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Snapchat. Shekhar (2017) also acknowledges that social media has turned into a hunting ground for sex traffickers. This outcome implies that while numerous benefits are attributed to the use of social media, the people and government should not lose focus on the fact that there are also inherent ills associated with it. The existence of both positive and negative influences implies the need to curb the unwholesome spread of information.

It is important to note that both patriarchy and social media are contributory factors for trafficking. The findings of this study have shown that the two factors complement one another as none of them can successfully cause the

escalation of trafficking independent of the other. The point exists in the study that even when the contact point is social media, families induce or even compel their young women to sign an agreement before the traffickers send them abroad. The finding here agrees with the Catholic Relief Services' (2019) statement that the causes of human trafficking are complex and interlinked, and include economic, social, and political factors. The statement emphasizes the point that poverty alone does not necessarily create vulnerability to trafficking, but becomes potent when combined with other factors such as civil unrest, lack of access to education, unemployment, family disruptions or dysfunctions, and human rights violations.

### **Conclusions**

This study has shown that both patriarchy and social media influence the trafficking of women in Benin City, Nigeria. In a bid to exit the systematic stigmatization and improve their well-being and that of their family through remittances, many Benin City women and girls accepted to be trafficked. Moreover, his study has also established that social media escalates the problem by enabling the unrestricted flow of information between the traffickers and

potential victims. It appears that this technological advancement compounds the problem rather than ameliorates it.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended;

- Job opportunities should be created to absorb the army of the unemployed young girls especially, the secondary school graduates
- National policies should be instituted to enable law enforcement and civil society organizations to monitor closely frivolous online job advertisement sites that promote trafficking and checkmate their owners.
- The Nigerian government and relevant multilateral agencies institute cross-border collaboration efforts and activities aimed at stopping the menace.

- The traditional institutions in Benin City should be encouraged to modernize by doing away with those customs and beliefs that make the female gender inferior. Women, too, should be celebrated!
- Current printed information on trafficking should be repackaged into audio-visuals by the public libraries and made available and accessible to the rural people in Benin City.
- Public libraries should also join the anti-trafficking advocacy by displaying posters in the library and carrying out outreach programs focused on anti-trafficking. During such programs, they should enlighten the public on the dangers associated with trafficking.

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