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Complex roles of families in enabling sex trafficking in Edo, Nigeria

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Abstract

Families are an expected haven for their members but could present threats in some contexts. Part of a large-scale PhD study with 101 participants, empirical findings on the roles played by families in encouraging sex trafficking in Edo, Nigeria are presented here. Using in-depth interviews and group discussions, data were elicited from actors within trafficking in persons. Core findings included the exploitation of roles and responsibilities in families towards enabling sex trafficking, the abuse of shared meanings of family in communities, and the exploitation of vulnerable families. Vulnerable families were identified to lack fathers or those whose parents were older adults and/or uneducated. Thus, women in such families were at greater risk of being trafficked. For conceptual understanding of these family roles in sex trafficking, we employed structure-agency insights. In all, anti-sex trafficking interventions must begin with families as the smallest unit of interventions.

Keywords: Edo, human trafficking, irregular migration, sex trafficking, trafficking

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Families and sex trafficking

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Abstract

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Keywords: Edo, human trafficking, irregular migration, sex trafficking, trafficking

Introduction

Among the drivers of sex trafficking, family connections are largely implicated (Plambech 2016, Pancieri 2017). The influence of family authority figures (decision makers in families, which could be fathers, mothers, or senior extended relatives and family friends) on sex trafficking came out strongly in a systematic review (Agwu, Okoye, et al 2020). There are corroborations by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), revealing that family members were involved in about half of child trafficking victims (International Organisation for Migration n.d.). The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report for 2021 and 2022 also suggested the influence of families in

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sex trafficking in Nigeria, Belize, Nepal, Mexico, Philippines, India, Lebanon, and Ghana, among others (US Department of State 2021, US Department of State 2022). Yet while it is known that families play a role in driving sex trafficking, the diverse causes and means are underexplored. This is the gap this study addresses.

The family is expected to be a haven for its members, providing succor, protection, and an enabling environment to encourage growth and development (Roman, et al. 2016). Unfortunately, this may not be the case. Defined as the use of force, fraud, deception, or coercion to encourage the transportation of individuals for commercial sex exploitation, sex trafficking has been at the front burner of global discourses, and families mostly for economic reasons have been participants (International Labour Organisation 2021). Structural reasons like a dysfunctional economy, political instability, strict migration regimes, and lack of interest in public goods by governments have largely dominated reasons why families are involved in sex trafficking (Baarda 2018, Baye and Heumann 2014). On the other hand, families could fall short of preserving their agency, which in part is to commit to the safety of their members despite structural challenges (Crossley 2022).

While many families progress economically in Edo, Nigeria, from the proceeds of sex trafficking, there are also many families that mourn, courtesy of death, unwanted pregnancies, severe bodily injuries, loss of vital body organs, contraction of sexually transmitted and terminal diseases, loss of intimate relationships and freedom, among others (Mai, et al. 2021, IOM 2019). A statement from a United Nations' agency describes the conditions surrounding sex trafficking as unspeakable, and the violation of rights as horrific, suggesting the apprehension and prosecution of perpetrators, while pursuing efforts that will address the root drivers (United Nations Population Fund 2020).

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Documented figures of sex trafficking victims from Nigeria in general, and Edo state, remain considerably high, even though it must be emphasized that the actual figures of sex trafficking victims are largely unknown. Nigeria's national agency against human trafficking reported that 8 in 10 human trafficking cases are females, and most of them report sexual exploitation (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons 2021). The TIP report for 2021 described Edo State as a historical in-country source location for sex trafficking victims, while highlighting the roles family members play in encouraging sex trafficking (US Department of State 2021).

Based on the discussed literature, broadly understanding why family networks will encourage sex trafficking and the various channels through which they do so will be a vital contribution to the sex trafficking literature. We answered the questions: (a) What are the realities of family involvement in sex trafficking? (b) What are the root causes of family participation in sex trafficking? (c) How do family networks facilitate sex trafficking? and (d) What measures could be deployed to tame family-related facilitation of sex trafficking?

Structure-agency and intersectionality arguments in sex trafficking and the position of families

Discourses about sex trafficking either cast blame on society (structure) or the choices of individuals and their families (agency). The focus on structure is founded on dysfunctional systems that deprive people of the means to a decent livelihood and reasonable standard of living (Nussbaum 2000, Urbanski 2022), with less emphasis on people being held to account for their choices (Homans 1961). The idea of choices is central to 'agency', and in this context, we refer to the agency of individual members of families and that of the family as a whole unit (Crossley 2022). The latter reflects how families could (not) decide to put their daughters at risk of

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trafficking, notwithstanding the influence from defective structures (Pancieri 2017, Vanderhaust 2017, Puigvert, et al. 2021).

Scholars argue that effective structures/systems can be measured by the positive agency created (Karasev 2022, Mai et al 2021), which can be defined as the capacity to make decisions that align with rules, rights, and relationships – the 3Rs defined by Crossley to be the fundamentals of structure (Crossley 2022). Therefore, a comprehensive approach to sex trafficking will be to find balance between structure (3Rs) and agency of families. This can be made manifest in anti-human trafficking strategies that elicit safe economic and cultural choices made by families, while in pursuit of people-centred governance.

Our research is of profound importance at this time when the Nigerian National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) has warned that family members that are accomplices to sex trafficking offences will be arrested and prosecuted (Egbejule 2022). There is no doubt that such carceral approaches, led by the national anti-human trafficking outfit, will enforce deterrence, but it should be accompanied by strategies that optimize and humanize the agency of individuals and families. This can be achieved through enabling progressive structures in societies that allow the agency of citizens to flourish in the context of order and in line with the rights to basic amenities of life and to progress in chosen diligent endeavours. Where structures are retrogressive, the agency of individuals and families are bound to be set on a path of survival, where any means of escaping will be welcomed, e.g., sex trafficking.

Victims of sex trafficking report that they took such a path for survival reasons or to rise above the unfair chances of relative economic success provided for them and their families by society – the structure (Agwu, Okoye et al. 2020, Agwu, Levy and Okoye 2023). However, a pattern has been discovered where women with little or no education, young, not gainfully employed, and from

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poor homes are often the most likely to be victims (Pathfinders Justice Initiative 2022). Such women seem to lack the agency to stand up against being victims, which can also be explained by intersectionality, where the vulnerability of a woman increases by additional layers of disadvantageous factors undermining her agency (Crenshaw, 2017).

Lastly, the structure-agency argument can be found in norms that typically characterize families in Nigeria. These norms reflect the broader cultural structure and have inadvertently defined the agency of the family in ways that are compelling. An example is how family members are obliged to be responsible for one another, such that economic success of a family member would only make sense when similar success is obtainable among others. Another example is that children from poor homes are charged with the responsibility of liberating their families from poverty, and not doing so can be deemed failure on their part. And finally, children are culturally compelled to obey their elders. These norms defining the agency of families in Nigeria have survived because they are currently integral to the cultural structure (Mead 1934, Blumer 1986). Unfortunately, they intersect to sustain sex trafficking (see Figure 1), which is why a report documented children fleeing their homes because they lack the agency to challenge such cultural norms that have now defined the overriding agency of families (Egbejule 2022).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Methods

Study area

The study was done in Edo State, located in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state is made up of 3 senatorial zones and 18 local government areas (LGAs), and keenly values its indigenous cultural practices (Agwu 2023). It is considered a hub of sex trafficking, as it accounts

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for most sex trafficking victims and survivors of Nigerian origin and cases of human trafficking connected to sexual exploitation (IOM 2019, Vanderhaust 2017). A 2021 report by the United Nations documented that since 2017, an average of 10,500 stranded migrants are returned to Edo annually, mainly from Libya and European destinations, and a substantial number are females (United Nations 2021). Despite campaigns against sex trafficking in Edo, it persists, hence the need for more scientific evidence to inform interventions (European Asylum Support Office 2021).

Sampling procedure

This study is a part of a large-scale qualitative PhD study that involved 101 participants in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. They were drawn from six groups – (a) sex trafficking survivors (b) local sex workers (c) male survivors of human trafficking that are knowledgeable about the experiences of female survivors (d) female survivors of sex trafficking (e) representatives of agencies that work with survivors, and (f) general community members representing families. To reach the participants, two senatorial zones (Edo South and Edo Central) with little or no reported cases of insecurity were picked. This was followed by randomly selecting from a pool of local government areas and communities documented by the Edo State Taskforce Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT) as notorious for human trafficking (ETAHT 2019). One community each was selected from the two selected LGAs per senatorial zone. Table 1 presents details of the selections.

Insert Table 1 about here

Through identified gatekeepers (leaders of Civil Society Organisations [CSOs], survivors' groups, and communities) we were able to recruit participants. Hence, we relied on a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. CSOs were first identified in literature before the

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field visit. Those that were unidentified were discovered in the field. With the assistance of the CSOs, leaders of communities and survivors' groups were identified, and they in turn assisted in recruiting the study participants. In all, 18 female sex trafficking survivors, 13 male survivors of human trafficking, 23 representatives of government and non-government agencies that work with survivors (Faith-based Organisations [FBOs] inclusive), 40 general community members, and 7 local sex workers with sufficient understanding of sex trafficking were selected across the sampled communities, making the sum of 101 participants for the study.

Data collection

The process of data collection was guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong, Sainsbury and Craig 2007). Gender- and age-disaggregated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with 40 community members shared across six groups, and in-depth interviews were held with 61 others, inclusive of survivors, representatives of agencies, and local sex workers. The phenomenological approach guided discussions and interviews, as the focus was on the lived experiences of the participants and the meanings they accord and attribute to such experiences (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio 2019). This guided the structuring of questions to elicit expressive responses. For instance, rather than asking "What will make parents expose their children to human traffickers?", we asked, "We want to know about some cases where parents knew about their children being trafficked. Can you tell us about that?" or if the questions were for survivors, we asked, "Can you talk about how your family members felt when you were travelling?". The latter always generated personal stories that touched on how family members could facilitate sex trafficking.

The study was conducted between June and August 2021 when all COVID-19-related restrictions were completely relaxed in Nigeria. Key areas covered included (a) the realities of family

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involvement in sex trafficking (b) the root causes of family participation in sex trafficking (c) the schemes deployed by family networks in facilitating sex trafficking, and (d) suggestions to address family-related facilitation of sex trafficking.

Data analysis

Data were analysed through inductive procedures by reading through transcripts and noting meaningful themes. Several themes were generated to house relevant narratives. The themes were further studied by the authors and suggestions were made for harmonization. Our analysis spreadsheet was offered to an independent peer for further scrutiny, and suggestions for harmonization or re-casting of the thematic categories were made. In all, our thematic analysis yielded four themes, which are: (a) realities of family involvement in sex trafficking (b) causes of family involvement in sex trafficking (c) schemes deployed by family networks in facilitating sex trafficking, and (d) suggestions to address family facilitation of sex trafficking.

Ethics

The study tool and proposal were approved by the ethical review board of the institution of the first author, with code NHREC/05/01/2008B-FWA00002458-1RB00002323. The interviews followed the 10 guiding principles for interviewing survivors as contained in the WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women (WHO 2003). The guiding principles included confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, full disclosure, and rapid sensitivity to emotional expressions. The social work expertise of the researchers helped with management of emotions elicited during the interviews, especially those conducted with survivors.

Results

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

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The demographic details in Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide a summary of the study participants. They are presented in categories of the recruited participants to include survivors of trafficking, community members/local sex workers, and representatives of CSOs, FBOs, and government agencies. Important points to note include (a) majority of the participants were from Edo State (b) among the survivors and community members, those with secondary education was the highest educational attainment comprising an exceptional majority (c) the majority of the CSOs were within the capital of Edo state (Benin) and Uselu which is very close to Benin.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Table 3 about here

Insert Table 4 about here

The realities of family involvement in sex trafficking

Ideally, family relationships should connote safety and prevention away from harm. But this was not the case in this current study, as family members could encourage sex trafficking. They did so covertly by being supportive in terms of prayers, financial support, and advice. Overt supports manifested in family members blatantly soliciting services of human traffickers and boldly urging family members to offer themselves for sex trafficking.

[...] We returned a 19-year-old girl to her family. Sadly, she got pregnant while in Libya. Her parents took the child from her and told her never to return until she succeeds. She came back to us [**Counsellor, 38 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

A survivor narrated how she left for Libya and the way her family supported her.

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I had given birth already before I travelled. My mother accepted to look after the children for me and the money they (father, mother, and siblings) gathered for me was about ₦300,000 [£550]. They also sent some money when I was kidnapped in Libya [**Sex trafficking survivor, 35 years, Female, Egor, IDI**]

On overt support, a survivor talked about how her stepmother pushed her daughter into sex trafficking.

My stepsister is in Libya. And I can tell you that from the experience while I was in Libya, I warned them to never allow anyone travel the way I had travelled. I told them of how I was sleeping with men to survive, to make money. My father at some point told me to just do anything to stay alive [...] I cried the day I discovered that my stepmother encouraged my stepsister to travel to Libya, even when I told them all I was going through. Hope she survives [**Sex trafficking survivor, 38 years, Female, Egor, IDI**]

Based on the above results, we sought to know if families understood the surrounding conditions of sexual exploitation that is at the heart of sex trafficking. Notwithstanding few responses that reported ignorance, many respondents said the families were aware.

An average Edo family has someone that has travelled. In some of those families you will see them living so well, which will encourage other families to tell their daughters to travel abroad, so that they can be sending money. I have handled several cases where the survivors told me that their families took them to their traffickers [**Head of Investigation, 48 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

Another added:

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Yes, they know. When a woman is travelling without visa, we all know what she will do. Everyone in Edo knows about it. It is annoying that some families will even borrow so their daughters can travel because they know that once the person succeeds, the family is automatically free from financial bondage. They do not care about how the money is made

[Sex trafficking survivor, 28 years, Female, Esan West, IDI]

Causes of family involvement in sex trafficking

It was common to hear from participants that poverty drove them into considering sex trafficking as an economic option. But more to that is the normalization of selling sex among residents, and so, converting this act into a means of earning foreign exchange has been considered an acceptable venture that is hardly disapproved. Parents could commodify their daughters, given expectations on them (daughters) to join the international sex work market for foreign exchange.

Our fathers will prefer to give birth to females than males, because they believe that each of the female will migrate and start sending money home. That is why most are less concerned and lazy **[Community resident, 24 years, Female, Oredo, FGD]**

Participants reported that it was a concern when fathers fail in their responsibilities as heads of homes, and such could encourage sex trafficking. They explained this in three categories of negligence, natural absence, and approval:

Negligence – My father did not train me in school. He only tried to get me through primary school. He never cared. Even my mother left him to marry another man. If he did what he was supposed to do, my life will not have ended up this way **[Sex trafficking survivor, 35 years, Female, Egor, IDI]**

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Natural absence – Our family scattered after our father died. We all went our separate ways, as there was no one to provide for us. It was around that time my sister then travelled so that she can support us [...] [**Community Resident, 27 years, Female, Esan North-East, FGD**]

Approval – We have handled cases where husbands told their wives and daughters to go, so far as they can bring money [**Project Manager, 41 years, Male, Oredo, IDI**]

As fathers seem to enable the prevalence of sex trafficking in Edo, mothers were not an exception.

It was because of the pity I had on my mother that made me to decide that I was going. I was tired of seeing her suffer. When I told her of my plan, she accepted it. She only asked me to make sure I give birth to a baby that she will use in remembering me when I am gone [**Local sex worker, 29 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

From the above quote, it seems there is a case of “**inverted responsibility**” – when children who are expected to be the beneficiaries of parental care and provisions, begin to step into the shoes of providing for their parents and the entire family. We discovered the normalization of such practice in Edo, as children who come from poor and middle-class homes begin to think in the direction of lifting their families out of poverty. A survivor said:

We are more than 10. So, we all have to fend for ourselves and take care of our parents [...] It is our culture that the children should grow up and fend for their parents. Since Nigeria did not give me the opportunity to do so, I had to travel [**Sex trafficking survivor, 28 years, Female, Esan West, IDI**]

Sequel to the above, findings showed that giving birth to many children without the wherewithal to cater to their welfare was a predisposing factor to sex trafficking.

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It is a common practice here for one man to go about having too many children, most times from different women. Many of these children end up living in the streets without care and protection. They become prone to any promise, anything at all that can take them off the street, be it prostitution, trafficking, internet fraud, gambling, just anything at all [**Religious Cleric, 48 years, Male, Oredo, IDI**]

Also, in polygamous families, material rivalry could exist between the different blocs, which can suffice as unhealthy competition among family members leading to sex trafficking.

When I got back, my step-mother mocked me that I was not sharp (intelligent). She started boasting that her daughter is sharper than me and will succeed. Despite the warning I gave to my father not to allow any member of the family join this thing because of how I was really suffering, they went ahead to allow her. She is currently in Libya [...] all her mother wants is to show that her daughter can bring back the money I could not bring. I cry each time I recall these things (sobs) [...] [**Sex trafficking survivor, 38 years, Female, Egor, IDI**]

Finally, older adults who are uneducated are susceptible to letting off their children and wards into the hands of sex traffickers.

The Edo man later came and told my father at the village that I will be a salesgirl in a boutique shop when I get there. He also added that within one month, that I will be sending money to them, and he will also be sending money for the upkeep of my baby that I left with my parents. My father only permitted me out of his ignorance [**Sex trafficking survivor, 24 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

Schemes deployed by family networks in facilitating sex trafficking

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Since human traffickers exploit family relationships to secure their victims, we tried to find out the tactics. First, it is considered that helping poor families to improve their economic status is a social obligation or responsibility, and ultimately a show of affection. To help poor families is not by just giving cash to family members, but by showing them how to make money, of which indulging in sex trafficking suffices in the context of our study.

Her aunty was helping her with some little money, and at some point, she stopped. She told her that she cannot be giving her fish all the time, so she has to learn how to fish. It was that time she agreed, and the aunty took her to Dubai to sell sex and help herself and family

[Local sex worker, 24 years, Female, Oredo, IDI]

A close scenario to the above is that perpetrators might threaten to withdraw helping their relatives who are dependent on them, citing that they should consider following the bandwagon and get trafficked to make money and become independent.

At a time, the pressure from my people became too much, then I ran to stay with one of my relatives who was accommodating me in his house. We even attend the same church. He too started pressuring me and threatened to throw me out of his house if I do not agree.

That was how I found myself in Libya **[Sex trafficking survivor, 28 years, Female, Esan West, IDI]**

In another explanation, we discovered that relatives with the connections to sex traffickers consider it a social responsibility to facilitate their kin's journey into sex trafficking, under the belief that the trafficked will make money and return to help her other members of the family.

[...] Her aunty helped her to Dubai and told her to just pay N1million [£1833] she used in sponsoring her trip. She was able to rent her apartment and settle her madam within one

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year, before she started saving in the subsequent years so that she could help her family

[...] that Aunt is a good person [**Local sex worker, 24 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

Interestingly, we discovered that this could be passed down from mothers to daughters, seeming to be some sort of family heritage.

Some mothers have been doing this thing and their daughters grew up to see them.

What do you expect? It is family business to some of them [**Community resident, 24 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

And male kins could take advantage of their patriarch status to exert force and compel their female kins to yield to sex trafficking.

We have handled cases where the victims lamented how their fathers threatened them to do what others are doing and get the family out of poverty. Some of them told us that their fathers threatened to evict them out of their homes if they do not consider travelling and sending foreign currencies home [**Head of Investigation, 48 years, Female, Oredo, IDI**]

Lastly, family networks could take to deception.

I was on my own when my aunty visited us and told my parents that she does not like how we are suffering, and she is ready to take me to Europe where I can work as nanny or do my tailoring. She convinced my people that nothing will happen to me [**Sex trafficking survivor, 25 years, Female, Esan North-East, IDI**]

Suggestions to reduce family facilitation of sex trafficking

Given the enablement of sex trafficking by families, participants gave suggestions towards remedies. A first suggestion was geared toward stringent punishment backed by law against family

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members that are found complicit to sex trafficking. The representatives of the CSOs and government agencies felt that family members aid their loved ones into sex trafficking because they feel they may never be caught up by the law. Even when they are arrested, the entire community begins pleading, citing blood relationship.

[...] Another factor is the family relationship. We have handled cases where parents are involved in trafficking these victims. Once you arrest such persons, everyone will start begging you because according to them, you cannot kill someone that you will still bury. The law should be clear on this. Parents should be arrested and prosecuted without pity

[Nigeria Immigration Service Official, 57 years, Male, Egor, IDI]

Other complementary interventions include designing targeted interventions for fathers and for families lacking father figures.

Let us have forums where we bring fathers together to discuss these things. This is a big issue that should be addressed. If we have men living up to their responsibilities, being responsible, taking care of their families, leading their families from the front, the numbers of those out there on the streets and that face trafficking will reduce [...] **[Religious Cleric, 48 years, Male, Oredo, IDI]**

It is also important to expose parents across urban and rural settings to regular migration procedures and demands. This can be backed by using traditional rulers to sensitize parents and put some order in communities. It is akin to the famous declaration made by the Oba of Benin (a foremost local chief in Edo State), proscribing the activities of witch doctors, which limited them from indulging oath taking for trafficking victims.

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The information about this has not really gotten to the grassroots. There are people in remote villages that can't access electricity not to talk of network cables, and these traffickers have redirected their moves to the interior part of the communities. They prey on the vulnerability of parents there. Maybe through religious and community leaders, parents and elderly community people can be brought together and educated. Where we cannot go, the religious and community leaders in those areas can be of help **[Social worker, 30 years, Male, Egor, IDI]**

Macro interventions can include investing in education, making girl child education compulsory, using curricular and extra-curricular activities in schools and learning centres to arm young persons with the right information they need to challenge older ones who wish to force or deceive them into sex trafficking, re-orientating young people towards the right approach to “**inverted responsibilities**”, some oversights on the local sex work market, and social protection for vulnerable families. Two quotes below capture some of these suggested remedies.

There is this primary school we went to some time ago. They reported a little girl that had stopped coming to school. We enquired from her friends, and they told us that she has been telling them that she will soon travel and be making money to build a home and buy cars for her parents [...] We monitored the family through the priest in that community, but the girl was moved at night. We then involved NAPTIP who helped us in tracking the girl [...] Since then we had to focus our attention on schools **[Director of a CSO, 45 years, Male, Oredo, IDI]**.

We now know that mothers are so involved in sex trafficking of their daughters. What we now do is to go find them at the markets. We bring survivors to tell their stories at the markets and we play those gory videos that show what the journey into sex trafficking

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looks like and what their daughters are passing through in the hands of madams. We invite theatre groups to act in the markets. Some of the women usually come to us after our sensitization to tell us that if they had seen all that we had showed them before this time, they would not have allowed their daughters to travel **[Founder of a CSO, 41 years, Female, Oredo, IDI]**

Discussion

Our study has revealed how families can be complicit in sex trafficking, which undermines their natural caregiving roles. This in no way undermines the prime importance of families in societies, but points to contexts where families can as well facilitate a dysfunctional society. Literature on sex trafficking alludes to the significance of families in facilitating sex trafficking, as well as their importance in community prevention of sex trafficking and community support for survivors (Baarda 2018, Lo Iacono 2014, Agwu 2023). However, to achieve the latter to a reasonable degree, it is important to address the former, making families a unit of anti-human trafficking and resilient in absorbing the schemes and shockers that come from the sex trafficking trade.

Thus, our study takes further the conversation about families and their involvement in sex trafficking by underscoring more evidence about their involvement, why they are involved, the schemes they use, and how families can evolve from being accomplices to become more resilient and the basic unit of anti-human trafficking across affected regions. The study concurs with a multi-country study that argues regulatory failures by states in taming the intermediaries (e.g., families) that facilitate sex trafficking (Fernandez 2013).

We had earlier described the structure-agency argument as used in sex trafficking context. On the structure side, we acknowledge Nigeria's challenged political climate and economic situation in

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recent times, as the country's inflation rate hit double figures and has gone into recession twice between 2015 and 2022, with the imminence of a third (Yinka 2022, The World Bank 2022). The implication of this is that there is widespread insecurity and poverty in Nigeria. Poverty is commonly mentioned in human trafficking research as a driver (Agwu et al 2020). And so, it is believed that addressing poverty will tame human trafficking. Incidentally, there are emerging findings from our research that do not totally align with the thoughts that poverty is the basic reason why people end up in human trafficking, as there are persons who are relatively well-off, yet involved in human trafficking, even as victims.

Concepts such as greed, the innate belief that success only comes by travelling abroad, the fact that living abroad is symbolically associated with a higher social status and wealth, among others, are emerging at the level of agency (choices of people) to disprove the argument that poverty is the basic antecedent to human trafficking (Pathfinders Justice Initiative 2022, Pancieri 2017, Agwu et al 2023). Therefore, while addressing the structural implications of political instability and bad economy on sex trafficking, paying attention to other agential factors offers the potential of a comprehensive approach and reduces the chances of increases in the number of sex trafficking perpetrators and victims that keep citing poverty as excuse.

Sex trafficking became widespread in Edo State owing to significant roles of families. These roles manifest in families rejecting their members who survive sex trafficking and return home without material wealth to show, including those who either give their loved ones in the outright to human traffickers or those that offer tangible (money, etc.) and non-tangible (advices and prayers, etc.) supports to their loved ones throughout the sex trafficking idea and actualization (Baarda 2018). While it is possible that some families may be ignorant of the schemes of human traffickers and human trafficking, a vast majority cannot claim to be ignorant, as sensitizations against human

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trafficking in Edo have been commendable, even though there is dire need for more sensitizations in remote and hard-to-reach locations (US Department of State 2022). Thus, it should be worrisome that even families that are aware of the dangers and damaging conditions around sexual exploitation for commercial benefits, still yield to sex trafficking. And it is even more worrisome that the act is normalized and barely disapproved.

Our study draws the attention of interventions to consider shifting the anti-human trafficking campaign to the fronts of families as the basic units of society, taking on a whole-of-community approach, as families in the study context extend beyond just parents and children. There is no doubt that some of the concerns that enable the involvement of families in the sex trafficking agenda are worthy societal values that are now being undermined. For instance, it is a worthy culture in Nigeria and Africa by extension, that children should not be onlookers when their families are poor. They are expected to offer some level of support to the economy of their families. But evidence from our study is showing that this worthy cultural value is exploited, as children are made to believe that by any means (including sex trafficking) the family must be lifted away from both absolute and relative poverty – a case we have referred to as ‘inverted responsibility’.

It is of more concern when ‘inverted responsibility’ becomes imminent at a time children are yet to be adults, and when the parents are still very active to earn a living. Addressing this mindset is critical, and evidence from this study is pointing to schools and learning centres as target places to commence reorientation and re-education of young persons into helping the economy of their families through appropriate and legitimate means. Also, educating them on right procedures of migration and to dispell the belief that economic success resides in countries away from Nigeria and those with better currencies is important.

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Furthermore, it is an integral part of the culture of family relationships in Nigeria that when one becomes economically successful, he or she should endeavour to help other family members become successful too, and it continues in that trajectory. This norm of responsibility (see theoretical underpinning) that characterizes a typical family in Edo and Nigeria by extension, has become a conduit for the facilitation of sex trafficking in the study area. It implies that the economic successes of family members should be interrogated by family elders and community leaders, and where found to be genuine and not in conflict with the law, approval can be guaranteed for the transfer of economic assistances and opportunities to other members of the family network. And when otherwise, rebuke should follow.

It is based on the above that our study recommends that CSOs and other agencies working within anti-human trafficking should intensify collaborations with traditional rulers, community leaders, and family elders, appealing to their sense of morality and integrity that characterize the typical African value founded on agential virtues like honesty, dignity, dilligence, and justice (Onuoha 2015). In the same way the Oba of Benin chastised and disapproved witch doctors from offering spiritual assistances to human traffickers (Agwu et al 2023), the same way he can raise his voice against families that covertly and overtly enable sex trafficking.

Identifying vulnerable families is needful in taming family involvement in sex trafficking. Besides families that are poor, our study discovered that families without father figures and those with older and uneducated parents are equally vulnerable. We do not intend to advance a narrative that fathers (males – considering gender in binary categories) are the sole custodians of family discipline, orderliness, and resourcefulness. But contextual evidence from the current study points to their significance in households in Edo, and when they are absent or do not live up to their fullest responsibility of securing their families, vulnerability to sex trafficking becomes imminent. In

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corroboration, a South African study found that families without fathers expressed dissatisfaction with most indicators of family wellness (Roman, et al. 2016). This evidence is not one to wish away because of its patriarch colouration, but calls for more critical thinking and investigation.

We could see how interveners are targeting mothers in market places, and we think it will make sense to target the fathers too, especially as evidence points to their direct and indirect influences in enabling sex trafficking. The same strategic intervention can be harnessed in the direction of older and uneducated parents who may be too frail or unaware of the schemes of human trafficking. These findings are instructive to the responsibility of the state and anti-human trafficking actors may consider to undertake, which is to profile vulnerable families and produce a vulnerability index akin to that produced by the Pathfinders Justice Initiative for women and girls (Pathfinders Justice Initiative 2022).

We discovered that anti-human trafficking laws are light on prosecuting family accomplices in sex trafficking. Enforcers of the law are constrained by lack of stringent laws against this category of law breakers, or are caught up by the cultural symbol of blood ties, where they are told that such scenarios are family affairs and should be handled within the confines of the family. But that is set to change as NAPTIP has warned that parents and family relatives that are sex trafficking accomplices must face the full wrath of the law (Egbejule 2022). But again, a carceral approach without efforts to balance structure-agency concerns might only end up throwing people into jail without comprehensively addressing why families are involved in sex trafficking, and even more, why very vulnerable females are the most targets. Therefore, the goal should be a progressive structure that will be committed to the enhancement of the agency of families to be aware of and have regards for rules, rights, and relationships, vis-à-vis the agency of the woman to stand up to threats to her safety.

Conclusion

Anti-human trafficking campaign must consider families as the basic unit of advocacy and prevention against sex trafficking. Families in anti-human trafficking discourses should transcend their roles in reintegration, and emphases must be made on using them as preventive mechanisms and insulators against sex and human trafficking in the society. The cultural symbols of the family in terms of roles, rights, and responsibilities can be preserved and harnessed positively.

In all, our study has set forth an important conversation in human trafficking discourses, with recommendations to strengthen the work of involving agencies and professionals within sex trafficking such as social workers, security agencies, psychologists, among other social services professionals. We encourage future studies to apply more qualitative explorations and quantitative analysis in establishing more justifiable relationships and statistical significances between the variables we have presented in the current study, such as the role of fathers/mothers in the vulnerability of families to human trafficking, the effects of stringent laws against family members enabling human trafficking, and the effects of curriculum enhancement in schools on human trafficking prevention, etc.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support this study cannot be publicly shared due to ethical or privacy reasons and may be shared upon reasonable request to the corresponding author if appropriate.

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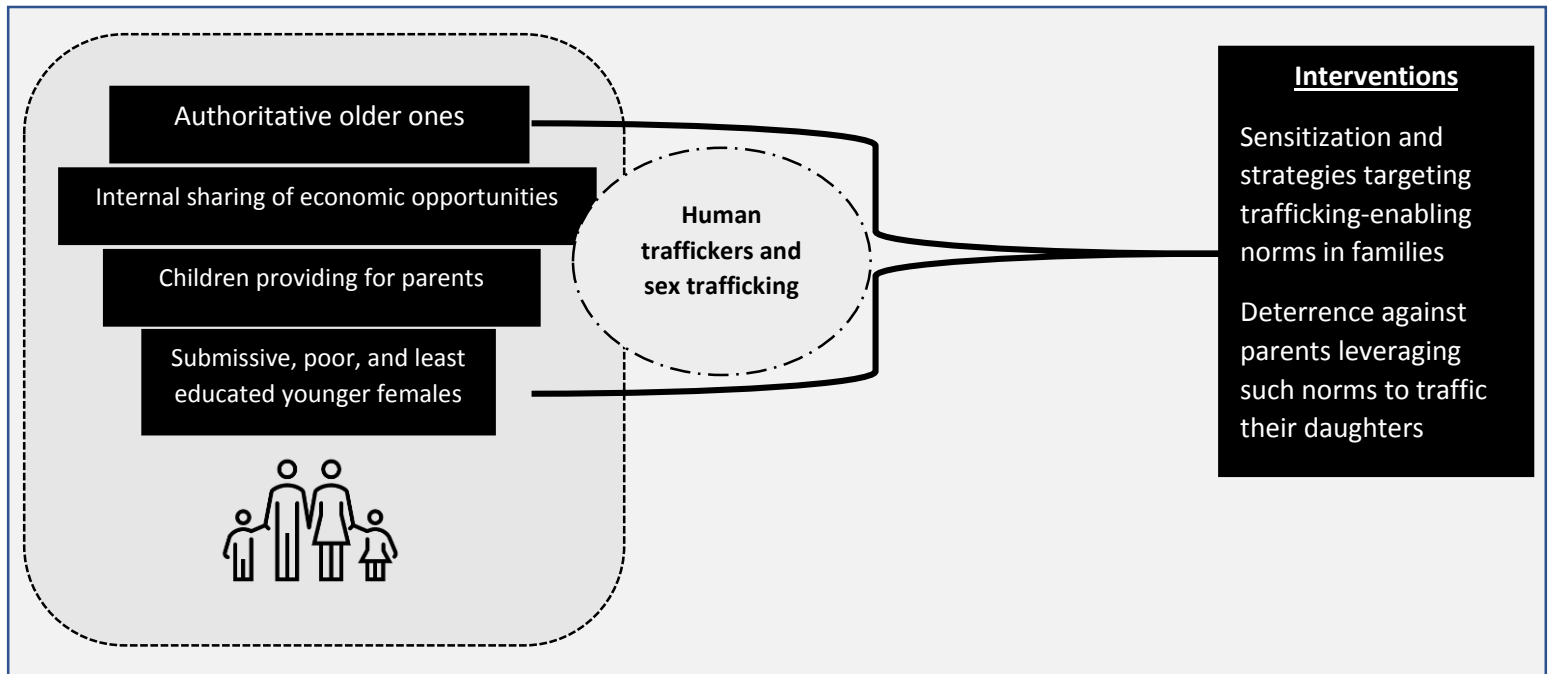


Figure 1: Network of family norms enabling sex trafficking of females and insights for interventions

Alt text: Sex trafficking could persist because of the interactions family norms such as respect for authoritative older family members, the demand on family members to share economic opportunities inclusive of sex trafficking, the demand on children to provide for their parents, could have with inherent vulnerabilities in poor women who are young, poorly or not educated, and submissive. To address these concerns, family norms that enable sex trafficking should be targeted by interventions, especially sensitization, and family members that lure co-family members into sex trafficking should be made to face the law as a way of reinforcing deterrence.

Table 1: Sampling clusters and selections

Selected senatorial zones	Selected Local Government Areas	Selected communities
Edo South	Egor	Uselu
	Oredo	Benin
Edo Central	Esan North-East	Uromi
	Esan West	Ekpoma

Table 2: Snapshot of the sociodemographic details of trafficking survivors

Trafficking survivors (n=31)	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	13	42%
Female	18	58%
Age		
18-25 years	4	13%
>25 years	27	87%
Local Government		
Oredo (Benin)	2	6.5%
Esan West (Ekpoma)	13	42%
Egor (Uselu)	5	16%
Esan North-East (Uromi)	11	35.5%
State of Origin		
Edo State	29	93.5%
Non-Edo State	2	6.5%
Level of Education		
No formal education	2	6.5
Primary education	2	6.5
Secondary education	20	64.4
National Diploma	3	9.7
Bachelors	4	12.9

Table 3: Snapshot of the sociodemographic details of representatives of CSOs and FBOs

Reps of CSOs and FBOs (n=23)	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	9	39%
Female	14	61%
Age		
18-30 years	8	35%
>30 years	15	65%
Local Government		
Oredo (Benin)	14	61%
Esan West (Ekpoma)	1	4.5%
Egor (Uselu)	7	30%
Esan North-East (Uromi)	1	4.5%
State of Origin		
Edo State	16	70%
Non-Edo State	7	30%
Level of Education		
Diploma qualification	4	17%
Bachelors	11	48%
Postgraduate	8	35%

Table 4: Snapshot of the sociodemographic details of general community members inclusive of local sex workers

Community members and local sex workers (n=47)	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	11	23%
Female	36	77%
Age		
18-30 years	39	83%
>30 years	8	17%
Local Government		
Oredo (Benin)	18	38%
Esan West (Ekpoma)	5	11%
Egor (Uselu)	17	36%
Esan North-East (Uromi)	7	15%
State of Origin		
Edo State	36	77%
Non-Edo State	11	23%
Level of Education		
No formal education	0	0%
Primary education	3	6%
Secondary education	30	64%
National Diploma	5	11%
Bachelors	8	17%
Postgraduate	1	2%