



Women and Clandestine Activities: A Case Study of Human Trafficking and Child Labour in Nigeria

Abstract

This article examined the paradoxical and understudied phenomenon of female perpetration in human trafficking and child labour in Nigeria. These crimes are predominantly attributed to male criminal networks and organised syndicates, yet a growing body of evidence shows that women make up a significant and active tier of perpetrators, often occupying roles that are indispensable to trafficking supply chains rather than incidental to them. This research employed a qualitative case study design, treating Nigeria as a bounded national case and drawing on secondary sources, peer-reviewed studies, legal instruments, and institutional reports from bodies such as NAPTIP and the UNODC, to examine how women's agency, vulnerability, and complicity converge in the exploitation of children. The article questioned the theoretical frameworks that have historically rendered women's criminality invisible and contended for a fuller understanding of gender and agency in organised crime, one in which the attributes conventionally read as markers of feminine virtue, gentleness, compassion, maternal instinct, can also function as instruments of exploitation. Findings indicate that this invisibility is not accidental: it is built into legal definitions, institutional practice, and scholarly convention alike, with direct implications for how Nigeria's trafficking and child-protection frameworks are drafted and enforced.

Keywords: human trafficking, child labour, gender and crime, child protection, Nigeria.

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Introduction

The conventional narrative of human trafficking and child labour in Nigeria foregrounds male perpetrators, organised criminal networks, and patriarchal power structures as the primary drivers of these crimes. That framing is not wrong, but it is incomplete. It obscures a critical and historically underexamined dimension of the phenomenon: the systematic participation, agency, and often essential facilitation

role that women play in the orchestration, maintenance, and expansion of trafficking and labour-exploitation networks.

To be clear, the argument here is not that male culpability should be minimised, nor that gender-based analysis is irrelevant to understanding trafficking. It is, more narrowly, that frameworks which render invisible the role of women, particularly women embodying the social and biological attributes conventionally coded as

maternal, nurturing, and compassionate, miss an important part of how child exploitation actually happens in Nigeria and across the African diaspora.

Women's participation in trafficking and child labour is not merely incidental, nor is it simply a product of their own prior victimisation. Their distinctive position within households, kinship networks, and informal economies makes them, in practice, strategically valuable actors within trafficking supply chains. The very attributes that legitimate maternal authority, tenderness, trustworthiness, access to children, the capacity to soothe and nurture, can be turned to exploitative ends. Documented case material compiled by Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and by international bodies records instances in which mothers have been directly implicated in trafficking their own children, in which aunts have arranged the placement of nieces into domestic servitude, and in which female neighbours have brokered arrangements that delivered children into labour bondage (NAPTIP, 2022; UNODC, 2018). These are not the only pathways, and the available case documentation is not systematic enough to establish their relative frequency with confidence; a limitation this article returns to below, but they are documented enough to demand scholarly attention that moves beyond purely victimological frameworks toward an account of women's complex agency within criminal ecosystems.

Nigeria is an instructive case site for this kind of investigation. It functions simultaneously as a source, transit, and destination country for trafficking, and its combination of acute economic precarity, thin child-protection infrastructure, and long-standing, culturally embedded practices of child fosterage and domestic labour creates conditions in which gendered trafficking networks can take root and persist.

Nigerian scholarship on these phenomena has, on the whole, rarely foregrounded women's agency and perpetration, tending instead to emphasise poverty, patriarchy, and male organised crime as the primary analytic lenses. By emphasizing Nigerian cases specifically, this article aims to contribute a more textured, and grounded account of how gender operates as a vector of criminality, and not only as a marker of victimhood.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, single-case research design, with Nigeria treated as the bounded case under examination rather than a comparison across multiple national contexts. The choice of Nigeria was purposive: as both a major source and destination country for trafficking, with a well-documented (if imperfectly enforced) legal framework and an active national anti-trafficking agency, it offers unusually rich secondary material against which to examine the specific question of women's perpetration.

The evidence base consists entirely of secondary sources: peer-reviewed criminological and sociological research

on trafficking in Nigeria and comparable contexts; Nigerian legal instruments, principally the Child Rights Act (2003) and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act (2015); and institutional reporting from NAPTIP and international bodies including the ILO and UNODC. No primary data such as interviews, court records, or case files, were collected for this study; the analysis is therefore interpretive and synthetic rather than empirical in the strict sense, and its claims about the scale of women's involvement in trafficking (as opposed to the existence and mechanisms of that involvement) should be read with that limitation in mind. Sources were read thematically, coded for recurring patterns in how gender shaped access, authority, and legal visibility, and organised around the four analytic questions set out in the Introduction.

Literature Review

The invisibility of women's participation in organised crime has been a persistent problem in criminological scholarship. Criminology has long been animated by an implicit assumption that organised crime, particularly in its most systematic and violent forms, is inherently male terrain. Several intellectual traditions reinforced this assumption. Early organised-crime scholarship, especially in the North American and European contexts, focused overwhelmingly on mafia structures, drug-trafficking syndicates, and protection rackets, domains coded as

masculine and understood to require physical violence or overt coercion. The result was a canonical image of the organised criminal as distinctly masculine: aggressive, territorial, embedded in all-male networks.

Feminist criminology has long challenged this assumption. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise's *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology* (1993) argues that mainstream sociological and criminological frameworks reproduce a form of epistemic injustice, rendering certain forms of harm and agency, particularly those associated with women, invisible to scholarly and institutional scrutiny (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

Feminist criminology has long argued that women occupy varied positions within criminal networks that reflect the specific social resources gender affords them, rather than a single undifferentiated role. James Messerschmidt's structured action theory treats crime itself as a resource through which men and women "do gender" in socially available, structurally constrained ways, implying that the criminal opportunities open to women differ systematically from those open to men, tracking the trust, mobility, and suspicion that gendered social position confers, rather than any lesser capacity for organised offending (Messerschmidt, 1997, as cited in Aderoju, 2024). Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind's earlier call for a feminist criminology made a related point: mainstream criminology's near-exclusive focus on men had left the diverse roles women actually occupy in

crime, as organisers as well as accomplices, largely undocumented (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1986, as cited in Aderoju, 2024). Applied to trafficking specifically, this suggests that women's roles as recruiters, intermediaries, and household-level custodians of children are not incidental but track the specific social terrain, kinship access, presumed harmlessness, domestic authority, that is more readily available to women than to men.

Applied to trafficking specifically, this line of argument is persuasive. Siddharth Kara's research on global slavery systems has shaped much of the contemporary understanding of trafficking networks; across his trilogy of studies, Kara documents the role of female perpetrators and observes that women traffickers are often especially effective at recruiting and managing victims, precisely because they can mobilise gendered trust and access in ways male perpetrators typically cannot (Kara, 2009, 2012, 2017).

Global estimates of trafficking vary by source, but the International Labour Organization has conservatively estimated that approximately 27.6 million people are in situations of forced labour globally, with children accounting for roughly 7.4 million of that figure (ILO, 2017). These aggregate numbers conceal considerable regional and sectoral variation. Trafficking operates through supply chains linking zones of acute poverty to higher-income destination areas, exploiting both legal and irregular migration channels along the way.

Trafficking theory has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Louise Shelley documents the shift from early supply-demand models toward more sophisticated accounts of trafficking as a distinct criminal enterprise, one that routinely intersects with legitimate economic sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, the sex industry, and manufacturing (Shelley, 2010). Phil Williams's analysis of transnational criminal networks similarly emphasises their structural and organisational sophistication, supply-chain management, risk mitigation, and adaptive capacity to law-enforcement pressure, a sophistication that depends substantially on reliable intermediaries able to operate with reduced visibility, a role women frequently occupy (Williams, 2001).

Nigeria's child-labour situation has to be read against several overlapping contexts: post-colonial state formation, uneven regional development, the coexistence of customary kinship systems with modern legal frameworks, and the particular pressures of economic adjustment and informalisation that have shaped Nigeria since the 1980s. Child labour was not comprehensively proscribed in Nigerian law until relatively recently; although the 1999 Constitution nominally guarantees the right to education and protection from exploitation, enforcement mechanisms have remained thin.

The Child Rights Act of 2003 is Nigeria's most comprehensive statutory child-protection framework, but its implementation has been inconsistent

across the federation, and certain forms of child labour, domestic servitude within households, apprenticeship arrangements, continue to occupy ambiguous legal and social ground (Okojie, 2009).

Estimates of child labour in Nigeria are contested, but credible sources put the figure at roughly 15 million children, or between a quarter and a third of the national child population, engaged in some form of labour, with a substantial and under-acknowledged proportion in domestic servitude concentrated in cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt (ILO, 2020). Girls disproportionately experience domestic and sexual labour; boys are concentrated in street trading, artisanal mining, and manufacturing. This gendered distribution of labour forms is itself revealing of the gendered networks through which children are recruited, placed, and exploited.

Nigerian criminological data on female offending more broadly supports the claim that women's criminality is under-researched and under-counted rather than genuinely rare. Nigeria's total prison population stood at 78,621 in 2024, of whom 97.8 percent were male and only 2.2 percent female (Nigerian Correctional Service, 2024, as cited in Aderoju, 2024), a gender gap that has been attributed partly to unreported offending by women and partly to the more lenient treatment, often termed "chivalry," that male-dominated police and court systems are said to extend to female suspects (Agboola, 2014; Barkan, 1997; Fontebo, 2013; Suleiman, 2014, as cited in Aderoju,

2024). Feminist criminologists have long contested this chivalry thesis, arguing instead that the scarcity of research on female offenders reflects a discipline that has treated women's crime as too minor to merit sustained study. Carol Smart's founding critique put the point starkly: "Our knowledge is still in its infancy" (Smart, 1977, as cited in Aderoju, 2024).

This general pattern of under-theorised female offending is compounded, where trafficking and child exploitation specifically are concerned, by a further problem: the tendency of feminist pathways scholarship to treat women's criminality only as a downstream product of their own victimisation. Kathleen Daly's gender pathways model, developed from a study of women sentenced in a New York felony court, identifies five routes into female offending: "street women" fleeing abusive homes, drug-connected women whose offending follows from addiction, "harmed and harming women" whose own childhood abuse issues into later harmful behaviour toward others, battered women coerced by intimate partners, and women engaged in economic offending for survival or gain (Daly, 1992, as cited in Aderoju, 2024). This typology matters for the present study precisely because it already anticipates that a woman's own history of harm can issue into her later harming of others, rather than only into passive victimhood. It is this same non-linear relationship between victimisation and perpetration, applied specifically to

trafficking, that the following section examines in the Nigerian case.

Emerging Evidence of Women's Perpetration in Human Trafficking

Over the past decade, empirical research on trafficking has increasingly documented women's role as perpetrators rather than only as victims. Global trafficking prosecution data compiled by the UNODC indicate that women comprise roughly 35 to 40 percent of convicted human traffickers worldwide (UNODC, 2018, 2019). In some African contexts, women represent the majority of prosecuted traffickers, particularly in cases involving domestic servitude and child labour.

Part of why the default assumption of male perpetration has persisted is the dominance, within the literature, of sex-trafficking frameworks specifically. Liz Kelly argues that the international anti-trafficking movement has constructed narratives centred on male sexual predation and the victimisation of women and girls for sexual exploitation, a framing that has crowded out attention to other trafficking forms and other perpetrator profiles (Kelly, 2005).

African criminological scholarship has been slower than scholarship in other regions to address women's perpetration directly. Malinda Smith's research on transnational smuggling and trafficking across African borders documents that women's participation is neither incidental nor motivated solely by prior victimisation; women have accrued

material, social, and symbolic benefits through their involvement in these networks (Smith, 2015).

Read against Daly's gender pathways typology discussed above, the Nigerian trafficking case fits most closely within the "harmed and harming" and economic-offending pathways: women who have themselves experienced abuse, deprivation, or trafficking-related exploitation may subsequently move into recruiting or managing others, a trajectory Daly's model treats as one of several plausible, non-linear routes into offending rather than as a contradiction requiring special explanation (Daly, 1992, as cited in Aderoju, 2024). This finding is consistent with the broader pattern Siddharth Kara documents for trafficking networks more generally, in which prior victimisation and subsequent perpetration frequently coexist within a single woman's biography (Kara, 2009).

Contemporary feminist scholarship has increasingly complicated narratives that position women as natural nurturers and inherently pacific beings. Donna Haraway argues, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, that the construction of women as natural nurturers is itself a myth, one that obscures women's capacity for complexity, contradiction, and harm (Haraway, 1991). Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, the systematic devaluing of certain people's credibility as witnesses and knowers, helps explain why women's own accounts of harm they have caused are so rarely treated as credible or even sought

out (Fricker, 2007). Taken together, this double invisibility, women read as inherently benevolent, and women's testimony discounted even when it isn't, creates considerable space for women perpetrators to evade both accountability and recognition.

The capacity to nurture does not preclude the capacity to exploit, and the experience of childbirth does not automatically generate empathy for other people's children. Women's socially legitimated authority within households and kinship networks, and their biologically grounded access to children, become resources that can be, and sometimes are turned toward exploitation rather than protection.

None of this is meant to pathologise women or motherhood as such. The point, rather, is that women's agency, power, and capacity for harm need to be recognised as part of the ordinary texture of human behaviour rather than treated as an anomaly requiring special explanation. Taking that capacity seriously is a precondition for understanding how women participate in trafficking networks, and for designing interventions that actually address it.

Women's Participation in Trafficking and Child Labour Networks in Nigeria

Women's participation in the exploitation and trafficking of children in Nigeria is not a recent phenomenon, though its scale and systematisation have intensified alongside urbanisation, economic liberalisation, and the expansion of informal labour markets.

Historical records of child domestic servitude from Nigeria's colonial and early post-colonial periods document cases in which women householders participated directly in the recruitment, purchase, and labour exploitation of young girls and boys (Okojie, 2009). Long-standing Nigerian fosterage and apprenticeship practices, in which children were placed in the households of traders, craftspeople, and wealthier families, provided a customary institutional template that later trafficking networks have, in places, adapted and exploited (Okojie, 2009).

Contemporary manifestations of women's perpetration operate across multiple sites and forms. In Lagos and other major urban centres, networks of female intermediaries facilitate the placement of children from poorer areas into domestic servitude in wealthier households; these women typically occupy precarious positions in the labour market themselves, often as house servants or informal traders, and leverage their knowledge of both the domestic labour market and vulnerable children to broker placements. In the northern Nigerian context, women have similarly played a role in facilitating child trafficking connected to internal migration and the placement of children in Qur'anic schools under the *almajiri* system, acting as brokers between families and informal schooling networks and identifying children who end up in street begging and manual labour rather than the religious education their families were promised.

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Motherhood, Family Networks, and the Initiation of Trafficking

Case documentation and the limited empirical research available describe instances in which mothers themselves initiate the trafficking of their own children, whether by negotiating directly with employers or traffickers or by working through intermediaries. The circumstances vary, but they typically combine acute economic destitution, relationship instability, and the absence of any viable alternative livelihood strategy. In some documented cases, mothers place children with partners or kin in exchange for material support or a measure of relational stability.

The relationship between maternal agency and maternal vulnerability is genuinely complex, and it resists neat sorting into victim-or-perpetrator categories. Mothers who participate in trafficking their own children very often do so under conditions of real material desperation and severely limited choice. Acknowledging those constraining circumstances, however, does not erase the fact of maternal complicity in a child's exploitation. The two things are compatible, however uncomfortable that is to sit with.

Beyond mothers, female relatives such as grandmothers, aunts, stepmothers, and fictive mothers, exercise real authority over children's fates. In the extended kinship systems characteristic of many Nigerian communities, decisions about a child's placement and labour are often made collectively, and women

frequently hold considerable power within these networks: determining who has access to a child, negotiating the terms of a labour placement, and mediating disputes when they arise.

Beyond the family unit, women also operate as intermediaries within broader trafficking and labour-exploitation networks, capitalising on their social positioning and on the gendered dimensions of trust and access. Female recruiters work within communities of origin, identifying vulnerable children, building rapport with families, and negotiating initial placements, a work that depends on their ability to mobilise social credibility, kinship ties, and local knowledge. Other women act as brokers linking different nodes of a trafficking network: between recruiters and traffickers, between traffickers and employers, between employers and the children themselves. This brokerage function is essential to how these networks operate, and it allows the women who perform it to accrue real economic and social capital; some move into more senior roles, becoming coordinators or even heads of trafficking enterprises in their own right.

The custodial role that some women occupy is particularly revealing of how assumptions about care work end up facilitating exploitation. A female householder who employs a child in domestic labour exercises daily control over that child's body, movements, and labour, and the outward appearance of care and mothering can mask what is, in

substance, profound control and exploitation.

Access, Authority, and the Gendered Construction of Kinship

Trafficking networks depend, in part, on the mobilisation of gender itself as a resource. Women are normatively positioned as caretakers and nurturers, and that positioning generates a presumption of benevolence that can be, and is, instrumentalised to gain access to vulnerable children; parents and community members are, on the whole, less inclined to scrutinise a woman's intentions or to see her as potentially dangerous. Women's positioned access to children through motherhood, household roles, and kinship networks also provides particular information: which children are vulnerable, which families are under economic strain, which children might plausibly be moved out of their kin networks without provoking alarm. That knowledge has value, and it can be monetised.

In a context of pervasive gender inequality and constrained legitimate income opportunities, participation in trafficking networks can become one of the few avenues through which some women, marginal traders without capital, displaced rural migrants, or women without male economic support following divorce or widowhood, can generate meaningful income. And women's participation is further enabled by a specific form of gender-blindness in law enforcement and social monitoring: police and child-protection officials, working from their own gendered

assumptions about who constitutes a threat, may scrutinise men's behaviour far more closely than women's, with the effect that a woman's involvement in a case can shift how that case is categorised and investigated in the first place.

Women's presumed benevolence, gentleness, and non-violence provide a distinctive cover for exploitation. Parents are, understandably, more inclined to entrust a child to a woman than to a man, on the assumption that she will treat the child with kindness. This presumption is not incidental to women's effectiveness as perpetrators, it is close to the centre of it. Women's historical exclusion from formal violence and criminal authority, while a genuine form of subordination, simultaneously generates a distinct kind of power in clandestine settings: a form of invisibility that men rarely have access to.

Trafficking operates not only through overt violence and coercion but through psychological manipulation and the deliberate construction of dependence. Women who are skilled at reading others' emotional needs are often particularly adept at creating the psychological conditions in which children remain, in effect, complicit in their own exploitation. This capacity to perform care while extracting harm is amplified by the social legitimacy already granted to women's nurturing roles: a man who gives a child affection and material support while also extracting labour from that child tends to arouse suspicion; a woman doing exactly the same thing is more often read as simply performing a maternal role. That asymmetry is, this article argues,

systematically exploited within trafficking networks.

Legal Frameworks, Institutional Blindness, and the Invisibility of Women Perpetrators

Nigerian legal frameworks criminalising trafficking and child labour were historically built around an assumption that men were the primary perpetrators. The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act of 2015, while gender-neutral on its face, contains implicit assumptions about perpetration that have left women's participation comparatively invisible: it emphasises transportation and movement across borders as defining elements of trafficking, a definition that aligns more readily with stereotypically male roles than with women's typical roles in recruitment and household-based exploitation. Similarly, a definition of trafficking centred on forced labour or extortion may fail to capture the more subtle coercive dynamics of household-based child labour orchestrated by women. This blindness to household-based and relationally embedded exploitation creates real space for women perpetrators to avoid criminal liability.

Police and child-protection officials in Nigeria operate under similar gendered assumptions about who is likely to be a criminal. During trafficking investigations, they are, on the available evidence, less likely to scrutinise women's behaviour or to pursue prosecution against them; the mere fact of

a woman's involvement can shift how a case is categorised and pursued. This gendered invisibility compounds an already serious problem of limited resources, capacity, and institutional corruption within Nigerian law enforcement, meaning that cases involving women perpetrators may receive even less institutional attention than comparable cases involving men.

Nigerian child-protection frameworks have also historically been shaped by an assumption that privileges maternal rights and parental autonomy. That deference has meant that a mother's decision to place a child in labour, or to send a child to relatives under arrangements that amount to trafficking, has often been treated as a matter of family autonomy rather than one of child protection, and the underlying presumption that mothers naturally act in their children's interest has meant that maternal agency in trafficking has frequently gone unrecognised and unaddressed. That presumption of maternal benevolence, effectively institutionalised in law and policy, becomes a mechanism through which women perpetrators escape accountability.

Conclusion

This article has examined the systematic participation of women in human trafficking and child labour in Nigeria, arguing that this involvement is not a peripheral or incidental phenomenon but an integral feature of how trafficking networks function and expand. The biological and social

attributes conventionally read as markers of feminine virtue such as gentleness, compassion, maternal instinct, and the lived experience of reproductive vulnerability, position women as strategically valuable participants in the trafficking and exploitation of children.

None of this is meant to suggest that women bear primary responsibility for trafficking and child labour in Nigeria; the structural conditions of poverty, economic inequality, weak state institutions, and persistent demand for cheap labour remain foundational to the whole system. The argument, rather, is that any adequate response to trafficking has to grapple with the full complexity of perpetration, including the ways gendered inequality and gendered authority become resources that some women use to harm others more vulnerable than themselves. By centring Nigerian cases specifically, this article has sought to contribute a more geographically grounded account of how gender operates as a vector of criminality, and not only as a marker of victimhood.

This research also contributes to a broader effort within gendered criminology to move beyond purely victimological frameworks and engage seriously with women's capacity for agency, power, and harm. Recognising women's perpetration is not a betrayal of feminist commitments to challenging gender inequality; if anything, it extends those commitments, since it takes seriously how power actually operates, including the uncomfortable fact that members of a marginalised group can

themselves become implicated in harming people even more vulnerable than they are. A criminology adequate to the realities of trafficking in the Global South needs to hold onto these complexities rather than treat any category of person, women included, as exempt from scrutiny regarding their capacity for harm.

Recommendations

- (a) First, Nigeria's legal frameworks governing trafficking and child labour should be revised to explicitly name and address women's trafficking perpetration, rather than relying on gender-neutral language that in practice tracks male-typical trafficking roles more closely than female-typical ones.
- (b) Second, law enforcement and child-protection training should directly confront the gendered assumptions about criminality identified in this article, building investigators' capacity to recognise and act on evidence of women's involvement in trafficking with the same rigour applied to cases involving men.
- (c) Third, child-protection frameworks should be reviewed with an eye to reducing automatic deference to parental and maternal autonomy in cases where the evidence suggests exploitation, while remaining alert to the risk of over-criminalising mothers who are themselves acting under severe

economic duress; these two goals are in tension, and reconciling them will require more field-level research than currently exists.

- (d) Finally, anti-trafficking interventions should address the gendered economic constraints that make trafficking-related income attractive to some women in the first place. Poverty does not excuse trafficking, but the limited legitimate income opportunities available to many Nigerian women plainly increase their exposure to illicit alternatives; expanding women's access to legitimate economic opportunity is not a complete solution, but it is a necessary part of one.

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