

## Mass Media Role in Combating Human Trafficking in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reviews how Nigeria has fared so far in the global battle to stamp out the obnoxious and dehumanising trade and the role the mass media plays in the tide of the global scourge. Nigeria is a signatory to the 2000 United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocol to Suppress, Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children. It was on this basis that Nigeria established NAPTIP in 2003, in fulfilment of its international obligation under the protocol to adopt and review measures to curb the enormity of trading in human commodities. The establishment of NAPTIP was not Nigeria's only response to the fight against the illicit trade. The federal government also develops policies that regulate and enforce plans to eliminate the scourge. The federal government has developed the national action plan on human trafficking in Nigeria (2022 to 2026), which serves as a roadmap for MDAs, state task forces against human trafficking, civil society organizations, international donor organizations, and the media in the fight against human trafficking. According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index, an estimated 50 million people are living in modern slavery, forced by one form of trafficking in persons or the other, with at least 1.6 million of them being Nigerians. Nigeria joined the rest of the world to mark the 2023 World Day against Trafficking in Persons.*

**Keywords:** *Mass Media, Human Trafficking, Nigeria, Organised Crime, United Nations.*

### INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is a heinous violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms. It preys on the vulnerable and thrives in times of conflict and instability. Today, amid growing inequalities, worsening climate emergencies, and record displacement, more people are left vulnerable to traffickers. Most ducted victims are women and children,

many of whom suffer brutal violence, forced labour, and horrific sexual exploitation and abuse. This must change. We must invest much more in detection and protection. We must strengthen law enforcement to bring criminals who commercialise humankind to justice. And we must help survivors to rebuild their lives. On this World Day against trafficking in persons, let us redouble our efforts to detect, protect, and support survivors and leave no trafficking victim behind. Together, let us build a world where no more can ever be bought, sold, or exploited (Antonio Guterres).

This was an extract of the address delivered by Antonio Guterres, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, to mark the 2023 World Day against trafficking in persons, themed: Reach Every Victim of Trafficking, Leave No one Behind. Nothing would gladden the heart of the UN chief than to see members of the international community, including Nigeria, hearken to his call for a world where no one can ever be bought, sold, or exploited. Antonio Guterres called on governments, law enforcement agencies, public services, and civil society to assess and enhance their efforts to strengthen prevention, identify and support victims, and end impunity.

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labour or a commercial sex act. Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked worldwide, thus raising concern about their safety and well-being. The media can be orchestrated to play a major role in mobilising public support and involvement to help prevent and combat trafficking in persons. Given its reach and ability to influence public opinion, the media are a powerful tool of social change.

### **Theoretical Discourse**

This paper is best explained by the Agenda-Setting Theory. Donohew and Palmgreen (1988) argue that theories should assist us in understanding some small or large part of the reality around us, which suggests that the usefulness of mass communication theories lies in their ability to help us make sense out of complex situations. Supporting this, Busby (1988) confirms that theories in the areas of mass communication will help us understand how the Media function, why the media function as they do, and the impact of the media on society and individuals.

Agenda setting is a theoretical perspective about the process, on the part of the mass media, of sifting out (from among many) certain issues which they (the media) consider very important to society, and focusing special and constant attention on these issues with the main purpose of getting the public to discuss them. The constant and specific attention paid to such issues by the media helps to keep the issues alive and generally leads to public discussion of the issues (Moemeka, 2000).

The proponents of the Agenda-Setting Theory are Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972). Miller (2002), McQuail and Windah (1986) said the proponents of the agenda-setting theory wrote in 1976 that:

*Audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, but they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it. For example, in reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media apparently determine the important issues. In other words, the mass media set the campaign's agenda. This ability to affect cognitive change in individuals is one of the most important aspects of mass communication power.*

It is quite apparent from the proponents' view of the Agenda Setting Theory that "agenda-setting" elicits appropriate action/actions (for or against) on those issues being publicly discussed (Moemeka, 2000). Cohen (1963), in Miller (2002), is said to have stimulated research on agenda-setting theory. In his study of foreign policy, Cohen (1963) noted that the press:

*...may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interest but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read (Miller, 2002 p258).*

The views in the quotation above by Cohen (1963) are indeed of the role of the media in our lives. The media may not be successful in telling us what to think (how to think of an issue), but they are surprisingly successful in telling us what to think about (topics that are important enough to warrant our attention). Folarin (1998, p.68) has identified the elements that enable successful agenda-setting by the media to include:

- a) The frequency of reporting
- b) Prominence is given to reports through headline display, pictures, and layout in newspapers and magazines, as well as through films, graphics, or timing on radio and television.
- c) The degree of conflicts generated in the report and
- d) Cumulative media-specific effects over time

The relevance of the agenda-setting theory to this discourse is obvious. The mass media can affect cognitive change in the individual's attention. In the same way, the Nigerian mass media can engage the masses in the fight against human trafficking by highlighting the dangers and enabling the public to attach importance to the scourge.

### **Concept of Human Trafficking**

Human trafficking is the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving individuals through force, fraud or coercion for the purpose

of exploitation. This exploitation may include forced labour, sexual slavery or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. It is considered a serious violation of human rights and a form of modern slavery. Efforts to combat human trafficking involve international laws, national policies, and non-governmental organisations (UNODC 2011, Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Human trafficking can occur both within a single country and across national borders. It is distinct from people smuggling, which involves the consent of the individual being smuggled and typically ends upon arrival at the destination. In contrast, human trafficking involves exploitation and a lack of consent, often through force, fraud or coercion. It is widely condemned by international agreements such as the United Nations as a violation of human rights. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons. Despite this condemnation, legal protections and enforcement vary significantly across countries. Globally, millions of individuals, including women, men and children, are estimated to be victims of human trafficking, enduring forced labour, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse (Ecker, 2022; US Government State Department, 2022).

The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children, which has 117 signatories and 173 parties (UNTC 2020), defines trafficking as:

- a) ...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion of abduction of fraud of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation or the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal, manipulation or implantation of organs;
- b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation outlined in sub-paragraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means outlined in subparagraph (a) have been used;
- c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered “trafficking in persons” even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in sub-paragraph (a) of this article;
- c) “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age (UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime Document, 2000).

## **Human Trafficking Prevalence**

There are many different estimates of the number of victims of human trafficking. According to the global estimates (2021), an estimated amount of 50million people are living in “modern-day slavery” across the globe (ILO, 2022). Women and children continue to make up the majority of victims worldwide. Child victims are increasingly detected globally; the ILO (2014) stated that forced labour alone (one component of human trafficking) generates an estimated \$150 billion in profits per annum as of 2014. In 2012, the ILO estimated that 21million victims were trapped in modern-day slavery. Of these, 14.2million (68%) were exploited for labour, and 4.5 million (22%) were exploited in state-imposed forced labour (ILO, 2012).

The following is the breakdown of profits by sector \$99 billion from commercial sexual exploitations, \$34 billion in construction, manufacturing, mining and utilities; \$9 billion in agriculture, including forestry and fishing; \$8 billion is served annually by private households that employ domestic workers under conditions of forced labour. Although only 19% of victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation, it makes up 66% of the global earnings of human trafficking (ILO, 2012). The average annual profits generated by each woman in forced sexual servitude (\$100,000) are estimated to be six times more than the average profits generated by each trafficking victim worldwide (\$21,800).

Human trafficking is the third largest crime industry in the world, behind drug dealing and arms trafficking, and is the fastest-growing activity of transitional criminal organisations (Shelly, 2010; ECPAT, 2018; Free for lifeintl.org, 2020). Around half of all trafficking in persons took place within the same region, with 42% occurring within national borders. One exception is the Middle East, where most detected victims are East and South Asians. Trafficking victims from East Asia have been detected in more than 64 countries, making them the most geographically dispersed group around the world. There are significant regional differences in the forms of exploitation. Countries in Africa and in Asia generally intercept more cases of trafficking for forced labour, while sexual exploitation is somewhat more frequently found in Europe and in the Americas.

About 74% of traffickers operated within organised crime groups, especially in business and government-type labour, which has now surpassed sexual exploitation (36%) as the most common form. Notably, trafficking for organ removal was detected in at least 1% of cases in 16 countries around the world. While significant progress has been made in legislation – with most countries having trafficking laws aligned with the UN Protocol – the report continues to raise concern about criminal justice outcomes: Only 17% of global convictions in 2022 were for forced labour, despite its rise, and men made up 70% of convicted traffickers, with women comprising 28% (Unodc.org, n.d).

## **Causes, Forms of Modern Slavery**

The United Nations could not agree less. Global crises, conflicts, and the climate emergency are escalating trafficking risks. Displacement and socio-economic inequalities are impacting millions of people worldwide, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers, it said. The global body noted that those who lack legal status live in poverty, have limited access to education, health care, or decent work, face discrimination, violence, or abuse, or come from marginalised communities are often the primary targets of traffickers.

However, the Devatop Centre for Africa Development brought the aforementioned reality nearer home when it said that millions of Nigerian young women, girls, boys, youth and children are at risk of human trafficking due to illiteracy, ignorance, greed, lack of opportunity, inequality, gender -induced cultural bias and persistent unemployment. The Centre listed other causative factors as poverty (a principal driving force), large family size, family and community crises, high demand for cheap labour, desire for youth emancipation, inadequate political commitment, porous borders and lack of strong political will. It also said that lack of access to education, sex-selective migration policies, disruption of the supportive system, traditional community attitude, manipulation of religious rituals, loss of parents, human deprivation and insurgency, among others, contribute to the situation.

On its part, Anti-Slavery International revealed that contemporary slavery takes various forms and affects people of all ages, genders and races, adding that the most common form of slavery is human trafficking. It described human trafficking as the use of violence, threats, or coercion to transport, recruit or harbour people to exploit them for purposes such as forced prostitution, labour, criminality, marriage or organ removal or harvesting. On the other hand, according to Anti-Slavery International, it is work or services people are forced to do against their will, usually under threat of punishment.

Another form of servitude is child slavery, which describes a situation where a child is exploited for someone else's gain. This can include child soldiers, child marriage and child domestic slavery. Also, forced and early marriage is another form of slavery. This is when people are married off against their will and cannot leave. Most child marriages can be considered slavery. These various forms of slavery must have informed the choice of the theme of the 2023 World Day against trafficking in persons, which is Reach Every Victim of trafficking, Leave No One Behind. And leaving no one behind is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The correlation between the theme, "Leave No One Behind", and the central focus of the fight against trafficking in persons is not far to seek. This is because when the theme was conceptualised in September 2015 by UN member states, the new

global development agenda was unanimously adopted. They agreed to set an agenda to achieve sustainable development by 2030, during which they decided to “Leave No one Behind” and to “reach the furthest behind first.” So, in the context of trafficking in persons, leaving people behind indicates failing to end the exploitation of trafficking victims, failing to support victim-survivors once they are free from their traffickers, and leaving identifiable groups vulnerable to traffickers.

The UN’s 2030 Agenda lists those who are left behind to include “children, youth, and persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 percent live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older people, indigenous people, refugees and internally displaced persons.” The world body reasoned that tackling human trafficking brings the world closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, combating organised crime and eradicating forced labour, exploitation and violence against children.

The 2030 Agenda aimed at sustainable development in the economic, social and environmental dimensions. Eradicating extreme poverty is at the heart of all efforts. But this seems to be an ambitious reverie, as poverty can only be ameliorated and not eliminated completely from society. “Leave No One Behind” targets 2030, when the Agenda for Sustainable Development and its attendant SDGs. This indicates the unambiguous commitment of all UN member states to ameliorate all forms of poverty, discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and humanity as a whole. While these are noble intentions, achieving them in an atmosphere of strife and insecurity in almost all countries, especially those in the third world, such as Nigeria, will certainly not be a walk in the park.

### **Nigeria’s Response to the Global Scourge**

As Nigeria joined the rest of the world to mark the 2023 World Day against Trafficking in Persons, the question on the lips of concerned local and international observers is how Africa’s largest and most populous country has fared in the global campaign to stamp out human trafficking and uplift the vulnerable from exploitative tendencies. What immediate and long-term measures (legal and institutional) has Nigeria put in place to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers? Is Nigeria still the missing link in the global campaign to stamp out the obnoxious trade? Are there clear pieces of evidence that the global fight against human trafficking, at least from Nigeria’s side, is on course and not losing steam? To what extent has the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), which is charged with the

responsibility of coordinating Nigeria's crime prevention and law enforcement resources to stamp out human trafficking, lived up to its billing?

Indeed, these questions have become pertinent given Nigeria's depressing human trafficking statistics. NAPTIP Director-General Professor Fatima Waziri-Azi, in a chat with newsmen on the activities lined up for the 2023 World Day against Human Trafficking, said the 2023 Global Slavery Index shows that 50 million individuals are living in modern slavery, with at least 1.6 million Nigerians affected. The figure, according to her, shows an increase of 10 million people since 2016. Despite the challenges faced by the agency, she contended that NAPTIP has been putting up a stiff fight against human trafficking, leading to better strategies to control and tackle the scourge. According to her, the Nigerian public is better informed about issues of human trafficking due to the amplified visibility of NAPTIP and its sustained media campaign. She noted that Nigerians have become their brother's keeper, looking out for one another and this has increased reporting of issues of human trafficking and violence against persons (domestic and sexual violence). She revealed that the Agency had rescued no fewer than 19,000 trafficked people in 2023 alone, with about 32 convicted of various crimes related to human trafficking between January and May of the same year. She also revealed that NAPTIP had identified 935 trafficking victims, including 521 involved in sex trafficking, 129 labour trafficking victims and 285 victims of unspecified exploitation, compared with 499 victims and 812 potential victims identified the previous year.

NAPTIP's statistics further indicate 1076 cases of trafficking in persons were recorded in 2018, as against 1052 in 2020. The data, however, show that sexual exploitation remained the first form of exploitation, with 60 cases against 279 recorded for forced labour. The Agency's indicators show a reduction in the number of female victims in 2018, with 961, in 2019, the figure reduced to 929; and in 2020, the number was further reduced to 868. NAPTIP rescued 1,450 victims of trafficking in 2021, out of which 1,266 were women. Although foreign travel, which promotes prostitution, was previously the largest category of Nigerian female trafficking victims who travel abroad, the same has now been overtaken by child abuse cases that stood at 312 in 2021, out of which 21 were girls.

In terms of performance and rating, the 2023 Global Slavery Index Report ranked Nigeria 38th out of 160 countries with the highest number of slaves in the range of 1.6 million. Nigeria is a signatory to the 2000 United Nations Convention on Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocol to Suppress, Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children.



## **Role of Mass Media in the Campaign against Human Trafficking**

The role of mass media in the fight against human trafficking has been documented (e.g., Adepelumi, 2015; Ahmed, 2020; Ajagun, 2022). Mass media play a crucial role in the campaign against human trafficking by raising public awareness, educating people on the dangers, and pressuring governments and organizations to take action. Through investigative journalism, documentaries, news reports, and social media campaigns, the media can expose the realities of trafficking, give a voice to survivors, and mobilise public support for prevention efforts.

### **Raising awareness and public education**

- **Inform the Public:** Media campaigns inform people about the signs, dangers, and prevalence of human trafficking, which is often a hidden crime.
- **Mould Public Opinion:** The media can help create a groundswell of public support for anti-trafficking efforts by bringing the issues to the forefront of public discourse.
- **Educate people on root causes:** Reporting on the root causes of trafficking, such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, helps the public understand the broader context of the issue.

### **Giving voice to survivors and promoting advocacy:**

- **Share victim stories:** Media Platforms provide a way for victims and survivors to share their stories, which can be powerful tools for advocacy and change.
- **Break the silence:** Story telling campaigns help break the culture of silence that can prevent people from reporting trafficking and seeking help.

### **Holding stakeholders accountable**

- **Pressure authorities:** Widespread media coverage can pressure governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders to address the issue and take action.
- **Promote accountability:** Responsible and thorough reporting can shed light on the actions of traffickers and the effectiveness of enforcement, potentially leading to more successful prosecutions.

### **Promoting Prevention and Action**

- **Provide resources:** Media can disseminate information on how to identify trafficking and where to get help.
- **Encourage Action:** By promoting skills for prevention and peace building, media can empower communities to take action in their immediate environment.

### **Using Digital Platforms**

- **Leverage Social Media:** The use of social media platforms with hashtags like #endtrafficking can help spread awareness quickly and widely.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is no denying the fact that human trafficking and all its forms pose a danger to society and should not be condoned. Its impact on Nigeria, despite concerted efforts to eliminate it to a reasonable extent, is still worrisome. Nigeria must step up efforts to eradicate human trafficking and ensure the existing legal and institutional measures are strengthened and adequately implemented to protect individuals from human traffickers. Public institutions must be able to fulfil their obligations to protect the rights of victims and survivors of trafficking and promote their social inclusion. The mass media must be orchestrated to play a more dynamic role in the fight against human trafficking. If properly deployed, the media (whether public or private) can make a substantial contribution to the war against human trafficking, and its impact can be felt everywhere.

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