

A Qualitative Study of the Causes and Consequences of Girl Child Migration in Plateau State, Nigeria**Felicia Dabugat**

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dabugatf@unijos.edu.ng**Abstract**

Girl Child migration in Nigeria has become an issue of concern in recent times because of its devastating consequences in the society, especially in Plateau State. One of the consequence of such migration is sexual exploitation and abuse, which according to the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), occurs on daily basis. NAPTIP unveiled the nature of sexual exploitation and abuse of young girls in Plateau State and other parts of Nigeria owing to internal and external migration. These young girls usually migrate within and outside Nigeria without restriction in search of greener pastures. Paradoxically the young girls end up becoming victims of abused and enslavement. The migrants ranges from minors, teenagers and adults and this has negative implications on them, their families and the society. The objective of this paper is to explore the factors responsible for the massive migration of girls in Nigeria ranging from possible parental neglect, decline in moral values, poor regional migration policies, poverty and quest for materialism. The study adopted the qualitative research design. Purposive sampling method was used to select respondents. The instrument of data collection was key informant interview (KII) and focused group discussion (FGD). The findings of the study revealed the causes and consequences of girl child migration in Plateau state. The study recommended practical solutions on reformation of local and regional national policies on irregular migration in Nigerian Society because of the consequences sexual of girl child migration.

Keywords: Causes, Consequences, Girl Child, Migration, Sexual Exploitation

INTRODUCTION

Sexual exploitation and girl child migration has a nexus and is now a global concern because it involves girls who are a vulnerable social group. Studies have shown that it is on the increase and driven by socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of education, son preference, conflict, parental neglect and societal pressures. Millions of under aged girls usually migrate internally and externally without the presence of their parents, relatives or guardians and easily become vulnerable to vices such as sexual exploitation and trafficking. Girls below 18 years often experience sexual exploitation in various forms such as rape, gender-based violence, prostitution, transactional sex (when in transit and at destination) and trafficking.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA 2024) projected that 48% of the total population of international migrants in the world as at mid-year 2024 were women and girls. Additionally, the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC, 2017) estimated that at least 300,000 unaccompanied and separated child migrants were in transit in eighty countries, which is a five-fold increase from five years ago. It is difficult to have an actual statistics or data of girls who migrate to Europe, America, Asia Latin America and other countries because they are irregular migrants. Girl Child migration entails the movement of girls who are below 18 years of age to other places- countries, states or localities different from their families of birth, orientation or adoption. These girls often move for several reasons, which could be conflicts, displacement, peer-group pressure and search for greener pastures. Consequently, exposing themselves to situations of vulnerability that includes sexual exploitation.

Statistics have shown that one in four African migrant is a child and about 6.2 million children and girls account for about half of the population. In other words, there are close to 3 million girls under 18 years moving within or from the continent to other places (UNICEF Data Snapshot 2024). In Nigeria, sexual exploitation and Girl Child migration has become a serious problem in recent times. The National agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) has been greatly occupied with cases of minors and under-aged girls who migrated and those that are constantly trying to move both within and outside Nigeria. Agboje (2024), a member of the International Association of Women Judges, writing on the vulnerability of the girl child asserted that; it would not be out of place to refer to the girl child in Nigeria as an “*endangered species*”.

The term migration and trafficking when it comes to girl child movement have similar vices and issues. Migration generally is the movement of people from one place to another, either domestically or externally. People migrate for various reasons such as education, marriage, business, fleeing conflicts and natural disasters. Trafficking on the other hand, is the forced or coercive movement of people for exploitation such as sex, labour or organ related issues. When young girls migrate, not all become victims of trafficking, but their movement alone without parental care expose them to trafficking, which occurs during migration flows. Sexual exploitation occurs in different forms such as molestation, rape, pornography, prostitution, sexual slavery and survival sex.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, Plateau State has witnessed an alarming increase in the number of young girls migrating both within and outside the state. This trend has become a major social and developmental concern, as the state currently ranks third in Nigeria for the highest cases of migration and trafficking involving the girl child. Many of these girls, driven by poverty, insecurity, lack of educational opportunities, and the search for better livelihoods, embark on these journeys unaccompanied. Unfortunately, such movements often expose them to multiple layers of vulnerability. Migrant girls, particularly those traveling alone, are easy targets for traffickers, abusers, and exploiters who take advantage of their precarious circumstances. Their susceptibility places them at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) at every stage of their migratory journey; from departure, through transit, to destination and even upon return.

Empirical evidence shows that unaccompanied minors are among the most vulnerable categories of migrants globally (UN Women, 2025, Temin *et al.*, 2013). In the context of Plateau State, many of these girls fall victim to trafficking networks that lure them with promises of employment or education, only to subject them to sexual exploitation, forced labour, or survival sex. The Plateau State Gender and Equal Opportunities Commission (GEOC) has reported rescuing 108 trafficked girls in 2025 alone, with new cases recorded on a near-daily basis. Despite efforts by government agencies and civil society organisations to combat trafficking and exploitation, the persistence of these incidents highlights a gap in understanding the specific risks, patterns, and implications of sexual exploitation among migrating girls from Plateau State. This study therefore seeks to deepen understanding of the nature, drivers, and consequences of sexual exploitation experienced by these girls. It also aims to explore mechanisms through which the survivors can be supported, rehabilitated and reintegrated, thereby contributing to policy interventions that safeguard the rights and wellbeing of the girl child in Plateau State.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To identify the major factors that drive the girl child migration in Plateau State;
- ii. To investigate the forms and locations of sexual exploitation encountered by girls who migrate in Plateau State;
- iii. Find out the institutional and socio-economic vulnerability that create the nexus between migration and sexual exploitation of girls in Plateau State;

- iv. Assess the role of agencies and support system that can prevent and rehabilitate girls who have experienced sexual exploitation due to migration in Plateau State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally hopelessness, wars, climate change, fear and a desire for a safer and better future lead many adolescent girls to embark on journeys that put them in danger, particularly of sexual and gender-based violence (Temin *et al.*, 2013). They posited that girls are on the move because they lack opportunities in their rural communities and account for a significant population of migrants. They travel internally and to Europe, Asia, Libya, America and other parts of the world. The international Federation of the Red Cross (2024) disclosed recent reports with insights from humanitarian teams that support child migrants on the front lines to shed critical light on the problem. There is no complete details or the full picture, but many children and young girls on the move experience sexual and gender-based violence in all stages of their migration journey.

There are push factors that propel some girls to migrate. For instance, research in Central America revealed that unaccompanied girls flee their country because the local street gangs known as the *maras*, were forcefully recruiting them to smuggle and sell drugs in their home countries, using sexual assault as a means of forcing them into compliance. In Honduras, girls as young as nine years old have been victims of gang rape. Unaccompanied girls also cited their fear of sexual assault and rape as a significant motivating factor for fleeing (Women Refugee Commission 2015). Sexual violence within the family is also a push factor for children to migrate. In another study-interviews with one hundred (100) migrant children who travelled alone to the United Kingdom revealed that more than one-third of them reported experiencing sexual violence at home, before they took flight (Thornton & Veenema, 2015).

A report by the country policy and Information note on trafficking of women in Nigeria (2022) disclosed that Nigeria is a source, transit point and destination for the trafficking of women and girls for forced labour and sexual exploitation. It lamented the absence of exact data of the statistics of girls and women who are trafficked to Europe and other parts of the world for sexual exploitation and labour. The report further revealed that migration, trafficking of girls and women is also highly prevalent within Nigeria, and some organized criminal gangs are solely responsible for the movement and trafficking of girls and women both domestically and externally. Girl child refers to girls who fall below eighteen (18) years. The convention on the Rights of a Child defines

a child as “A human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child majority is attained earlier”. Similarly, Offorma (2009) defined the girl child as a biological female offspring from birth to eighteen (18) years of age just as the definition of the convention on the rights of the child.

Historically, movement and trafficking of women and girls was predominantly from Edo State and other parts of Southern Nigeria. Trafficking and migration in recent times has taken a new dimension with Plateau and Benue State having the highest rate of migration or trafficking of girls within Nigeria and other continents. Several factors have been attributed to girls who are a vulnerable social group, which include the following:

Poverty

The inability of the girls to meet up with their fundamental basic needs (food, clothing and shelter) places them in a vulnerable position of moving either voluntarily or forcefully. Kolesnik *et al.*, (2023) cited in Idibhar and Tonye (2024) disclosed that traffickers often look out for girls and single mothers who are affected by poverty and give them the option of offering job opportunities as a “disguised” help, which ironically is trafficking for sexual exploitation and other motives.

Lack of Parental Guidance and Control

Girls who grow in families or homes with poor or lack of parental guidance and control can be easily manipulated to move or migrate and become victims of sexual exploitation. The Plateau State Gender and Equal Opportunities Commission (GEOC) in 2025 dealt with 402 cases of parental neglect, which are directly linked to Girl Child migration in the state. Many of the girls from such parental backgrounds are among the survivors of sexual exploitation in the State.

Conflicts and Displacements

Ethno-religious conflicts, wars, attacks by bandits and terrorists and other forms of natural disasters account for the movement of girls among other migrants. In Plateau State, the high rate of incessant upheavals accounts for the high rate of trafficking and voluntary movements of girls who are trying to fend for themselves. The Head of Operations of the National Agency for the Protection of Trafficking in Persons and other related matters (NAPTIP) in Plateau disclosed his observation about the migration of girls in the state. He keenly observed from a location of exit called Mararaban Jama'a and gave this narration as follows: “One of my experience was at

Mararaban Janmma'a in Jos, in one particular day; where in less than 45 minutes, I counted over 30 girls leaving the state" (African Drum News 2022). This show how serious the issue is. Many survivors have revealed the negative impact of such migration on the migrants, their families and the society.

Harmful Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Many cultures in Africa and Nigeria places a high value and preference to male children. Where this prevails, the girl does not receive the same treatment compared to that of a boy (Idyorough, 2005). This has led to discrimination and unequal treatment of boys and girls in families. Girls raised under this culture or environment who are not well catered for are usually victims of sexual exploitation when they migrate from their origins. This is because such cultural practices sometime exclude girls from access to education.

Peer Group Pressure

Peer group pressure can also lead to girl child migration. This occurs when friends entice their naïve friends about opportunities that can lead to wealth and other values of the peer group. Many girls under such influence admire the seeming wealth displayed by possession of expensive phones, wigs, artificial nails and fashion attires their friends display and fall for the deceit. Consequences of peer group influence are devastating because many girls who were lured ended up as victims of sexual exploitation.

High Rate of Unemployment

This is one of the push (triggers) factors surrounding the girl child migration. Traffickers target unemployed ambitious girls with the promise of job opportunities and lure them to move. Alexandra (2017) posited that traffickers actually take advantage of the level of ignorance and inexperience of the girls to deceive them. Regardless of the factors above, girls who move sometimes do so for various or multiple reasons and it differs across time and space.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Marxist theory of gender is Karl Max proposition on the historical evolution of women's oppression in the society, which also affects the girl child. Karl Max and Frederick Engels are the original and main proponents of this theory. In 1884, in a book titled "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the state"; they explained that the etymological derivation of the family is

from the Latin word “famulus” which is “household slave” and “familia” refers to the totality of slaves owned by one person. Marx and Engels postulated that the problems of women (and girls) is deeply rooted in patriarchy and the capitalist system of production.

The postulation of Marxist theory posits that economic structure, specifically the ownership and control of the means of production is the foundation of social inequality. Though Marx and Engels primarily focused on class conflict between the bourgeoisies (owners) proletariats (have-nots), their work provides the groundwork for a critical view of gender and the family. This framework provides a powerful lens for understanding how global capitalism contributes to sexual exploitation and the migration of girls in search of survival and opportunities.

Marxism posits that society is divided into classes based on control over the means of production. Capitalists own and control productive resources, while workers sell their labour power to survive. Engels (1884/1972), in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, linked the subordination of women to the rise of private property and the patriarchal family structure. Engels argued that women’s unpaid domestic labour, reproduction, and child rearing ensured the continuation of the labour force while remaining unacknowledged and uncompensated.

Other Marxist theorists and socialist feminists such as Silvia Federici, Heidi Hartmann, and Angela Davis contributed and expanded this analysis by emphasizing how capitalism relies on both class and gender hierarchies. Women’s labour in the household and the informal economy, often invisible and undervalued, is crucial for maintaining the capitalist system (Federici, 2004; Hartmann, 1979; Davis, 1981). Additionally, the sexual commodification of women through prostitution, pornography, and the global sex trade illustrates how capitalist markets have transformed female bodies into sources of profit. These processes are not isolated from the global economy but rather integral to its functioning.

The migration of girls and women across borders can be explained through structural inequalities generated by capitalism. Economic crises, unemployment, and land dispossession globally often push women and girls to migrate in search of work. However, the international division of labour under global capitalism positions girls in precarious and exploitative forms of employment such as domestic work, caregiving, or the sex industry (Sassen, 2000). Marxist theory highlights that

this migration is not a matter of individual choice alone but a systemic outcome of capitalist expansion that creates surplus labour and deepens dependency between rich and poor nations.

Sexual exploitation, particularly of migrant girls, can be seen as an extreme manifestation of capitalism and patriarchy. Recruiters, traffickers, and employers profit from women's vulnerability, turning their bodies and labour into commodities. The promise of economic opportunity often conceals exploitative realities, where girls experience sexual violence, coercion, and debt bondage. Marxist feminism explains this exploitation not simply as moral failure but as a predictable outcome of a system, which commodifies human relations (Federici, 2012). The global sex trade, in particular, reflects how capitalist markets absorb even the most intimate aspects of human life for profit, while racial, gender, and class inequalities determine who is most vulnerable.

Furthermore, Marxist perspective draws attention to how states and global institutions perpetuate these conditions. Immigration laws, trade policies, and structural adjustment programs often exacerbate poverty and limit safe migration routes, indirectly influencing trafficking and exploitation (True, 2012). Capitalist economies benefit from this situation: migrant women, particularly girls provide cheap, flexible labour with minimal social protection. Their invisibility and marginal status in host societies or communities reinforce their economic and sexual exploitation.

Thus, Marxist theory reveals that sexual exploitation and the migration of girls are not isolated social problems but products of a global capitalist system that commodifies both labour and bodies. By connecting gender inequality to material and economic structures, Marxist feminism exposes the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and *globalisation* in sustaining women's oppression. To address the sexual exploitation of migrant girls, therefore, requires more than moral condemnation or legal reform, but a transformation of cultures, economic and social systems that make their exploitation profitable and their migration necessary.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a qualitative research design method. Jos North LGA was the study area because most of the girls who migrated out of the state from other Local Government Areas of Plateau State were in some *Safe Homes* receiving psychosocial support and rehabilitation from the

government and some NGOs. Purposive sampling method was employed to select only girls (participants) who had migrated either internally or externally and returned either voluntarily or by deportation. Data was collected through in-depth interview for the participants who were seven in number from the population of the returned migrant girls. The seven participants were purposively selected because they were below eighteen (18) years, which is the required target sample. A focus group discussion was also conducted in a single session, which lasted for an hour for all the respondents. The data was analysed thematically in line with the study objectives. The study adhered to the ethics of social research by first obtaining permission from the agency responsible for the girls to gain access to them. Additionally the principles of debriefing, informed consent, right to decline, anonymity and doing no harm to the participants was upheld due to the sensitive nature of the topic of study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants interviewed were all from Plateau State, but from different Local Government Areas (LGAs). Their ages were 12, 14, 17, 16, 14, 15, and 17 respectively. Some of them said they were deceived to migrate further their education, but ended up as victims of abuse and sexual exploitation. The respondents were from Riyom, Barkin Ladi, Shendam and Bassa LGAs, but majority (4) were from Riyom LGA, which tallied with media reportage that majority of girls who move either voluntarily or forcefully.

The girls revealed that it was high expectation (push factor) for a better standard of living that motivated them to move. Four (4) of them were victims of rape, one was physically assaulted by her host who she called her “madam”. Apparently, these young girls left with nothing and returned with nothing. During the interviews and FGD, the girls revealed the critical role played by the Plateau State Gender and Equal Opportunities Commission in rescuing them. The participants revealed that they were lured to move by women who convinced them of a bright future ahead and their parents willingly released them. A 12-year-old participant was very emotional and traumatized and could not discuss her ordeal.

The participants have trauma from the terrible experiences, and were still in a “safe house” receiving counselling, therapy and psychosocial support. A respondent who is Fourteen years old respondent speaking on her ordeal said: *“my madam never sent me to school as she promised earlier. I was responsible for performing all the domestic chores in the house and still received*

beatings. Sometime she beats me with sharp objects and insults me so much until a neighbour informed the civil defence office and they came and picked me". Another respondent who is twelve years old from Bassa LGA partially narrated how her stepmother gave her out and she became a victim of rape.

Despite the consequences of the migration of the Girl-Child in the Plateau, the GEOC painfully disclosed that one hundred and sixty four (164) children, mostly girls, have been apprehended and deterred from migrating from the state. The agency has also succeeded reporting trafficking related cases, eight persons (8) have been prosecuted, and twenty- one (21) are still awaiting trial.

Sexual Exploitation and the Girl Child Migrant

Sexual exploitation plays out during the migration of girls within and outside Nigeria. Internal migration also has cases of sexual exploitation like instances where husbands of the employers of the migrant girls either raped or molested them. Worst still, Some migration routes are more dangerous than others are for all migrants and irregular paths thus, when children resort to unsafe routes, and are traveling without the protection of caring adults; they are at significantly increased risk of suffering sexual and gender-based violence by ill-intentioned smugglers and other unscrupulous actors.

Humanitarian workers stated that many unaccompanied adolescent girls traveling through Niger, many of them coming from Nigeria rely on the local brothels to get the money they need to continue their journey to Europe. In Agadez for instance, women and girls in the brothels typically earn around three dollars per client, much of which goes to local *madams*, in exchange for room and board during the weeks or months they stay in the desert city. Their only source of support they get is from Red Cross volunteers who are among very few aid workers allowed to give support inside the brothels because they are known and trusted by the local communities. For many migrant girls, the humanitarian workers are their only source of support. The Niger Red Cross estimates that there are 150 brothels in the Agadez region and describe conditions in them as unhealthy, unsanitary and precarious. The girls and women often require medical care and psychosocial assistance, sometimes because of sexually transmitted infections, sexual assaults, beatings and other violence incurred during transit through Niger. Health services, including prevention and response services for sexual violence, are extremely limited and largely inaccessible for the women and girls, as it is for most other migrants. In many cases, these women

and girls are in a perilous situation and in many cases are afraid of seeking support from the authorities. This is because there are also reported cases of abuse by the authority.

Amnesty International (2010) found out that an astonishing six out of ten Central American migrant women and girls have been raped while on the move in Mexico. This reveals the devastating nature of the journey of girls across the globe. Another study in 2017 on unaccompanied and separated girls who arrived in Italy underscores that girls are suffering sexual exploitation, sexual assault, and trafficking and survival sex throughout their entire journey. Ribul, (2017) opined that it is evident that women and girls are aware of the high risk of sexual assault and exploitation prior to undertaking dangerous journeys, and take some precautions because some girls take birth control pills as a preventative measure to avoid pregnancy in case of sexual violence. One study found that women and girls from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia who passed through Sudan sought out emergency contraception to take with them on their journey to Libya in fearful anticipation of sexual exploitation (IFRC 2024).

The nexus between sexual exploitation and girl child migration is a negative one that needs advocacy and awareness due its consequences on girls in every society. Literature revealed the nature of the dangers and demeaning exchanges that occurs during and after migration. Some young girls on transit lost their lives and never lived to narrate their ordeals. Some girls from Plateau State recently were deported from Ghana, Mali, Cameroon and other countries. However, there is no baseline data on this and studies like will contribute to literature on Girl Child migration in Plateau State.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the causes and consequences of girl child migration in Plateau State. The push and pull factors and vulnerability of girls create an opportunity for traffickers and other criminal elements in the society who promise assistance and opportunities to the girls to move either internally (within Nigeria) and externally (outside Nigeria). Hence, the urgent need of declaring a war on sexual exploitation and migration of girls in the Nigerian society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are made:

- i. The government must prioritise access to education to children, especially girls at all levels- primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.
- ii. Government should foster social, economic and political stability in Nigeria because conflicts and instability serve as triggers of migration.
- iii. Private individuals, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and should complement government effort by initiating and facilitating economic empowerment opportunities for women and girls.
- iv. Community leaders at the grass-root levels should improve access to vocational education to girls who may not want to attend the formal system of education.
- v. Parents and caregivers should sit-up in their parental responsibilities and treat both boys and girls with equal love and fairness.
- vi. Child and forced marriages needs to be discouraged and abolished. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) should advocate against such harmful cultural practices.
- vii. The girl child needs to be educated and given guidance on how to shun peer-pressure and subtle activities of traffickers who are in groups of organized crime in contemporary societies.
- viii. There is need for practical and feasible policies at all level of governance that will help in curbing the menace.
- ix. The Plateau State government can create a task force, which should comprise members of the Nigerian Police force, Civil Defence Corps, NAPTIP Staff, and Staff of the GEOC and local vigilante officers who will monitor movements at the various motor parks in the state and seventeen LGAs. This will help in detecting and stopping the migration of girls before they leave any LGA or part of the state.

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