NIU Journal of Social Sciences Copyright©2026
Nexus International University ISSN: *3007-1682;* 12(3): 289-297

Demand for Cheap Labour and Commercial Sexual Exploitation as Drivers of Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria

GABRIEL OHIOLE IZEDOMEN
University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria

Abstract. The demand that fuels trafficking is generally not studied systematically, but poverty, family pressure, and criminal networks which enable trafficking from Edo State are explained. The question asked in this paper is what have been the reasons human trafficking is encouraged in Edo State. In other to answer this question, empirical historical design was utilised, by means of secondary data from peer-reviewed studies, institutional data, government reports and documented investigations published primarily during 2021-2025. The evidence is structured in terms of three aspects of demand: low-cost labour, demand for commercial sexual services, and demand for controllable workers in both labour and sexual markets. Transaction cost economics suggests that when the intermediaries can recruit, relocate and manage workers via debt, oaths, and weak enforcement, the evidence shows that those intermediaries generate profit from vulnerability, which allows them to meet their demand. According to transaction cost economics, intermediaries make profit from vulnerability, and they can meet demand, when they can recruit, move and control workers cheaply, using debt, oaths and weak enforcement. Best documented are commercial sexual services and controllability, while thinner, but not absent, are labour demands in Edo State. The paper argues that demand has been a strong reinforcing condition and not the only one, as a reinforcing condition of the vulnerability of the supply side. It suggests the licensing of recruitment intermediaries, the tracing of financial and financial gains from trafficking and the prosecution of the practice of coercion via an oath taking.

Keywords: Human Trafficking; Edo State; Demand; Cheap Labour; Commercial Sexual Exploitation; Transaction Cost Economics.

1. Introduction

Human trafficking is well documented but challenging to measure. In 2021, the International Labour Organisation, Walk Free and the International Organisation for Migration estimated 27.6 million people in forced labour, including 6.3 million in forced commercial sexual exploitation and 17.3 million in forced labour by private actors. In the private sector, forced labour has been estimated to generate US$236 billion in illegal profits annually, and 73% of that amount of illegal profits comes from forced commercial sexual exploitation, despite accounting for only 27% of forced labour victims (International Labour Organisation, Walk Free, & International Organisation for Migration, 2022; International Labour Organisation, ILO, 2024). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC (2024), victims identified globally in 2022 have been found to be 25% higher than in 2019. These figures are not accurate counts but instead suggest size is based on surveys and detection.

Trafficking is typically explained in the terms of "supply" and "demand". The supply-side approach focuses on the factors that make people recruitable, such as poverty, gender inequalities and limited labour force participation. Demand-side accounts question the need of employers, intermediaries and consumers for labour and services in coercive and/or vulnerable forms. The Palermo Protocol obliges states to discourage the demand that fosters exploitation leading to trafficking (United Nations, 2000, as cited in Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, 2021). The OSCE (2021) continues that while buyers do not intentionally seek out trafficked persons, they are interested in avoiding knowledge that the trafficked person is a victim.

Demand is important because it affects the returns to exploitation, which in turn affect the profitability of trafficking.

UNODC (2023) reported that sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was the region with the highest number of countries reporting victims in Africa. Nigeria is a source, transit and destination country. In 2021, Walk Free estimated 1.6 million people in modern slavery in Nigeria, and in 2024, 744 investigations, 71 prosecutions and 49 convictions were reported by the U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Nigerian victims are trafficked for sex in Europe and for domestic servitude and sex in the Gulf, and West and Central Africa (U.S. Department of State, 2024). As noted in the data in this Summary, Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) reported 460 cases of sexual exploitation and 279 cases of forced labour during the period. This image has a unique significance for Edo State.

The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (2021) has identified the Edo (or Bini) ethnic group as the source of Nigerian victims trafficked to Europe for prostitution purposes and in a purposive sample of 31 Nigerian victims in Italy 64.5% had been trafficked from Edo State. The path through Libya has created a system of structural violence in Edo which has been connected to an 'abuse-for-profit' system in Libya since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 (Adeyinka, Lietaert & Derluyn, 2023b; de Haan, Aghedo & Eaton, 2024). The State started its Task Force Against Human Trafficking in 2017 and adopted an anti-trafficking law in 2018, while the Oba of Benin cancelled oaths taken by victims of trafficking on 9 March 2018 (Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2021; Adeyinka et al., 2023b). Even the Task Force's own workload for 2020-2021 consisted of 13 investigations of forced labour and four of sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2021), which is a reminder that Edo trafficking is not just sexual.

Previous studies have identified family and community acceptance of remittances, oath-based bondage, intermediaries with motives of mobility and status, among others, as drivers of Edo trafficking (OSCE, 2021; European Asylum Support Office, EASO, 2021; Adeyinka et al., 2023b; Rizzotti, 2022; and de Haan et al., 2024). The studies on demand, however, have been geared towards destination markets and policy. What has not been explored in the Edo case, however, is how the "need for cheap workers" and "commercial sex" dictate the nature of the case itself, and why this is important because interventions focused just on vulnerability do not affect the income from exploitation. This paper posits human trafficking as dependent and demand for cheap labour and commercial sexual exploitation as independent variables, which are further broken down into three sub-variables: demand for low-cost labour, demand for commercial sexual services, and demand for controllable workers in the labour and sexual markets. The second reflects the desire of the exploiters and intermediaries to have workers whose debt, class or ritual bondage reduces the cost of exploiting them.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Edo State has a legal framework even after 20 years of interventions, trafficking still continues. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO, 2021) quoted experts as saying sex trafficking in Benin City has not reduced. Despite the European controls and the decrease in the number of Libyan returnees, the trafficking of women to other destinations has picked up. The U.S. Department of State (2021) noted that there were no known instances of a trafficker being convicted since the Task Force was established in 2018, and that corruption and weak judicial capacity are challenges within the country (2025). The longevity, then, creates an empirical demand side issue. If the problem was vulnerability alone, one would expect to see more reductions in recruitment if the problem was solved by awareness and poverty reduction efforts.

Exploitation continues to make money, suggesting that there are still consumers of labour and sexual services willing to accept recruits on the basis of coercion. In 2021, in a Spanish operation, investigators discovered that the money from a network in Benin City was mostly used to fund trafficking in Nigeria, which had an additional victim in the city (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project [OCCRP], 2021). Evidence of survivors also reveals that 90.6% of the Nigerian survivors in one dataset had been sexually exploited, and for adolescents in Italy, wages were deducted to cover the costs of the traffickers (Kiss, Fotheringhame, Kyegombe, McAlpine, Abilio, Kyamulabi, Walakira, Devries & Tanton, 2022).

The lack of scholarship is thus particular. Perceptions of human trafficking among residents of Oredo and Egor Local Government Areas (LGA) (Akhigbe & Iduemre 2021), juju rituals and oath-taking in the exploitation and indebtedness of Nigerian trafficking victims (Adeyinka et al., 2023), returnee identity (Shaidrova, 2023), and the violence continuum linking Edo and Libya (de Haan et al., 2024) are examined. Demand has been responded to, however, primarily at destination level and in terms of policy perspectives

(OSCE, 2021). The labour dimension is less well represented, with evidence of sexual exploitation more likely to be found in relation to Edo trafficking and forced labour and domestic servitude more likely to be found at the national level (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

There is also a methodological gap. Documentary-based research can be complemented by systematic historical synthesis of documentary evidence, which may have conceptual and ethical challenges for Edo research, as much of the research is based on interviews with trafficking survivors, officials, and traffickers (Diagboya, 2023). This study therefore looks at three dimensions of the demand and their linkages with Edo State and trafficking. It does not take it for granted that demand is the only entity to blame; it enquires about how much of the profitability and sustainability of trafficking can be attributed to vulnerabilities already identified on the supply side, as well as demand side conditions.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study set out to:

- Examine the relationship between demand for low-cost labour and human trafficking in Edo State;
- Assess the relationship between demand for commercial sexual services and human trafficking in Edo State; and
- Analyse the relationship between demand for controllable workers in labour and sexual markets and human trafficking in Edo State.

1.3 Research Questions

- To what extent has demand for low-cost labour been associated with human trafficking in Edo State?
- To what extent has demand for commercial sexual services been associated with human trafficking in Edo State?
- To what extent has demand for controllable workers in labour and sexual markets been associated with human trafficking in Edo State?

2. Method of the Study

The research design used is empirical historical study using secondary data. The design is appropriate for a question of the evolution and persistence of the demand conditions, as trafficking is hidden and its history can be made known only by documents, investigation and institutional reporting. There was no questionnaire, no interviews, no respondents were engaged and no primary human-subject data was collected. The sources were identified by conducting online search of scholarly and institutional repositories using various combinations of terms related to Edo State, Benin City, trafficking, labour exploitation, commercial sexual exploitation, demand, debt bondage, oaths and returnees. The corpus includes peer-reviewed articles, research papers by think-tanks and agencies, the UNODC, ILO, OSCE publications, reports from the U.S Department of State and Labour, a report by a recognised journalism organisation and a report from civil society. Sources were preserved where possible, institutionally and individually identifiable and related to Edo State, Nigerian trafficking or demand-side mechanisms.

The study is not about the document itself, but about secondary interpretations of the document. The secondary sources that analyse legal instruments take precedence over the instruments themselves, and these are cited as primary documents in the case of the Palermo Protocol. The figures for institutional datasets are secondary compilations, and the figures from scholarly articles are based on their own methods, with the limitations of which noted wherever they are relevant. The criteria for assessing credibility related to authorship, peer review or institutional mandate, transparency of method and consistency with other sources. A claim was more convincing when it was supported by scholarly, institutional and investigative sources and less convincing when it was qualified by a single source. The evidence was presented and examined in terms of the three research questions and then analysed thematically and historically, from the documentary evidence to the interpretation, comparison with previous research and theoretical implications. There is no claim that the study is statistically significant. The main constraints are that: some trafficking may not have been detected and sources on labour demand in Edo are fewer than interest in sexual exploitation.

3. Conceptual Review

3.1 Labour

Labour is a social relationship in which a worker brings effort to the relationship that is negotiated in unequal terms of pay, conditions and authority. Markets coordinate the supply and demand, but the coordination relies on the ability of bargainers, the information available, and alternatives. In an informal and precarious employment context, wages are unregulated and protection is thin, thus creating a larger room for manoeuvre by the employer to

determine the terms of employment that workers are not likely to reject. How regular pay arrangements can be used to control forced labour: Withholding wages is one of the most common types of coercion in forced labour practices (ILO, 2024). Labour demands can only become an issue when a demand exists for labour, but the demand involves employers and/or intermediaries willing to pay wages that fall below acceptable levels, or to work under exploitative conditions. The relationship between limited alternatives and exploitative labour is particularly close in Nigeria where there is little formal employment and high prevalence of informal employment and this relationship ties the analysis of labour to the analysis of trafficking.

3.2 The Concept of Demand

Demand: In economics, the desire to acquire a service or a product at a particular price; for example, the demand for labour is how many workers are required by an employer at a specific price and the demand for services is by consumers. Trafficking questions what ensues of this. The OSCE (2021) also identifies demand as a root cause since it can be a chain from demand that leads to exploitation to trafficking and also recognizes that buyers are not necessarily looking to buy trafficked persons and do not seek to identify trafficked persons. Demand should not be confused with trafficking. When a price or conditions are demanded for labour and services, and they can be obtained, or at least most economically, from people who cannot refuse, this is not a legitimate demand, but rather a contributing factor to the occurrence of trafficking. This separation of demand for labour and demand for exploitable labour sets the stage for the availability of cheap labour.

3.3 Cheap Labour

Cheap labour is the term used to describe labour that is obtained at low cost, in the form of low pay, low hours, non-standard contracts or the lack of social protection. Trafficking is not synonymous with low wages, as many low-paid workers are able to leave and renegotiate. Forced labour is defined as labour obtained by means of an implicit or explicit threat to penalty and not freely given (ILO, 2024), and trafficked labour is the recruitment, movement or harbouring of individuals under a threat of penalty in addition to the above. Sitting between these extremes are situations where cheapness is dependent on limited choice, including withheld wages, debts that can't be paid, limited mobility, and exploitative recruitment. Forced labour confers a cost advantage to the victim, estimated at US$10,000 per victim by ILO (2024). In Nigeria, the relevant contexts are domestic work, in which Nigerian victims are exploited at home and in the Gulf (U.S Department of State, 2024); and the debt-financed migration economy of Edo State, where the price of migration becomes a demand for future earnings (Kiss et al., 2022).

3.4 Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Commercial sexual exploitation includes any sexual service that is acquired or provided in a market-based activity through exploitation, such as through coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability. It is a gender-based human rights concern: 92% of the 100,000 plus victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the world are female (OSCE, 2021). The focus of the test discussed here is the specific elements of coercion, deception or abuse of vulnerability, not the type of service provided, and such elements are not necessarily present in consensual adult sex work. The markets for commercial sex encourage and sustain demand which can be met by the practitioners of sex work and the ILO (2024) indicates that this market generates disproportionate profit. Buyers' conduct is not only important when intentional but also when unintentional, because according to OSCE (2021) in 2017-2018, only one in 72 victims identified across the EU was subject of a prosecution for buyers' conduct. The history that is relevant to Edo State is the migration of women who are recruited for street prostitution to Italy and other European markets (Adeyinka et al., 2023b; Kiss et al., 2022). Commercial sexual exploitation denotes coercive or forceful sexual services rendered by some female individuals to the male genders, either domestically or internationally or in foreign lands.

3.5 Human Trafficking

The international legal definition can be found in the Palermo Protocol, which the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive is based upon, and it is an act, means and purpose. The acts are recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons (European Union Agency for Asylum, EUAA, 2021). These methods are physical, threatening, manipulative, and dishonest such as using some kind of vulnerability, like power, coercion, fraud or deception. Exploitation refers to the exploitation of the prostitution of others and other sexual exploitation (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, 2021) and forced labour/s. Trafficking does not only take place at border crossing and the Nigerian law criminalises both sex trafficking and labour trafficking (U.S Department of State, 2025). The definition has

the hook of demand and trafficking—demand provides the purpose, and vulnerability provides the means.

3.6 The Nexus of Commercial Sexual Exploitation, Cheap Labour and Human Trafficking

As the OCCRP (2021) documents, the preceding concepts can be linked in a causal chain: demand generates an economic incentive, the incentive creates a space for recruitment and platforms that provide workers on exploitable terms, the exploitation lowers the cost of labour or services, the lowering of the cost of labour or services creates margins, the margins create an economic incentive for trafficking, and the economic incentive of trafficking funds further exploitation. Mechanisms vary from market to market. In labour markets the incentive is cost reduction in a sector that is difficult to monitor and in the case of exploitation, the dependence on the employer or intermediary sustain exploitation. The incentive in sexual market is continuity of consumers' demand while control is through debt, violence, and in the case of Nigeria, through oaths (Adeyinka et al., 2023b). Intermediates like the recruiters and madams and transporters bring down the expenses involved in matching the vulnerable with the demand in both. The asked dreams of the women who recruited them were similar to the ones that the madams interviewed after conviction in Italy expressed (Rizzotti, 2022).

Demand is not the only cause. Trafficking is multi-layered and demand is coupled with vulnerabilities on the supply side, including family poverty, adverse childhood experiences, remittance acceptance in the community, and low enforcement (EASO, 2021; Kiss et al., 2022). This study's conceptual understanding is that demand does not make things vulnerable; rather it outlines conditions under which they can become vulnerable for exploitation and profit.

4. Theoretical Framework

Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) is chosen because it accounts for the relationship under study: the connection between actors looking for labour or services at low cost and some arrangements which minimise the costs of finding, contracting and controlling workers. While Rational Choice Theory (RCT) has been used to explain individual offenders' decisions, it has little to predict the organisation of exchange, and segmented labour market theory has explained the preference of employers for vulnerable individuals, it cannot predict how exchange is organised and enforced by the intermediaries. TCE engages directly with organisation. TCE was introduced in Coase (1937) where he asked about the costs of relying on the price mechanism as the solution to the question of the existence of firms (as cited in Sent & Kroese 2022). Williamson formalised the view in the 1970s and 1980s, which recognized bounded rationality and opportunism (self-interest seeking with guile) as human factors and asset specificity, uncertainty and frequency as transaction attributes (Williamson, 1975, 1985). If there is no opportunity control, parties will implement governance mechanisms to safeguard against opportunism (Sent & Kroese, 2022). Cuypers, Hennart, Silverman and Ertug (2021) examine the development of the theory, the existing challenges and empirical record. Baarda (2016) used it to analyse a Nigerian trafficking network, looking at 'voodoo ritual' as a way of ensuring that the arrangements of the network were upheld.

TCE's appeal is that it is solely based on how the trafficking of persons companies can replace the actual need for legal enforcement in the illegal marketplace, which is one reason why trafficking networks rely on debt, oaths and intermediaries. There are weaknesses recorded about it. Opportunism is also been criticized as empirically incorrect and even as unnecessary for a theory of the firm (Sent & Kroese, 2022). Cuypers et al. (2021) point out that empirical methods for the study of opportunism are still to be developed. Another aspect here is that TCE views parties as similar exchange partners and offers little insights on gender, power and structural coercion, all of which are key aspects of trafficking.

Here TCE reveals the demand for cheap labour, the search for what can reduce labour cost; the demand for commercial sexual services, as the continuing demand which makes labour recruiting pay; and the demand for controlled labour, where cost of control sinks into debt and swearing. It does not give an account of the weakness of institutions, which it relies on the enforcement evidence mentioned above. TCE is not evidence of demand which leads to trafficking but rather a lens over mechanisms.

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Demand for Low-Cost Labour

There is abundant evidence at the global and national level and less at the Edo State level of low cost labour demand. According to ILO et al. (2022), 17.3 million people are in forced labour as a result of the actions of private individuals globally, while ILO (2024) estimated that the annual value of forced labour is US$236 billion, with Africa accounting for US$20

billion and domestic work for US$2.6 billion a year. For the first time ever, the number of detected trafficking for labour was just marginally higher than that of detected trafficking for sexual exploitation, but Nigeria had more detected cases of sexual exploitation (460) than cases of forced labour (279) in the data gathered and reported by NAPTIP (2023). U.S Department of State (2024) revealed that the trafficking of Nigerians into forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation in the West and Central Africa, and the Gulf has occurred. The U.S Department of Labour (2025) has classified children in and near Benin City as being at increased risk of being trafficked for purposes of forced labour and commercial sexual exploitation.

Edo State's documentary trace is real but moderate. Labour trafficking is a realistic issue and not a theoretical one as evidenced by the 13 cases of forced labour reported by the Task Force Against Human Trafficking during the 2020-2021 reporting period (U.S Department of State, 2021). Recruitment on the promise of work or migration followed by passage financed by Nigerian debt, also results in the conversion of future wages of the recruit to low-cost labour for others. Kiss et al. (2022) reported the withholding of Nigerian survivors' wages to pay the trafficker's costs. This is compared to 10.4 percent of the survivors from Nigeria and 83.1 percent from Uganda who was victims of forced labour, which indicates a sexual market demand to the exclusion of a labour market demand for Edo-related trafficking.

The results are congruent with demand scholarship, which suggests that demand reduction of exploitable labour is a plausible background to trafficking, but they qualify robust demand-driven arguments since there is no evidence of demand by employers in the corpus specifically for Edo. The thinness might be because of the predominance of sexual exploitation in research and attention given by enforcement agencies, which may result in an under-identification of labour trafficking, as evidenced by the 13 labour cases. While the Index does not disaggregate by state, Walk Free (2023) ranks Nigeria fifth for prevalence of modern slavery in Africa, meaning that there is a national market for the exploitation of labour in Edo. As devices that reduce the cost of employing and retaining labour, withheld wages and debt are instruments that should be evaluated with great care in the absence of direct evidence on the employers. The evidence indicates that low-cost labour demand is correlated with trafficking in Edo State, primarily through debt-based practices, and also underpinned by a relatively low but highly real labour demand. As such, its independent contribution is yet to be determined.

5.2 Demand for Commercial Sexual Services

The evidence for commercial sexual services is more convincing. Nigeria is an origin country for sex trafficking to Europe (European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 2021), and women from Nigeria are trafficked to Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, where they are victims of highly organised groups, some of which are associated with cult confraternities (U.S Department of State, 2024). Baarda (2016) was able to draw up a network of women who were transported across the Netherlands to be brought to Italy for prostitution on the streets. Adeyinka et al. (2023b) identified survivors in the group of those working under madams who set their debts, and Adeyinka et al. (2023a) reported on the sexual and physical violence experienced by these survivors in Libya and Italy. The Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) (2021) case indicates that profits from sexual exploitation disproportionately fuel forced labour, and the ILO (2024) illustrates that profits from sexual exploitation were reinvested for subsequent recruitment in Nigeria.

These conclusions mirror OSCE's (2021) findings that the purchase of sex – intentional or otherwise – contributes to the financing of trafficking, and that users are rarely prosecuted. They also reflect a mode of enforcement; in 2020–2021, the Edo Task Force had a caseload that was strongly characterised by labour abuses, whereas the documentary evidence of Edo-related exploitation overseas is almost exclusively of a sexual nature (U.S Department of State, 2021). They qualify more categorical claims, however. As the OSCE itself recognises, buyers do not usually seek to buy trafficked persons, and are not interested in being known as a trafficker implies that demand continues to traffic persons only as a side-effect of being fed by the market. More experts are concerned about the indirect demand for sexual services through online advertising, which has increased in recent years and during the pandemic, according to UNODC (2022). Edo evidence refers to destination markets overseas, and therefore does not reveal local Edo demand for commercial sex; while EASO (2021) notes that some girls and women actively proactively approached traffickers.

By the process of TCE, the constant demand in the destination market reduces the risk for the recruiter and makes the initial expenses of sending, recruiting and passage to the destination market payable in debt. This is how the demand can continue even though

buyers of trafficked persons don't necessarily want trafficked persons. The evidence, therefore, indicates that demand for commercial sexual services has been linked to trafficking from Edo State primarily as the market condition that facilitates profitable recruitment, rather than the labour association, and the evidence on this is more available than the evidence on the labour association.

5.3 Demand for Controllable Workers in Labour and Sexual Markets

The most uniform documentary theme in the Edo literature is control. Adeyinka et al. (2023b) reported 26 of 31 survivors who had taken an oath before leaving to repay debts and keep their traffickers' identities secret. In this study, ritual practices were identified as a coercive tool governing the arrangements of the network (Baarda 2016). According to the U.S Department of State (2021), the women and girls recruited with the promise of employment are from poor Edo families, and they are forced to sign a loyalty oath; in France, families of victims are threatened by the networks to maintain control in Nigeria. EUAA (2021a) identifies madams and cult members as key actors and Rizzotti (2022) demonstrates that some madams are seeking geographical and social mobility, making for an uneven and complicated picture of ruthless madams.
The 2018 Oba declaration is an interesting example. Some survivors stated that it had helped them to flee, but the authors point out that trafficking is not over and it is not known how many survivors left as a result of it (Adeyinka et al., 2023b). EASO (2021) noted that groups adapt and communities might tolerate trafficking if there are remittances involved. The lack of convictions in the first few years of the Task Force's existence reduces the perceived threat of punishment for controllers, and Shaidrova (2023) demonstrates that, from 2017, the returnee category, which was influenced by returns from Libya, partially undermined the older terminology of trafficking victims in Benin City, which indicates that control persisted in new ways. Along the way, De Haan et al. (2024) continue, violence in Libya becomes a part of an abuse-for-profit system, and control is reproduced along the way.
These results confirm and build upon previous research concerning the centrality of oaths and debt and that control serves as a reaction to the need for the exploitation of workers in a predictable manner. The most unambiguous reading is the one provided by TCE: where the earnings of the recruits are delayed and no one is enforcing the law, the opportunism of the recruits is a risk, and the oaths and debt are protections that make the arrangement self-enforcing, as Baarda's appeal to theory demonstrates. Most of the evidence in the reading is survivor-based (due to the above-mentioned criticisms regarding TCE's treatment of opportunism; Sent & Kroese, 2022; Cuypers et al., 2021) and only a limited amount of it has been obtained from people who have left networks. The evidence indicates that demand for controllable workers is the factor that is closely linked to the organisation of trafficking in Edo State as control technology will enable a demand for persons to be met at low cost.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the level to which high demand of cheap labour and commercial sex has promoted trafficking in Edo State. The evidence points to a qualified answer: Destination markets for commercial sexual exploitation, and the arrangements that facilitate the control of exploited persons, have been reinforcing factors of trafficking in Edo State, while documented demand for cheap labour by employers has been less clearly a reinforcing factor. Three findings emerge. The low cost labour demand is associated with trafficking primarily in the form of debt-based demand, and it is unclear that it makes a meaningful contribution apart from this for Edo State. Second, demand for commercial sexual services seems to be continuing to recruit by providing "good" money, although buyers are not usually looking for trafficked people per se. Thirdly, there is clear relationship between the need for controllable workers and the oath and debt system that organises the trafficking from Edo State. Overall, vulnerability can be monetised if it is demanded, and those who can be accessed and those who can be accessed safely are determined by poverty, gender inequality, family pressure and weak enforcement. Trafficking is a multidimensional phenomenon, and the evidence is documentary, secondary evidence and cannot be quantified of the contribution of demand.

7. Recommendations

Private recruitment agencies in Edo State should be licensed and registered by the Edo State Ministry of Labour in partnership with NAPTIP. All worker fees should be disclosed in licenses and no fees should be allowed that can lead to debt. The Ministry should also publish the results of periodic audits to minimise the exploitation of vulnerability for cheap labour.

Edo state Ministry of Labour should cover complaint-based inspection of domestic and informal work. All suspected cases of trafficking should be referred to NAPTIP. Inspectors to be trained to look for indicators

including withheld wages, and limited movement. This will help further enhance the detection of trafficked labour in the less monitored sectors.

NAPTIP and the Federal Ministry of Justice should develop cooperation and build up joint investigations with the prosecutors in Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. Financial tracing should be an integral part of prosecutions, as reinvested profits help to sustain recruitment (OCCRP, 2021). The U.S. Department of State (2025) recommends that confiscated assets be deposited in an unoperationalised victims' trust fund.

Bilateral measures against victims of trafficking providing services to the traffickers should be increased in destination countries through the Federal Ministry of Justice. Online advertising of sexual services needs to be included in demand-reduction measures as well, due to the increasing importance of the Internet in the facilitation of trafficking (UNODC, 2022).

NAPTIP and the Edo State Government should provide training for prosecuting and judicial officers to identify oath-based and debt-based control as coercive or vulnerability-based. Training should be based on real Edo cases and include judicial training institutions. This will contribute to the issue of impunity of traffickers.

NAPTIP and Edo State Government should endeavour to strengthen witness protection to avert retaliation against survivors and families thereof. Traditional authorities need to complement prosecution, not supplant it, as the impact of their actions on the long term is unknown and traffickers evolve.

NAPTIP should agree with the National Bureau of Statistics to have a common database of trafficking data including the types of exploitation, routes of trafficking, and means of recruitment and the reactions of the victims to the traditional efforts to stop trafficking. Improved data will help to more rigorously test demand-side explanations and to facilitate better coordination between government and traditional institutions.

References

Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023). The role of juju rituals in human trafficking of Nigerians: A tool of enslavement, but also escape. *SAGE Open, 13*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210474

Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023a). It happened in the desert, in Libya and in Italy: Physical and sexual violence experienced by female, Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20*(5), Article 4309. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054309

Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I. (2023b). The role of juju rituals in human trafficking of Nigerians: A tool of enslavement, but also escape. *SAGE Open, 13*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210474

Akhigbe, C. M., & Iduemre, O. (2021). Perception on human trafficking among residents of Oredo and Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. *Benue Journal of Sociology, 8*(2), 120–128.

Baarda, C. S. (2016). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria into Western Europe: The role of voodoo rituals in the functioning of a criminal network. *European Journal of Criminology, 13*(2), 257–273. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370815617188.

Coase, R. H. (1937). The nature of the firm. *Economica, 4*(16), 386–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0335.1937.tb00002.x

Cuypers, I. R. P., Hennart, J.-F., Silverman, B. S., & Ertug, G. (2021). Transaction cost theory: Past progress, current challenges, and suggestions for the future. *Academy of Management Annals, 15*(1), 111–150.

de Haan, L., Aghedo, I., & Eaton, T. (2024). *Tracing the 'continuum of violence' between Nigeria and Libya*. Chatham House. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/07/tracing-continuum-violence-between-nigeria-and-libya

Diagboya, P. O. (2023). Ethical and conceptual challenges in researching human trafficking in Edo state, Nigeria. *Trends in Organized Crime, 26*, 444–462. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-023-09504-2

European Asylum Support Office. (EASO). (2021). *Nigeria: Trafficking in human beings. Country of origin information report*. https://www.euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2021_04_EASO_COI_Report_Nigeria_Trafficking_in_human_beings.pdf

European Union Agency for Asylum. (EUAA). (2021). *Country guidance: Nigeria. Victims of human trafficking, including forced prostitution*. https://www.euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-nigeria-2021/215-victims-human-trafficking-including-forced-prostitution

International Labour Organization, Walk Free, & International Organization for Migration. (2022). *Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage*. ILO.

International Labour Organization. (2024). *Profits and poverty: The economics of forced labour*. ILO.

Kiss, L., Fotheringhame, D., Kyegombe, N., McAlpine, A., Abilio, L., Kyamulabi, A., Walakira, E. J., Devries, K., & Tanton, C. (2022). Violence, abuse and exploitation among trafficked women and girls: A mixed-methods study in Nigeria and Uganda. *BMC Public Health, 22*, Article 794. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13021-2.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). (2021). *Discouraging the demand that fosters trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation* (Occasional Paper No. 11). Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. https://www.osce.org/cthb/489388

Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. (2021, November 16). *Spanish police arrest two suspected sex traffickers of Nigerian women*. https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/15502-spanish-police-arrest-two-suspected-sex-traffickers-of-nigerian-women

Pathfinders Justice Initiative. (2021, August 30). *ETAHT wraps up its 4-year tenure*. https://pathfindersji.org/etaht-wraps-up-its-4-year-tenure/

Rizzotti, M. (2022). Chasing geographical and social mobility: The motivations of Nigerian madams to enter indentured relationships. *Anti-Trafficking Review, 18*, 49–66. https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222184

Sent, E.-M., & Kroese, A. L. J. (2022). Commemorating Oliver Williamson, a founding father of transaction cost economics. *Journal of Institutional Economics, 18*(2), 181–193. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137421000606

Shaidrova, M. (2023). Performing a 'returnee' in Benin City, Nigeria. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 24*(Suppl. 2), 503–520. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-022-00976-9

U.S Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs. (2025). *2024 findings on the worst forms of child labor: Nigeria*. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2024/Nigeria.pdf

U.S Department of State. (2021). *2021 trafficking in persons report: Nigeria*. https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria

U.S Department of State. (2024). *2024 trafficking in persons report: Nigeria*. https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria/

U.S Department of State. (2025). *2025 trafficking in persons report: Nigeria*. https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report/nigeria

U.S. Department of State. (2012). *2012 trafficking in persons report: Nigeria*. U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2022, May 16). *Trafficking for sex: Experts examine the demand for sexual exploitation*. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/Webstories2022/trafficking-for-sex_-experts-examine-the-demand-for-sexual-exploitation.html

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). *Global report on trafficking in persons 2022*. United Nations.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2024). *Global repor on trafficking in persons 2024*. United Nations.

Walk Free. (2023). *Global slavery index 2023*. https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/

Williamson, O. E. (1975). *Markets and hierarchies: Analysis and antitrust implications: A study in the economics of internal organization*. Free Press.

Williamson, O. E. (1985). *The economic institutions of capitalism: Firms, markets, and relational contracting*. Free Press.