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CHILD LABOUR AND TRAFFICKING IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT
The global upsurge of child labour and trafficking has posed serious threats to the existence of modern states. While this phenomenon has been widely studied regarding its impact on

economic development and the psychological and emotional well-being of the victims, the connection to human capital development and internal security in Nigeria remains unexplored. Hence, investigating this problem within the context of economic and survival theory, the study employed a descriptive research design. It adopted library sources to gather secondary data, and it was analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. The study contended that, even though certain domestic factors account for the prevalence of child labour and trafficking, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic quagmire worsened the situation. The paper found that this menace has led to an increasing rate of children out of school, depriving them of their fundamental right to education, which is the bedrock of human capital development. Following the path of the relative deprivation school of thought, the paper argued that these deprived children react to the inflamed sense of injustice inflicted on them by their families, thus resulting in acts of violence, which have over the years threatened internal security in Nigeria. The paper concluded that child labour and trafficking have negative consequences on human capital development and internal security in Nigeria. The study recommends, inter alia, that the government should intensify efforts on the implementation of policies aimed at eliminating the out-of-school children phenomenon and prohibiting human trafficking in Nigeria.
Keywords**:** Child Labour, Trafficking, Development, Security, Covid-19, Education, Human Capital, Economic quagmire

1. Introduction

The prevalence of child labour and trafficking has reached alarming levels worldwide, with Sub-Saharan Africa experiencing a notable surge in detected victims, particularly a 31% increase in child victims between 2019 and 2022 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2024). Contributing significantly to the global figure of 160 million child Labourers, Nigeria reports 39.2% of its child population engaged in such activities (NBS, 2020), a situation intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (International LabourOrganisation (ILO), 2023; United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2022; United Nations (UN), 2024). The root causes of this exploitation within Sub-Saharan African families are deeply intertwined with poverty, educational deficits, and societal issues such as greed and the erosion of cultural values (Godwin &Iyaba, 2008; Adegun, 2013; Awosusi& Adebo, 2012).

This persistent problem results in children engaged in various forms of labour, including agriculture and street vending (Abdu, Rabiu & Usman, 2020), and has evolved into a lucrative industry, particularly in urban areas, driven by economic hardship and leading to children's involvement in apprenticeships and domestic service (Folarin, 2009; Taiwo, 2023).

The detrimental impact of child labour and trafficking on Nigeria's development has prompted the government to adopt various international conventions and protocols, including the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (1981), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2001), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), in an effort to combat this issue.

The Nigerian Constitution, through Section 34(1) and Chapter II, establishes a legal foundation against child labour and trafficking, further strengthened by acts like the Child Rights Act and the Trafficking in Persons Act (The Nigerian Constitution, 1999). Despite these legal protections, child labour and trafficking persist, leaving many Nigerian children

without access to education in both rural and urban areas (Awosusi& Adebo, 2012; Abdu, Rabiu & Usman, 2020).

In addition, the pervasive issues of child labour and trafficking have significant social, economic, and welfare consequences for children, as evidenced by existing research such as Godwin and Iyaba, (2008); Adegun, (2013). While continental and regional analyses are prevalent, numerous studies, including those by Okafor (2010), Abdu, Rabiu, and Usman (2020), and Ebigbo (2006), have specifically examined the detrimental impact of child labour on children's education, sustainable development, and economic growth.

However, there is no literature that establishes nexus between child labour, trafficking and human capital development and internal security in Nigeria. Hence, it is this identified academic lacuna that this paper sets out to fill. Against this backdrop, this study investigates child labour and trafficking in the 21st century and its implication for human capital development and internal security in Nigeria.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study sets out to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the nature and pattern of child labour and trafficking in Nigeria.
2. To investigate the implication of child labour and trafficking on human capital development in Nigeria.
3. To examine the effects of child labour and human trafficking on internal security in Nigeria; and
4. To advance some measures in tackling the menace of child labour and human trafficking as panacea to enhance human capital development and internal security in the country.

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

Child Labour

Child labour, as defined by the ILO (2021), encompasses work that jeopardizes a child's well-being, development, and education, including hazardous tasks that disrupt schooling (ILO, 2023). This exploitation, recognized as a pervasive issue, robs children of their childhood, potential, and dignity (UNICEF, 2022).

While children may engage in various forms of work, it is essential to differentiate between child labour and child work; the latter, encompassing activities like light household chores or family business assistance outside of school hours, which can positively contribute to a child's development, as long as it does not impede education or endanger their health (ILO, 2023). Meanwhile, Child labour on the other hand, as viewed by UNICEF (2001), involves children working excessively long hours in hazardous environments, bearing age-inappropriate burdens, and sacrificing their education, resulting in exploitation and harm to their overall development. Furthermore, the ILO (2011) characterizes child labour as any work that robs individuals under 18 of their childhood, potential, and dignity, with adverse effects on their physical and mental health.

Therefore, child labour involves work that is mentally, physically, or morally harmful and/or disrupts a child's education by preventing school attendance, forcing them to drop out, or requiring them to balance school with overly demanding and lengthy work.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is viewed as a grave violation of human rights and a global crime Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, harboring, or receipt of individuals

(action) through coercive methods like force, fraud, coercion, abduction, deception, abuse of power, or exploiting vulnerabilities (means), for the ultimate purpose of exploitation, which may include sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude, or organ removal (UNODC, 2021).

Human trafficking, a global concern, exploits individuals of all demographics, with children particularly at risk (UNICEF, 2023), and encompasses diverse forms of exploitation, including forced Labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriage, and organ removal (Polaris, 2022); this crime occurs both within and across international borders (UNODC, 2023).

In this study, we define human trafficking as encompassing both sex trafficking, where force or coercion is used to induce a commercial sex act, particularly involving minors, and the recruitment, harboring, or transport of individuals for forced labour or services.

Human Capital Development

Human capital development (HCD) refers to the process of improving the knowledge, skills, abilities, and health of individuals, enabling them to contribute effectively to economic growth and societal well-being. It encompasses investments in education, training, healthcare, and other social services that enhance human capabilities (OECD, 2021). Essentially, it is about investing in people.

Human capital development (HCD) involves expanding people's capabilities through education, healthcare, and experience, enabling their economic and social participation (World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). HCD, as measured by skills and education, significantly impacts worker productivity and earning potential (Pettinger, 2019; OECD, 2022). Consequently, HCD is a lifelong process that fosters a productive and healthy workforce.

By inference, the principal components of human capital development are fundamentally built upon education, spanning all learning stages (UNESCO, 2021), robust health, which ensures a productive population (WHO, 2023), the acquisition of diverse skills through training and experience (ILO, 2023), and strong social protection systems that enable individuals to overcome challenges and invest in their own development (ILO, 2021).

Internal Security

Internal security, as defined by Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde (1998), involves a nation's efforts to protect itself from internal threats, focusing on maintaining peace, order, and stability to safeguard citizens, institutions, and infrastructure against dangers such as civil unrest, crime, terrorism, and insurgency.

Imobighe (2003) defines internal security as the absence of threats to life and property, facilitating a stable environment for citizens to pursue their lawful interests; in this study, internal security is understood as the comprehensive safety of all citizens across all aspects of life, encompassing health, economy, education, governance, and environment. Besides, internal security, focused on threats within a nation's boundaries, is managed by law enforcement and internal security forces, and sometimes the military (Collins, 2010; ICT, 2020). This domain encompasses diverse threats such as civil unrest, organized crime, terrorism, and socio-economic instability, which governments address through policing, intelligence, counterterrorism, border control, cybersecurity, and socio-economic programmes.

Analysis and synthesis of the above conceptualisations show that internal security is a nation's active effort to protect its citizens and infrastructure from internal threats, going

beyond just preventing violence to creating a stable environment for all aspects of life, like health and education, using a combination of policing, intelligence, military action, and social programs to maintain peace and societal resilience against various dangers.

2.2 Literature Review

Child labour and trafficking severely hinder socio-economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa, leading to widespread negative consequences that have prompted extensive research by scholars and organizations.

Study by Adegun (2013) revealed that Child Labour and trafficking in Nigeria have seen a substantial increase, rising from 12 million children in 1995 to over 20 million by 2021 (Adegun, 2013; ILO, 2021), with children from various regions, including Calabar, Delta, and others, frequently seen as domestic servants or street vendors. The North East region shows particularly high prevalence, linked to factors like poverty and lack of access to basic services (UNICEF, 2001).

Meanwhile, the studies carried out by Awosusi and Adebo (2012), Okafor (2010), Abdu, Rabiu and Usman (2020) found nexus between child labour and human trafficking, and inhumanly abused physically, mentally sexually, psychological trauma, poor education or lack of education and development, among others. In fact, it is obvious that the child labour and human trafficking dynamics have far reaching negative effects on sustainable development in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Oloko's study revealed that working children, especially those laboring late or on highways, face increased risks of falls and assaults, with girls particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. Additionally, denied educational opportunities, especially in rural areas where agriculture hinders school attendance, and combining work with schooling negatively impact academic performance compared to non-working children (Oloko, 1994).

Also, a 2020 UNICEF study revealed a strong link between child Labour and trafficking and human rights abuses, with girls facing sexual exploitation and boys at risk of exploitation by armed forces, exacerbating social inequality and depriving children of their childhood (UNICEF, 2020). Specifically, girls burdened with school and household duties are particularly vulnerable to poverty and exclusion, highlighting the connection between child exploitation and socio-economic inequality in Nigeria.

Ebigbo's 2006 research linked widespread poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment to the prevalence of child trafficking, demonstrating how these factors drive desperate, poorly educated parents with large families to engage in such exploitative practices due to their lack of awareness about the consequences. In another continuum, Heady's 2000 research demonstrated a direct correlation between child Labour, specifically involvement in various hazardous economic activities, and decreased school attendance and educational attainment in Ghana, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

A synthesis of the literature reviewed above shows that poverty, economic inequality, unemployment, illiteracy, poor living standard etc. are at the root causes of child labour and child trafficking. Hence, it is evident that the findings of the previous studies established nexus between this social pathogen and its effects on psychological, economic, educational backwardness of the victims. However, it is clear that none of these studies focuses on the effects of child labour and human trafficking on human capital development and internal security crisis in Nigeria. It is this gaps that this current study sets out to fill.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts economics and survival theory. The theory was proposed by Berdal and Malone (2013). It is hinged on the assumption that social conflicts are generated by so many factors, some of which are deep-rooted. And that conflicts have come to be seen as having a functional utility and are embedded in economic disparity/inequality. This is supported by the fact that child laboourer and people trafficked are mostly the poor and under privileged in the society who seek means of survival outside their family homes or countries with acute economic deprivation occasioned by economic disparity.

In relation to this study, the economic situation triggered by the Covid-19 Pandemic and current high rate of food inflation in the recent times in Nigeria has produced poverty driven families and this has made child labour and human trafficking a lucrative business to the extent that the victims of these social pathogen are vulnerable. Therefore, it is most likely that a country or society that has the interest of its citizen would take pragmatic steps to discourage people who are involved in this illicit venture for the sake of human capital development and internal security.

3.1 Methods and materials

This study was a product of library research. It employed a descriptive research design This approach necessitates the review of existing reports, legal frameworks, and government documents, alongside the analysis of statistical data from sources like the NBS, ILO, UNICEF, and UNODC to understand prevalence and trends of child labour and trafficking thereby creating a comprehensive understanding of the issue. It also adopted qualitative approach to gather secondary data from published books, journal articles newspapers and internet materials, and it was analyzed qualitatively using content analysis.

4.1 International and Domestic Legal Frameworks Against Child Labour and Trafficking in Nigeria

Nigeria combats child Labour and human trafficking through a combination of national laws and international agreements, creating a legal structure designed to protect children's rights. The following sections outline the core components of this framework.

Nigeria demonstrates its commitment to combating child Labour and trafficking by ratifying crucial international treaties, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which mandates protection from exploitation (Articles 32, 34), and ILO Convention No. 182, requiring immediate action against the worst forms of child Labour (Article 1). Additionally, ILO Convention No. 138 establishes minimum employment ages, and the UN Palermo Protocol addresses human trafficking, requiring criminalization within national laws. These actions signify Nigeria's adherence to global standards in safeguarding children (United Nations Convention on the Right of Child, Articles 32, 34; ILO Convention 182, Article 1; ILO Convention 138; UN Palermo Protocol, 25 December 2003).

Nigeria's domestic legal framework, though aiming to combat child Labour and trafficking, presents both strengths and weaknesses. The 1999 Constitution protects fundamental rights (Sections 34 & 35), and the Child Rights Act 2003 prohibits exploitative Labour and trafficking (Sections 28-30), while the 2015 Trafficking in Persons Act criminalizes all forms of trafficking and establishes NAPTIP (Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015). However, the outdated 2004 Labour Act's conflicting provisions (Section 59) undermine these efforts (Nigeria Labour Acts, 2004), and the scattered nature of other relevant laws dilutes their effectiveness, highlighting the need for consistent application and enforcement.

Arising from the above, it is evident that although Nigeria has laws against child Labour and trafficking, effective enforcement is hindered by inconsistent application, resource limitations, low public awareness, and persistent socio-economic challenges like poverty and cultural norms, which sustain these exploitative practices.

4.2 Nature and Pattern of Child Labour and Human Trafficking in Nigeria

Specifically, the nature and pattern of child labour and trafficking in Nigeria are discussed thus:

Industrial work: This form of child labour cut across agricultural and non-agricultural sector in Nigeria. This pattern of child labour is common in most urban areas in Nigeria, where children labourers engage in production of Manioc/Cassava, Cocoa, Rice, tobacco, fishing activities, herding livestock, mining and quarrying granite and grovel, construction including making blocks, artisanal gold mining and processing, (Akinwotu, 2016). These labourous works are considered too risky even for adult in the industrialized societies (Burke & Knaul, 2021).

Domestic Service: Majority of child workers in Nigeria are in domestic services. The use of child for domestic services such as: house help, household chores, collecting money on public buses, and automotive repair, etc. (ILO, 2013). These set of children that engage in these services no doubt are deprived of affection, adequate and functional schooling (Tade, 2010 & Okafor, 2010).

Child Trafficking: This has been considered as one of the worst forms of child labour. This form of child abuse, especially on the part of girl child include girl engaging in sex trade/commercial sex within and even outside the country. Ebigbo (2006) points out that about 60% - 80% of girls that involved in sex trade outside the country are in Italy, while Belgium and the Netherlands experience an increasing rate in the number of Nigerian girls.

Street hawking: This pattern of child labour is common in most cities in Nigeria. The child may be made to hawk along the Bus Street and major highway, in order to augment family income. In most cases, object of hawking includes: cold soft drinks, fruits, sachet cold water, foot wears, etcetera (Isamah& Okunola, 2002: Okafor, 2010; Burke & Knaul, 2021).

Other pattern of child labour are: forced begging, street vending, textile manufacturing the use of children in illicit activities for armed groups, more often, as a result of forced recruitment, including participation in extortion, armed robbery, drug trafficking recruitment of children by non-state armed groups for use in armed conflict and in non-conflict support role as in the case of north eastern Nigeria where Boko Haram forcibly recruited and used child soldiers in their operation (Sally, 2017: Nigeria Moderate Advancement, 2021).

Thus, the manifestation of all these patterns of child labour and trafficking in Nigeria reflects in the incessant crime rate and violent conflict in the country.

4.3 Impacts of Child Labour and Trafficking on Human Capital Development and Internal Security in Nigeria

There are many effects of child labour and human trafficking. But our focus in this paper is on human capital development and internal security. This is considered pertinent judging from the angle of present precarious internal security challenges and developmental debacles that Nigeria is experiencing.

The practice of child labour and child trafficking has posed the problems of eroding human capital by its negative impact on the labour market in Nigeria. According to ILO (2023),

forcing children to work at an early age and subjecting them to ten to 20 hours of work per day denies children access to the education necessary to break the cycle of poverty and literacy that makes conditions ripe for child trafficking. It also denies them a healthy childhood development, both socially and physically. Hence, children cannot acquire the skills necessary to compete in their country's labour market, which translates into a labour force at the national level that is not equipped to compete in the global economy, where success is based on skilled workers.

Also, departure of children to other countries is no doubt an irretrievable loss of human resources for Nigeria because, these trafficked children contribute to the development of their host country. The long term effects of trafficking translate into a lower number of individuals left to care for an increasing number of elderly as well as social imbalances in the proportion of males to females (Godwin &Iyaba, 2008). In 2021, ILO estimates that over 10,000 children are trafficked each year, even though statistics regarding the magnitude of child trafficking are difficult. Also, the trafficking of Nigerian female children to Italy and other European countries as sex workers has become prominent in Nigeria. In 2019, more than 18,000 Nigerian female children were recorded to have arrived into Europe through illegal route (Human Trafficking Factsheet, 2021). In 2020, child abuse and the exploitation of children in domestic labour, forced begging, and armed conflict in Nigeria severely hindered their education and undermined the development of human capital.

Nigeria's current economic hardship poses a significant threat to both human capital development and internal security by exacerbating the already prevalent issues of child labour and trafficking. The increased poverty resulting from this economic downturn directly fuels child labour and trafficking. Desperate families, facing stark choices, send their children to work, even in hazardous conditions, or fall prey to the deceptive promises of traffickers (Cody et al., 2023). This immediate need for survival undermines long-term human capital development by pulling children out of school. As education becomes a less attainable priority, school attendance plummets, depriving these children of the very skills and knowledge they need to contribute to the nation's future (Yunana& Ishaya, 2022). This loss of educational opportunity translates to a diminished workforce with reduced capacity for innovation and economic growth, hindering Nigeria's long-term development.

Furthermore, the economic crisis fuels the expansion of the informal sector, a breeding ground for child labour and exploitation due to its less regulated nature (Akinwotu, 2016). Children engaged in street vending, domestic work, and other informal jobs are not only deprived of education but also exposed to heightened risks of abuse and exploitation, further damaging their physical and psychological well-being, key components of human capital.

Compounding these issues, economic hardship as manifested in the hyper inflation rate of 24.66% in 2023, rising to 32.46% in 2024 before slightly decreasing to 24.98% in 2025 (Statista, 2025). However, Trading Economics reports a higher rate of 34.8% for December 2024, suggesting that inflation is on the increase (Trading Economics, 2024). Economic hardship in Nigeria weakens child protection institutions, reduces law enforcement capacity, and fosters impunity for those exploiting children, which not only directly endangers children but also undermines the rule of law, a critical component of internal security.

Economic hardship in Nigeria intensifies child trafficking as traffickers exploit vulnerable families with false promises (Uzoh & John, 2023), leading to community instability, transnational crime, and a decline in internal security. This creates a cycle where poverty-

driven child Labour and trafficking undermine human capital development and threaten Nigeria's future.

Human insecurity has become a cause of internal security. Coupled with over 10 million out of school children in Nigeria, which is on increase annually by 3 million of which Covid-19 Pandemic and the current economic quagmire are equally contributing factors. This shows that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in sub-Sahara Africa (The Guardian, 2021).

The impact of child Labour and trafficking on internal security can be understood through the lens of relative deprivation theory, which suggests that a gap between expectations and achievements leads to negative attitudes (Offiong, 1983; Imobighe, 2009; Nwagbara, 2004, 2017). Children denied education experience negative emotions like anger and resentment (Dube & Guimond, 1986; Nwagbara, 2004), which can manifest as social unrest, violence, and crime when their expectations are unmet. Consequently, child Labour and trafficking create human insecurity, contributing to internal security crises in Nigeria.

For example, in Northern Nigeria, the Almajiri system, where children are sent to urban areas for Quranic education under Mallams, often results in forced begging, making them vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups like Boko Haram (Shepler, 2016; US Embassy, 2015). This exploitation has severely hindered the Nigerian military's counter-insurgency efforts, as evidenced by the use of child suicide bombers (Nigeria Moderate Advancement, 2016). Children as young as eight are frequently coerced into armed conflict by various groups, including bandits and political militias, further destabilizing internal security.

Also, during the reporting period, Boko Haram's activities in Northeast Nigeria involved the forced recruitment of child soldiers (UNGAHR, 2016; Hinshaw, 2016), an increased use of girls as suicide bombers (UN General Assembly Human Rights Council &Oshome, 2016), and the exploitation of out-of-school girls for forced labour and sexual servitude (USDS, Watch list & UN, 2016). This resulted in the internal displacement of 1-8 million people, including 1 million children, with reports of children being trafficked from IDP camps for labor and sexual exploitation (IOM, 2016; Oshome, 2016). The destruction of numerous educational institutions in Maiduguri, Yobe, and Adamawa, including hundreds of primary and secondary schools, has significantly increased the number of children without access to education in Nigeria, thereby exacerbating the existing security challenges.

5. Conclusion

The paper concludes that child labour and trafficking as social pathogen are becoming more prevalent in the 21st Century in Nigeria especially in the face of globalization and it causes are multifaceted. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the current economic hardship in the country have worsened the situation. It was also found out that these practices have far reaching effects on the human capital development in Nigeria on the one hand because the very foundation of human capital development is deeply rooted in access to quality, sound, and basic education, skills acquisition, health facilities, on job training, etc. and these have been heralded and denied of the children under child labour and trafficking venture and by extension hampered human security which is one of the causes of internal security crisis in the country on the other hand.

The paper also contends that even though Nigeria government at different point in time have enacted various laws, formulated different policies in line with the international, regional and continental conventions as legal frameworks to overcome these challenges, the menace remains seemingly unabated. Therefore, combating child labour and trafficking as a panacea

for enhancing human capital development internal security, require strong and implementable policy options as recommendations.

6. Recommendations

1. Government at all levels in Nigeria should as a matter of urgency intensify efforts on the implementation of eliminating out –of-school child policy. This will not only enhance human capital development, but it will also stimulate human security and address internal security crisis in Nigeria.
2. Government in collabouration with non-governmental organization should provide educational incentives such as scholarship, school uniforms, transportation and writing materials to the rural poor children whose parent cannot afford such educational needs and costs.
3. There should be strong government and civil initiative to promote the already decomposing moral values in the society which are base values of the society.
4. There is need for the Federal Government to harmonize practice and procedure by the government agencies in the enforcement of laws and values that are against child and human trafficking in our society.

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