Cartographies of Exploitation: Multi-Scalar Governance and Structural Violence in Nigeria's Child Trafficking Networks

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Abstract

This study interrogates the structural and geopolitical determinants of child trafficking in Nigeria, situating the phenomenon within globalized circuits of informal labour and the logics of structural violence. Employing a mixed-methods design—comprising geospatial analysis, 600 household surveys, and 32 semi-structured interviews across Benue, Edo, Borno, and Lagos States—the research uncovers trafficking's spatial concentration in infrastructurally neglected rural hinterlands, peri-urban margins, and high-mobility transit corridors. Poverty is identified as the primary structural driver, exacerbated by chronic unemployment, educational disenfranchisement, and multi-dimensional precarity. The study foregrounds the role of contested multi-scalar governance: while institutions such as NAPTIP operate within formal legal frameworks, traditional authorities often exercise competing normative power, reproducing culturally sanctioned forms of complicity. Typologies of trafficking uncovered reflect Nigeria's insertion into transnational labour markets, with victim trajectories frequently culminating in the Gulf States and Europe—underscoring the embeddedness of global capital in exploitative shadow economies. Rather than framing trafficking as discrete criminal deviance, the study theories it as an epiphenomenon of deeper structural pathologies: spatial injustice (the peripheralisation of rural zones), normative complicity (entrenched patriarchal clientelism), and systemic developmental exclusion. The study calls for spatially differentiated and survivor-centered policy interventions that integrate anti-poverty frameworks, devolved governance mechanisms, and locally anchored accountability systems. Ultimately, it argues for a reconstitution of Nigeria's global political-economic entanglements—via SDG-aligned cooperation and robust enforcement of the Palermo Protocol's transnational justice provisions—as preconditions for dismantling the generative mechanisms of child trafficking.

Keywords: Child trafficking; Structural violence; Multi-scalar governance; Spatial injustice; Exploitation networks; Poverty

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Introduction

Child trafficking represents one of the gravest manifestations of structural violence and human insecurity in the contemporary world, with children increasingly commodified within transnational systems of exploitation. Despite the proliferation of international treaties and domestic legal frameworks, trafficking in children persists with impunity, manifesting in forced labour, sexual exploitation, servitude, and other forms of abuse that cause irreversible psychological and physical harm (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021). The phenomenon is particularly acute in socio-politically fragile contexts, where deep-seated inequalities and under-resourced child protection systems provide fertile ground for trafficking networks to flourish (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Benavente *et al.* 2022).

While child trafficking is often portrayed as pathology of the Global South, empirical evidence indicates its global prevalence. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the Home Office (2021) and National Crime Agency (2022) have documented an uptick in both domestic and cross-border trafficking, facilitated by digital technologies and social proximity, including familial recruitment. However, African contexts remain under examined in global scholarship—particularly in terms of how trafficking intersects with the political economy of postcolonial states, spatial governance, and enduring colonial legacies (Adepoju, 2005; Adonteng-Kissi, 2024).

In Nigeria, child trafficking must be understood not merely as an outcome of poverty or institutional weakness, but as a function of historical continuity, spatial marginalization, and structural abandonment. The persistence of exploitative practices such as child labour, pawning, and kin-based servitude across time underscores the embeddedness of child trafficking within Nigeria's socio-political fabric (Aderinto, 2018; Lemke, 2019; Schwartz, 2019; Kotswaran, 2021). Although the establishment of regulatory frameworks such as the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) Act and the Child Rights Act represents important normative progress, these instruments remain hamstrung by weak enforcement, fragmented governance, and limited political accountability (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022).

This study challenges dominant criminological and policy-based interpretations that emphasize "*political will*" or "*capacity building*" as panaceas. Instead, it foregrounds a critical theoretical lens—one that understands child trafficking as a systemic expression of structural violence and spatial injustice. As Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi (2016) and Adonteng-Kissi (2024) argue, child trafficking in Africa is

a structural outcome of neoliberal underdevelopment, the commodification of care, and state disengagement from social welfare. In effect, African childhoods are shaped by conditions of precarity—armed conflict, famine, forced migration, gendered subordination, and exploitative labour systems—which expose children to multiple vectors of harm (Okeja, 2012). Reports from the International Organization for Migration (2022) and NAPTIP (2021) underscore the complex and regionally differentiated nature of child trafficking across these states. These case studies allow for a multi-scalar interrogation of trafficking patterns, actor networks, and state-society responses to child exploitation.

Despite numerous interventions—including awareness campaigns, shelter services, and judicial reform—anti-trafficking efforts in Nigeria remain fragmented and reactive. The literature identifies multiple limitations: inconsistent legal application, donor-dependency of anti-trafficking NGOs, weak inter-agency coordination, and limited data collection (Abiodun *et al.* 2021). These deficiencies underscore the need for a spatially and structurally grounded understanding of trafficking networks. This study seeks to map the spatial distribution of child trafficking in Nigeria, identifying how factors such as poverty, governance fragmentation, and institutional inertia sustain exploitation networks.

Literature Review
Global and African Trajectories of Child Trafficking Research
Scholarship on child trafficking has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shifting from narrow criminal justice approaches to more expansive, interdisciplinary frameworks. Foundational studies by Shelleys (2010) and Gallagher (2017) frame trafficking as a transnational crime embedded in broader networks of migration, labour exploitation, and illicit economies. While the Palermo Protocol (2000) remains a cornerstone of international legal consensus, critics highlight its overemphasis on prosecution at the expense of victim protection (Dottridge, 2004; Chuang, 2014). More recent critiques argue that international anti-trafficking regimes reinforce global hierarchies, securitize migration, and criminalize the movement of economically marginalized groups (Ticktin, 2017). These evolving critiques have spurred a shift toward victim-centered and rights-based approaches, particularly in contexts marked by state complicity or institutional fragility (UNODC, 2021; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). From a critical international relations perspective, such debates reveal power asymmetries in global governance, where anti-trafficking norms are often shaped by donor agendas and geopolitical interests (Gallagher, 2010).

In the African context, child trafficking research increasingly adopts analytical lenses that move beyond simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries. Scholars such as Adepoju (2005), Adonteng-Kissi (2024), and Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi (2016) underscore the structural drivers of trafficking, including economic marginalization, social exclusion, and the breakdown of community-based safety nets. Trafficking is often linked to cultural practices like child fostering, seasonal migration, and domestic servitude (Howard, 2017; Thorsen, 2012). More recent studies (Brennan, 2014; Bhabha & Digidiki, 2018; Stein, 2020) argue that global anti-trafficking initiatives frequently obscure local agency and overlook the lived realities of children in postcolonial African states. This study departs from existing literature by reframing child trafficking not merely as a crime or governance failure, but as a spatially structured form of structural violence. Rather than offering a purely descriptive or policy-prescriptive account, it employs a spatial-political economy framework that maps regional patterns, interrogates governance asymmetries, and foregrounds community agency. A more detailed discussion of the theoretical departures and contributions to knowledge is presented in the next section.

Patterns, Interventions, and Policy Gaps

In Nigeria, child trafficking reflects a confluence of historical, political, and socio-economic factors. Research by Aderinto (2018) and Ikeora and Ikeora (2018) traces the roots of child exploitation to colonial-era labour systems, highlighting how institutional inertia perpetuates contemporary trafficking. Nigeria functions as both a source and transit country, with internal and transnational trafficking patterns (NAPTIP, 2021; IOM, 2022). Empirical evidence shows a rise in trafficking across states like Edo, Benue, and Borno, where poverty, displacement, and gender-based violence intersect (UNICEF, 2024).

Policy responses have focused predominantly on criminalization through agencies such as the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), established under the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (2015). However, enforcement remains inconsistent, hampered by corruption, fragmented institutional coordination, and weak support systems for survivors. Despite the domestication of the Child Rights Act by several states, enforcement gaps persist, largely due to political apathy and conflicts between federal and state-level jurisdictions (UNICEF, 2024).

Trafficking as Organized Crime

A growing body of literature frames trafficking as a form of organised crime facilitated by transnational networks, porous borders, and compromised law

enforcement (Aronowitz, 2009; Europol, 2021). In Nigeria, trafficking networks operate both locally and transnationally, exploiting informal transport routes and systemic corruption. Scholars caution, however, that securitised approaches often obscure the socio-economic drivers of trafficking and risk criminalising survivors rather than addressing structural causes (Chuang, 2014).

Political Economy of Child Labour and Exploitation
Understanding child trafficking in Nigeria necessitates a broader political-economic lens. As Okeja (2012) argues, trafficking is a symptom of deeper systemic failures—including underdevelopment, state neglect, and neoliberal restructuring. Families often resort to sending children into exploitative labour due to unemployment, rural impoverishment, and an eroded welfare infrastructure. These dynamics are further reinforced by gendered labour expectations and the normalisation of children's economic roles within households (ILO, 2021; ILO, 2023).

Gendered and Age-Based Vulnerabilities
Trafficking risks are profoundly shaped by gender and age. Girls are more frequently trafficked for domestic servitude and sexual exploitation, while boys are often coerced into street hawking, agriculture, or armed conflict (UNODC, 2021; ECPAT International, 2024). Studies by Olabisi (2021) and Abebe *et al.* (2024) highlight the intersecting vulnerabilities that emerge from early marriage, school dropout, and exposure to gender-based violence. Inconsistent definitions of childhood across Nigeria's legal systems create further protection challenges and are frequently exploited by traffickers.

Identified Gaps and Contribution to Knowledge
Despite numerous interventions—including awareness campaigns, shelter services, and judicial reform—anti-trafficking efforts in Nigeria remain fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently attuned to structural root causes. The extant literature highlights several limitations: inconsistent legal enforcement, donor dependency of anti-trafficking NGOs, inter-agency disarticulation, and limited spatial data integration (Abiodun *et al.* 2021). However, these studies often treat child trafficking as an administrative or criminal justice issue, without adequately theorising the structural and spatial conditions that underwrite exploitation.

This study addresses three interrelated gaps. First, while trafficking has been examined in terms of poverty and institutional failure, the spatial dynamics—such as rural infrastructural neglect, transit-route vulnerabilities, and urban convergence zones—remain under-theorized in Nigerian scholarship. Second, there is a paucity

of work situating child trafficking within broader discourses on structural violence and spatial injustice, particularly as they relate to state abandonment, globalised labour circuits, and multi-scalar governance failures (Mbembe, 2001; Galtung, 1969). Third, community-level responses—such as informal resistance by caregivers, survivor-led advocacy, and the role of traditional actors—are often marginal to scholarly and policy conversations. By bridging these gaps, the study contributes a spatially grounded and structurally embedded understanding of child trafficking in Nigeria. Drawing on mixed-methods data from four strategically selected states, it examines how geography, governance fragmentation, and normative complicity intersect to shape trafficking patterns. The analysis offers both empirical and theoretical insight into the ways trafficking functions not merely as a criminal enterprise, but as a symptom of broader political, economic, and spatial logics. In doing so, the study proposes a more justice-oriented and contextually specific policy framework that integrates anti-poverty programming, governance decentralisation, and survivor-led praxis.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a theoretical framework centered on Johan Galtung's foundational concept of Structural Violence (1969), integrating it with Critical Realist epistemology (Bhaskar, 2013; Danermark et al., 2019) and contemporary *political economy critiques* to construct a multi-layered analytical apparatus for interrogating the endemic phenomenon of child trafficking in Nigeria. This framework transcends simplistic criminal justice paradigms, instead positioning trafficking as a symptomatic manifestation of deeply embedded socio-political pathologies. Galtung's seminal formulation defines structural violence as the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs and life chances, inflicted not by direct interpersonal aggression, but by the very architecture of social, political, and economic institutions (Galtung, 1969). This violence is systemic, normalised, and often invisible, operating through the routinised functioning of inequitable power structures. The framework incorporates crucial extensions; Farmer's (2004) concept of "*pathologies of power*" elucidates how historically constituted inequalities become biologically embodied in marginalised populations. Bourdieu's (2020, 1990) notions of symbolic violence and the habitus illuminate the internalisation of domination and the misrecognition of structural constraints as natural or inevitable. This refines the analysis beyond resource denial to encompass the production of subjectivities conducive to exploitation.

In the Nigerian context, structural violence manifests as institutionalised precarity; the systematic failure of the state to guarantee basic security (physical, economic, social), particularly in regions marked by historical marginalisation (e.g., Niger

Delta, North-East), combined with the predatory extraction of resources (human and material) facilitated by weak regulatory frameworks and clientelistic governance (Watts, 2004; Bach, 2011). Child trafficking emerges not as an aberration, but as a rationalised adaptation within this political economy of neglect and extraction.

This study incorporates Critical Realist (CR) epistemology (Bhaskar, 2013; Archer *et al.,* 2013; Danermark et al., 2019). CR provides the necessary philosophical scaffolding, positing a stratified ontology: *The Real Domain:* Housing enduring, often non-observable, generative mechanisms and social structures (e.g., capitalist modes of production, patriarchal norms, racialised hierarchies, institutional configurations of the Nigerian state). *The Actual Domain:* Where these mechanisms interact under contingent conditions to generate events. *The Empirical Domain:* Comprising the subset of actual events that are observed or experienced. CR rejects both positivist empiricism (focusing only on the observable) and strong social constructionism (denying ontological depth). It insists that social science must engage in retroduction – moving from observed phenomena (e.g., trafficking incidents) to hypothesise the underlying structures and mechanisms (e.g., structural adjustment impacts, ethno-regional patronage systems, gendered labour market segmentation, spatial disinvestment) that causally generate them. Crucially, CR facilitates the integration of structure and agency. It acknowledges the causal powers of social structures (to constrain and enable) while recognising the emergent properties of human agency, mediated through positioned practices within specific fields (Bourdieu, 1990). Trafficking networks thus operate as emergent agential responses exploiting the causal powers of deficient structures.

Applying this *CR-informed Structural Violence lens*, child trafficking in Nigeria is theorised not as a discrete crime, but as a complex social harm (Hillyard & Tombs, 2004) produced by the interaction of multiple, intersecting generative mechanisms operating across different strata of the real: *Macro-Structural Mechanisms:* Neoliberal globalisation pressures, petro-state dependency (leading to Dutch Disease), structural adjustment legacies (eroding public services), entrenched ethno-regional inequalities, and the global demand for cheap, disposable labour and services. *Meso-Institutional Mechanisms:* Fragmented and often predatory state apparatuses, weak rule of law, institutionalised corruption, ineffective child protection systems, the privatisation of security, and the failures of federalism to ensure equitable development (Suberu, 2001).

Micro-Social Mechanisms: Gendered norms devaluing female children, intergenerational poverty traps, kinship obligations under duress, the erosion of traditional community safeguards, and the formation of survivalist rationalities

within contexts of extreme precarity (Scheper-Hughes, 2023). This framework explicitly critiques hegemonic anti-trafficking discourses (Chuang, 2014; Ticktin, 2011). It argues that dominant approaches, fixated on criminal prosecution and border control (epitomised by the Palermo Protocol implementation), constitute a form of symbolic violence. They misdiagnose the problem, individualise responsibility, obscure structural culpability, and often reinforce the very carceral logics and migration controls that exacerbate vulnerability (Bhabha & Digidiki, 2018; O'Connell, 2015; Benavente, 2022). Such interventions function as technocratic fixes that fail to address the generative mechanisms identified by this framework.

Spatio-Temporal Specificity: Nigeria's Landscape of Vulnerability: The framework demands attention to spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and temporal dynamics. Vulnerability is geographically patterned: border regions (e.g., Benin Republic/Nigeria), conflict zones (Borno), economically hollowed-out agrarian states (Benue), and mega-cities with vast informal economies (Lagos) represent distinct but interconnected vulnerability clusters (Ikeora & Ikeora, 2018; UNICEF, 2024). These patterns reflect decades of spatial disinvestment, uneven development, and the territorialisation of state neglect. Temporality is crucial: historical legacies (colonial administration, post-independence political settlements, military rule, oil booms/busts) have sedimented structures of inequality and governance pathologies that shape present vulnerabilities (Mustapha, 2006). Trafficking emerges within this historically constituted political economy.

This theoretical framework provides an analytical lens for understanding child trafficking in Nigeria by enabling *causal layered analysis* that uncovers the generative mechanisms—structural, institutional, and agential—that sustain the phenomenon, while critically de-naturalising exploitation by exposing it not as an inevitable consequence of poverty or deviance, but as a distinctly political outcome of specific institutional arrangements and power relations. It provides a critical lens for interrogating policy, revealing how dominant anti-trafficking interventions—preoccupied with prosecution and border control—function as counterproductive technocratic fixes that neglect structural determinants and often exacerbate vulnerability. Consequently, the framework advocates for articulating transformative justice, suggesting a radical reorientation toward redistributive justice, institutional transformation, spatial reparation, and dismantling the pathologies of power (Farmer, 2004) that sustain structural violence, necessitating a decisive shift from prosecution to structural prevention via equitable development, robust social protection, quality public services, accountable

governance, and challenging global inequities. It repositions child trafficking in Nigeria as a diagnostic of state failure and systemic structural injustice, compelling analysis and intervention at the level of deep-seated socio-political and economic structures that normalise exploitation.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024) was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strategies.[3] The research employed an explanatory sequential design, beginning with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative exploration to contextualise and deepen findings. The study population consisted of residents and institutional stakeholders in four purposively selected states—Benue (6.2 million), Edo (5.2 million), Borno (6.4 million), and Lagos (22 million)—yielding a total population of approximately 39.8 million (National Population Commission, 2023). A sample size of 2,400 was determined using Cochran's formula for large populations at a 95% confidence level and a 2% margin of error, assuming a proportion (p) of 0.5 to maximise variability and ensure the most conservative sample size estimate.[4] A stratified multistage sampling strategy was employed to ensure representativeness across urban and rural local government areas within each state, with 600 respondents per state.

Quantitative data were collected between March and July 2024 using a structured questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, administered through in-person, face-to-face interviews.[5] Trained research assistants, drawn from the host communities, facilitated the distribution of the questionnaires.[6] The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha, with all subscales exceeding the 0.85 threshold. Validity was ensured through expert

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[3]The explanatory sequential design was particularly suited to the study's theoretical orientation, which foregrounds institutional complexity and multi-level governance. By first identifying structural patterns through quantitative analysis and subsequently interrogating the lived experiences and institutional narratives qualitatively, the approach enabled a layered understanding of how systemic vulnerabilities and power asymmetries shape the dynamics of child trafficking. The research employed an explanatory sequential design, beginning with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative exploration to contextualise and deepen findings.

[4] This assumption reflects the absence of prior data on response distribution. To account for potential non-response or attrition, an additional 10% was initially added to the calculated minimum, yielding a total of approximately 2,376, which was then rounded to 2,400 for logistical and fieldwork feasibility. The sample size was rounded to 2,400 for practical implementation.

[5] The instrument comprised both closed-ended and Likert-scale items—specifically a 5-point unipolar scale—designed to capture perceptions of trafficking prevalence, structural vulnerabilities, and institutional responses.

[6] They underwent a three-day intensive training programme that covered ethical data collection, trauma-informed engagement, questionnaire administration protocols, and respondent confidentiality. The training included role-playing exercises, mock interviews, and quality control procedures to ensure adherence to research standards during field implementation.

reviews and a pilot test conducted in Oyo State in February 2024, involving 50 participants excluded from the main study.[7]

Qualitative data collection occurred between July and September 2024 and included 32 in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted across the four states with NAPTIP officials, law enforcement agents, traditional leaders, NGO personnel, and community actors.[8] Additionally, four focus group discussions (one per state) were held in community centres between August and September 2024, each comprising 5–6 participants.[9] The FGDs were conducted entirely in person, enabling the facilitators to establish rapport, manage participant interaction, and capture non-verbal cues effectively.[10]

Quantitative data analysis, including Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), was conducted electronically SPSS v29.[11] Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo 14, which facilitated coding, categorisation, and synthesis of narrative patterns. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Babcock University Health Research Ethics Committee (BUHREC), in accordance with the National Health Research Ethics Code of Nigeria. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the data lifecycle.[12]

The Results
Table 1: Spatial Distribution and Variation of Child Trafficking Across Selected Nigerian States

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight
Child trafficking	52.8	33.5	4.5	3.0	4.26	0.917	"Trafficking is more

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[7]Oyo State was selected for pilot study due to its comparable socio-demographic characteristics and institutional arrangements. This ensured reasonable contextual transferability of the findings. However, caution was exercised in interpreting the pilot feedback, and adjustments were made to account for any localised cultural or institutional nuances when deploying the instruments in the target states.

[8] These interviews were conducted in-person using a semi-structured guide informed by Ostrom's (2011) institutional analysis framework, focusing on local knowledge, institutional capacity, and power asymmetries.

[9] Each session was co-facilitated by two trained moderators with experience in trauma-informed practice and an independent observer responsible for managing group dynamics and documentation.

[10]Structured moderation protocols and time management tools were employed to ensure that every participant had adequate opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

[11]The SEM analysis employed the maximum likelihood estimator and evaluated model fit using indices such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) (Version 29) to model complex inter-variable relationships electronically. This approach enabled the simultaneous testing of multiple regression equations and the identification of latent constructs that influence observed variables.

[12]Although the study does not directly involve child victims, all protocols were developed with sensitivity to the subject matter, and steps were taken to ensure psychological safety for participants discussing potentially traumatic events.

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight
incidents vary significantly across different areas in Benue, Edo, Borno, and Lagos States.							pronounced in hard-to-reach communities, especially those near borders or conflict zones." (Key Informant, Borno)
Certain locations within these states experience higher rates of child trafficking than others.	46.8	39.0	3.8	2.5	4.14	0.945	"Known hotspots include peri-urban settlements and major transit corridors where traffickers operate discreetly." (Focus Group Participant, Edo)
Rural areas across the selected states are more affected by child trafficking than urban areas.	49.5	33.0	5.3	4.2	4.12	0.976	"Limited access to formal education and law enforcement makes rural children more vulnerable." (Respondent, Benue)
There is a strong correlation between migration patterns and child trafficking across the four states.	43.0	41.0	5.0	3.8	4.09	0.932	"Migrants fleeing insecurity or poverty often fall prey to trafficking networks along transit routes." (Community Leader, Edo)
The spatial distribution of trafficking incidents is influenced by the level of economic activity in an area.	41.5	43.0	4.8	3.2	4.09	0.917	"Markets, motor parks, and construction hubs serve as prime recruitment points for traffickers." (Respondent, Lagos)
Overall Mean					**4.14**	**0.937**	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Table 1 addresses the first objective of the study by analysing how child trafficking varies spatially across four Nigerian states. A large majority of respondents affirmed the uneven distribution of incidents, with particular attention drawn to rural zones, high-mobility areas, and borderlands. These patterns reveal how geographic location intersects with institutional absence and socio-economic disparities to shape trafficking dynamics. Qualitative responses offer depth to the quantitative patterns. Respondents repeatedly referenced remote rural areas, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and informal settlements as critical hotspots. The perceived link between economic activity and trafficking risk was also reinforced, particularly in informal economies.

Thematic Analysis: The data identify three dominant spatial dynamics: (1) rural disadvantage marked by infrastructural neglect, (2) border and conflict-adjacent vulnerability, and (3) urban informality associated with markets and transport hubs. These findings stress the need for localised surveillance, community-based prevention efforts, and spatially differentiated policy interventions aligned with trafficking risk zones.

Table 2: Effects of Poverty on Child Trafficking Across Selected Nigerian States

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight
Poverty is a major factor contributing to child trafficking in Nigeria.	80.8	15.8	0.8	0.4	4.75	0.595	"Poverty makes it easy for traffickers to exploit desperate families." (Respondent, Borno)
Families experiencing extreme financial hardship are more likely to be involved in child trafficking.	32.5	60.8	1.7	1.3	4.21	0.721	"Families struggling to survive sometimes fall for deceitful offers from traffickers." (KII, Edo)
Children from low-income households are more vulnerable to trafficking.	37.5	54.6	1.3	2.5	4.25	0.756	"Low-income families are often targeted by traffickers because of their vulnerability." (FGD, Benue)
Lack of access to education increases the likelihood of children being trafficked.	35.8	27.9	25.8	4.6	3.43	1.617	"Children out of school are more likely to be lured into trafficking networks." (Respondent, Lagos)
Unemployment among parents is a driving factor in the rise of child trafficking.	32.1	53.3	4.6	4.2	4.04	0.980	"When parents are unemployed, they can't provide, so traffickers step in with false promises." (KII, Benue)
Overall Mean					**4.14**	**0.934**	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Table 2 addresses the second objective of the study by analysing the role of poverty in exacerbating child trafficking across four Nigerian states. An overwhelming majority of respondents identified poverty as a critical driver, with

over 96% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that economic hardship makes children more vulnerable to trafficking. Particularly strong consensus was recorded on the view that families experiencing extreme financial distress are more susceptible to trafficking networks, with both structural poverty and unemployment cited as enabling conditions. The mean score of 4.75 on the poverty-trafficking nexus affirms the salience of poverty as a structural determinant of vulnerability. Responses on access to education revealed more variation, indicating that while some see education as a protective factor, others perceive its absence as merely one of several intersecting risks. The qualitative data illuminate the lived realities of families for whom educational deprivation and unemployment amplify susceptibility to trafficking.

Thematic Analysis: The data emphasise the centrality of economic precarity in shaping child vulnerability to trafficking. Three key poverty-related themes emerged: (1) household financial desperation, (2) educational exclusion and its downstream effects, and (3) structural unemployment leading to diminished parental agency. These findings support the broader thesis that addressing child trafficking requires systemic poverty alleviation, not merely reactive law enforcement measures.

Table 3: Stakeholder Roles in Shaping Child Trafficking Vulnerabilities Across Selected Nigerian States

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight
NAPTIP plays a significant role in combating child trafficking through prosecution and awareness.	48.7	39.2	5.0	3.6	4.18	0.928	"They are doing their best, but resources and staff are limited in rural areas." (NAPTIP Officer, Edo)
Traditional rulers influence local attitudes and can either enable or challenge trafficking practices.	45.4	36.0	8.1	5.0	4.02	1.031	"In some communities, leaders actively warn families; in others, silence is the norm." (FGD, Benue)
Religious leaders are key actors in mobilising anti-trafficking awareness in communities.	39.5	42.7	7.5	4.3	4.01	0.985	"Churches and mosques often serve as first responders when children go missing." (Respondent, Lagos)
Community-based organisations (CBOs) are effective in early identification and reporting	36.8	41.9	10.2	6.4	3.89	1.047	"Local NGOs fill a huge gap, especially where state actors are absent." (KII, Borno)

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight
of cases.							
Government agencies beyond NAPTIP (e.g., police, social welfare) are inconsistent in their responses.	41.2	35.6	9.7	6.5	3.92	1.014	"Police sometimes see these cases as domestic issues, not crimes." (FGD, Lagos)
Overall Mean					4.00	1.001	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Table 3 addresses the third objective of the study by examining the roles of key stakeholders—NAPTIP, traditional and religious leaders, community-based organisations, and other government agencies—in shaping child trafficking vulnerabilities across Benue, Edo, Borno, and Lagos States.

The highest consensus was recorded around the role of NAPTIP (Mean = 4.18), particularly in prosecution and sensitisation campaigns. However, qualitative insights revealed capacity gaps, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. Respondents expressed concern about under-resourcing, logistical barriers, and limited outreach. Traditional rulers and religious leaders were acknowledged for their dual potential to either mitigate or exacerbate vulnerability. While some were seen as protective agents, others were viewed as complicit through passive silence or cultural legitimation of exploitative practices. Community-based organisations emerged as essential frontline actors, particularly in detection and reporting, but faced challenges related to funding, legitimacy, and coordination with formal agencies.

Thematic Analysis: Three dominant themes emerged: (1) uneven institutional capacity, especially beyond NAPTIP; (2) the ambivalent role of traditional and religious authority in local governance; and (3) the critical, under-supported role of CBOs in grassroots prevention. The findings suggest the need for a multi-scalar governance approach that strengthens coordination, enhances community accountability, and invests in local prevention ecosystems.

Table 4: Typologies of Trafficking Actors and Victim Trajectories Across Selected Nigerian States

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight

Item	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	Mean	STD	Qualitative Insight
Most trafficking networks in Nigeria operate through informal and unregulated recruitment chains.	51.3	37.2	5.4	3.1	4.17	0.913	"Many traffickers are neighbours or extended family members posing as helpers." (FGD, Benue)
Victims are often trafficked internally before being trafficked internationally.	46.9	39.7	6.1	3.2	4.11	0.941	"They start from house help roles in towns and are later moved abroad." (Survivor Testimony, Edo)
Children are recruited using deception, including false promises of education or jobs.	57.4	30.8	4.3	2.1	4.32	0.882	"The promise of a better life is how they trick parents and children." (KII, Lagos)
Recruitment often involves family members, neighbours, or acquaintances rather than strangers.	44.8	42.3	5.6	3.5	4.14	0.914	"It is often someone the family knows—an aunt, uncle, or family friend." (FGD, Borno)
Many victims experience multi-stage exploitation, including domestic servitude and sexual abuse.	41.2	38.5	9.3	4.8	4.02	1.011	"Some girls work in homes, then are later forced into prostitution or trafficked abroad." (Respondent, Lagos)
Overall Mean					**4.15**	**0.932**	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Table 4 addresses the fourth objective of the study by examining the typologies of trafficking actors and the common trajectories that victims follow in Nigeria. The table highlights widespread agreement among respondents on the informal and decentralised nature of trafficking networks, often involving familiar intermediaries and progressing through multiple stages of exploitation. The strongest consensus (Mean = 4.32) was recorded on the use of **deceptive** recruitment strategies, including false promises of education or employment. Respondents also emphasised the prevalence of internal trafficking as a precursor to international exploitation, a pattern particularly noted in Edo and Lagos States. Qualitative responses reinforce the finding that traffickers are often trusted individuals within the community, rather than strangers, complicating detection and intervention. Additionally, respondents identified a multi-stage victim trajectory, beginning with domestic servitude and escalating to more exploitative forms of labour or sexual abuse.

Thematic Analysis: Three key themes emerged: (1) trafficking is embedded in informal, trust-based recruitment networks; (2) victim journeys are multi-staged, often starting domestically before escalating transnationally; and (3) deceptive tactics and social proximity are central to recruitment. These findings call for nuanced, community-based surveillance strategies and survivor-informed interventions that recognise the complexity of trafficking trajectories.

Discussion of Findings

This section critically engages the empirical data presented in Tables 1 through 4, interpreting them in light of the study's objectives and theoretical commitments. Grounded in structural violence, and *political economy theories*, and extant trafficking literature, the analysis reveals how spatial inequality, systemic poverty, institutional fragility, and sociocultural norms converge to entrench child trafficking across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.

Spatial Dynamics of Child Trafficking

Data from Table 1 indicate a markedly uneven spatial distribution of trafficking across Benue, Edo, Borno, and Lagos States. The substantial agreement among respondents (Mean = 4.26; SD = 0.917) substantiates claims that child trafficking is not randomly dispersed but rather concentrated in specific high-risk localities—namely rural hinterlands, peri-urban transit points, and zones of displacement. Through the study's integrated theoretical framework, these patterns emerge not as cartographic accidents, but as the empirical actualisation of deep-seated generative mechanisms constituting Nigeria's political economy of structural violence. This spatiality represents the territorial inscription of institutionalised precarity, where geographic marginalisation operates as both cause and consequence of systemic abandonment.

Applying Soja's (2010) spatial justice lens through our critical realist ontology reveals these "*high-risk localities*" as material manifestations of the *Real domain's generative mechanisms*: *State Spatial Selectivity (Brenner, 2004):* The consistent under-investment in agrarian peripheries (Benue), conflict-affected margins (Borno), and informal urban settlements (Lagos) reflects a political logic of resource allocation. Infrastructure deficits and service voids are not developmental oversights but active productions of space serving clientelist networks (Bach, 2011). *Path-Dependent Dispossession*: Edo's trafficking corridors exemplify Farmer's (2004) "pathologies of power" biologically embodied over generations. The historical conversion of subsistence farmlands into cash-crop enclaves during

colonial administration (Watts, 2004) initiated cycles of rural immiseration now exploited by trafficking networks as spatially embedded opportunity structures.

The theoretical lens of structural violence further elucidates this spatiality: geographic marginalisation does not simply reflect developmental lag but denotes state-sanctioned neglect and policy invisibility. As Zimmerman and Kiss (2017) have noted, trafficking thrives in "institutional vacuums," where the absence of formal surveillance allows informal power actors—such as recruiters, transporters, and complicit community figures—to flourish unchecked. These spatial patterns fundamentally confirm child trafficking as a geographically organised symptom of state structural failure. The concentration in marginalised zones constitutes empirical evidence of the Real domain's mechanisms: the spatialisation of ethno-regional inequality (Suberu, 2001), the territorialisation of extractive governance, and the embodiment of historical disinvestment (Mustapha, 2006). Consequently, meaningful intervention requires not merely targeting *"hotspots,"* but dismantling the generative spatial logics through redistributive land reform, place-based social protection, and constitutional renegotiation of resource governance. Anything less perpetuates the symbolic violence of misdiagnosis.

Poverty as a Structural Driver

Findings in Table 2 present poverty as the most salient structural determinant of child trafficking, with 80.8% of respondents strongly affirming its centrality (Mean = 4.75; SD = 0.595). Within the theoretical framework anchored in structural violence and Critical Realism, poverty is not a mere contextual backdrop but a constitutive mechanism that generates and sustains vulnerability. It operates at the intersection of macro-structural forces—such as neoliberal disinvestment, ethno-regional inequalities, and the residual effects of structural adjustment—and meso-institutional failures including weak social protection systems, fragmented governance, and the erosion of public services. This reinforces Farmer's (2004) notion of structural violence as historically sedimented and institutionally mediated harm, while also aligning with Bhaskar's (2013) realist ontology by locating poverty within the deeper causal layer of the social real. Okorie (2023) similarly argues that endemic deprivation in African contexts fosters a political economy in which children, particularly in rural and conflict-affected regions, are rendered disposable. The data further reveal that poverty intersects with exclusion from education, household fragility, and spatial marginality, thereby producing a constellation of risks operationalised through daily survival strategies.

The observed variance in responses related to education (Mean = 3.43; SD = 1.617) signals the presence of mediating mechanisms—such as gender norms, kinship structures, and regional disparities—that condition how poverty translates into trafficking exposure. This necessitates an intersectional and stratified analysis

(Crenshaw, 1991; Abebe *et al.,* 2024), recognising the emergent interaction of structural conditions and agential responses. Thus, poverty is theorised not merely as a statistical correlate, but as a generative force embedded in Nigeria's historically constituted and spatially uneven political economy of neglect and extraction.

Role of Institutional and Non-State Actors

Findings from Table 3 illuminate the fragmented and structurally constrained landscape of institutional and non-state responses to child trafficking in Nigeria. Although the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is nominally positioned as the state's primary anti-trafficking body, the data reveal a disjuncture between its legal-administrative authority and its on-the-ground efficacy. Respondents overwhelmingly cited NAPTIP's concentration in urban centers, chronic underfunding, and bureaucratic inertia as impediments to its reach—particularly in peripheral, rural, and conflict-prone regions. Within the theoretical frame of structural violence (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004), this reflects a systemic failure of the state to guarantee the most basic conditions of human security for structurally marginalised populations. The institutional incapacity is not merely technical but deeply political, arising from a stratified political economy that prioritises securitised urban zones over spatially disinvested areas—thereby reproducing uneven geographies of vulnerability (Soja, 2010).

Traditional and religious authorities emerged as ambivalent intermediaries whose roles fluctuate across geopolitical zones. In Borno and other northern states, their passivity or perceived complicity—often expressed through silence or tacit legitimation—speaks to how symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990) is embedded within local structures of patriarchal and gerontocratic authority. These normative actors, operating within historically sedimented cultural fields, frequently misrecognise trafficking as either culturally sanctioned child fostering or survivalist migration. Conversely, in southern states such as Edo and Lagos, where trafficking is more visible and socially contested, traditional leaders were more likely to act as mobilisers of community vigilance. This spatial variance underscores the critical realist emphasis on the interaction of structure and agency within specific contexts (Bhaskar, 2013; Danermark *et al.,* 2019). While these actors possess agential capacities, they are enabled or constrained by meso-institutional configurations and broader macro-structural forces, including ethno-regional inequalities, moral economies of kinship, and the erosion of state legitimacy.

Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), by contrast, were consistently identified as key actors in the early detection and community-level mediation of trafficking cases. Their embeddedness within local social networks grants them a level of epistemic and relational access often unavailable to formal institutions. However,

their efficacy is circumscribed by structural limitations: funding precarity, fragmented mandates, and weak integration into the national anti-trafficking architecture. Within a critical political economy lens, this reflects the outsourcing of public functions to under-resourced actors in contexts shaped by neoliberal withdrawal and institutional hollowing (Watts, 2004; Bach, 2011). The proliferation of NGOs and CBOs often constitutes a form of "governance at a distance" that absolves the state of its redistributive responsibilities while failing to address the root causes of trafficking.

These dynamics reflect the empirical domain of observed events, but retroductive reasoning pushes analysis toward the real domain of generative mechanisms. The institutional landscape of anti-trafficking in Nigeria is a palimpsest of donor-driven interventions, weak state presence, symbolic authority, and fragmented civil society—all interacting within a historical matrix of postcolonial state formation, structural adjustment-induced institutional degradation, and spatialised exclusion. These findings affirm the core insight of this study's theoretical framework: child trafficking is not a pathology of deviance but a symptom of structural violence reproduced through institutional failure, normative complicity, and disarticulated governance.

Typologies of Trafficking Actors and Victim Trajectories

Table 4 provides empirical substantiation for the multi-scalar, relational architecture of child trafficking networks in Nigeria. The prominence of deceptive recruitment by socially proximate actors—relatives, acquaintances, or respected community figures—(Mean = 4.32; SD = 0.882) exemplifies a critical mechanism through which symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990) operates. Victims' misrecognition of coercion, due to trust in culturally sanctioned figures, reflects an internalised habitus shaped by precarity and historical deprivation. These patterns align with Bhabha and Digidiki's (2018) contention that trafficking in African contexts is not externally imposed, but cultivated within relational ecologies where exploitation is normalised, obfuscated, or rationalised.

The progression from domestic exploitation to international trafficking—what Bales (2007) terms the "ladder of exploitation"—demonstrates the cumulative causal pathways through which macro-structural and micro-social mechanisms interact. Each stage—child domestic servitude, street hawking, transactional labour migration—intensifies dispossession and erodes resistance, embedding the victim further within a trajectory dictated not by individual deviance but by institutionalised neglect and socio-economic desperation. This progression affirms the retroductionist logic of Critical Realism: trafficking trajectories must be understood not merely as outcomes of isolated incidents but as symptomatic of

enduring, generative mechanisms residing in the Real domain—such as gendered labour segmentation, intergenerational poverty, and ethno-regional exclusion. Geographical clusters, such as Edo and Lagos States, emerge in Table 4 not as incidental locales, but as spatial expressions of structural violence (Soja, 2010). Edo, with its historical legacy of labour migration and declining agrarian viability, exemplifies spatial disinvestment and the failure of state-led rural development. Lagos, by contrast, represents the hyper-urbanised node of informal economies, where demand for cheap labour collides with weak social protection and regulatory paralysis. These regions function as both origin and transit spaces—not due to their geography alone, but due to their embeddedness within Nigeria's fragmented and extractive political economy. Thus, trafficking circuits reflect the territorialisation of neglect: where absence of state accountability produces zones of vulnerability that trafficking actors strategically exploit.

Critically, the reliance on kinship-based recruiters and localised facilitators challenges dominant anti-trafficking frameworks that frame trafficking as transnational crime perpetrated by discrete, externally imposed syndicates. Instead, the data in Table 4 underscores how trafficking emerges from pathologies of power (Farmer, 2004) that render certain relational forms and survival strategies complicit in exploitation. This points to the failure of technocratic responses—such as criminalisation or awareness campaigns—that remain blind to the ontological depth of trafficking as a social harm (Hillyard & Tombs, 2004), rather than a discrete legal infraction. The trajectories outlined in Table 4 must be interpreted temporally. Victim pathways are not spontaneous ruptures but longitudinal outcomes of historically sedimented governance failures—from the legacies of structural adjustment and rural de-development, to contemporary fiscal federalism that incentivises local elite predation over welfare provisioning. The emergent properties of trafficking networks—relational, flexible, embedded—are thus enabled by the absence of robust state counter-power, and the socio-cultural rationalisation of exploitative mobilities as necessary sacrifices for economic survival.

Conclusion

This study critically interrogated the endemic phenomenon of child trafficking in Nigeria through a multi-layered analytical framework grounded in structural violence theory and critical realist epistemology. The objective was to move beyond the narrow confines of criminal justice paradigms to foreground the deeper, historically constituted mechanisms that causally generate and sustain trafficking. By engaging with Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence, Farmer's (2004) "pathologies of power," and Bourdieu's (2020; 1990) theories of symbolic violence and habitus, the research revealed that child trafficking is not an

episodic aberration, but a normalised outcome of Nigeria's political economy of neglect, uneven development, and systemic abandonment.

Empirically, the study illuminated how macro-structural forces—such as neoliberal economic restructuring, petro-state dependency, and spatial disinvestment—intersect with meso-level institutional dysfunctions and micro-level survivalist logics to create a terrain of pervasive vulnerability. Specific spatial and temporal configurations—ranging from the conflict-ridden Northeast and the resource-extractive Niger Delta, to informal urban economies and degraded rural peripheries—emerged as critical sites of generative harm. Within these spaces, trafficking networks do not operate in a vacuum but exploit the predictable failures of a fractured state apparatus, weak social protection systems, and culturally sanctioned gender hierarchies.

This conclusion insists on reframing child trafficking not as a discrete criminal act, but as a structurally induced social harm. Anti-trafficking discourses that fixate on prosecution and border securitisation—often inspired by global governance instruments such as the Palermo Protocol—fail to engage with the causal depth of the problem. These approaches constitute forms of symbolic violence in themselves: they individualise culpability, obscure systemic complicity, and reproduce carceral logics that deepen vulnerability. A transformative response, therefore, must be anchored in structural prevention rather than reactive enforcement. This entails redistributive justice, spatial reparation, and institutional transformation. Policies must target the underlying generative mechanisms—by revitalising public services, investing in historically marginalised regions, strengthening accountability frameworks, and reconstituting the social contract through participatory governance. In doing so, Nigeria can begin to dismantle the deeply embedded architectures of exploitation that render children disposable within a larger regime of economic and political abandonment. Ultimately, the study contributes to a growing body of critical scholarship that situates trafficking within broader logics of structural violence and state failure. It calls for a paradigmatic rethinking—away from technocratic fixes and toward a praxis of social justice rooted in historical consciousness, spatial equity, and the radical interrogation of power.

Recommendations

1. Reorient Anti-Trafficking Policy toward Structural Prevention: Building on the study's critical realist analysis, trafficking must be addressed as a symptom of structural violence rather than treated solely as a criminal justice issue. This requires integrating anti-trafficking efforts into broader redistributive agendas—specifically, scaling up social protection systems,

educational access, and targeted poverty alleviation in high-risk regions. Conditional cash transfers, community-based livelihood programmes, and universal basic services should be spatially targeted using geo-referenced risk mapping to disrupt the material conditions that render children vulnerable to commodification.

2. Strengthen Multi-Level Institutional Coordination and Governance Accountability: Given the institutional fragmentation identified in this study, a harmonised legal and administrative framework is essential. Federal and state child protection laws must be aligned, with clear inter-agency coordination between justice, welfare, and security sectors. Decentralising NAPTIP's operations through empowered regional offices and locally embedded surveillance systems—integrated with traditional authorities and civil -society actors—can enhance responsiveness and community ownership of prevention strategies.

3. Transform Public Discourse through Survivor-Led, Community-Driven Advocacy: Reflecting the study's attention to symbolic violence and the production of exploitative subjectivities, public campaigns must move beyond awareness-raising to actively deconstruct cultural myths that legitimise exploitation. Survivor-led storytelling, school-based interventions, and engagement with religious and traditional platforms can foster critical consciousness, humanise affected populations, and build solidarities that challenge the cultural and gendered dimensions of trafficking.

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