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# **The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Child Abduction and Trafficking in Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

One of the fastest growing and highly lucrative areas of criminal activity is the illegal transportation of persons whether male or female against their will, from one place to another, through the use of force, deceit, threats, debt bondage and servitude. This criminal activity which is termed abduction and trafficking could be perpetrated for the purpose of sale, slavery or forced labour, early marriage and other purposes frowned at by existing international treaties, conventions and municipal legislation. Moreso, as a highly organised crime and with the advent of technology, there is an increase in cases involving women and children despite the plethora of fine worded legislation and agencies put in place to curb this menace. This work addressed the topic 'The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Child Abduction and Trafficking in Nigeria.' The specific objective of this work, was to examine the effectiveness of the legal framework proscribing this phenomenon, in line with innovations of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning tools. It was found that there are gaps in legislation due to the technicalities created by AI. To nip these technicalities in the bud, this work has recommended a robust legislative review, while viewing this menace from a holistic approach and taking into consideration the future prospects of AI.

## **1. Introduction**

Human trafficking for sexual exploitation is believed to be one of the fastest growing areas of criminal activity. The phenomenon of human trafficking, particularly in West Africa, has in recent years assumed

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alarming proportions and hence receives unprecedented global attention. Although there is a lack of accurate data, it is reported that in West and Central Africa about 200,000 children are trafficked annually, while in West Africa alone, an estimated 35,000 women and children are trafficked every year for commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>1</sup> Nigeria, the largest and most populous country (140 million) in Sub-Saharan African occupies a central position as a country of origin, transit and destination for the crime of human trafficking.<sup>2</sup>

Child victims are particularly vulnerable but there is little systematic knowledge based on empirical research about their characteristics, experiences, and prospects for long-term integration into the mainstream society.<sup>3</sup> Women and children especially, from poor rural communities and with little or no education often constitute the larger percentage of trafficked persons in Nigeria. Traffickers exploit the vulnerability of the people in places where there is general poverty, lack of income generating opportunities and pervading ignorance, to source the victims of trafficking. The vulnerability of rural dwellers becomes more visible in cases where the children and young people are not only from poor rural communities but are orphans or come from dysfunctional homes. In some cases human trafficking is facilitated or carried out with the active connivance of members of the victims' families.<sup>4</sup>

Nigeria, like some of its neighbouring countries in West Africa such as Benin, Togo and Ghana, has been affected by human trafficking for several years but has only recently recognized the phenomenon as an issue of concern to be given national attention.<sup>5</sup> In 2003, Nigeria became the first country in the region to adopt national legislation to deal specifically with

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<sup>1</sup> A Mantua, 'Trafficking in Women and Children' (2003) *African Women's Journal*, New People Media Centre.

<sup>2</sup> The Trafficking in Persons Report, US State Department, July 2001.

<sup>3</sup> E Goździak, 'Victims No Longer: Research on Child Survivors of Trafficking for Sexual and Labor Exploitation in the United States' (2008) NIJ Grant NO. 2005-IJ-CX-0051 Final Report p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Olagbegi, B O 'Review of legislation and policies in Nigeria on Human Trafficking and Forced Labour' (2010) Action Programme against Trafficking and Forced Labour in West Africa.

<sup>5</sup> B O Olagbegi and A Ikpeme, 'Review of legislation and policies in Nigeria on Human Trafficking and Forced Labour' Action Programme against Trafficking and Forced Labour in West Africa p.1.

the issue of human trafficking. The Act is known as the “Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act, 2003”. In addition Nigeria has signed, ratified and domesticated the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children and the United Nations Convention against Trans-national Organised crime.<sup>6</sup>

In recent times and with the emergence of technology, the welfare and state of children globally have been plagued by a sizeable number of conundrums and ill practices as a result of the activities of child traffickers. These ill-practices as exhibited in abduction, abuse, child stealing and trafficking have been impacted largely by evolving concerns of generative human technology, data privacy and protection which has impacted positively and negatively on the statistics for the perpetration of these crimes. These issues are critically addressed in this work with a view to proffer suggestions and measures to be taken to reduce or eliminate these crimes and strengthen the existing legal framework.

## **2. Analysis and Gaps in Legislation**

One of the major gaps that exist in the concept of artificial intelligence as it relates to the menace of human trafficking is largely the period of its evolution into Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> This increasing interest in AI having found its way into the Nigerian Jurisprudence has pinpointed the need for previously enacted legislation to evaluate its applicability in line with the evolution.<sup>8</sup> With the increase in child abduction and human trafficking globally, and with the attendant hydra-headed problems, there was heightened international concern about the adverse effects of trafficking on the efforts of the United Nations and regional intergovernmental organisations to promote human rights and human security in the world. Consequently, the need to ensure that the issue was addressed from a

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<sup>6</sup> The Nigerian domesticated laws are “The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons especially women and children (ratification and enforcement) Act, 2003” and “The UN Convention against Trans-national Organized Crime (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, 2003.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Haenlein, Andreas Kaplan, ‘A Brief History of Artificial Intelligence: On the Past, Present and Future of Artificial Intelligence’ (2019) <https://www.researchgate.net> accessed 24 October 2025

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

human rights perspective informed the adoption of various conventions and guidelines for the protection of trafficked victims. Nigeria has signed and ratified many of these instruments and, in order to make them nationally applicable, the following instruments have been domesticated:

**i. The Palermo Protocol**

A major step that was taken by the comity of nations under the auspices of the United Nations to address the issue of human trafficking is the adoption of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children, supplementing the Convention against Trans-national Organized Crime signed in Palermo, Italy in 2000. Nigeria signed and ratified the Palermo Protocol and the Convention on 13th December 2000 and 28th June 2001 respectively. The Nigerian Government further domesticated it by an Act of the National Assembly signed into law in 2003 and known as the "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children (ratification and enforcement) Act 2003 and the United Nations Convention against Trans-national Organized Crime (Ratification and Enforcement Act), 2003. Incidentally, Nigeria is one of the first countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to ratify and domesticate the Palermo Protocol, which shows the political will of the Government to combat human trafficking in Nigeria. The wordings of this protocol may have made it easy to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking crimes, however, with the sophistication of technology application in different jurisdictions, there are inherent dangers in the verbatim adoption of international instruments as domestic laws.

**ii. The Optional Protocol on the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC)**

This protocol aims at furthering the achievement of the purposes of the Convention on the Rights of a Child by providing states with detailed requirements to end the sexual exploitation and abuse and also protect children from being sold for non-sexual purposes- such as other forms of forced labour, illegal adoption and organ donation. For purposes of the Protocol, Article 2 of the Protocol provides definitions for the offences of 'sale of children', 'child prostitution' and 'child pornography'. It further creates obligations on governments to criminalize and punish

activities related to these offences.<sup>9</sup> The protocol also protects the rights, and interests of child victims.<sup>10</sup> Governments must provide legal and other support services to child victims. This obligation includes considering the best interests of the child in any interactions with the criminal justice system.<sup>11</sup>

**iii. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC)<sup>12</sup>**

The OPAC refers to the inclusion as a war crime in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 years or using them to participate actively in hostilities in both international and non-international armed conflicts. The Preamble takes note of the definition of a Child in Article 1 of the CRC and expresses the conviction that raising the age of possible recruitment will contribute effectively to implementing the principle of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. The Protocol by Articles 1 and 2 extends the minimum age requirement for direct participation in armed conflict and conscription to eighteen respectively and forbids rebel or other non-governmental armed forces “under any circumstances,” to recruit or to use in hostilities persons under that age.<sup>13</sup> It does not prescribe age eighteen as the minimum for voluntary recruitment, but requires States Parties to raise the minimum age for it from fifteen<sup>14</sup> (i.e., to 16 years of age) and to deposit a binding declaration setting forth the minimum age permitted for voluntary recruitment and describing safeguards adopted to ensure

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<sup>9</sup>Article 3 of the OPSC.

<sup>10</sup>Article 8 of the OPSC.

<sup>11</sup>Article 8(3) of the OPSC. As a complement to the CRC, the interpretation of the Optional Protocol’s text must always be guided by the general principles of non-discrimination, best interests of the child and child participation.

<sup>12</sup> This Protocol is also called the Child Soldiers Protocol. It comprises of a Preamble and 13 articles, entered into force on February 12, 2002. G.A. Res. A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000. For an online text, see the OHCHR Web site, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc-conflict.htm> accessed on 25th of May 2017. The status of ratifications and reservations to the Protocol is available via hyperlinks in the left column of that same Web site.

<sup>13</sup>Article 4.

<sup>14</sup>Article 38 (3) of the CRC.

voluntariness<sup>15</sup>. The Protocol also requires States Parties to take “all feasible measures to ensure” the demobilisation or release from service of children recruited into armed conflict or used in hostilities and, “when necessary,” to accord “all appropriate assistance” for the children’s rehabilitation and social reintegration.<sup>16</sup>

#### **iv. Domestication of the CRC and ACRWC in Nigeria**

Nigeria signed and ratified both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 1991 and 2000 respectively. Generally, States that have ratified the CRC are known in international law as State Parties and subsequently take on both positive and negative duties to respect, protect and fulfill the rights contained in the treaty.<sup>17</sup> With precision, Article 4 of the CRC and Article 1 of the ACRWC puts Nigeria under a positive international law obligation to undertake legislative means amongst other means to implement the rights recognised in both Conventions being that the country is a State Party to them. It therefore against this backdrop that a draft Child’s Rights Bill aimed at principally enacting into Law in Nigeria the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the AU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was prepared in the early nineties. However, it was only in 2003 that the Bill was eventually passed into law by the National Assembly and signed into law by the President; giving birth to the Child’s Rights Act of 2003.

#### **v. The Child’s Rights Act 2003**

The structure of the CRA is informed by the mandate to provide a legislation which incorporates all the rights and responsibilities of children, and which consolidates all laws relating to children into one single

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<sup>15</sup> Article 3(1-3). Importantly also, According to Article 3(5), “the requirement to raise the age in paragraph 1 of the present article does not apply to schools operated by or under the control of the armed forces of the States Parties, in keeping with articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

<sup>16</sup>Article 6(1) and (3).

<sup>17</sup>For Example Committee on Civil and Political Rights, General Comment No. 31, The nature of the general legal obligation imposed on States Parties to the Covenant, CCPR/GC/2004/21/Rev.1/Add.13, 2004; Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 3, The nature of States Parties’ obligations, Geneva: UN, E/1991/23, 1990.

legislation, as well as specifying the duties and obligations of government, parents, relevant authorities and organisation. As stated previously, the power to legislate on issues concerning children in Nigeria rests on the States and as such, it is in the residuary legislative list. Consequently, individual States ought to adopt and adapt the Child's Rights Act. On this note, the CRA has presently been passed into law in at least 26 States of the Federation. The Child's Rights Act in its rights and responsibilities approach is culturally sensitive, compatible, relevant and above all in the best interest of the Nigerian child.<sup>18</sup>

#### **vi. NAPTIP Act<sup>19</sup>**

Examining the NAPTIP Act as a whole, one finds that the legislation is oriented more towards the prosecution of traffickers than to the prevention of trafficking and protection of trafficked persons. Another major flaw is that the offences created by the NAPTIP law focus on trafficking for sexual purposes to the neglect of offences relating to trafficking for other forms of labour. The NAPTIP Act has, for the first time instituted severe penalties for the offence of human trafficking ranging from two years to life imprisonment. In addition, it provides for a series of other penalties including the option of fines and confiscation of the properties of convicted traffickers and accomplices. It is noteworthy that penalties for trafficking offences related to sexual purposes and involving minors under the age of 18 are much stiffer than other penalties.

The deficiencies in the NAPTIP Act regarding the protection of victims and witnesses has resulted in difficulty to effectively prosecute offenders due to the lack of cooperation from victims and witnesses who fear reprisals. In its first two years of existence only two cases were successfully prosecuted to conviction under the law despite the thousands of trafficking transactions taking place in Nigeria. To the extent that the NAPTIP Act lacks victims or witness protection, it has not complied with the internationally recommended human rights standard approach. The Nigerian government has taken a laudable step towards strengthening the legislative framework to address human trafficking in Nigeria by the passage of the NAPTIP Act. There is, however, a need for law reform to make the Act truly comprehensive and to address the various issues and

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<sup>18</sup>I W Nwakpu, 'Overview of the Legal Framework for the Protection of the Rights of the Child in Nigeria' (2013) 5(1) Ebonyi State University Law. p 33-41.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



manifestations of human trafficking in Nigeria, considering the proliferation of data privacy breaches and insecurities.

#### **vii. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Act<sup>20</sup>**

The Cybercrimes Act is Nigeria's principal legislation for combatting crimes perpetrated on the cyberspace. It promotes cybersecurity and protection of computer systems and networks and privacy rights. However, with the fastpaced integration of Artificial Intelligence technologies into the online space and the enactment of the Act long before this innovation, it lacks specific provisions addressing Artificial Intelligence related threats.<sup>21</sup> This regulatory gap creates difficulties in prosecuting cases where Artificial Intelligence systems are used for unlawful purposes, such as automated recruitment or data-driven exploitation.<sup>22</sup>

### **3. Artificial Intelligence and Child Abduction**

The concept of Artificial Intelligence cannot be discussed without considering the risks and innovations associated with it. AI has impacted positively and negatively on cases of child abduction and trafficking in Nigeria. As an emerging technology in our digital space, AI based technologies are becoming prevalent and increasingly integrated into modern life, ensuring new opportunities for the safeguard of child rights and projecting frontiers for crime perpetrators.<sup>23</sup> As a highly organized crime and with the evolution of the digital space, artificial intelligence is beneficial for innovation, data management and security.<sup>24</sup> Traffickers increasingly use Artificial Intelligence tools which are capable of displaying human like abilities such as reasoning, learning, planning and creativity to

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<sup>20</sup> 2015

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Technology and Human Trafficking: Emerging Threats and Opportunities* (Vienna: UNODC, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Huskie Commons, *The Emerging danger of AI generated Child Sexual Abuse*, <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu> accessed 24 October 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Ifeyinwa Nsude, (2024) *Enhancing Child Rights Protection in Nigeria Through Artificial Intelligence (AI)* <https://doi.org/10.4000/123j3> <https://www.researchgate.net> accessed 24 October 2025

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

exploit children through deceptive recruitment tactics, identity theft, and algorithm-driven operations.<sup>25</sup>

Advanced machine-learning systems allow criminals to create false identities, monitor potential victims on social media, and distribute exploitative content with anonymity and efficiency.<sup>26</sup> Artificial Intelligence is embedded in children's toys, video games and adaptive learning systems and can determine a growing number of decisions impacting directly on the welfare and safety of the child.<sup>27</sup> To date, not so much has been published on how human traffickers are using generative AI to exploit the vulnerabilities of children. As a consequence, debates about the risks associated with AI and trafficking crimes have not focused much on AI-enabled human trafficking despite the existence of readily available cases. The methods transnational criminal organizations use to develop scams and create deepfake images are very similar to known trafficking business models and raises concerns of data privacy, stemming from data collection and reporting of issues of potential misuse.<sup>28</sup>

Conversely, Artificial Intelligence also offers transformative tools for combatting trafficking. Predictive analytics and data-driven investigations can assist law enforcement agencies in identifying trafficking networks and monitoring abduction prone areas. Facial recognition software, for instance, has been used globally to locate missing persons and dismantle trafficking rings. In Nigeria, Artificial Intelligence-powered systems could be used to trace digital footprints of traffickers, identify victims, and predict patterns of abduction.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, these technologies raise privacy and ethical concerns with excessive monitoring infringing the on constitutional rights under section 37 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended). This provision guarantees privacy of citizens and is recognised as a fundamental human right. Therefore, the deployment of Artificial

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<sup>25</sup>ibid

<sup>26</sup> ibid

<sup>27</sup> Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe ... NEW FRONTIERS: THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO FACILITATE TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/579715.pdf> accessed 23rd October, 2025

<sup>28</sup> ibid

<sup>29</sup> ibid

Intelligence must be accompanied by robust legal safeguards to prevent infringements.

Some scholars emphasise that the Nigerian government must adopt a rights-based approach to Artificial Intelligence regulation by aligning domestic laws with international standards such as the United Nations Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence and Child Protection (2021).<sup>30</sup> This would ensure accountability, transparency, and fairness in the use of technology for both prevention and prosecution.

#### **4. Conclusion/Recommendations**

Trafficking in children is, without doubt, a despicable practice. It is a dehumanising practice for millions of children trapped in it because their fundamental rights are violated, and their future is jeopardised. In the light of the impact brought on by artificial intelligence, the combat waged against human trafficking in general and child trafficking, in particular, purport that the legal frameworks are heavily disadvantaged and must be reviewed to keep pace with current realities. The key historic event in legislation about human trafficking is recorded with the advent of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime which encompassed the Trafficking in Person Protocol and recently United Nations Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence and Child Protection (2021). It should be recognised that the most enlightened lawmakers drafted them and the laws appear fit for purpose. Nigeria needs to put in place workable Legislation, policies and strategies and ensure that social protection legislation, policies and strategies are devised to tackle all forms of child abuses no matter the emerging challenges occasioned by artificial intelligence influences on the Nigerian society.

Apart from a robust legislative paradigm shift, it is high time Nigeria opted for the intensive capacity building. Indeed, there is a need to build the capacity of existing structures, which are both under-resourced and under-funded, to be well equipped with AI tools and the knowledge base to combat child trafficking. Capacity-building should also occur for personnel in the immigration service, the police, the customs and National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking In Persons (NAPTIP). The Nigerian biometric passport should not be falsifiable as it currently is the case. The passport service and the immigration staff should be trained to prevent or foil

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<sup>30</sup> Uche, O. and Odo, J., Artificial Intelligence and Child Protection in the Digital Age: Emerging Legal Gaps in Nigeria (2022) *Nigerian Journal of Cyberlaw* 7(2), 45–67.

attempts to forge travel documents and identity theft. The biometric system for travel document should be centralised and placed under the strict control of trustworthy employees. Also, Nigeria has to cooperate in cases of extradition of criminals involved-in-human-trafficking.

In light of the suggestion for immediate domestication, the problem of implementation and enforcement will remain. Hence, legal paradigms, political paradigms, and socio-economic paradigm issues such as children's data and privacy protection, participation to work, public awareness, the institutionalisation of child fostering, and effective cooperation between states are fundamental in providing a definite response to the problem of child-trafficking enhanced by artificial intelligence.