

Modern slavery in Nigeria

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 206,140,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$5,186

7.8

PREVALENCE OF MODERN SLAVERY per 1,000 people

1,611,000

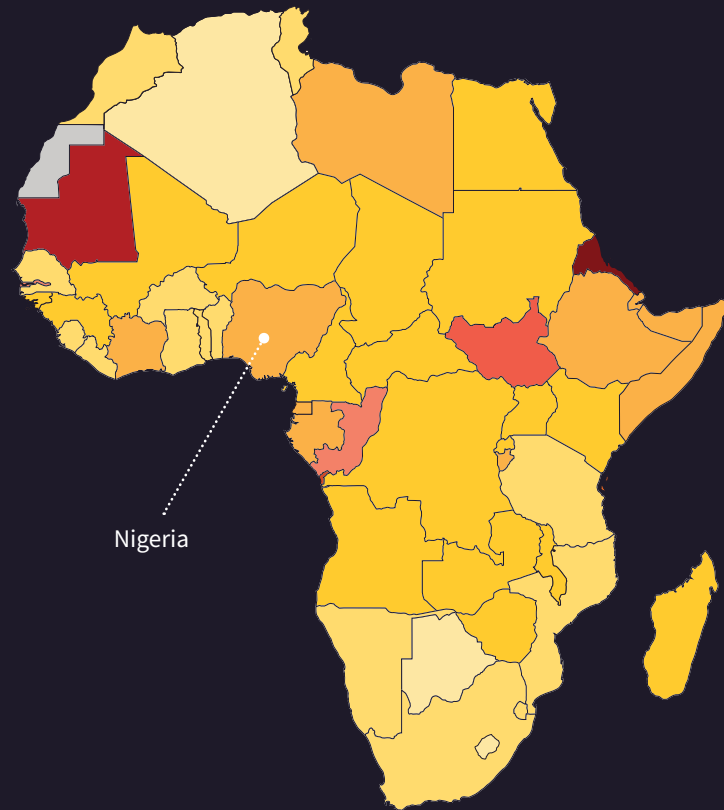
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN MODERN SLAVERY

76/100

VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

54/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MODERN SLAVERY



Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across Africa



Overview

Relative to its wealth, Nigeria is outperforming its neighbours in its efforts to address modern slavery risks in the country. Nigeria had the strongest response to modern slavery in Africa, reflecting strong criminal justice mechanisms to address modern slavery, as well steps taken to support survivors, address risk factors, and coordinate the response, including by launching a new National Action Plan. However, gaps in the government's response remain and provide opportunities for further action, including establishing a minimum age of marriage at 18 with no exceptions. Nigeria is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in Africa and has the fifth highest prevalence of modern slavery in the region.

Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 1.6 million individuals living in modern slavery in Nigeria. This equates to a prevalence of 7.8 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. Within the Africa region, Nigeria is ranked fifth out of 51 countries in terms of prevalence of modern slavery, and 38 out of 160 countries globally. Notably, this estimate does not include the number of children recruited into armed conflicts, which is reportedly perpetrated in Nigeria non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram.¹ This figure is best understood as a baseline number of people living in modern slavery in Nigeria.

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Katsina, Nigeria,
December 2020.

Parents of abducted schoolboys wait outside a camp to receive their children upon their release. Exhausted and dishevelled, several hundred Nigerian schoolboys seized in a mass abduction claimed by Boko Haram experienced their first full day of freedom. Photo credit: Kola Sulaimon/AFP via Getty Images.

Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

In 2020, 52 cases of forced labour within Nigeria were reported to the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP),² and a further 27 were reported in the first half of 2021.³ Experiences of forced labour vary according to gender and age, but are predominant in the unregulated informal sector.⁴ Men and boys are reportedly exploited in street vending, domestic servitude, mining and stone quarrying, agriculture, and textile manufacturing in Nigeria,⁵ while women and girls are disproportionately impacted by domestic servitude.⁶ According to a 2019 Human Rights Watch investigation for example, Nigerian women and girls were found to experience forced labour in stereotypically ‘female’ sectors, such as domestic and care work, and were trafficked from both within Nigeria and from neighbouring countries on false promises of paid employment, education, or training.⁷ On arrival, individuals were subjected to exploitative labour practices, such as excessive hours, sexual harassment, and emotional, verbal, sexual and physical abuse, which often included denial of food and medical care.⁸ Further, many girls who have migrated from rural parts of the country to Nigerian cities⁹ to work as ‘house girls’ in private homes are routinely beaten, disfigured, and sexually abused.¹⁰

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults

In 2020, NAPTIP received 146 reports related to the procurement of persons for sexual exploitation,¹¹ and a further 85 reports in the first half of 2021.¹² The exploitation of Nigerian women is widespread and well-documented both within the country¹³ and overseas, particularly across Europe.¹⁴ Traffickers offer false promises of paid employment in sex work or other sectors only to trap women and girls in situations of modern slavery abroad.¹⁵ Traffickers use threats of juju (voodoo curses) to force women and girls into debt bondage, often making them swear an oath to repay their debts to control them.¹⁶ Some individuals are reportedly trafficked by women who themselves had been

trafficked to Europe, following their return after repaying their debts.¹⁷ Reportedly, these women use their experience of ‘success’ to deceive others to migrate abroad.¹⁸

Nigerian women are also internally trafficked, often from rural to urban areas, for the purpose of sexual exploitation,¹⁹ or into ‘baby factories.’²⁰ Women trafficked into baby farms are brought to venues such as orphanages, maternity homes, or religious centres, where they are forcibly impregnated and made to deliver children who are sold to families seeking to adopt, or to other traffickers for the purposes of labour or sexual exploitation.²¹ Pregnant women and girls living in poverty are also targeted by traffickers, who sell the babies to couples or middlemen.²² There is limited data on the sexual exploitation of Nigerian men.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children

In 2020, four cases of children exploited in the commercial sex industry were reported to NAPTIP,²³ with a further five cases reported in the first half of 2021.²⁴ Reports indicate that children within Nigeria are subject to commercial sexual exploitation,²⁵ with girls facing greater risks of sexual violence and exploitation as a result of the conflict and associated socio-political instability.²⁶

Forced marriage

According to a 2021 national survey, an estimated 30 per cent of women and two per cent of men aged 20 to 24 years in Nigeria were first married or in a union before the age of 18.²⁷ Several factors drive child marriage, with women from rural areas, lower-income households, or who have low levels of education disproportionately affected.²⁸ Adolescent girls are reportedly made to marry by family members who are motivated by endemic poverty or discriminatory norms and practices.²⁹ In Cross River State, women and girls are sold into marriages to older men to repay family debt in the traditional practice of ‘money marriages.’³⁰

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The impact of conflict on modern slavery

Migrants fleeing conflict and struggling to meet their survival needs are particularly vulnerable to forced labour in Nigeria. A study by the International Organization for Migration, International Labour Organization, and Walk Free on slavery-related abuses among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Northeast Nigeria found that one in 60 IDPs had experienced either forced labour, forced recruitment into armed groups or forces, or abduction in the preceding five years.³¹ Armed groups were the perpetrators in almost half of forced labour cases (47 per cent), and armed forces³² were responsible for 13 per cent of cases.³³

“When I was taken by Boko Haram, I was forced to engage in fighting. They train us and we were given gun[s]. They have very large farm and they also forced us to work on their farm.”
45-year-old male from Nigeria, 2018³⁴

“He was taken away by armed forces in his place of displacement in a camp in Damboa.”

Respondent on the abduction of her husband at age 57, Nigeria, 2018

Boko Haram, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), and the Nigerian Security Forces have all been identified in the recruitment and use of children throughout the ongoing conflict in Northeast Nigeria,³⁵ though in 2017 the CJTF signed an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children.³⁶ Our findings revealed that IDPs who were recruited into armed groups or forces as children were not necessarily engaged in fighting, and were rather involved in supporting or ancillary activities.³⁷ Combatants have forced thousands of children in Northeast Nigeria to engage in a range of activities including fighting, carrying out suicide attacks, portering dangerous devices, spying, manning checkpoints, patrolling, bodyguarding, delivering messengers, cleaning, or cooking.³⁸

Women and girls in particular face forced sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, and forced marriage in the context of the ongoing conflict.³⁹ Families struggling to survive in conflict settings may adopt negative coping mechanisms that ultimately lead to the exploitation of women and girls. For example, parents may force their daughters into marriage to protect them from further sexual violence, including by armed groups.⁴⁰

“My parents thought I was old enough for marriage and I needed to marry to reduce the family burden.”

Female respondent from Nigeria, aged 32, married at age 16, 2018

Sexual exploitation occurs alongside other forms of exploitation that occur in the context of the conflict, such as recruitment into armed forces or abduction.⁴¹ Between 2017 and 2019, the United Nations country taskforce on monitoring and reporting in Nigeria verified that 204 children (195 girls and 9 boys) between the ages of five and 15 years were affected by incidents of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, sexual slavery and forced marriage, attributed to Boko Haram and the Nigerian Security Forces.⁴² Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of forced marriage cases among IDPs involved force by a member of an armed group,⁴³ such as Boko Haram.⁴⁴ Further, splinter groups and affiliates of Boko Haram also routinely kidnap adolescent girls and force them to marry their fighters.⁴⁵

“When [armed group] kidnapped me, I was forced to marry one of the leaders.”

Female respondent from Nigeria, aged 35, married at age 28, 2018⁴⁶

Organ trafficking

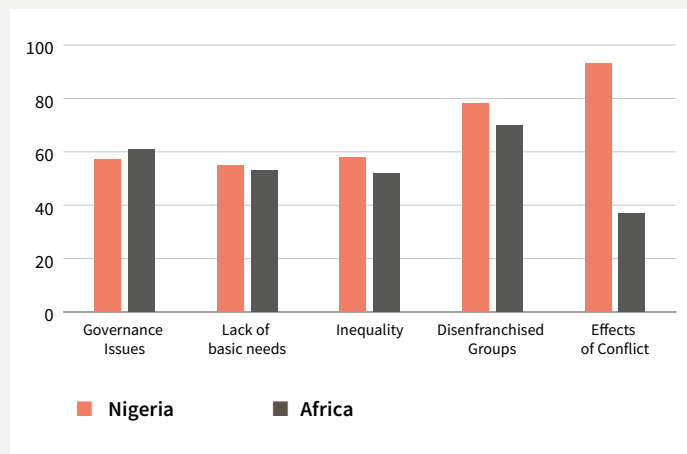
Information on organ trafficking in Nigeria is limited, however the practice has been reported to occur. In a 2019 survey among West African migrants, the incidence of organ trafficking in Nigeria was found to be low, but was noted to be a “growing phenomenon” in the country.⁴⁷ Reportedly, Nigerians deceived into trafficking for organ removal are often taken to the organ recipient’s country under false promises of paid employment.⁴⁸ In the first half of 2021, NAP TIP received one reported case of organ harvesting.⁴⁹ More recently in March 2023, a Nigerian senator and his wife were convicted of organ trafficking in the United Kingdom,⁵⁰ after they were arrested in 2022 for facilitating a man’s travel from Nigeria to the UK for purposes of organ trafficking.⁵¹

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Vulnerability

Figure 1.
Vulnerability of Nigeria to modern slavery by dimension, compared to the regional average



Nigeria is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in the Africa region and globally. Nigeria received an overall vulnerability score of 76 out of 100, with this high score largely driven by the effects of conflict. Nigeria has faced protracted conflict and widespread displacement in the Northeast region since the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009.⁵² Indiscriminate attacks against civilians have led millions to flee, both within Nigeria and across its borders.⁵³ As of December 2021, there were 2.2 million IDPs in Northeast Nigeria, largely in the states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe.⁵⁴ IDPs displaced by conflict are particularly vulnerable to modern slavery⁵⁵ with evidence that Boko Haram has actively targeted displaced persons in their attacks.⁵⁶

Practices and attitudes rooted in gender inequality underpin risk for women and girls and are reflected in patriarchal legal frameworks. For instance, in Edo state, where the eldest son in a family generally inherits property, the death of a husband in a polygamous marriage can leave women and their children without safe housing. To cope, families left behind may send their daughters abroad for work.⁵⁷ Norms that associate family honour with female purity also contribute to early marriage in Nigeria. Families force their pregnant daughters into marriage to prevent community perceptions of dishonour on the family.⁵⁸ Poverty also magnifies the inequalities faced by women and girls, driving families to marry off young girls to relieve economic strain.⁵⁹ Women from households in the lowest wealth quintile in Nigeria are far more likely to be married before the age of 18 (57 per cent) compared to women from households in the highest wealth quintile (10 per cent).⁶⁰

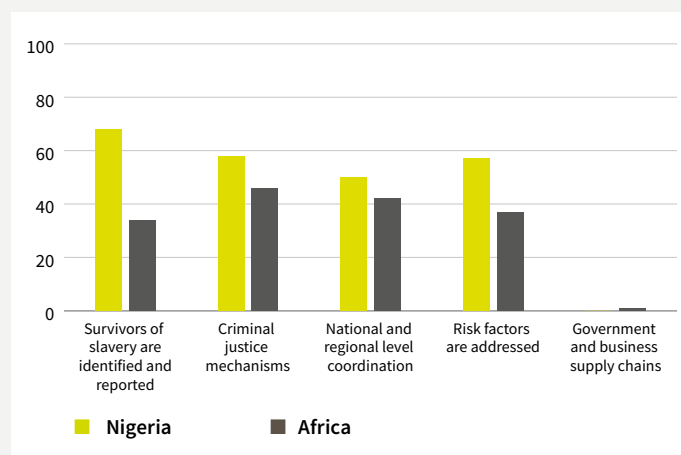
In 2019, it was estimated that 40 per cent of Nigeria's population were living below the poverty line, with rates significantly higher in rural areas than in urban settings (52 per cent and 18 per cent respectively).⁶¹ The COVID-19 pandemic spurred the need to migrate among residents of Benin City, as a result of their deteriorating economic situation. However, the fall in income also meant that many migration plans were delayed, as families did not

have the means to finance their journey. As a result, migrants were more reliant on smugglers, increasing their risk of exploitation, such as debt bondage.⁶²

Governance issues also drive vulnerability to modern slavery in Nigeria. Despite being criminalised,⁶³ widespread corruption continued to impact all levels of government. Corruption within the judiciary, security forces, and law enforcement impedes criminal justice processes and inhibits action to hold traffickers accountable for their crimes.⁶⁴ The need to investigate the involvement of public officials in trafficking in Nigeria has been highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons.⁶⁵

Government response

Figure 2.
Government of Nigeria's responses to modern slavery by milestone, compared with the regional average



Out of all nations in Africa, Nigeria had the strongest response to modern slavery, receiving a score of 54 percent. This means Nigeria has taken just over half of the actions required of governments to combat modern slavery.

The government's strongest efforts were related to identifying and supporting survivors. The government delivers national information campaigns to promote 24-hour hotlines where modern slavery crimes can be reported,⁶⁶ and operates a National Referral Mechanism to refer survivors to support services⁶⁷ – one of 17 countries in the region to do so. However, government-run shelters face a number of challenges that impede their ability to effectively support survivors. The shelters tend to lack sufficient resources and generally only offer survivors up to six weeks of accommodation. Further, shelters restrict survivors' right to freedom of movement.⁶⁸ Reports indicate that authorities sometimes refer survivors to services offered by civil society organisations after the six-week period has expired to receive continued services.⁶⁹

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Gaps in legal frameworks and a lack of enforcement of protections further reduce the efficacy of support services for survivors in Nigeria. The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act – which criminalises human trafficking, forced labour, and slavery – recognises that survivors of exploitation should not be treated as criminals for conduct that occurred while under the control of traffickers.⁷⁰ Despite this, Nigerian children are unlawfully detained by authorities for allegedly associating with Boko Haram: in 2018, more than 200 children had been detained for over two years.⁷¹ The children were detained in overcrowded military detention centres with poor sanitation, insufficient food and water, where they faced constant threats of physical and sexual violence.⁷² The Child’s Right Act of 2003, while prohibiting the recruitment of children in armed conflict, fails to criminalise it,⁷³ despite continued evidence of this issue in Nigeria.⁷⁴

The Nigerian government has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,⁷⁵ and signed the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage.⁷⁶ However, it fails to effectively tackle forced and child marriage despite its pervasiveness in the country.⁷⁷ Forced marriage is not criminalised as a distinct offence, and although the federal Child Rights Act prohibits marriage before the age of 18,⁷⁸ the legislation has not been adopted in all states.⁷⁹ The pluralistic legal system in Nigeria, where many citizens act in accordance with customary and Islamic law,⁸⁰ undermines legislation such as the Child Rights Act. For example, customary and Sharia laws consider factors such as the onset of puberty to signal a girl’s readiness to marry.⁸¹ Further efforts by the federal government to target child marriage include forming a technical working group with civil society,⁸² launching the National Strategy to End Child Marriage,⁸³ and encouraging states to adopt the Child Rights Act.⁸⁴

Nigeria’s National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is responsible for investigating and prosecuting perpetrators, providing support services, and collaborating with civil society to conduct awareness-raising activities and refer survivors requiring additional assistance to NGOs.⁸⁵ NAPTIP also launched a new National Action Plan on Human Trafficking for the period 2022 to 2026.⁸⁶ Although the Plan has a tentative budget attached to its activities,⁸⁷ it is unclear whether it has been fully funded. NAPTIP lacks sufficient resources to effectively combat the scale of the problem in Nigeria, and has faced increasing funding constraints due to the economic impacts of the pandemic.⁸⁸

The Ministry of Labour and Employment (MLE) conducts labour inspections to identify modern slavery and ensure compliance with labour laws in Nigeria. In 2020, the MLE conducted close to 10,000 inspections, leading to the removal of almost 3,000 children from potential situations of trafficking.⁸⁹ However, despite an increase in the number of labour inspectors in recent years, there are concerns that the number is insufficient to cover Nigeria’s large workforce.⁹⁰ Pandemic mitigation measures further limited the ability of labour inspectors to conduct inspections in the informal sector, where forced labour is prevalent.⁹¹ Moreover, the government has not made efforts to eradicate modern slavery from government and business supply chains.

Recommendations

- 1 Survivors identified and supported**
 - Address gaps in support services available for people who have experienced modern slavery. Ensure survivors can freely leave shelters and that children who were recruited into the armed forces receive specialised support services.
- 2 Criminal justice mechanisms**
 - Ensure that survivors of exploitation are not punished or detained for crimes committed while under the control of criminals, including children recruited by armed groups.
 - Ensure adequate protection in national legislation, including by making it a criminal offence to force someone to marry and prohibiting the use of children in armed conflict.
- 3 National and regional level coordination**
 - Allocate dedicated funds to the implementation of the National Action Plan on Human Trafficking in Nigeria.
- 4 Risk factors are addressed**
 - Raise the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 for girls and boys in all states, without exception.
 - Ensure there are a sufficient number of labour inspectors to cover the size of the workforce, and that inspections are regularly taking place in the informal sector.
- 5 Government and business supply chains**
 - Identify sectors at high risk of forced labour in Nigeria and work with business and civil society to develop initiatives to eradicate forced labour and labour exploitation.



THE GLOBAL SLAVERY INDEX 2023

WALK FREE

For more information on modern slavery, visit the Global Slavery Index 2023 website.



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Endnotes

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