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Factors influencing adolescent pregnancies with intent for child trafficking in selected vulnerable communities in Nigeria: A qualitative exploration

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Turnwait O. Michael^{1*}, Tolulope F. Ojo², Richard D. Agbana³, Olasupo A. Ijabadeniyi⁴, Michael A. Ibikunle⁴, Olaniyi E. Oluwasanmi⁵ and Bukola O. Ilori⁶

Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa¹; Department of Sociology, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA²; Department of Community Medicine, Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria³; Department of Sociology, Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria⁴; Department of Sociology, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA⁵; Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Ibadan, Nigeria⁶

*For Correspondence: Email: mturnwait@uj.ac.za; turnwaitmichael@gmail.com; Phone: +27686847745

Abstract

In accordance with the United Nations Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking, intentional adolescent pregnancies for the purpose of child trafficking are a grave violation of human rights, demonstrating egregious exploitation. This study examines the determinants of deliberate adolescent pregnancies aimed at selling newborns to child traffickers in Nigeria. Employing a qualitative design, purposive sampling was utilized to select 46 participants, including eight pregnant adolescent girls (aged 11 to 16), seven family members of the pregnant adolescents, six community leaders, and twenty-five community members. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used. Audio-recorded interviews were meticulously transcribed and translated from Ibibio to English by certified language experts to preserve meaning. Thematic analysis employed identified themes and sub-themes. Data underwent coding, categorization, and analysis using ATLAS.ti qualitative software. Determinant factors influencing deliberate pregnancies among adolescent girls for child trafficking include socioeconomic vulnerability, marital infertility, societal pressure, money rituals, criminal exploitation, limited education access, and inadequate legal protection. A holistic approach addressing socioeconomic disparities, cultural norms, criminal networks, legal protections, and education empowerment offers promise to eradicate buying and selling of babies. By confronting these factors, Nigeria can forge a safer, more equitable future for its adolescent girls. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [3]: 50-62).

Keywords: Adolescent pregnancies, baby buying, baby selling, baby factory, child trafficking, determinant factors

Résumé

Conformément aux Principes et lignes directrices recommandés par les Nations Unies sur les droits de l'homme et la traite des êtres humains, les grossesses intentionnelles d'adolescentes aux fins de traite d'enfants constituent une grave violation des droits de l'homme, démontrant une exploitation flagrante. Cette étude examine les déterminants des grossesses délibérées d'adolescentes visant à vendre des nouveau-nés à des trafiquants d'enfants au Nigeria. En utilisant une conception qualitative, un échantillonnage raisonné a été utilisé pour sélectionner 46 participants, dont huit adolescentes enceintes (âgées de 11 à 16 ans), sept membres de la famille des adolescentes enceintes, six dirigeants communautaires et vingt-cinq membres de la communauté. Des entretiens approfondis semi-structurés et des discussions de groupe ont été utilisés. Les entretiens enregistrés sur audio ont été méticuleusement transcrits et traduits de l'ibibio vers l'anglais par des experts linguistiques certifiés afin d'en préserver le sens. L'analyse thématique a utilisé des thèmes et sous-thèmes identifiés. Les données ont été codées, catégorisées et analysées à l'aide du logiciel qualitatif ATLAS.ti. Les facteurs déterminants qui influencent les grossesses délibérées chez les adolescentes aux fins de trafic d'enfants comprennent la vulnérabilité socio-économique, l'infertilité conjugale, la pression sociétale, les rituels financiers, l'exploitation criminelle, l'accès limité à l'éducation et une protection juridique inadéquate. Une approche holistique abordant les disparités socio-économiques, les normes culturelles, les réseaux criminels, les protections juridiques et l'autonomisation en matière d'éducation offre la promesse d'éradiquer l'achat et la vente de bébés. En faisant face à ces facteurs, le Nigeria peut forger un avenir plus sûr et plus équitable pour ses adolescentes. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [3]: 50-62).

Mots-clés: Grossesses adolescentes, Achat de bébé, Vente de bébé, Usine à bébé, Traite d'enfants, Facteurs déterminants

Introduction

In the depths of the global child trafficking trade lies a disturbing and heart-wrenching phenomenon called “baby selling”. Despite the global prohibition of child trafficking, the buying and selling of infants continues unabated worldwide via various means¹⁻³. In the vast and diverse landscape of Africa, where individual and cultural practices interweave with economic challenges and social complexities⁴⁻⁷, a distressing and deeply troubling phenomenon has cast its ominous shadow – deliberate adolescent pregnancies orchestrated with the chilling aim of selling newborns to child traffickers in Nigeria. This sinister practice strikes at the heart of the region's vulnerable populations, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and depriving young lives of their rightful innocence⁸⁻¹⁰.

Globally, the number of identified traffickers increased from 90,354 in 2021 to 115,324 in 2022¹¹. Child trafficking remains most prevalent in Africa, where the regions documented a rise from 11,450 victims in 2021 to 21,790 in 2022¹¹. In Nigeria, amidst its substantial unreported cases of child traffickers, 779 suspected traffickers were apprehended in 2021, a figure notably exceeding that of most other African nations¹². Among the registered trafficking instances in Nigeria, the trading of humans for various purposes constituted the highest number of arrested suspects, encompassing 30.1% females¹³. A cause for concern is that 61% of human trafficking cases in Nigeria occur within the country's borders, contrasting with the 39% attributed to cross-border trafficking¹². Some Nigerian states also have “baby factories,” which are hidden facilities where child traffickers illegally house pregnant adolescent girls with the intention of providing them with prenatal support until childbirth so they can buy their newborn babies and resell them to their clients who need babies for various reasons¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

The deliberate impregnation of adolescent girls for the purpose of selling their newborns to child traffickers represents a stark manifestation of the vulnerabilities faced by marginalized communities across Nigeria^{17,18}. Amidst the struggle for economic survival, limited access to education, and fragile healthcare systems, adolescent girls find themselves ensnared in a menacing nexus of desperation and criminality¹⁹⁻²¹.

This study embarks on a comprehensive exploration into the determinants that propel deliberate adolescent pregnancies for the baleful purpose of child trafficking in Nigerian's vulnerable communities. By peeling the layers of socio-economic disparities, cultural norms, criminal networks, and legal gaps, we endeavour to expose the underlying factors driving this alarming practice.

As we embarked on this investigation, our aim is to shed light on the complex interplay of forces that give rise to deliberate adolescent pregnancies destined for child trafficking, paving the way for informed interventions, targeted policies, and awareness campaigns that can disrupt these distressing cycles^{12,22-24}. By unearthing the determinants behind this heart-wrenching issue, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by vulnerable adolescents and ultimately work towards dismantling the networks of exploitation that threaten their futures. Through rigorous analysis and compassionate inquiry, this study strives to make a meaningful contribution to the fight against child trafficking and create a safer, more just world for young girls caught in this cruel grip.

Methods

Study setting

This study was conducted in Southern Iman of Etinan in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria comprising thirty communities. Nestled in the southern region of Nigeria, Akwa Ibom is a coastal state. Situated between latitudes 4°32'N and 5°33'N and longitudes 7°25'E and 8°25'E, the state occupies a prime position within the West African subcontinent. Bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the south, Akwa Ibom's coastline stretches along the Gulf of Guinea, offering breathtaking coastal vistas and access to maritime activities. Inland, the state's landscape is defined by a mix of rolling hills, fertile plains, and lush rainforests. Its rural setting is characterized by a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, traditional values, and natural beauty. Despite its rustic charm, limited access to healthcare facilities, education, and infrastructure remains a concern in rural areas²⁵. In the state, 12.2 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 have children²⁶. See Figure 1 for the map of the study area.

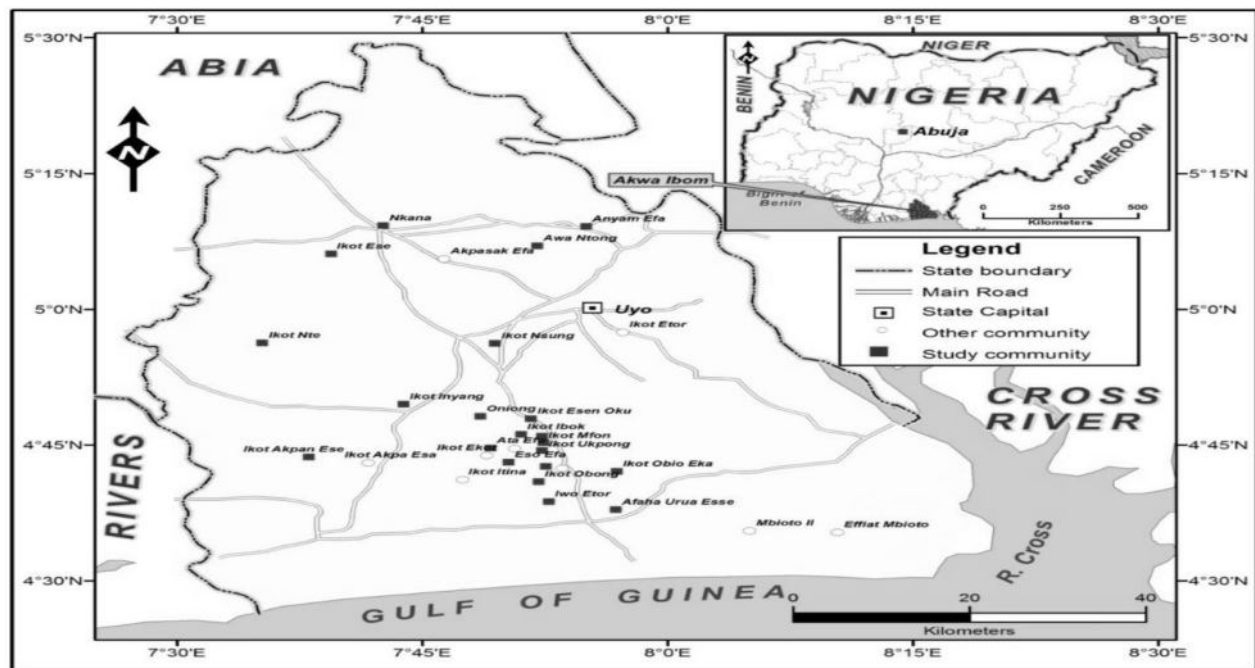


Figure 1: Map showing the study communities

Study design and data source

An exploratory qualitative study designed was employed to understand the underlying socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors that drive adolescent girls to intentionally become pregnant for the purpose of child trafficking, how the criminal networks exploit the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls and their families, and how the adolescent girls perceive and navigate the complex challenges they face in this context. The drafting of this manuscript was guided by the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR)²⁷.

Participants recruitment and sampling strategy

The study utilized purposive sampling to select a total of 46 participants, ensuring a diversity of perspective and experiences. This included 8 adolescent girls, aged 11 to 16, who had been intentionally impregnated for child trafficking, alongside 7 family members of these girls, 6 community leaders, and 25 community members. (See Table 1). Purposive sampling was employed in this study to ensure that the selected participants provided diverse perspectives relevant to the research topic. This sampling method involves selecting individuals who possess specific

characteristics or experiences that are of interest to the study. In this case, the sampled population, including adolescent girls intentionally impregnated for child trafficking, their family members, community leaders, and community members, were best suited as participants because they directly interacted with or were affected by the phenomenon under investigation. Their insights and experiences offered valuable insights into the issue of child trafficking and related social dynamics within their communities. Buyers and baby factory owners were excluded from the sampled population because their perspectives might not align with the objectives of the study, which primarily focus on understanding the experiences and challenges faced by victims and their immediate social circles rather than the motivations or operations of perpetrators.

The sample size for each category was determined based on achieving a point of saturation. The primary focus was on young adolescent girls, encompassing ages 10 to 16, as per World Health Organization's classification of vulnerable adolescents^{28,29}. Within each focused group session, participant numbers ranged from 7 to 10 individuals. Individuals were enlisted from stratified rural environments of Akwa Ibom State to encompass a wide range of viewpoints. Diligent measures were taken to guarantee inclusivity across

cultural contexts and socioeconomic levels. Only those who had lived in the communities for at least three years were included in the discussions. Representatives from NGOs, traditional birth attendant associations and community leaders working in child protection and anti-trafficking efforts assisted with list of affected adolescent girls. The decision to include only individuals who had lived in the communities for at least three years was made to ensure that participants had sufficient familiarity and understanding of the local context, cultural dynamics, and social issues relevant to the study. By selecting long-term residents, the researchers aimed to capture insights and perspectives that were grounded in firsthand experiences within the community. This criterion also helped to ensure that participants had established relationships and networks within the community, which facilitated open and candid discussions during data collection. Representatives from NGOs and traditional birth attendants were also part of the community members who participated in the FGD sessions, contributing additional perspectives and expertise.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with individual adolescent girls, family members, and community leaders. Focus group discussions were conducted with community members. Interviews and discussions were conducted in English and Ibibio (local language), and audio-recorded with consent. Each interview and discussion session lasted between 44-60 minutes. Examples of the interview questions for adolescent girls included “Can you please share your experiences and the circumstances that led you to become pregnant? Can you describe any interactions you had with the person that impregnated you? What can you say are the risks or benefits you have experienced as a result of getting pregnant or giving birth?” Examples of the interview questions for community leaders included “What can you say about adolescent pregnancy in this community? What can you say about child trafficking in this area? Can you provide insights into the determinants and underlying factors that lead to impregnation of adolescent girls in this community?” and “From your knowledge of this

community, what role do societal norms, traditions, and legal gaps play in adolescent pregnancy and child trafficking in this area?”

Data process and analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify themes and sub-themes within the data (See Table 2). Audio-recorded interviews and discussions underwent meticulous transcription and translation by certified experts, with degree, in the Ibibio language to preserve the original meanings and prevent errors. The data underwent coding, categorization, and analysis using ATLAS.ti qualitative software to unveil determinants and underlying motivations. Participant identities were anonymized. To address researcher reflexivity and positionality challenges, two external experts proficient in qualitative analysis were engaged to review the original transcripts, coding, thematic groupings, and findings' interpretations. The analysis outcomes were also shared in a workshop attended by relevant community members to ensure data validation.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent was meticulously obtained after providing a comprehensive understanding of the study's purpose. For adolescent participants, parental or guardian consent was secured. The girls were given the opportunity to debrief with a support person (parent or guardian) accompanying them to the interview setting. For adolescents who had to travel from one community to another to participate in the focus group discussions (FGDs), transportation fare was provided for both adolescents and their parents or guardians to facilitate their participation. The emotional well-being of participants was carefully guarded, granting them the autonomy to skip uncomfortable questions or withdraw from the study at any stage without repercussion. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld throughout analysis, reporting, and publication. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ibadan Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (UI/SSHEC/201/8/0005). Approval was also obtained from relevant authorities in Akwa Ibom State.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a key element upheld by researchers throughout the study, as highlighted in the literature³⁰. The purpose of maintaining reflexivity was to openly recognize and address any biases and preconceptions held by the researchers, thereby enhancing transparency and rigour in the research process. In the specific context of the study, researchers consciously acknowledged and reflected upon their own biases, assumptions, and beliefs related to adolescent pregnancies, child trafficking, their respective communities, and the effectiveness of existing control programs. This commitment to reflexivity influenced various stages of the research, starting with data collection. Researchers ensured that their presence did not unduly impact participants' responses by being mindful of their own biases. During interviews, a concerted effort was made to maintain an open and non-judgmental attitude. Reflexivity extended into the data analysis phase, where researchers critically examined their role in shaping the interpretation of findings. Actively engaging in discussions, they sought to challenge and validate their interpretations, thereby mitigating the risk of biased conclusions. Researchers documented their reflexive process, recording insights, challenges, and personal reflections throughout the research journey. This record served as a valuable reference point, offering insights into how the researchers' perspectives may have influenced decisions and interpretations. By openly addressing their subjectivities and presenting findings without biases, researchers contributed significantly to the overall trustworthiness and credibility of the study³¹.

Results

Participants' characteristics

Table 1 provides detailed information on the characteristics of the participants involved in the study, categorized by interview type, community, age range, sex, and position within the community. The table encompasses a total of 40 participants, with a variety of demographics represented. The majority of participants (18) were adolescent girls aged 10-16, engaged through focus group discussions (FGD) and In-depth interviews (IDI)

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across various age groups and educational backgrounds, shedding light on their personal experiences. Additionally, there were adult females (8) and adult males (7) participating in FGDs from different communities, providing further insights from the adult population. Family members of the adolescent girls, including both males and females spanning different age groups, were also interviewed, offering familial perspectives. Furthermore, male and female community leaders, comprising traditional rulers, women leaders, and youth leaders, participated in IDIs, providing insights from their leadership positions within the community.

Determinant factors influencing deliberate pregnancies among adolescent girls for child trafficking

The deliberate impregnation of adolescent girls for the purpose of child trafficking represents a grievous violation of human rights and a distressing manifestation of exploitation. This practice, with its roots in Nigeria's complex sociocultural and economic landscape, underscores the urgent need to comprehend the determinant factors driving this phenomenon. By dissecting the multifaceted dynamics at play, we can develop targeted interventions to mitigate the distressing consequences faced by vulnerable girls and combat child trafficking as a whole. Individual determinant factors are presented as sub-themes below.

Socioeconomic vulnerability

One of the central determinant factors is the dire socioeconomic circumstances prevailing in the study area. The interviews revealed that adolescent girls, disproportionately affected by these hardships, often find themselves ensnared in a cycle of hopelessness. In these conditions, adolescent girls, also burdened by their families' financial struggles, view the prospect of bearing and selling a child as a means to alleviate their suffering and lack of food.

"I didn't want to be pregnant, especially as an unmarried adolescent girl, but poverty forced me to. Some days, I will go to bed hungry, with no food to eat and little hope of eating food the next day... I accepted the offer to become pregnant in a distant

Table 1: Participants' Information

No of partakers (N=40)	Interview category	Community	Age range (years)	Sex	Position
10	FGD	Ikot Ese	10-16	Adolescent girls	Community members
8	FGD	Akpasak Efa	26-49	Adult females	Community members
7	FGD	Ikot Akpan Ese	26-47	Adult males	Community members
1	IDI	Ikot Inyang	14	Adolescent girls	Junior secondary
1	IDI	Ikot Mfon	16	Adolescent girls	Senior secondary
1	IDI	Ikot Nte	12	Adolescent girls	Primary school
1	IDI	Mbioto II	14	Adolescent girls	Junior secondary
1	IDI	Ikot Ukpong	13	Adolescent girls	No schooling
1	IDI	Ikot Etor	15	Adolescent girls	Junior secondary
1	IDI	Ayam Efa	16	Adolescent girls	Senior secondary
1	IDI	Ikot Obio Eka	11	Adolescent girls	No schooling
1	IDI	Ikot Mfon	37	Female	Family member
1	IDI	Ikot Etor	46	Female	Family member
1	IDI	Ikot Obio Eka	67	Female	Family member
1	IDI	Mbioto II	53	Female	Family member
1	IDI	Ikot Ukpong	32	Male	Family member
1	IDI	Ikot Inyang	66	Male	Family member
1	IDI	Ikot Nte	57	Male	Family member
1	IDI	Ayam Efa	68	Female	Community leader
1	IDI	Ikot Ibok	64	Female	Community leader
1	IDI	Ikot Nsung	71	Male	Community leader
1	IDI	Oniong	66	Male	Community leader
1	IDI	Nkana	69	Male	Community leader
1	IDI	Ikot Ese	62	Male	Community leader

Note: FGD – focus group discussion; IDI – in-depth interview

Table 2: Theme and sub-themes

Theme: Determinant factors influencing deliberate pregnancies among adolescent girls for child trafficking	
Sub-themes	Overview of sub-theme
Socioeconomic Vulnerability	Rampant poverty creates an environment of desperation to overcome financial struggles through bearing and selling babies.
Marital infertility and societal pressure	Infertility within marriages evokes the desperation to fulfill societal expectations and the desire for offspring to continue family legacies, pushes couples to seek alternative means of parenthood, inadvertently leading to the buying of children.
Money rituals and material wealth	Buying of babies intertwined with the belief that a child acquired through rituals can bring financial prosperity.
Criminal exploitation and networks	Criminal networks and traffickers are central actors and capitalize on the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls, exploiting their lack of awareness, agency, and legal protection.
Limited access to education and empowerment	Lack of educational opportunities and limited access to information contribute to the vulnerability of adolescent girls.
Inadequate legal protection framework and enforcement	Inadequate legal frameworks and their inconsistent enforcement fail to deter those involved in child trafficking.

city where my family members would be unaware for 120,000 naira [equal to \$267].” (IDI, Adolescent Girl).

As disclosed in the interviews, poverty, limited income and opportunity, and the inability to buy basic necessities such as food, clothing, sanitary pads, body cream, and bathing soap all contribute to creating an environment of desperation among adolescent girls.

“Most of us girls in this community don't even have money to buy sanitary pads, let alone ordinary body cream and bathing soap. Those who are deceiving us into following them to the city are aware of our hardships and are taking advantage of our suffering to force us to become pregnant and sell babies for money.” (FGD, Adolescent Girls).

“Baby buying has become a major issue in our communities and the local government as a whole. That is why, before permitting you to visit our community (referring to the researchers), we had to do a thorough inquiry to ensure you are not coming in disguise to deceive our young girls... Child traffickers take advantage of our poverty to get our children pregnant and sell their babies for money.” (IDI, Community Leader).

Marital infertility and societal pressure

Infertility within marriages evokes profound emotional and psychological distress for couples. Interview revealed that the societal emphasis on procreation and family lineage intensifies the pressure on couples to bear children, often placing the blame squarely on women. The desperation to fulfill societal expectations and the desire for offspring to continue family legacies push couples to seek alternative means of parenthood, inadvertently leading to child buying.

“They [child traffickers] informed us that they do not kill our babies, but rather send them to families who do not have children so that they can provide joy to those families, but they would not let us know who those families are.” (IDI, Adolescent Girl).

“All of these stigmatisations towards women who do not have their own children, as well as blaming women for childlessness, are the root causes of baby buying and selling in these communities. People who buy these newborns are selling them to childless couples!” (IDI, Family Member).

Interviews also revealed that a desire for a specific sex of a child, particularly a male child, as well as the stigmatisation and societal marginalisation of infertile couples, heighten their vulnerability to exploitation. Isolation from their communities drives couples to seek alternative means of gaining acceptability and meeting societal expectations, through buying newborn babies where community members will not know that it is not their biological child.

“Some of the families involved in this baby buying are seeking for a boy or son. Perhaps the couple has two, three, four, or more girl children and still want a son. Because they do not have a male child, some of them buy male newborn babies. The traffickers would hunt for a male newborn by tricking young girls into becoming pregnant so that they can sell it to them.” (IDI, Community Leader).

“If you give birth to a baby boy, you will be paid more, N150,000 [equal to \$333]. If you give birth to a baby girl, you will be paid N120,000 [about \$267]. If your child is very attractive, you may be able to earn extra money.” (IDI, Adolescent Girl).

Money rituals and material wealth

Deep-rooted in the beliefs and cultural traditions of the people are money rituals, where material wealth is believed to be acquired through supernatural means, often involving human sacrifices or rituals. In this context, the commodification of children becomes intertwined with the belief that a child acquired through such rituals can bring financial prosperity. Vulnerable people struggling with financial difficulties were enticed by this belief system and procured a child through these rituals to meet cultural and familial expectations through a get-rich-quick syndrome.

“One of the causes of baby buying and selling in the communities surrounding here is the need for quick money through money rituals in which a baby or human part is required for sacrifice... Traffickers will buy children and sell them to ritualists for money in exchange for making sacrifices.” (IDI, Community Leader).

In addition, placenta was identified as a material safely held by traffickers for reasons unknown to the teenagers if it is later sold to customers for money rituals or other ritual activities.

“They [child traffickers] didn’t inform us they wanted to sell our children to ritualists... We weren’t sure if they were telling the truth... We only know that they often keep our placenta very carefully in case they need it for something.” (IDI, Adolescent Girl).

Participants reported that baby buying and selling is not limited to adolescents. Adults in the community also sell their babies on purpose in order to earn money from buyers.

“Because of the urge for quick money among today’s youth, they are using a number of methods to obtain new born babies for money rituals. Even adults I know sell their newborns to ritualists for large sums of money in the communities surrounding here.” (FGD, Community Members).

Criminal exploitation and networks

As disclosed in the interviews, criminal networks and traffickers are central actors in this distressing phenomenon. These networks capitalize on the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls, exploiting their lack of awareness, agency, and legal protection. Their promise of financial gain and false assurances sway girls into making life-altering decisions. According to the interviews, child traffickers operate under the guise of an orphanage home to keep young girls and bring men to have affairs with the girls in order for the girls to become pregnant and bear babies for them. They also collaborate with some nasty police officers and hospital midwives to fulfil their objectives.

“It was like we were in an orphanage home. We had up to 12 girls in the compound, some of them were pregnant. Those who have given birth would be sent out.” (IDI, Adolescent Girl).

“These child traffickers are well-organized. They are not poor people. To carry out their evil aim, they collaborate with certain terrible policemen and health midwives. They also have informants in numerous locations, making it harder to catch them.” (IDI, Community Leader).

The interviews revealed that the child traffickers disguised themselves and visited locations where people might not recognise them in order to find adolescent girls. They also target adolescent girls who do not have parental care or a place to live

in order to take them to their baby factories and care for them until the girl gives birth.

“Some child traffickers’ accomplices come from far communities. They go to areas where their identity is not known to fool young girls... They also target young girls who are pregnant but do not have parental care or a place to live. They will take the girls to their baby factories and care for them until the girl has given birth to a child for them.” (FGD, Community Members).

“On my way to get firewood, I was met by one of the child traffickers, a stranger. He promised to transform my life and provide me with a large sum of money if I agreed to run away from my family and follow him. He promised me that when I returned to this village, I would be a rich girl... I said no!” (FGD, Adolescent Girls).

Limited access to education and empowerment

Interviews disclosed that a lack of educational opportunities and limited access to information contribute to the vulnerability of adolescent girls. Education serves as a powerful tool to empower girls, enabling them to make informed decisions about their bodies and futures. According to the interviewees, child traffickers target rural villages far from cities since the girls in these places are more likely to be ignorant or uninformed. They take advantage of the widespread illiteracy and lack of awareness among village girls to entice them to follow them to cities where they become pregnant, sell their babies to child traffickers, and return home rich after nine months without their families knowing they were pregnant or had delivered a baby.

“The traffickers target ignorant girls in the community in order to deceive them into agreeing to their conditions... Some are even primary or junior secondary school students.” (FGD, Community Members).

“When the child traffickers lured my friend into following them to the city, she was a dropout from junior secondary school, class 2... Her parents had died. She lived with her granny...” (FGD, Adolescent Girls).

According to the participants, communities are now using town criers, church pastors, community leaders, and market women at market places to

inform young girls about the tactics used by child traffickers and the consequences of associating with them.

“We are now constantly raising awareness in our community through town criers, churches, and market places to tell our girls about the tactics used by child traffickers and the consequences of such tactics on their health in comparison to the false promises made to them by traffickers... A factor is a lack of sufficient awareness...” (IDI, Community Leader).

Inadequate legal protection framework and enforcement

The absence of robust legal safeguards exacerbates the issue. Inadequate legal frameworks and their inconsistent enforcement fail to deter those involved in child trafficking. Interviews revealed that many adolescent girls do not have access to proper legal representation, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation and coercion. The lack of development and enforcement of comprehensive laws that explicitly criminalize and address child trafficking and baby buying, coupled with support systems for victims, contribute to the rise in baby buying and selling in the study area.

“Our communities are not well protected by the police. In fact, police stations are located far from our neighbourhoods. We are now safeguarding ourselves with the help of community vigilantes. The child traffickers are aware that there are no police stations in our villages and take advantage of this to enter.” (IDI, Community Leader).

Participants also described how they had to pay police and fuel police vehicles to assist with the inquiry of their daughters' whereabouts after they had been persuaded and taken away by child traffickers.

“I went to the police station to report that my daughter had gone missing after I couldn't find her. I was told to pay them money to assist with the investigation and the buying of petrol for the police vehicle... I gathered all of my money and gave it to them, but there was still no good response... I would not have seen my daughter if she had not returned home after nine months.” (IDI, Family Member).

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of police stations in and around their neighbourhoods. They also question the police force's sincerity and honesty, claiming that the officers are corrupt, accepting bribes from child traffickers, and failing to effectively punish child traffickers as required by law and policy. According to the participants, they are frequently unaware of the nature of the penalties imposed on child traffickers after they are apprehended.

“Our police are not sincere or trustworthy, and even when child traffickers are caught, we rarely know what happens next. They'll bribe police officers and get away with it... That is why the incidence remains high in our communities.” (FGD, Community Members).

“The lack of adequate enforcement of the prescribed penalty for child traffickers is the reason why child trafficking is still common in our communities. Those that perpetuate this evil are not held accountable. The most we could hear was that the traffickers had been arrested, but no further information was available... Offender punishment is the only way out of this mess.” (FGD, Community Member).

Discussion

Our study explored the factors driving child trafficking in the study area, with a central determinant being the prevailing poor socioeconomic circumstances. Through interviews, we uncovered that adolescent girls, disproportionately affected by these hardships, often find themselves trapped in a cycle of despair. In their desperation, some see bearing and selling a child as a means to escape their predicament. Our findings mirrored previous research that highlighted how poverty and economic challenges influence involvement in child trafficking in Nigeria³², child labor in Bangladesh³³, and early pregnancy in Zambia⁶ and Kenya⁸.

Infertility within marriages emerged as another poignant factor, evoking emotional turmoil and distress. The societal emphasis on procreation intensifies the pressure on couples, especially women, to bear children, often pushing them towards unconventional paths of parenthood, including child buying. Similar findings were observed in studies conducted in Turkey³⁴, Ghana³⁵,

Uganda³⁶, and Sudan³⁷. Desire for a specific gender, particularly male children, coupled with societal stigmatization of infertile couples, further heightened vulnerability to exploitation. Isolation from their communities compelled couples to resort to child buying, driven by the aspiration to fulfill societal expectations. Correspondingly, studies in Italy³⁸, India³⁹, and China⁴⁰ highlighted the connection between gender preferences and child trafficking.

Rooted in cultural beliefs were money rituals, where children were seen as conduits to supernatural wealth acquisition. This belief system enticed vulnerable individuals, struggling with financial difficulties, into procuring children through rituals to meet cultural and familial expectations. Comparable research in Ghana^{10,41} found child sacrifice linked to money rituals. A similar study in Nigeria⁴² noted child defilement for wealth acquisition.

Surprisingly, we discovered that traffickers hold placentas, possibly for rituals, adding a layer of complexity. This practice reflects cultural norms observed in Ethiopia⁴³, Nepal⁴⁴, Benin⁴⁵, and Chile⁴⁶, emphasizing the significance of placenta in fertility and well-being. The phenomenon extended beyond adolescents, as adults also resorted to child selling, often facilitated by criminal networks and traffickers. Exploiting vulnerabilities, they deceived adolescents with promises of financial gain, contributing to this distressing reality. Our findings echoed previous research conducted in Nigeria^{20,22}, noting the involvement of adults in child trafficking.

Inadequate legal frameworks and inconsistent enforcement failed to deter traffickers, leaving victims without proper legal representation. This lack of comprehensive laws and support systems contributed to the surge in child buying and selling. Our participants expressed dissatisfaction with the police force's corruption and lack of transparency, aligning with studies in South Africa⁴⁷, Zimbabwe⁴⁸, and Turkey⁴⁹. Efforts to raise awareness involved community leaders, town criers, and church pastors, reinforcing the role of community influencers. Our study underlined the importance of education and awareness in empowering adolescent girls and exposing their vulnerabilities. This was corroborated by research in Zambia⁶, Ghana²¹, and Kenya⁸.

Strengths

The qualitative nature of the study allows for a deep and nuanced exploration of the determinants of deliberate adolescent pregnancies for the purpose of selling newborns to child traffickers. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors that drive this alarming phenomenon. Conducting the study in rural areas provides insights specific to the local context of Akwa Ibom State. This contextual relevance enhances the applicability of findings and recommendations to similar settings within the region. By interviewing adolescent girls, family members, and community leaders and members, the study incorporates a range of perspectives. This diverse pool of participants offers a well-rounded view of the issue, enriching the depth and breadth of the research findings.

Limitations

On the limitations of the study, buyers and baby factory owners were excluded from the sampled population. Additionally, the use of purposeful sampling may result in a certain level of bias, as participants may have unique experiences that differ from the broader population. The findings might not be fully representative of all adolescents, families, and community members in rural and urban areas. This limited generalizability could impact the broader applicability of the study's recommendations. Despite these limitations, the study's qualitative approach provides valuable insights into the determinants of deliberate adolescent pregnancies for child trafficking, contributing to a deeper understanding of this distressing issue and informing targeted interventions.

Conclusion

Our study unraveled the complex web of factors driving child trafficking, highlighting the urgent need for multifaceted interventions to combat this distressing phenomenon across the study area. Understanding the determinant factors that drive the deliberate impregnation of adolescent girls for child trafficking is essential for crafting effective

interventions. A holistic approach that addresses socioeconomic disparities, challenges harmful cultural norms, dismantles criminal networks, strengthens legal protections, and empowers girls through education and awareness can pave the way toward a future where the exploitation of vulnerable girls becomes a relic of the past. By tackling these factors head-on, Nigeria can work toward a safer, more equitable society for its adolescent girls.

Authors' contributions

TOM and TFO conceived the proposal; TOM, TFO and RDA collected the data, TOM, OAJ, MAI and BOI participated in data analysis and interpretation; TOM, TFO, RDA, and OEO supervised data quality; TOM, TFO, RDA, OAI, MAI, OEO and BOI drafted the original manuscript; TOM, TFO, RDA, OAI, MAI, OEO and BOI participated in manuscript reviewing and editing. All the authors read and agreed to the final manuscript.

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Data availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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