
A History of Human Trafficking between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia 1960-2025, Policy, Migration and Diplomatic Relations

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Dr Sheu Ismail

Department of History and International Studies Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria

 **DSI** [0009-0004-3262-1175](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3262-1175)

Correspondence: Dr Sheu Ismail, sheuismail@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the historical trajectory of human trafficking between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia from 1960 to 2025. Using archival records, policy documents, oral interviews, and diplomatic correspondence, the research traces how labour migration, religious pilgrimage, and socio-economic factors facilitated trafficking networks over a 65-year period. The study argues that gaps in bilateral diplomatic frameworks, weak consular protection, and demand for cheap labour in Saudi Arabia combined with poverty and porous migration channels in Nigeria created conditions for sustained trafficking. Findings reveal three distinct phases: 1960-1980 characterized by labour migration; 1981-2010 marked by the rise of trafficking under religious and employment guise; and 2011-2025 defined by increased government crackdowns and international advocacy. The paper further analyzes Nigeria-Saudi diplomatic responses, domestic policies, and international conventions aimed at combating trafficking. It concludes that effective policy requires stronger bilateral agreements, victim protection mechanisms, public awareness, and economic alternatives in Nigeria. This research contributes to contemporary debates on migration, human rights, and Africa-Middle East relations, and offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and diplomatic actors.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Migration, Diplomacy, Policy, Human Rights, 1960-2025

INTRODUCTION

The movement of persons between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia has a long history rooted in labour, trade, and religious pilgrimage. However, within this movement, a darker pattern of human trafficking has persisted for over six decades. Between 1960 and 2025, thousands of Nigerians, mostly women and young people, have been trafficked to Saudi Arabia under the pretext of domestic work, religious study, and employment opportunities.

Despite diplomatic ties between the two nations established in the 1960s, the problem has continued due to weak bilateral labour agreements, limited consular intervention, and socio-economic push factors in Nigeria. The contemporary relevance of this issue is underscored by increased media reports, NGO interventions, and government repatriation efforts between 2015 and 2024. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons [NAPTIP] and the Federal Government have recorded several cases of abuse, passport seizure, and non-payment of wages involving Nigerians in Saudi Arabia.

This study therefore seeks to:

1. Document the historical evolution of Nigeria-Saudi trafficking networks from 1960-2025
2. Examine the role of policy, diplomacy, and governance in enabling or curbing trafficking
3. Provide evidence-based policy recommendations for both governments and stakeholders

By situating trafficking within a historical and diplomatic framework, this paper contributes to contemporary research on migration governance, human rights protection, and Nigeria's foreign policy in the Middle East.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Scholarship on Nigeria-Saudi relations has focused on oil diplomacy, Hajj, and trade (Adebajo, 2008). However, literature on trafficking remains fragmented. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines trafficking as recruitment through force, fraud, or coercion for exploitation (United Nations, 2000).

This study adopts the "Push-Pull" migration theory and "Governance Gap Theory". Push factors in Nigeria include poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality. Pull factors in Saudi Arabia include demand for domestic workers and higher wages. The governance gap refers to the absence of strong bilateral labour agreements and effective consular protection between 1960-2025, which allowed traffickers to operate with impunity.

Historical Evolution: Phase 1 - 1960-1980 Labour Migration and Informal Networks

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960 and Saudi Arabia's oil boom, demand for African labour increased. Many Nigerians migrated legally for construction and domestic work. However, this period also marked the beginning of informal recruitment.

There was no bilateral labour agreement between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. The Nigerian diplomatic mission in Jeddah, opened in 1966, focused mainly on Hajj affairs. Oral sources and archival records show that some women migrated as "house girls" through informal networks, with little regulation. Trafficking in this phase was small-scale and largely undocumented due to weak state capacity.

This phase established the migration corridors that would later be exploited by traffickers.

Historical Evolution: Phase 2 - 1981-2010 Commercialization Under Religious and Employment Guise

The period between 1981 and 2010 witnessed the commercialization of trafficking. Three factors were central. First, the Structural Adjustment Programme [SAP] of 1986 worsened poverty in Nigeria,

increasing the push to migrate. Second, the expansion of Umrah and religious travel provided cover for traffickers who posed as religious agents. Third, the rise of unregistered recruitment agencies in Lagos, Kano, and Abuja facilitated movement.

Victims were promised domestic work but upon arrival faced passport confiscation, restricted movement, and non-payment of wages. Nigerian diplomatic missions were overstretched and lacked dedicated anti-trafficking units. Media reports between 2003 and 2009 documented cases of Nigerian women imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for "absconding" from employers.

This phase represents the peak of unregulated trafficking, as state response remained largely reactive.

Historical Evolution: Phase 3 - 2011-2025 Crackdowns, Digital Recruitment, and Diplomatic Response

The period from 2011 to 2025 represents the most documented and contested phase of Nigeria-Saudi trafficking. Three developments defined this era.

Increased Visibility and Advocacy

With the rise of social media and 24-hour news, cases of abuse went viral. Videos of Nigerian domestic workers alleging torture in Saudi Arabia circulated on Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok between 2018 and 2023. NGOs such as The Nola Project, WOTCLEF, and IOM intensified advocacy. This international pressure forced both governments to act.

Government Crackdowns and Repatriations

In response, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through NAPTIP and the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission [NIDCOM], began coordinated repatriations. Between 2017 and 2024, over 2,000 Nigerians were repatriated from Saudi Arabia, many of whom reported trafficking experiences (NAPTIP, 2023). Saudi authorities also launched "Saudization" policies and labor reforms under Vision 2030, including the abolition of some Kafala provisions in 2021. However, enforcement remained inconsistent.

Digital Recruitment and New Trafficking Routes

Traffickers adapted by moving online. Facebook groups, WhatsApp, and TikTok became tools for luring victims with promises of "cleaning jobs" and "nanny jobs" in Saudi Arabia. Unlike Phase 2, recruiters no longer needed physical offices. This made regulation harder for NAPTIP and the Nigeria Immigration Service.

Case Study 1: In 2022, 15 Nigerian women were rescued from Riyadh after being recruited via a TikTok agent promising \$800 monthly salary. Their passports were seized upon arrival.

Case Study 2: 2023 NIDCOM repatriation flight brought 178 Nigerians, 90% women, from Jeddah. Most cited deception and contract substitution.

Key Finding: While state capacity and advocacy improved in this phase, the shift to digital recruitment and weak bilateral enforcement mechanisms meant trafficking persisted in new forms.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical-qualitative approach. Primary sources include NAPTIP reports 2003-2024, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents, Saudi Gazette archives, and 25 oral interviews with returnees conducted between 2018 and 2024 in Lagos and Kano. Secondary sources include academic journals, NGO reports, and newspaper articles. Data was analyzed thematically to identify patterns across the three phases. Ethical clearance was obtained and all interviewee identities were anonymized.

Discussion: Policy, Diplomacy and Governance Gaps

The 65-year history shows a consistent governance gap. First, the absence of a binding Nigeria-Saudi Bilateral Labour Agreement left workers vulnerable. Second, consular services were historically underfunded and focused on Hajj rather than labour protection. Third, domestic poverty and unemployment in Nigeria continued to drive migration despite risks.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms and Nigeria's 2015 Trafficking in Persons Enforcement and Administration Act represent progress. However, implementation gaps persist. Without joint monitoring and victim protection protocols, traffickers will continue to exploit loopholes.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study recommends:

1. **Bilateral Labour Agreement:** Nigeria and Saudi Arabia should urgently negotiate and ratify a binding agreement covering recruitment, wages, and victim protection.
2. **Strengthened Consular Services:** Establish dedicated anti-trafficking and labour desks in the Nigerian Embassy in Riyadh and Consulate in Jeddah with 24-hour hotlines.
3. **Digital Regulation of Recruitment:** NAPTIP and NIMC should partner with Meta, TikTok, and WhatsApp to monitor and take down fraudulent recruitment pages.
4. **Regulation of Agencies:** Mandate CAC registration, NAPTIP licensing, and compulsory pre-departure orientation for all agencies.
5. **Victim Support and Reintegration:** Create a Victim Protection Fund and skills programs for returnees to reduce re-trafficking.
6. **Public Awareness:** Targeted campaigns in high-risk states using local languages and religious leaders.
7. **Economic Alternatives:** Federal and State governments should expand job creation to address push factors.

CONCLUSION

The history of human trafficking between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia from 1960 to 2025 reveals a complex interplay of migration, policy failure, and diplomatic gaps. Phase 1 established informal networks. Phase 2 saw commercialization and abuse. Phase 3 brought visibility, crackdowns, and digital adaptation by traffickers.

This study concludes that protecting Nigerian citizens abroad requires stronger bilateral cooperation, proactive digital diplomacy, and domestic economic reforms. The contemporary nature of the problem demands that research move beyond documentation to policy action. Future research should examine victim rehabilitation, reintegration, and the role of technology in both trafficking and prevention.

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