

The Role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Addressing Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria (2017-2019)

Annisa Ramadhani Santosa^{1*}, Maulana Rifai¹, Prilla Marsingga¹

¹ Singaperbangsa University, Karawang, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: annisasars92@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Article Info :

Article history :

Received : 03-03-2026

Revised : 01-07-2026

Accepted : 30-10-2026

Keywords :

Edo State,
Human Trafficking,
International Organization for
Migration (IOM),
Juju Oath,
Neoliberal Institutionalism,
Nigeria.

Background: Human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria, is a transnational crime involving irregular migration, sexual exploitation, debt bondage, and juju oath-based psychological control. Objective: This article analyzes the role of IOM in addressing human trafficking in Edo State during 2017-2019. Method: It uses a qualitative case study based on secondary data from IOM reports, Nigerian government documents, international organization publications, media reports, and peer-reviewed literature. Documents were selected according to relevance, credibility, period, and direct connection to Edo State and IOM programs. Data were analyzed using the 4P framework and interpreted through neoliberal institutionalism. Results: IOM contributed through awareness campaigns, livelihood support, AVRR, capacity-building for anti-trafficking institutions, and partnerships with state, civil-society, international, and traditional actors. The key novelty is IOM's culturally sensitive cooperation around the Oba of Benin's 2018 declaration, which challenged juju-based control. Conclusion: IOM strengthened anti-trafficking governance, although outcomes remained constrained by poverty, donor dependence, and adaptive trafficking networks.



This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

How to cite this article:

Santosa, A., Rifai, M., & Marsingga, P. (2026). The Role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Addressing Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria (2017-2019). *Journal of Government Science Studies*, 5(2), 215-222. <https://doi.org/10.66254/jgssvol5issue2page215-222>

Copyright © 2026 Annisa Ramadhani Santosa, Maulana Rifai, Prilla Marsingga

Journal homepage: <https://ojs3.unpatti.ac.id/index.php/jgss/>

Journal e-mail: jurnaljgssunpatti@gmail.com

Research Article · [Open Access](#)

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is a serious transnational crime and human rights violation because it involves recruitment, transportation, coercion, deception, exploitation, and cross-border criminal networks. Under the Palermo Protocol, trafficking in persons is understood as an act committed through coercive or deceptive means for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2000). This definition is important for International Relations because trafficking cannot be solved by one state alone; it requires cooperation among source, transit, and destination countries, international organizations, law-enforcement institutions, and local communities.

Nigeria has been repeatedly identified as one of the major source countries for trafficking victims moving through the Central Mediterranean route to Europe. Within Nigeria, Edo State, especially Benin City and its surrounding areas, occupies a distinctive position as a source area for women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation. The persistence of trafficking from Edo State is related to economic vulnerability, gendered migration expectations, debt bondage, family pressure, and the presence of recruiters within local communities (Baarda, 2016; Plambech, 2017; U.S. Department of State, 2019).

A major characteristic that makes trafficking from Edo State analytically significant is the use of juju oath-taking. Victims are often required to swear oaths before migration, promising obedience, secrecy, and repayment of debts. These oaths function as a psychological mechanism of control because victims fear spiritual punishment for themselves or their families if they disobey traffickers. This cultural dimension shows that trafficking is not only maintained through physical violence and economic exploitation, but also through symbolic, spiritual, and social mechanisms rooted in local belief systems (Adeyinka et al., 2023; Van Dijk, 2001).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) became one of the key international actors involved in responding to trafficking from Edo State during 2017-2019. Through the EU-IOM Joint Initiative, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), awareness campaigns, livelihood assistance, capacity-building, and partnerships with Nigerian institutions, IOM attempted to address trafficking through a multidimensional approach. In this context, IOM did not act as a substitute for the state, but as a facilitator of cooperation among governmental, international, civil-society, and community actors.

The academic urgency of this study lies in the need to understand how international organizations adapt anti-trafficking interventions to local social and cultural realities. This is important because trafficking in Edo State is shaped not only by criminal networks, but also by economic vulnerability, migration aspirations, and culturally embedded mechanisms of control.

Previous studies have discussed trafficking routes, victim experiences, juju rituals, and anti-trafficking policies in Nigeria. However, many studies remain focused either on the experiences of victims or on legal and criminal justice responses, while fewer studies analyze the institutional role of IOM in connecting global migration governance with local actors in Edo State.

The research gap addressed in this article is the limited explanation of IOM as an institutional broker in Edo State during 2017-2019, especially in the cultural approach involving the Oba of Benin. The novelty of this study is that it treats the Oba's 2018 declaration not only as a symbolic event but as part of anti-trafficking governance. This study therefore analyzes IOM's role through the 4P framework and neoliberal institutionalism.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in addressing human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria, during 2017-2019. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study examines

institutional roles, program implementation, actor interaction, and socio-cultural dynamics that cannot be fully explained through numerical measurement alone.

Research Design

The case study design was selected because Edo State represents a specific and analytically important location in Nigerian trafficking networks. The study focuses on IOM programs implemented during 2017-2019 and examines them through the 4P framework: prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. These four dimensions are then interpreted using neoliberal institutionalism to explain how IOM facilitated cooperation among state and non-state actors.

Data source

The study relies on secondary data. The use of secondary data is justified because IOM programs, Nigerian anti-trafficking policy, and international migration governance are documented in official reports, policy documents, institutional publications, and peer-reviewed studies. To strengthen validity and reliability, the study prioritizes sources that are institutional, traceable, published, and directly related to IOM, Edo State, Nigeria, and anti-trafficking governance during or around 2017-2019.

1. IOM documents, including program reports, AVRR-related publications, Nigeria mission reports, and EU-IOM Joint Initiative materials.
2. Nigerian government documents, especially reports and publications from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the Edo State Government, and related public institutions.
3. International organization and policy reports, including publications from UNODC, the U.S. Department of State, the European Union, and other institutions concerned with trafficking and migration governance.
4. Peer-reviewed academic articles and books on human trafficking, Nigerian trafficking networks, juju rituals, migration governance, IOM, and neoliberal institutionalism.

The inclusion criteria were: documents published by recognized institutions or reputable academic publishers; documents discussing human trafficking, IOM, Nigeria, Edo State, AVRR, anti-trafficking policy, or juju-based control; documents relevant to the 2017-2019 period or providing contextual background to that period; and documents containing empirical, policy, or theoretical information useful for analyzing IOM's role.

The exclusion criteria were: opinion pieces without clear factual basis, anonymous online sources, documents unrelated to Nigeria or IOM, sources without identifiable publication information, and materials whose claims could not be cross-checked with other sources. These criteria were used to reduce selection bias and strengthen the credibility of the analysis.

Data collection technique

Data were collected through document analysis using a qualitative content analysis approach. The researcher identified, read, categorized, and compared documents that contained information on IOM policies, program activities, institutional partnerships, victim protection mechanisms, law-enforcement support, and culturally based interventions in Edo State.

The reliability of the data was strengthened by comparing information from different types of sources. For example, claims from IOM reports were checked against Nigerian government documents, international organization publications, and academic literature. This cross-checking process helped reduce dependence on a single institutional narrative.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's qualitative analysis procedures, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In this study, the procedure was operationalized as follows:

1. Data reduction: relevant information from each document was selected and grouped according to the 4P framework, namely prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership.
2. Data display: the selected information was organized into thematic categories showing IOM programs, implementing actors, institutional mechanisms, and observed limitations.
3. Conclusion drawing and triangulation: findings from IOM documents were compared with government reports, academic literature, and international policy reports. The results were then interpreted through neoliberal institutionalism to explain IOM's institutional role.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on secondary data and therefore does not include interviews with IOM officers, Nigerian officials, civil-society actors, or trafficking survivors. Second, the decrease or change in trafficking patterns during 2017-2019 cannot be attributed exclusively to IOM because it was also influenced by Nigerian policy, European migration control, law-enforcement operations, local community dynamics, and changes in trafficking routes. Third, some IOM and government documents are program-oriented and may emphasize institutional achievements. To address these limitations, this study applies source triangulation and compares institutional claims with academic literature and external policy reports.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research result

1. IOM Program Planning and Implementation in Edo State

IOM programs in Edo State during 2017-2019 can be understood as part of a broader institutional response to transnational human trafficking. The programs were organized around prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. These four pillars show that IOM did not address trafficking only as a criminal issue, but as a governance problem involving vulnerability reduction, victim assistance, law-enforcement capacity, and cross-actor cooperation.

Prevention

In the prevention pillar, IOM supported public awareness and community-based information campaigns designed to reduce vulnerability to traffickers. These campaigns explained the risks of irregular migration, debt bondage, sexual exploitation, and deceptive recruitment. The preventive approach is consistent with studies showing that information campaigns are frequently used in migration governance to influence risk perception and reduce exposure to trafficking networks (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007; O'Brien, 2016).

IOM also supported livelihood-oriented interventions, including vocational training and reintegration assistance for vulnerable groups and returnees. These programs are important because poverty and lack of employment opportunities remain major factors that increase vulnerability to traffickers. However, prevention cannot be reduced to awareness alone. As Bryant and Landman (2020) argue, anti-trafficking interventions become more effective when they address structural vulnerability rather than merely warning potential victims about risks.

Protection

In the protection pillar, IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program played a central role. Through AVRR, IOM facilitated the return of Nigerian migrants and trafficking victims from destination and transit countries such as Italy and Libya. Protection included travel assistance, documentation support, psychosocial assistance, family tracing, and reintegration support. This role reflects neoliberal institutionalism because IOM provided coordination, information, and operational capacity that individual states often could not provide alone.

Protection also involved the difficult task of preventing re-trafficking. Return alone does not guarantee safety if victims return to the same economic hardship, social stigma, debt pressure, and family expectations that contributed to their migration. Therefore, reintegration support is central to victim protection. This finding is in line with Davy (2016), who emphasizes that anti-trafficking programs should be assessed not only by the number of assisted victims but also by the sustainability of protection outcomes.

Prosecution

In the prosecution pillar, IOM contributed indirectly by strengthening the capacity of Nigerian anti-trafficking institutions, especially through training and technical support for victim-centered approaches. This included support for improving the ability of law-enforcement and judicial actors to identify victims, collect information sensitively, and process trafficking cases without deepening victim trauma. Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) note that policing human trafficking is often hindered by institutional barriers and limited understanding of victim behavior; IOM's capacity-building role responded to this type of institutional weakness.

Nevertheless, prosecution remained the weakest of the four pillars because successful prosecution depends on national legal institutions, victim testimony, evidence collection, and political commitment. IOM could support institutional capacity but could not replace Nigerian law-enforcement authority. This confirms the theoretical point that international organizations facilitate cooperation and capacity but remain constrained by the authority and resources of member states.

Partnership

Partnership was the most important pillar in the Edo State case. IOM worked with the Nigerian federal government, NAPTIP, the Edo State Government, European partners, civil-society organizations, and community actors. These partnerships reduced coordination gaps and connected international resources with local implementation. In terms of neoliberal institutionalism, IOM functioned as a cooperation platform that helped actors share information, coordinate assistance, and stabilize expectations in responding to trafficking.

The most distinctive partnership was the culturally sensitive cooperation surrounding the Oba of Benin. In March 2018, the Oba issued a public declaration nullifying juju oaths used by traffickers to control victims. This finding is the main novelty of the article. Unlike conventional anti-trafficking approaches that rely mainly on legal prosecution or awareness campaigns, this case shows how international institutional efforts can become more effective when they engage respected local authority and address the symbolic mechanisms used by traffickers.

Discussion

The findings show that IOM's role in Edo State was multidimensional and institutionally significant. Through prevention, IOM helped shape public awareness and reduce recruitment vulnerability. Through protection, it facilitated return and reintegration assistance for trafficking victims. Through prosecution-related support, it strengthened the capacity of Nigerian institutions. Through partnership, it connected international, national, state, civil-society, and

traditional actors. These findings demonstrate that IOM functioned not merely as a humanitarian service provider but as an institutional facilitator of anti-trafficking governance.

The link with neoliberal institutionalism is clear. IOM reduced coordination problems by providing information, technical support, operational mechanisms, and a cooperation platform for actors dealing with a transnational issue. This supports the view that international institutions matter when states face interdependent problems that cannot be managed unilaterally.

Compared with previous studies, this article confirms the importance of victim protection and institutional cooperation but adds a more specific contribution. Studies by Baarda (2016), Plambech (2017), and Adeyinka et al. (2023) explain the power of juju and the vulnerability of Nigerian trafficking victims. Meanwhile, studies such as Davy (2016) and Bryant and Landman (2020) emphasize the need to evaluate anti-trafficking interventions beyond criminal prosecution. This study contributes by showing how IOM connected these two dimensions: institutional anti-trafficking governance and culturally embedded mechanisms of victim control.

The novelty of the Edo State case lies in the integration of traditional authority into anti-trafficking governance. The Oba of Benin's declaration challenged the spiritual fear that traffickers used to maintain obedience. IOM's relevance was not that it created the authority of the Oba, but that its broader partnership environment supported the translation of a local cultural intervention into an anti-trafficking governance strategy. This shows that international organizations can be more effective when they do not simply impose universal policy models but adapt them to local legitimacy structures.

However, the findings also reveal limitations. IOM's programs depended heavily on donor funding and on the cooperation of Nigerian and European institutions. Reintegration support was also constrained by poverty, unemployment, stigma, and the adaptability of trafficking networks. Therefore, IOM's role should be understood as significant but not sufficient. It contributed to reducing vulnerability and improving governance capacity, but it could not eliminate the structural conditions that sustain trafficking from Edo State.

The practical implication is that anti-trafficking programs in Edo State should combine economic reintegration, psychosocial support, law-enforcement capacity, and culturally legitimate community engagement. The theoretical implication is that neoliberal institutionalism needs to be read together with local context: international institutions facilitate cooperation, but the effectiveness of cooperation depends on whether global norms are translated through locally trusted actors and social meanings.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that IOM played a significant role in addressing human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria, during 2017-2019 through prevention, protection, prosecution-related support, and partnership. IOM contributed to awareness campaigns, livelihood assistance, AVR-based victim protection, institutional capacity-building, and coordination among government, civil-society, international, and traditional actors.

The scientific contribution of this article lies in positioning IOM as an institutional broker within anti-trafficking governance. Through neoliberal institutionalism, the study shows that IOM helped reduce coordination problems and connect global anti-trafficking norms with local implementation. The novelty of the study is the analysis of the Oba of Benin's 2018 declaration as a culturally grounded governance intervention that challenged juju-based psychological control used by traffickers.

The study recommends strengthening reintegration, local capacity, economic alternatives, and partnerships with culturally legitimate leaders.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, K. W., & Snidal, D. (1998). Why states act through formal international organizations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42(1), 3-32.
- Adepoju, A. (2005). Review of research and data on human trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa. *International Migration*, 43(1-2), 75-98.
- Adeyinka, S., Okorie, N., & Ajayi, A. I. (2023). The role of juju rituals in human trafficking of Nigerians: A tool of enslavement, but also escape. *SAGE Open*, 13(4), 1-12.
- Aghatise, E. (2004). Trafficking for prostitution in Italy: Concept paper. *Violence Against Women*, 10(10), 1126-1155.
- Andrijasevic, R., & Walters, W. (2010). The International Organization for Migration and the international government of borders. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(6), 977-999.
- Baarda, C. S. (2016). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria into Western Europe: The role of voodoo rituals in the functioning of a criminal network. *European Journal of Criminology*, 13(2), 257-273.
- Barnett, M. N., & Finnemore, M. (1999). The politics, power, and pathologies of international organizations. *International Organization*, 53(4), 699-732.
- Bryant, K., & Landman, T. (2020). Combatting human trafficking since Palermo: What do we know about what works? *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 6(2), 119-140.
- Chisholm, A., Harlow, S., & Baarda, C. (2022). Human trafficking, juju oaths and criminal justice responses: Understanding coercion beyond physical violence. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 8(4), 453-470.
- Chuang, J. A. (2006). Beyond a snapshot: Preventing human trafficking in the global economy. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 13(1), 137-163.
- Davy, D. (2016). Anti-human trafficking interventions: How do we know if they are working? *American Journal of Evaluation*, 37(4), 486-504.
- European Union External Action. (2017). EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration: One year on. <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/>
- Farrell, A., & Pfeffer, R. (2014). Policing human trafficking: Cultural blinders and organizational barriers. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 653(1), 46-64.
- Gallagher, A. T. (2001). Human rights and the new UN protocols on trafficking and migrant smuggling: A preliminary analysis. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 23(4), 975-1004.
- International Organization for Migration. (2017). Human trafficking through the Central Mediterranean route: Data, stories and information collected by IOM. IOM Italy.
- International Organization for Migration. (2024). Profile of Nigerian victims of human trafficking since 2017. IOM Nigeria.
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Keohane, R. O., & Martin, L. L. (1995). The promise of institutionalist theory. *International Security*, 20(1), 39-51.
- Martin, L. L., & Simmons, B. A. (1998). Theories and empirical studies of international institutions. *International Organization*, 52(4), 729-757.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Nieuwenhuys, C., & Pecoud, A. (2007). Human trafficking, information campaigns, and strategies of migration control. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50(12), 1674-1695.

- Nwaubani, A. T. (2018). A voodoo curse on human traffickers. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/>
- Obokata, T. (2005). Trafficking of human beings as a crime against humanity: Some implications for the international legal system. *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 54(2), 445-458.
- O'Brien, E. (2016). Human trafficking heroes and villains: Representing the problem in anti-trafficking awareness campaigns. *Social & Legal Studies*, 25(2), 205-224.
- Pecoud, A. (2018). What do we know about the International Organization for Migration? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(10), 1621-1638.
- Plambech, S. (2017). Sex, deportation and rescue: Economies of migration among Nigerian sex workers. *Feminist Economics*, 23(3), 134-159.
- Scarpa, S. (2006). Trafficking in human beings: Modern slavery. *European Journal of International Law*, 17(1), 1-31.
- Serughetti, G. (2018). Smuggled or trafficked? Refugee or job seeker? Deconstructing rigid classifications by rethinking women's vulnerability. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 11, 65-83.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2000). Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children. United Nations.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2024). Global report on trafficking in persons 2024. United Nations.
- U.S. Department of State. (2019). Trafficking in persons report 2019: Nigeria. U.S. Department of State.
- Van Dijk, R. (2001). Voodoo on the doorstep: Young Nigerian prostitutes and magic policing in the Netherlands. *Africa*, 71(4), 558-586.
- Weitzer, R. (2014). New directions in research on human trafficking. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 653(1), 6-24.