Trafficking as Choice? Evidence from Nigeria^{*}

Tamara Bogatzki[†], Daniel Meierrieks[‡]

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Abstract

The discourse surrounding human trafficking often portrays migrants as naive subjects of deceit and disinformation. Yet, some argue that migrants actively choose trafficking as a migration strategy. We shed light on this discussion by investigating original data from a two-wave repeated cross-section of approximately 2,700 individuals fielded in 2021 and 2023 in Edo State, Nigeria, a focal point for international migration and human trafficking. Our data shows that a significant share of respondents express a willingness to expose themselves to human trafficking to migrate even when this arrangement could lead to forced labor to pay back one's debt to the trafficker. Results from a list experiment indicate that we likely underestimate the willingness to rely on human trafficking in direct assessments, especially among women. The downward-bias may result from female trafficking oftentimes leading to socially stigmatized and forced sex work. Yet on average, survey respondents are well-informed about the risks and earnings potential associated with trafficking. Investigating whether information is differently processed if aspirations are high, we find no evidence for self-deception or recall biases regarding the processing of information about trafficking. Instead, we suggest that individuals who would expose themselves to human trafficking exhibit high migration aspirations but limited migration capabilities, especially with respect to financial opportunities and formal education. While our study shows that choosing this high-risk migration mode does not stem from naivety, becoming receptive to trafficking due to low migration capabilities should not be confused with making the same decision under full freedom of choice.

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[†]WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Christian-Albrechts-University Kiel, Email: tamara.bogatzki@wzb.eu.

[‡]WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Email: daniel.meierrieks@wzb.eu.

1 Introduction

In 2021, approximately 27.6 million people were subject to exploitative labor arrangements. The majority, 17.3 million, worked in the private sector (e.g., agriculture, construction and sweat shops or as domestic servants) and an additional 6.3 million, overwhelmingly women and girls, were subject to commercial sexual exploitation (ILO et al., 2022). Such labor arrangements are often linked to international migration and *human trafficking*.¹ There may be circumstances under which potential migrants decide to submit to their own criminal exploitation: Where traffickers offer documents and transport services against little or no upfront payment, for some this is the only way to cross the border.² However, the repayment of the often arbitrarily high debts through forced labor will be due in transit and/or upon arrival at a destination beyond the migrants' control.

Information campaigns targeting irregular migration and human trafficking, on which the European Commission has spent more than 40 million Euros since 2015, ³ assume that selection into human trafficking is primarily the result of deceit and misinformation. While we do not deny the existence of deceit, we show that there is a substantial willingness to commit to the high risks and costs of human trafficking for which information plays only a limited role. Why do some individuals knowingly choose human trafficking despite its risks?

Using original survey data from Edo State, Nigeria – one of the world's most significant hubs for both international migration and human trafficking – we provide systematic evidence on how migration aspirations, economic constraints, and information shape individuals' willingness to expose themselves to human trafficking. Our representative repeated cross-sections, collected in two waves in 2021 and 2023, includes responses from approximately 2,700 individuals. We find that a significant share of respondents (24 percent) openly state they would agree to migrate via a trafficker, despite understanding that this arrangement may lead to forced labor.

The protocol can be found here: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/ instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons.

¹According to the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, human trafficking is defined as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

²Human trafficking does not by definition proceed across borders, even though it often does. ³Following the calls AMIF-2019-AG-CALL-04, AMIF-2022-TF1-AG-INFO, and AMIF-2024-TF2-AG-INFO published on the EU Funding & Tenders Portal.

Importantly, a list experiment suggests this figure underestimates true willingness, particularly among women, due to the social stigma associated with sex trafficking.

To interpret these findings, we adapt the *aspirations-capabilities framework* (de Haas, 2021) to the case of human trafficking. In the basic framework, all forms of migration are a function of migration aspirations and migration capabilities (i.e., the economic, social and cultural resources relevant to migration). We focus on the conditions under which individuals may consciously opt for human trafficking as a way of migrating.⁴ In particular, we hypothesize that opting to expose oneself to the dangers of human trafficking positively correlates (ceteris paribus) with individual migration aspirations while it negatively correlates (ceteris paribus) with migration capabilities. In other words, people are more likely to consider human trafficking as a mode of irregular migration when they want to overcome a state of involuntary immobility. Finally, we extend our theoretical discussion to account for the role of (mis-)information in the choice for human trafficking, explicitly considering that trafficked migrants are often treated as victims of fraud and deception in isolation of the socioeconomic hardships that may have driven their choice.⁵ Here, we challenge the awareness campaigns' presumption that access to information about human trafficking negatively correlates (ceteris paribus) with an individuals' proclivity for human trafficking.

We furthermore use our survey data to study the correlates of the individual willingness to be trafficked. We show that individuals are more likely to opt for human trafficking when they are in a state of involuntary immobility, i.e., when their migration aspirations are high but migration capabilities are low. We also find that having information about potentially adverse consequences of human trafficking (e.g., through exposure to anti-trafficking campaigns) does not correlate with the willingness to expose oneself to a trafficker.

Zooming in on the concrete case of female trafficking, we present stylized facts that show that respondents neither underestimate the risks of sex work and debt bondage nor do they overestimate the earning potential of Nigerian women sex trafficked to Europe. Finally, we study whether there are differences across respondents who

⁴The choice for human trafficking on the part of the migrant assumes a certain degree of *agency*, i.e., "the limited – but real – ability [...] to make independent choices and to impose these on the world" (de Haas, 2021, p.14). Indeed, the aspirations-capabilities framework rejects the notion of "migrants as pawns [...] [or] passive victims of smugglers and traffickers" (de Haas, 2021, p. 8), instead highlighting that migrants decide to move (or stay) by exercising agency. At the same time, however, this agency is limited (Wheaton et al., 2010). For one, trafficked migrants lose considerable agency when they are eventually subject to labor exploitation to pay off the debts incurred to traffickers. For another, and more important to our study, other forms of regular and irregular migration are likely not available to a prospective migrant who opts for human trafficking, which implies limited agency even before the migration journey.

⁵As an example, a 2019 report describes the situation of Nigerian women from Edo State and other Nigerian states who were trafficked and ended up in prostitution in Libya and Europe as follows: "Women and girls who believed they were migrating for high-paying overseas employment as domestic workers, hairdressers, or hotel staff, said they were shocked to learn they were tricked and trapped in exploitation" (Human Rights Watch, 2019, p.12).

report a low versus high willingness to expose themselves to human trafficking with respect to certain cognitive dispositions that may explain the high approval rates. We focus on self-deception, susceptibility to recall bias and confirmation bias. We do not find evidence for cognitive dispositions favoring human trafficking, which further speaks to the idea that individuals who would expose themselves to trafficking have realistic rather than naive conceptions concerning the life of a trafficked person living abroad.

In sum, our findings challenge conventional wisdom that trafficking is primarily a result of deception. Potential migrants consciously opt for human trafficking as a mode of migration even though they are equipped with sufficient knowledge about the exploitative labor conditions trafficking entails. That said, our empirical findings indicate that trafficking can be understood as a constrained optimization problem: The informed choice for human trafficking is more probable when high migration aspirations are coupled with a high degree of economic and social vulnerability, which makes it difficult to realize these aspirations in less risky ways. That is, opting for a trafficking arrangement is not tantamount to entering such an arrangement under conditions of complete freedom of choice.

Our paper adds to the literature in several ways. First, systematic knowledge about the micro-level causes and consequences of human trafficking remains scarce.⁶ Three quantitative papers have touched upon predicting the selection into human trafficking: Mahmoud and Trebesch (2010) relate the prevalence of trafficking to local migration pressure, using micro-level data from Eastern Europe. Mo (2018) finds that in Nepal, relative deprivation increases risk-seeking behavior, thereby exposing individuals and their children to a higher likelihood of exploitation. Finally, Björkman Nyqvist et al. (2018) study the causes and consequences of trafficking in underage victims in Philippine shelters, showing that the trafficking experience makes girls more risk-seeking, while certain economic and demographic conditions, such as high expectations about marrying a foreigner, predict the likelihood of parents exposing their children to trafficking.

Evidence on human trafficking in Africa remains similarly scarce and empirically underdeveloped. The closest studies to ours are Okonofua et al. (2004) and Omorodion (2009). Omorodion (2009) presents descriptive statistics from a sample of senior secondary school students in Edo and Delta States, assessing their knowledge of human trafficking and perceptions of its attractiveness. While students demonstrate strong awareness of trafficking risks (e.g., labor exploitation, forced prostitution, violence, unwanted pregnancies, and STDs), they primarily attribute its appeal to economic

⁶For empirical studies that relate macro-conditions (e.g., income levels, globalization, sex work regulations and migration policy) to the prevalence of human trafficking in countries of origin and destination, see, e.g., Cho (2012); Rao and Presenti (2012); Cho et al. (2013); Jakobsson and Kotsadam (2013); Akee et al. (2014); Cho et al. (2014); Jakobsson and Kotsadam (2015); Danailova-Trainor and Belser (2006); Tariq and Malik (2018); Theoharides (2020). See also Jakobsson and Kotsadam (2015) for a comprehensive literature review.

hardship (e.g., poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy). However, this study captures third-person perspectives among a relatively educated sample rather than firsthand experiences. In contrast, Okonofua et al. (2004) examines young women in Benin City (Edo State), finding that low education and the desire to live abroad correlate with support for the continuation of sex trafficking.⁷ Both studies emphasize awareness, knowledge, and attitudes superficially linked to socioeconomic factors but lack an analytical framework that models trafficking as a constrained economic choice. Our study advances the literature by explicitly conceptualizing human trafficking as a rational decision within the aspirations-capabilities framework. We enhance empirical rigor through experimental and regression methods, notably using a list experiment to uncover gendered social desirability bias in self-reported data. Unlike prior work, our approach enables us to systematically assess gender heterogeneity using recent, representative survey data for both men and women. Furthermore, we test for cognitive biases - self-deception, recall bias, and misinformation - offering deeper insights into frictions in migration decision-making despite widespread exposure to awareness campaigns.

Finally, the evidence on the effectiveness of information campaigns in affecting irregular migration and human trafficking remains mixed (e.g., Mahmoud and Trebesch, 2010; Archer et al., 2016; Davy, 2016; Björkman Nyqvist et al., 2018; Boittin et al., 2018; Tjaden et al., 2018; Boittin et al., 2019; Obi et al., 2019; Bah et al., 2023). Our empirical efforts add to the discussion concerning the effectiveness of such campaigns championed by foreign backers. By highlighting that human trafficking becomes more attractive due to high migration aspirations and low migration capabilities – meaning that the choice for trafficking is ultimately born out of necessity – rather than misinformation, our study suggests that alternative policy efforts (e.g., allowing for additional legal migration or reducing socioeconomic hardship in origin countries) may prove more successful in combating human trafficking.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we discuss our theoretical framework in detail, deriving several testable predictions. In Section 3, we introduce our survey data. We use this data to assess interest in human trafficking in Edo State in Section 4. In Section 5, we sketch a profile of the average individual who would expose themselves to trafficking, focusing on the influence of migration aspirations and capabilities as well information about human trafficking. In Section 6, we analyze how widespread misinformation about female trafficking is and how it relates to the individual proclivity for trafficking. Section 7 concludes.

 $^{^7\}mathrm{For}$ an overview of other reports and studies on sex work migration in Edo State, see Agwu et al. (2020).

2 Theoretical Considerations

In this section, we develop our theoretical argument on how potential migrants may consciously choose human trafficking as a means of (international) migration. First, we briefly discuss the aspirations-capabilities framework of de Haas (2021). Second, we adapt this framework to the case of human trafficking. Third, given that (a lack of) information about trafficking – for instance, in the form of deceit by traffickers – may arguably matter to one's choice for human trafficking as a migration mode, we further factor in the role of information. Finally, we use our considerations to derive severable testable theoretical predictions.

2.1 Adapting the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework to the Case of Human Trafficking

The aspirations-capabilities framework of de Haas (2021) is "a single meta-theoretical framework [...] conceptualising virtually all forms of migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate [...]".⁸ Here, "migration aspirations reflect people's general life preferences as well as their subjective perceptions about opportunities and life elsewhere" (de Haas, 2021, p. 17). Consequently, strong migration aspirations relate to the "conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration" (Carling and Schewel, 2018, p. 946). Furthermore, the term migration capabilities describes the economic, cultural and social resources that are necessary to exercise full migratory agency (de Haas, 2021). Here, economic capabilities relate to the potential migrant's knowledge and skills relevant to the migration process. According to de Haas (2021, p. 21), the term "cultural capabilities" is synonymous with *human capital*. Finally, social capabilities refer to the migration network) who potentially matter to the migration process.

The aspirations-capabilities framework identifies four paradigmatic migration scenarios (see also Schewel, 2020). Voluntary migration occurs when individuals possess both high migration aspirations and the necessary capabilities. Involuntary immobility arises when strong aspirations to migrate are constrained by a lack of resources, limiting agency (Carling, 2002). Acquiescent immobility describes those with both low aspirations and low capabilities, leading to a passive acceptance of staying put (Schewel, 2020). Lastly, voluntary immobility emerges when individuals with high capabilities choose not to migrate due to low aspirations, as ample resources make staying more attractive.

⁸This framework builds on – sometimes in an approving and sometimes in a disapproving manner – earlier ideas and insights of, inter alia, political philosophy (Berlin, 1969), neo-classical and development economics (e.g., Todaro, 1969; Harris and Todaro, 1970; Sen, 1999) as well as other theoretical approaches such as push-pull models, conflict theory or migrant network theories (e.g., Lee, 1966; Massey et al., 1993; de Haas, 2010).

While the aspirations-capabilities framework does not predict selection into human trafficking explicitly, we can use its insights to discuss under which circumstances human trafficking may be an attractive mode of international migration.

A first important insight of the aspirations-capabilities framework is its emphasis on the role of human agency, where migrants choose whether to migrate or stay as well as their migration destinations and the modes of their migration journey on their own volition. Indeed, de Haas (2021, p. 8) explicitly rejects the notion of "migrants as pawns [...] [or] as passive victims of smugglers and traffickers". In other words, both regular and irregular migration can be rational choices for a potential migrant, where there can be a conscious choice for irregular migration, including by way of human trafficking. A similar idea of modeling human trafficking as one out of several migration options available to a migrant is suggested by Wheaton et al. (2010) who emphasize that potential migrants (as utility-maximizing economic agents) may opt for human trafficking as a mode of migration as a result of rational cost-benefit considerations.⁹

Under what circumstances, then, are migrants expect to opt for human trafficking as a mode of migration? Given the framework's four paradigmatic scenarios, the individual choice for human trafficking most likely emerges in the case of involuntary immobility, i.e., when potential migrants have the desire to migrate to another country (high migration aspirations) but lack the resources (low capabilities) to migrate. Here, resorting to human trafficking would be a means to avoid a state of involuntary immobility or entrapment. By contrast, for the cases of acquiescent and voluntary immobility, there is no aspiration to migrate – be it regularly or irregularly – in the first place; individuals with low migration aspirations are instead expected to choose immobility. Finally, individuals with high migration aspirations and high capabilities have at their disposal alternative modes of migration that are more accommodating. Consequently, human trafficking is especially attractive when migration capabilities are low because low migration capabilities inhibit other modes of both regular and irregular migration.

In detail, with respect to low *economic capabilities*, trafficking may be especially attractive to poor individuals who cannot pay for their migration journey or save enough money for it. This lack of financial resources means that other forms of irregular migration are not easily accessible. For instance, a lack of economic resources may make it difficult to afford traveling to another country with the plan of overstaying one's tourist visa. The same lack of financial resources also impedes resorting to human smuggling as another means of irregular migration. In contrast

⁹Conceptualizing trafficking as a rational choice to maximize utility (in terms of, e.g., income or well-being), given the benefits of trafficking (e.g., earning more money in a preferred location) and its costs (e.g., forced labor and debt burden), relates to many theoretical arguments underlying the broader economic literature on the modeling of regular and irregular labor migration (for examples of this latter literature, see e.g., Borjas 1987; Todaro and Maruszko 1987; Grogger and Hansen 2011; Aksoy and Poutvaara 2021).

to human smuggling, traffickers may not require an upfront payment but demand their efforts to be repaid through exploitative labor once in their power.¹⁰

Furthermore, a lack of *cultural capabilities*, i.e., human capital, may make human trafficking more attractive because legal alternatives to it are less accessible. In the context of low individual human capital endowments, this especially refers to student migration or labor migration as less accessible ways to enter foreign countries in a legal manner.

Finally, human trafficking may also be more attractive to individuals who lack networks and family support abroad (low *social capabilities*). For one, a lack of such networks is likely to reduce the possibility of family migration as a mode of regular migration. For another, the same lack may also increase the attractiveness of human trafficking as a special form of irregular migration. For instance, trafficking may be less risky than an autonomous (irregular) migration journey. This might be especially true for women. For example, journalistic reports suggest that networks of madams (i.e., older women who cooperate with other human traffickers particularly in the context of prostitution) reach out all the way to destination countries, whereas autonomous migrants not guided by a madam have to rely on the goodwill of many different people, all of which may demand unpredictable tolls in return, potentially including abuse and sexual violence (Taub, 2017).

2.2 The Role of Information

So far, our discussion suggests that individuals may opt for human trafficking as a mode of migration when they are not able to act on their high migration aspirations due to a lack of migration capabilities. However, migrants that end up in forced labor after having been trafficked are often viewed as victims of deception, suggesting that their choice for human trafficking is – at least partly – a consequence of misinformation about trafficking. For instance, people who are trafficked may fall for dishonest offers, where they assume that their migration arrangement would involve a regular job (e.g., as a hairdresser rather than sex worker) that is linked to an official work visa. In general, misinformation about human trafficking may mean that (potential) migrants underestimate the risks and overestimate the benefits of human trafficking, leading them to misjudge the attractiveness voluntary migration via human trafficking especially vis-à-vis staying (i.e., voluntary immobility).

This argument suggests that we also need to consider the role of information to understand the individual choice for human trafficking as a migration mode. Here, accurate information about trafficking (e.g., concerning its nature and dangers) is

¹⁰Such debt bondage comes with potentially enormous costs. For instance, according to Carling (2006), already in the early 2000s, women incurred a debt of between 40,000 and 100,000 USD when being trafficked from Nigeria to Italy. More recently, Stamping out Trafficking in Nigeria (2020) from interviews of 30 trafficked migrants that have returned to Edo State report that trafficking via air costs several 10,000 USD, while trafficking via land is "only" up to 10,000 USD.

expected to decrease the individual willingness to opt for human trafficking. Indeed, this is the implicit assumption of awareness campaigns in the context of human trafficking. If potential migrants are systematically misinformed about the costs and benefits of trafficking, they are more likely to become trafficking victims; awareness campaigns counter this misinformation and are thus expected to disincentivize migration via human trafficking. As already stressed in the introduction, however, evidence on the effectiveness of campaigns targeting irregular migration and human trafficking remains inconclusive (e.g. Mahmoud and Trebesch, 2010; Archer et al., 2016; Davy, 2016; Björkman Nyqvist et al., 2018; Boittin et al., 2018; Tjaden et al., 2018; Boittin et al., 2019; Obi et al., 2019; Bah et al., 2023).

2.3 Theoretical Predictions

Building on and adapting the aspirations-capabilities framework, we argue (i) that individuals consciously opt for human trafficking as a way of migrating and (ii) that this choice is a function of individual migration aspirations and migration capabilities as well as access to information about human trafficking. Here, we derive three theoretical predictions. First, higher individual migration aspirations correlate (ceteris paribus) with a higher attractiveness of trafficking. Second, higher migration capabilities are associated (ceteris paribus) with a lower likelihood to resort to human trafficking. Third, more access to information about human trafficking correlates (ceteris paribus) with a lower individual proclivity to migrate by means of human trafficking. We shall empirically test these theoretical predictions in subsequent sections of this paper.

3 Data Collection and Local Context

In this section, we introduce our survey data that we use for the subsequent empirical analyses. We discuss our sampling approach and ethics considerations, and present summary statistics.

3.1 Edo State

We conducted our surveys in Edo State, one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As shown in Figure 1, Edo State is located in the south of Nigeria. It had a population of about 4.8 million as of 2021; for comparison, Kano State and Lagos State, the largest states by population size, both had over 14 and 12 million inhabitants, respectively.¹¹ Benin City is the state's largest and capital city with over one million inhabitants. In terms of its economic size, in 2021 Edo State was a

¹¹Demographic and economic data on Edo State and other Nigerian states is drawn from here: https://budgit.org.

middle-ranking state, with its per capita income of approximately 2,000 USD being somewhat larger than Nigeria's GDP per capita as a whole (which is approximately 1,700 USD).



Figure 1: Edo State in Nigeria

For this study, we chose Edo State because it is a hub for international migration and is often described – especially with reference to Benin City – as the "the corridor to Europe" (Arhin-Sam, 2019, p. 23). Common destination countries of international migration from Edo State are the United Kingdom – Nigeria was a British colony until 1960 – as well as other European countries, the Gulf States, and the United States (Mberu and Pongou, 2010). At the same time, Edo State is equally important as a hub for irregular migration and human trafficking (e.g., Arhin-Sam, 2019; Office of the Under Secretary for Global Affairs, 2020). For example, the prevalence of human trafficking in Edo State is discussed in UNODC (2006). This study reports that of the approximately 800 female migrants surveyed between 1991 and 2001 that returned from Italy to Nigeria after having been trafficked, 94 percent came from Edo State and the neighboring Delta State.¹²

3.2 Sampling Framework

We conducted two rounds of a representative survey in Edo State in the spring of 2021 and summer of 2023, respectively. Both survey rounds were carried out in cooperation with *Oxford Policy Management* (OPM), a Nigerian private survey company. Survey participants were at least 15 years old.¹³ Due to absence of up-to-date census

¹²However, exact statistics are scarce and their origins often unclear. A fact-finding mission from the Danish Immigration Service in September 2007 reported numbers of 70 to 80 percent citing different NGO representatives and public officials (Danish Immigration Service, 2008). It is possible that Edo is only a transit location for many women. The mentioned sources do not permit to infer whether the women were asked about their birth place or about their state of departure. In our survey, 75 percent of respondents report to be from Edo state.

¹³Many migration surveys target individuals aged 18-34, the age range at which individuals are considered most likely to migrate. For our survey, the decision to also sample minors was based on

data, sampling in the first wave relied on raster population data produced by Facebook in collaboration with the Center for International Earth Science Information Network.¹⁴ Interview locations were based on multi-stage clustered random sampling, as depicted in Figure 2. In the first stage of random sampling, 125 clusters were drawn randomly from 5km^2 grid cells. In the second stage, 0.5km^2 grid cells were drawn without replacement from the larger clusters selected in the first stage. Sampling probabilities were proportional to population size at both stages. Within each small cluster from the second stage, 12 households were selected using a random walk procedure; from each household, one individual was randomly selected for a computer-assisted personal interview.



Figure 2: Survey sites in Edo State; red: 2021, purple: 2023

Interviews were conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin. We ensured that the enumerators were locals who were familiar with the cultural and geographical environment. For the second wave of the survey conducted in the summer of 2023, interviews were conducted in the same clusters selected for the first survey round, where we used a random walk procedure starting from the initial interview locations of the first interview round. In total, there were 1,528 respondents in the first wave and 1,212 respondents in the second wave. Between both waves, all variables of interest remained largely stable. The summary statistics (combined for both waves) for those survey items employed throughout this study are reported in Table 1.

the notion that traffickers often target teenage girls and boys. For instance, the *Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative* (see https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org) dataset of registered and self-reported victims of trafficking (launched in November 2017) shows that 30 percent of the 2,867 Nigerian respondents who reported their ages were younger than 21 upon registration and 10 percent were minors. We also sampled people older than 34 because the project assesses opinions about and experiences with migration that are representative of Edo's population as a whole. Nonetheless, the median age in our sample is 30 and only 10 percent of the population is older than 55.

¹⁴At the time of our first survey, the latest official census in Nigeria had been conducted in 2006.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min.	Max.
Would Consider Trafficking	0.248	0.432	0	1
Awareness Campaign	0.373	0.484	0	1
Knows Trafficked Person	0.243	0.429	0	1
Migration Aspirations	3.271	1.674	1	5
Any Family Member Abroad	0.142	0.349	0	1
Family Supports Migration	0.781	0.414	0	1
Household Economic Situation	1.523	0.958	0	4
State of Nigerian Economy	3.435	1.008	0	4
Female	0.542	0.498	0	1
Married	0.505	0.500	0	1
Age	34.261	14.634	15	97
Education	4.665	1.612	0	9

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Notes: Number of observations is n = 2733 for all variables. See the main text for further discussion of variables and their respective measurement.

3.3 Ethics Considerations

Before the start of the survey we received formal ethical clearance with respect to our research project and underlying questionnaire from both the ethics committee of our research institution and an ethics committee in Nigeria¹⁵. We were aware of the fact that inquiring about migration aspirations and human trafficking can be sensitive in a context in which many people cannot act upon their migration aspirations and where the potential consequences of trafficking (e.g. forced labor and sexual exploitation) may carry a strong social stigma. Consequently, we solicited feedback from OPM as well as local researchers prior to the collection of the data regarding the wording of the questionnaire. This feedback proved very helpful, allowing us to change questions that were regarded as potentially sensitive to avoid any potential discomfort for the survey participants. Importantly, according to this feedback, trafficking and sex work (unlike, e.g., questions concerning religious beliefs) were not considered sensitive topics per se as long as these issues were addressed in Nigerian Pidgin in a fashion as polite as possible. This specific feedback was carefully incorporated into the interviewer training. Finally, when the survey data was collected, all survey respondents were asked for their consent before the interviews, where anonymity was always guaranteed. For the case of interviewed minors, we asked for parental consent as well as consent from the minors themselves. All questions regarding the topic of trafficking were administered in privacy, i.e., without other household members listening.

 $^{^{15}}$ WZB Research Ethics Review (2020/3/101 and 2023/05/198); National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria (NHREC/01/01/2007-16/03/2021 and NHREC/01/01/2007-14/06/2023).

4 Approval of Human Trafficking in Edo State

In this section, we investigate the extent to which respondents express a willingness to migrate through trafficking, despite its known risks. To measure this, we employ two complementary empirical strategies: First, we analyze answers from a direct question assessing self-reported willingness to accept a trafficking arrangement. Second, we conduct a list experiment designed to mitigate social desirability bias and uncover potential underreporting. Here, we also put a special emphasis on differences in levels of approval between men and women.

4.1 Measuring Approval of Human Trafficking: Two Empirical Approaches

4.1.1 Direct Response

We begin by directly asking respondents whether they would consider migrating with the assistance of a trafficker, despite the risks of forced labor. Specifically, they were asked: "Would you consider migrating with a sponsor, even though this may mean repaying your debt in forced labour once abroad?" Here, "sponsor" is locally recognized term used in Edo State to refer to human traffickers (Okonofua et al., 2004; Osezua, 2016). At the same time, by referring to the repayment of one's travel debt in forced labor, the exploitative nature of the relationship between sponsor and potential migrant is made apparent.

4.1.2 List Experiment: Assessing Social Desirability Bias

Since individuals may underreport approval of trafficking due to stigma – particularly for women – we employ a list experiment in the context of the 2023 cross-section of our survey. This indirect questioning method increases response privacy, making respondents more likely to answer truthfully.¹⁶ In a list experiment, respondents are randomly assigned to either a control or treatment group. The control group is presented with a list of items, while the treatment group is presented with the same list plus an additional sensitive item (in our case, an item referring to human trafficking). Instead of answering each item individually, respondents are only asked to report the number of items they agree with. The difference in average item counts between the two groups reveals the hidden prevalence of trafficking approval.

For our list experiment, interviewers read out to the interviewee the assigned list of items whose order was randomized. Each item described a different action, where the respondents were asked to state the number of actions described they would

 $^{^{16}}$ List experiments, also known as the item count or unmatched count technique, are an indirect response survey method first introduced by Raghavarao and Federer (1979) and Miller (1984) (see also, e.g., Imai, 2011; Blair and Imai, 2012; Blair et al., 2020).

personally consider doing. To further ensure anonymity, interviewers offered to hand over the tablet in which the survey data was recorded so that interviewees could enter their answer themselves and then skip to the next question, meaning that interviewers would not see the answer.¹⁷

The list of items for the control group was as follows:

How many of the following things would you personally consider doing? You don't need to say which ones you'd consider, just specify the number of them (0, 1, 2, or 3).

- Support same-sex marriage in Nigeria, even though this may mean political persecution.

- Marry someone you love, even though your family disapproves of him or her.

- Invite a person in need for dinner, even though this may mean having less for yourself.

Respondents in the treatment group also received an item that refers to human trafficking:

How many of the following things would you personally consider doing? You don't need to say which ones you'd consider, just specify the number of them (0, 1, 2, 3, or 4).

- Support same-sex marriage in Nigeria, even though this may mean political persecution.

- Marry someone you love, even though your family disapproves of him or her.

- Invite a person in need for dinner, even though this may mean having less for yourself.

- Migrate with a sponsor, even though this may mean repaying your debt in forced labour once abroad.

By comparing responses from both the direct question and the list experiment, we assess whether trafficking approval is underreported when asked directly.

4.2 Results: How Many People Would Consider Trafficking?

4.2.1 Direct Responses Indicate Considerable Approval

Assessing respondents' direct answers concerning trafficking gives three interesting insights. First, a substantial minority – 24 percent of respondents – report willingness

¹⁷Already during the interviewer training, we made sure that all interviewers understood the purpose of the experiment and that they executed the experiment correctly by means of role plays with immediate feedback.

to migrate with a sponsor despite the emphasized risk of forced labor.¹⁸ Second, there are strong differences between the responses of men and women. The latter are much less likely affirm their willingness to be trafficked. 35 percent of men express approval compared to only 13 percent of women. Third, younger respondents are more likely to agree. When restricting the sample to those with the highest migration potential, i.e. for those younger than 35 (n=1,577), the share of affirmative answers is at 29 percent, with 40 percent of young men and 20 percent of young women reporting approval. The results suggest that trafficking approval is not marginal and to carefully consider gender-specific attitudes towards human trafficking.

4.2.2 List Experiment Suggests Underreporting Among Women

What can explain that women are much less likely to report their their interest in migrating with the help of a trafficker compared to men? Plausibly, this difference relates to the type of (forced) labor trafficked persons are expected to carry out once they are abroad. Here, men may be more likely to associate the term "forced labor" with relatively benign work in construction and agriculture. By contrast, women have a much higher likelihood of ending up in prostitution. Sex work is especially dangerous to one's mental and bodily integrity (e.g., in terms of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease and the prevalence of sexual violence). What is more, sex work carries a substantial social stigma in Edo State (see the review by Agwu et al., 2020). The social stigmatization of sex work, in turn, may give rise to *social desirability bias* resulting from respondents giving an answer they believe would find approval by others (Edwards, 1957)). Higher levels of social stigma with respect to female human trafficking because of its relation to prostitution may – at least in parts – explain why women are less likely to report their willingness to be trafficked.

Results from the list experiment confirm this concern. We present our first main finding in Figure 3. This figure shows the average rates of trafficking approval assessed directly and using the list experiment for the full sample and the subsample of young respondents (under 35). The results for the full sample are also reported in Table 2, column 1. We find that respondents who received the treatment (i.e., the sensitive item concerning trafficking) report that they would consider a larger number of items compared to the control group. This indicates that some respondents do not answer truthfully when directly asked about their interest in resorting to human trafficking as a mode of migration. As shown in Figure 3, there is a difference of of several percentage points between the direct and indirect assessment of the willingness to consider a trafficker for migrating. Similar results are obtained when we focus on respondents under 35. Moreover, as reported in Table 2, column 2, accounting for a

¹⁸When we asked this question in 2021, the share of respondents who would expose themselves to trafficking was 25 percent. Asking this question in 2023, this share was 24 percent. The difference between responses in both years is not statistically significant (p=0.488).



Figure 3: Direct question versus list experimental results on whether respondents would consider migrating with a sponsor despite debt bondage and exploitation for the full sample (left) and those under 35 (right).

number of demographic controls does not affect our main finding.¹⁹ In the previous sub-section, we showed that women are far less likely affirm their willingness to be trafficked when asked directly. Consequently, we allow for heterogeneous treatment effects with respect to gender (Table 2, column 3). Again, we find that respondents in the treatment group would consider a larger number of items compared to the control group. At the same time, these estimates point to significant heterogeneous treatment effects with respect to gender.

In sum, keeping in mind potential concerns about statistical precision due to sample size (Blair et al., 2020), the list experiment findings suggest that the direct response to our human trafficking reveals a lower bound of human trafficking approval especially among women. Plotting the findings from column 3 in Figure 4, we show that 40 percent of men and 22 percent of women are willing to be trafficked according to our list experiment. For men, the difference between direct and indirect responses is modest. For women, trafficking approval jumps by 69 percent when measured indirectly, highlighting a strong social desirability bias in direct responses. Similarly, for those under 35, the difference between the direct and the indirect assessment is only 5 percent for men but 67 percent for women, even though the sample restriction further reduces statistical power. This suggests that misreporting with respect to

¹⁹See Appendix Table A.1 for a glossary of the control variables and their measurement.

	Dependen	t Variable: It	em Count
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	0.310	0.306	0.402
	$(0.044)^{***}$	$(0.044)^{***}$	$(0.064)^{***}$
Female		-0.100	0.011
		$(0.046)^{**}$	(0.060)
Age		-0.008	
		$(0.002)^{***}$	
Education		0.026	
		(0.016)	
Married		0.027	
		(0.053)	
Female # Treat.		· · · ·	-0.179
			$(0.089)^{**}$
R-Squared	0.038	0.061	0.044
Observations	1212	1212	1212

Table 2: List Experiment Regression Estimates

Notes: OLS regression results for the list experiment, where "Treatment" equals unity when respondents are shown the longer list with the sensitive item about trafficking and 0 otherwise. The dependent variable is the number of items the respondent would agree to from the list presented to them. Column 2 includes demographic controls. Column 3 introduces an interaction term whose coefficient depicts the relative prevalence of the sensitive item among the subpopulation, i.e., with respect to gender. Constant not reported. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

trafficking inclinations is indeed a function of gender. Underreporting may relate to the social stigma associated with gendered sexual exploitation in the context of human trafficking. Thus, while women report lower trafficking approval when asked outright, the list experiment suggests that their true willingness may be significantly higher.²⁰

4.2.3 Robustness of the Experimental Results

There are several assumptions associated with list experiments that need to be fulfilled to allow a meaningful interpretation of the results. First, respondents must be randomly assigned to the control or treatment group. In Appendix Table B.1, we show that members of the control and treatment group are similar with respect to a variety of characteristics (age, gender, education etc.). Additionally, there is no statistically significant difference in mean answers to the direct questions on human trafficking between both groups (p=0.749). This indicates that randomization was successful.

²⁰As a robustness check, we employ two alternative methods to evaluate our list experiment data, following Imai (2011) and Eady (2017) (see also Aronow et al., 2015), coming to the same conclusion. We discuss these methods and related empirical results in more detail in Appendix Section C.



Figure 4: Willingness to expose oneself to trafficking by gender for the full sample (left) and those younger than 35 (right)

Second, respondents have to give truthful answers for all items (e.g., Blair and Imai, 2012). While we cannot test this no liars assumption, we can consider floor and ceiling effects, which can be an important source of dishonesty. Such effects may arise when respondents agree with all control items as well as the sensitive item (ceiling effect) or when they disagree with all control items (floor effect). In situations with floor or ceiling effects, "respondents in the treatment group may fear that answering the question truthfully would reveal their true (affirmative) preference for the sensitive item", given them an incentive to lie (Blair and Imai, 2012, p. 50). For one, to avoid such effects, we include both a control item that most people in Edo State would disagree with (same-sex marriage) and a control item many people would agree with because it corresponds to common religious values (inviting a person in need for dinner). For another, Appendix Figure B.1 depicts the distribution of the number of items respondents consider by treatment status. Inspecting this figure, there is no indication of either floor or ceiling effects.

Third, there must be no design effects. The presence of such effects would imply that the response to the non-sensitive items changes due to the presence of the sensitive item (e.g., Blair and Imai, 2012). We test for the presence of design effects following Blair and Imai (2012). As shown by the test results reported in Appendix Table B.2, we find no evidence for design effects.

4.3 Further Experimental Evidence on Social Stigma

To further examine the social stigma associated with sexual exploitation, we conducted a survey experiment in which respondents were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Each group received a different version of a question about migrating with a sponsor. The control group was asked "Do you agree with the following statement: Going abroad with the help of a sponsor can be an opportunity for children to support their families?", while the treatment group was asked "Do you agree with the following statement: Going abroad with the help of a sponsor can be an opportunity for children to support their families, even if it entails working in prostitution?". By introducing an explicit reference to prostitution in the treatment group, this experiment allows us to isolate the effect of social stigma on approval of human trafficking.



Figure 5: Approval of sponsored migration and migration for prostitution

As expected, the prostitution cue significantly reduces agreement with the statement. On a four-point scale, respondents in the treatment group report agreement levels that are 1.36 points lower on average (p < 0.001). Average agreement in the treatment group is 0.66 (in between disagreement and strong disagreement); for the control group it is 2.01 (corresponding to somewhat agreement). Figure 5 further illustrates this effect: 70 percent of respondents in the control group approve or strongly approve of migrating with a sponsor to support one's family. In contrast, approval drops sharply when prostitution is mentioned, reinforcing the strong social stigma surrounding sex work in the context of human trafficking. Despite this stigma, 23 percent of respondents in the treatment group still somewhat or strongly support the idea of sex work abroad as a means of family support. This suggests that while social disapproval of prostitution is strong, economic necessity may override moral concerns for some individuals.

These findings provide experimental evidence that while human trafficking is often tolerated as a migration strategy, social stigma significantly dampens approval when it involves sexual exploitation. This aligns with our earlier findings that trafficking approval is systematically underreported among women. In the next section, we further explore the socioeconomic and informational drivers of trafficking willingness.

5 Characteristics of Individuals Who Would Expose Themselves to Trafficking

The results from the previous section suggest that there is a considerable willingness among Nigerian survey respondents to consider human trafficking as a mode of migration. In our theoretical discussion, we argued that individual *migration aspirations* and *migration capabilities* as well as *information about trafficking* may matter to the individual proclivity to opt for human trafficking, where human trafficking is more likely when (i) aspirations are high, (ii) capabilities are low and/or (iii) information about trafficking is poor. In this section, we use our representative survey data to test these theoretical predictions. The summary statistics of all variables used in this section can be found in Table 1, while information concerning their operationalization – in case the variables are not already discussed in the main text – is provided in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

5.1 Empirical Model

We study the following linear probability model:

$$traf_i = \beta_1 \times aspir_i + \beta_2 \times capab_i + \beta_3 \times info_i + \beta' \times controls_i + \alpha_w + \delta_e + \psi_d + \tau_t + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

As above, traf is a dummy variable that is equal to unity if a respondent *i* answers in the affirmative to the question "Would you consider migrating with a sponsor, even though this may mean repaying your debt in forced labor once abroad?" and zero otherwise. We explain this willingness to be trafficked by a set of variables indicating a respondent's migration aspirations (aspir), capabilities (cabap) and level of information about trafficking (info). We discuss the respective variable operationalizations in more detail below.

We also include a vector of demographic controls (*controls*) for a respondent's gender, age, marital status, number of children and religion (which can either be Islam,

Christianity, another or no religion). Furthermore, our model always includes a set of dummies accounting for the individual enumerator (e), interview date (d), survey ward (w) and survey wave (t). These variables are included to account for enumerator-specific and interview-specific effects (e.g., differences in language proficiency when conducting an interview on a certain day), ward-specific effects (e.g., due to geographical location) and differences between the two survey waves, respectively.

Migration Aspirations. We operationalize respondents' migration intentions by considering their response to a survey question asking them how strongly they consider moving to another location outside of Edo State and/or outside of Nigeria to live there.²¹ Answers could range from 1 to 5, with higher values meaning stronger migration aspirations. While approximately 28 percent of survey respondents report no to little migration aspirations, about 34 percent report moderate to high and almost 38 percent report the highest possible aspirations. This speaks to the general observation that migration aspirations in Edo State – and in Nigeria in general – are considerable. For instance, a 2024 Afrobarometer report finds that more than half of Nigerians say they have considered leaving Nigeria (Afrobarometer, 2024).

Migration Capabilities. As already discussed more extensively above, in the aspirations-capabilities framework of de Haas (2021) migration capabilities are the economic, cultural and social resources that are necessary to exert true migratory agency. We adapt this framework to the case of human trafficking, arguing that these capabilities also matter to the attractiveness and feasibility of trafficking visà-vis other modes of migration.

To operationalize capabilities, from our survey we draw three variables that account for economic, cultural and social capabilities, respectively. By means of a polychoric principal component analysis (e.g., Kolenikov and Angeles, 2009), a variant of principal component analysis that is appropriate when one uses categorical variables, we create a composite *index of individual migration capabilities* as the first principal component associated with the respondents' economic, cultural and social migration capabilities. Higher values of this index correspond to higher capabilities. As part of our robustness checks, we also examine the relationship between the constituent components of the index with the individual trafficking willingness.

In detail, to measure economic capabilities, we consider the respondents' assessment of their current *household economic situation*. Here, most respondents (approximately 90 percent) consider their households' economic situation either to be very poor (15 percent), poor (33 percent) or adequate (41 percent), while only about 10

²¹While in the first wave, respondents were asked about moving to another location outside of Edo State, be it within or outside of Nigeria, the second wave differentiates between domestic and international migration by means of two separate survey questions. For the second wave, we thus create the mean between domestic and international migration aspirations as a measure of general the intention to leave Edo State to match the information collected in the first wave.

percent consider it to be good or very good.

As stressed above, the idea of cultural capabilities is synonymous with *human capital* de Haas (2021, p.21). Consequently, we operationalize cultural capabilities via the respondents' (self-reported) highest *level of education*. About 20 percent of respondents have at most completed primary schooling, while about 60 percent have at most completed secondary schooling and approximately 20 percent have some post-secondary qualification or a university degree.

Finally, social capabilities refer to one's access to other people who relevant to the migration process. To operationalize these capabilities, we thus use the respondents' answer to the survey question whether any of their family members currently lives abroad (*migration network*). Here, approximately 15 percent of respondents have a family member living in another country at this time.

Information about Trafficking. Our main variable indicating respondents' knowledge about human trafficking refers to their experience with anti-trafficking messages in the media, using the following question: "Have you listened to or come across a radio or TV program at home or elsewhere talking about trafficking during the past four weeks?"²² We consider the past four weeks to account for plausible individual recall; about 37 percent of respondents say they had listened to a campaign in the previous month. Anti-trafficking campaigns in Edo State that highlight the dangers of human trafficking and irregular migration are run by international agencies such as the *International Organization for Migration* but also local actors such as the *Edo State Task Force Against Human trafficking* and the *National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons*. We expect such awareness campaigns to reduce the attractiveness of human trafficking.

As an alternative information variable, we also inquire respondents about their contacts with other people that have been trafficked, asking the following survey question: "Do you know at least one person who was trafficked and works or has worked in prostitution in another country to support herself and/or her family?" We anticipate such contact to provide respondents with a better understanding of the nature of human trafficking, especially with respect to its murky underbelly, which may consequently also (negatively) affect their willingness to be trafficked themselves. About 24 percent of respondents report knowing at least one (former) trafficked prostitute.

 $^{^{22}}$ To make sure respondents understood the meaning of "trafficking", we provided them with the official definition of trafficking by the *United Nations*, where this definition was also accompanied by an illustrated show card. Note also that the definition and show card were given *before* asking about the support for migration with a sponsor versus for prostitution but *after* the direct question on being willing to go with a sponsor oneself and the list experiment. The similar figures from before and after the show card suggest no considerable priming and a preexisting understanding of the concept of human trafficking.

5.2 Empirical Findings

Our regression results are reported in Table 3.²³ Our results can be summarized as follows. First, we find that women have a lower likelihood of considering exposing themselves to trafficking. As argued above, such gender differences may be due to differences in the kind of forced labor such trafficking would entail, where women are more likely to end up in prostitution, an occupation that is both less socially accepted and more psychologically taxing.

Second, respondents with higher migration aspirations are more likely to report a higher willingness to be trafficked, while respondents with higher migration capabilities are less likely to consider human trafficking as a way to leave Edo State. These latter two findings are in line with our theoretical expectations on the roles of migration aspirations and capabilities in the choice for human trafficking as a mode of migration. As an empirical extension, we also look at the constituent components of our capabilities index. As shown Table D.1 in the Appendix, we find that (i) a lack of household income is the most consistent predictor of a higher likelihood to consider trafficking, while (ii) individual levels of education and the existence of a network abroad are less robust predictors. These findings suggest that especially a lack of economic rather than cultural or social capabilities is associated with a higher attractiveness of human trafficking as a mode of migration.

Finally, we consider the role of information in human trafficking. Here, recent exposure to an anti-trafficking campaign is not associated with a lower willingness to be trafficked. While this finding speaks to the mixed evidence on the effectiveness of such campaigns in affecting irregular migration (e.g., Mahmoud and Trebesch, 2010; Archer et al., 2016; Davy, 2016; Björkman Nyqvist et al., 2018; Boittin et al., 2018; Tjaden et al., 2018; Boittin et al., 2019; Obi et al., 2019), it runs counter to our theoretical expectation that information about trafficking may disincentivize it. What is more, we find that respondents who know a woman who has been trafficked and worked in prostitution (as an alternative measure of information about trafficking) are *more likely* to report that they would migrate with a sponsor even though this may involve forced labor.²⁴

In Table D.2 in the Appendix, we show that the aforementioned main results survive several robustness checks, including (i) controlling for additional covariates (e.g., economic expectations and life satisfaction), (ii) separately assessing the role of migration aspirations and capabilities as well as information on the willingness of trafficking of male and female respondents and (iii) restricting our analysis to respondents who

 $^{^{23}{\}rm The}$ reported results are from OLS regressions. They are qualitatively similar when we run logit or probit regressions instead.

²⁴We also test whether there are gendered differences with respect to this information variable. We find that knowing a trafficked female prostitute correlates with a higher trafficking willingness among men, while it is not associated with trafficking considerations among women in statistically significant ways.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Migration Aspirations	0.047^{***} (0.005)			0.048^{***} (0.005)	0.047^{***} (0.005)	0.047^{***} (0.005)	0.042^{***} (0.006)
Migration Capabilities	~ /	-0.049^{***} (0.016)		-0.057^{***} (0.016)	-0.058^{***} (0.016)	-0.019 (0.028)	-0.043 (0.034)
Anti-Trafficking Campaign			-0.005 (0.018)	-0.003 (0.017)		-0.003 (0.017)	-0.057 (0.036)
Knows Trafficked Prostitute					0.041^{**} (0.019)	. ,	. ,
Female	-0.170^{***} (0.017)	-0.184^{***} (0.017)	-0.178*** (0.017)	-0.177^{***} (0.017)	-0.179^{***} (0.017)	-0.177*** (0.017)	-0.178^{***} (0.017)
Aspirations \times Capabilities			. ,	. ,	. ,	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.010)
Campaign \times Aspirations							$0.015 \\ (0.010)$
Campaign \times Capabilities							$\begin{array}{c} 0.081 \\ (0.058) \end{array}$
$\begin{array}{l} {\rm Campaign} \times {\rm Aspirations} \\ \times {\rm Capabilities} \end{array}$							-0.009 (0.017)
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interview Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ward FE Wave FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2.733	2.733	2,733	2,733	2,733	2,733	2.733
R-Squared	0.263	0.245	0.242	0.266	0.268	0.267	0.268

Table 3: Correlates of Human Trafficking Approval

Notes: OLS estimates reported. Demographic controls are gender, age, marital status, number of children and religion. Interview controls are for enumerator and interview date. Constant not reported. Standard errors clustered at the ward level in parentheses. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

are 35 years old or younger as the group of people most likely to migrate and thus resort to human trafficking.

Next, while we have so far studied the roles of aspirations, capabilities and information in trafficking in a ceteris paribus manner, our theoretical discussion above also allows for interaction effects between these variables. For instance, we may expect that individuals who have high migration aspirations *and* low migration capabilities at the same time are especially likely to report a willingness to resort to human trafficking as a way to leave Edo State. To test for such possibilities, we amend our model with a double interaction between the aspiration and capability variables and a triple interaction between the aspirations, capabilities and information variables, respectively. The corresponding regressions results are reported in Table 3, while the interaction effects are also visualized in Figure 6 (interaction between aspirations and capabilities) and Figure 7 (triple interaction).

In Figure 6, we show that individuals with low migration capabilities who also have high migration aspirations are especially likely to report a high willingness to resort to trafficking.²⁵ In Figure 7, we again show that higher migration capabilities are

 $^{^{25}}$ Here, "low migration aspirations" refers to a self-reported aspiration of 1 on a 1-5 scale, while "high migration aspirations" refers to a self-reported aspiration of 5. That is, we compare respondents with the lowest and highest possible reported migration aspirations.

associated with a lower trafficking willingness, where high aspiration individuals tend to respond more strongly. However, there is little obvious effect of information (in the form of exposure to an information campaign) in further shaping the interplay between migration aspirations and capabilities.



Figure 6: Interaction between Migration Aspirations and Migration Capabilities

In sum, the main findings of our regression analysis can be summarized as follows. First, there is strong support for the aspirations-capabilities model we adapted to the case of human trafficking in that individuals are more likely to consider human trafficking as a migration option when they have high migration aspirations or low migration capabilities. Second, on closer inspection, the most influential capability variable associated with a greater likelihood of opting for human trafficking is a lack of household income (i.e., low economic capability), while a lack of education or of a network abroad (i.e., low cultural or social capabilities) appear to be less relevant. Third, individuals who combine high migration aspirations and low migration capabilities are especially likely to consider trafficking.

Finally, our results concerning the role of information in trafficking do not meet theoretical expectations. For instance, we do not find that exposure to trafficking campaigns further shapes human trafficking considerations of low capacity-high aspiration individuals. The same exposure is also not found to matter to trafficking considerations more generally. What is more, contacts with trafficked female prostitutes are even associated with a higher likelihood to consider trafficking. This may



Figure 7: Triple Interaction Effect

mean that our information measures are inadequate. For example, the influence of information campaigns may be only short-lived and not considered trustworthy especially when they are initiated by foreign actors. Similarly, being personally acquainted with a person that was trafficked in the past may mean that respondents receive a particularly positive picture about the trafficking experience (e.g., in terms of material success), given that successful trafficked persons may be more likely to reveal themselves to their families and communities. Alternatively, respondents may already be well-informed about trafficking, so that additional information (e.g., in form of information campaigns) does not factor in their trafficking considerations. In any event, studying the role of information in trafficking warrants additional analyses which we shall carry out in the next section.

6 The Role of Information: Further Evidence for Female Trafficking

The results of the previous section suggest that individuals who would expose themselves to trafficking do not do so because they lack adequate information (e.g., as indicated by recent exposure to a trafficking awareness campaign). In this section, we further investigate the role of information in human trafficking. Here, we especially focus on female human trafficking, given that our earlier results point to the gendered nature of attitudes towards trafficking that is especially driven by the risk of sexual exploitation associated with female trafficking.

6.1 Evaluation of Risk and Income

One potential driver of human trafficking is the underestimation of its risks. If potential migrants perceive trafficking as less dangerous than it is, they may be more inclined to accept it as a migration strategy. To assess whether respondents accurately evaluate the risks of exploitation, interviewers read out the following information snippet about the trafficking of women midway through the survey:

Some people see trafficking as a way out of poverty, but it comes at a high cost. The first contact to a sponsor is often through a close friend or family member. The girls' and women's material success could allow families to buy cars and houses. Yet, the girls and women head off believing they will work a regular job or will only work in prostitution for some months. Traffickers force them to work and stay in commercial sex by changing the working conditions and increasing victims' travel debts. Some victims' parents encourage them to obey their traffickers and endure sexual exploitation to earn money.

This text was carefully designed to reflect both the *perceived* opportunities and the realities of trafficking while ensuring that the risks (false promises, debt bondage, coercion, contact through intrinsically trustworthy persons) outweighed the potential benefits (escape from poverty, material success). We paid close attention to present those potential benefits as beliefs rather than facts. We formulated the snippet in such a manner as to not encourage individuals to select into trafficking after the survey was completed. To test whether information framing influences risk assessments, the snippet was randomly attributed to either the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) or Cable News Network (CNN) or left unsourced (control condition). Importantly, we did not deceive respondents as the text was compiled from information from topical online articles published by both media outlets. We find that the source attribution had no impact on subsequent responses, indicating that risk assessments were not significantly shaped by perceived credibility.

Immediately after receiving this information, respondents were asked: "For those who are approached by a sponsor, do you think the described exploitation happens to..." Response options included "Everyone", "Most people", "Some people", "Very few people" and "No one really". That is, we asked respondents to evaluate the risk of placing oneself in the hands of a human trafficker (the sponsor) in light of the information they had just received.

The results, illustrated in Figure 8, show that the majority of respondents acknowledge significant risks. Almost half of all respondents (42 percent) belief that most or all trafficked individuals experience the described exploitation. Among those who would *not* consider a sponsor, 44 percent believe this, compared to 38 percent of those who would. While there is a significant difference (p=0.021) of five percentage points in expectations, both groups recognize that exploitation is common. The gap between groups suggests that those considering trafficking may be somewhat more optimistic about avoiding the worst outcomes, but their assessments are not dramatically misaligned with broader perceptions.²⁶

In addition to risk perceptions, exaggerated expectations about the economic benefits of trafficking could incentivize individuals to consider it. To evaluate this possibility, survey participants were asked: "How much does a Nigerian woman who went to Europe with a madam and who works in prostitution earn per month (in Naira)?"

We visualize our findings in Figure 9, where values have been converted to Euro using the appropriate 2023 exchange rates. While only about a quarter (26.40 percent) of respondents provided an estimate, those who did gave relatively conservative assessments, with the average estimate falling below 1,000 EUR per month. Moreover, there is little difference in estimated earnings between those willing and unwilling to consider a trafficker, indicating that exaggerated income expectations are unlikely to be a primary driver of trafficking willingness. While it is difficult to provide true figures of the earning potential of trafficked female sex workers, respondents' answers do not point to excessive expectations about the material benefits of female trafficking.

Overall, these findings suggest that differences in risk and income expectations exist but are not extreme. While those willing to consider trafficking exhibit slightly more optimistic views on risk, they are still aware that exploitation is widespread. Similarly, their income expectations are not substantially inflated compared to those rejecting trafficking. This supports the broader argument that misinformation alone does not explain trafficking willingness. Instead, individuals appear to make relatively informed choices within a constrained opportunity structure. While some may exhibit optimism bias regarding their personal risks, their overall assessments remain within a reasonable range of general expectations.

6.2 Self-Deception

Migrants may engage in *self-deception* by downplaying risks to justify their decision to leave. Hernández-Carretero and Carling (2012) show that pre-departure optimism leads migrants to focus on benefits while rejecting adverse outcomes. A similar

²⁶At the same time, Figure 8 also demonstrates that respondents convincingly relate the term "sponsor" to potentially exploitative trafficking outcomes. This speaks to our approach taken throughout this paper of labeling traffickers as "sponsors" in the Edo context.



Figure 8: Expected risk of exploitation by own willingness to expose oneself to trafficking



Figure 9: Expected monthly income for a Nigerian sex worker in Europe by willingness to expose oneself to trafficking

mechanism may apply to trafficking: individuals might underestimate their personal risk of exploitation while acknowledging it for others.

To test for self-deception, we conducted a survey experiment where respondents were asked whether they (women) or their daughters (men) would accept a hypothetical migration offer. The treatment group was presented with a job offer as a maid, while the control group received a university study offer. Male respondents advised their daughters, while females made decisions for themselves.²⁷ Directly after accepting or declining the hypothetical offer (women) or recommending to their daughter to accept or decline (men), both treatment and control group were asked the following question: "How many women out of ten will end up in forced labour or prostitution when being offered a job as a maid abroad?" If self-deception plays a role, those who accept the maid offer should estimate lower trafficking risks compared to those who reject it.

Respondents estimated that 6.7 out of 10 women would face exploitation, closely matching the *IOM DTM Flow Monitoring Surveys* which were collected between December 2015 and November 2016 on the main migration routes to Europe (Galos et al., 2017). According to these surveys, approximately 60 percent of Nigerians were

²⁷The precise wording for the female treatment group was "Imagine someone offered you to work as a maid in another country, would you take the offer?". The control group received the question "Imagine someone offered you the opportunity to study at university in another country, would you take the offer?". For male respondents, the wording changed to e.g. "Imagine someone offered your daughter the opportunity to study at university in another country, would you take the offer?".

exposed to exploitative practices when trafficked. Hence, the respondents estimates again point to a high level of awareness about the risks associated with human trafficking, similar to the findings reported in the previous subsection.

Do respondents who would take the offer as a maid (or advise their daughter accordingly) state lower estimates of exploitation connected to the same offer? We report our estimates in Table 4.²⁸ Because of the different phrasing for men an women, we control for the respondent's gender (columns 1 to 4) and split the sample accordingly (columns 5 and 6). We test whether respondents report different trafficking risk assessments depending on the treatment (columns 1 to 3) alone and depending the treatment in combination with their acceptance of the offer (columns 4 to 6), i.e. our assessment of retroactive self-deception.²⁹ Being primed with the maid offer had no significant effect on risk assessments. Moreover, those who accepted either offer (maid or university) reported lower trafficking risk overall, but without adjusting their estimates retroactively to justify their prior response. Among men, those who advised their daughters to accept an offer (regardless of type) estimated nearly one woman less in forced labor than those who advised against acceptance (column 6).³⁰ However, both men and women who accepted any type of offer or advised for its acceptance, believed that 6.4 out of 10 women would be subject to sexual exploitation when accepting the maid offer, suggesting that not only does retroactive self-deception play a limited role in shaping trafficking risk perceptions but also that respondents' risk assessments appear stable and realistic, supporting the broader argument that trafficking choices are informed rather than naive.

6.3 Recall and Confirmation Bias

Related to the idea of self-deception, potential migrants may unconsciously process trafficking-related information with a bias toward migration. We examine whether trafficking approval (signaling migration willingness) correlates with with how well they can recall information about trafficking and whether there is a recall bias in favor of potential benefits associated with trafficking.

To assess recall, respondents were asked at the end of the survey to recount information from the snippet about human trafficking that was being read to all survey participants in the middle of the survey. Interviewers did not read out the text again or gave any options to the interviewees. They recorded remembered details, matching them to a predefined list or an open field for unmatched responses, which were

 $^{^{28}}$ For this experiment, we had to drop 83 observations from our sample of 2,740 respondents because the survey interface in these cases displayed the survey experiment question incorrectly.

 $^{^{29}\}mathrm{University}$ offers were more attractive than maid offers with a 73 versus 40 percent acceptance rate.

³⁰One might expect that actually having a daughter leads to higher risk assessments among men. However, controlling adding a dummy variable that indicates if men have at least one daughter does not affect our results.

	All (1)	All (2)	All (3)	All (4)	Women (5)	Men (6)
Treatment	0.045	0.107	0.090	0.000	-0.057	-0.202
	(0.108)	(0.158)	(0.158)	(0.182)	(0.260)	(0.264)
Female	-0.177	-0.119	-0.109	-0.180	. ,	
	(0.108)	(0.154)	(0.161)	(0.112)		
Treatment # Female		-0.115	-0.039			
		(0.216)	(0.215)			
Age			0.003		-0.007	0.003
			(0.005)		(0.007)	(0.007)
Education			0.181		0.178	0.166
			$(0.037)^{***}$		$(0.054)^{***}$	$(0.051)^{***}$
Married			0.046		-0.090	0.271
			(0.126)		(0.163)	(0.212)
Acceptance				-0.497	-0.495	-0.787
				$(0.180)^{***}$	$(0.259)^*$	$(0.261)^{***}$
Treatment # Acceptance				-0.226	-0.112	-0.071
				(0.235)	(0.327)	(0.350)
Fixed Effects	No	No	Ward, Wave	Ward, Wave	Ward, Wave	Ward, Wave
R-Squared	0.001	0.001	0.067	0.068	0.105	0.134
Observations	2657	2657	2654	2657	1425	1226

Table 4: Adjusted Risk Assessment: Experimental Results

Notes: OLS results reported. The dependent variable is the response to question: "How many women out of ten will end up in forced labour or prostitution when being offered a job as a maid abroad?". Respondents in the treatment group were previously asked about their agreement to a hypothetical offer to work abroad as a maid (control group: to study abroad) to themselves (women) or their daughters (men) while the control group was asked the same question about an offer to study at university. We test whether respondents report different trafficking risk assessments depending on the treatment (columns 1 to 3) and their acceptance of the offer (columns 4 to 6). Specifications 5 and 6 show the results of column 4 for women and men separately. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Constant not reported. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

categorized post-data collection.

As shown in Table 5, trafficking approval does not correlate with selective memory. Sixteen percent of respondents recalled no information, suggesting reliable data collection. Those willing to expose themselves to trafficking recall both risks (coercion, debt bondage, recruitment by loved ones) and benefits (material success) better than non-approvers. They appear to be overall more receptive to information on this migration mode and have better recollection of three out of the five pieces of information from the text compared to people unwilling to expose themselves to trafficking.

We cannot rule out that certain pieces of trafficking information are better recalled because they are novel to respondents (e.g., the role of friends and family in recruitment).³¹ However, our results indicate that knowledge about female trafficking among Nigerian respondents is generally sound and not distorted by cognitive biases, avoidance behavior, or individual migration aspirations. If anything, trafficking-approving respondents demonstrate greater awareness of female trafficking realities.

³¹Appendix Table D.3 shows the results for the subsample of respondents who were not exposed to an awareness campaign in the four weeks before our survey. For them, the willingness to expose oneself to trafficking additionally increases the likelihood of remembering content about debt bondage and coercion, while there appears to be no difference in the extensive margin of memorizing something from the snippet between those considering trafficking agreement and those not. Also among those for whom our snippet was the only recent information about trafficking, we find no evidence that trafficking approval distorts memory.

	Seen as a way out of poverty by families (1)	Material success (2)	Coercion, debt bondage (3)	False promises, sex work (4)	Contact via friends or family (5)	Any item (6)
Would Consider Trafficking	-0.020 (0.022)	0.042 (0.020)**	$\begin{array}{c} 0.030 \\ (0.023) \end{array}$	$0.056 \\ (0.023)^{**}$	0.057 (0.020)***	0.091 $(0.032)^{***}$
Sample Average Further Controls	0.348 Yes	0.264 Yes	0.482 Yes	0.446 Yes	0.225 Yes	0.841 Yes
Wave FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ward FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2721	2721	2721	2721	2721	2721

Table 5: Willingness to Engage in Trafficking and Selective Memory

Notes: OLS regression results reported. Further controls are for gender, age, education and marital status. Columns 1 to 5 show the correlations between the willingness to engage in trafficking and remembering a specific piece of information about trafficking. Column 6 shows the correlation between willingness to engage in trafficking and a dummy variable being 1 if anything was remembered and 0 otherwise. Constant not reported. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.

These findings support the broader argument that trafficking decisions are informed rather than naive. Individuals willing to consider trafficking are not misremembering or ignoring risks but appear more engaged with trafficking-related information.

7 Conclusion

Human trafficking is often viewed through the lens of deception and coercion, yet our findings challenge the assumption that trafficking decisions are primarily driven by misinformation. Using data from a two-wave representative survey of over 2,700 individuals in Edo State – a key migration and human trafficking hub – we find that a significant share of respondents openly consider human trafficking as a viable migration strategy, despite its inherent risks.

Our analysis yields several insights. First, about a quarter of respondents indicate a willingness to migrate through a trafficker, even when explicitly informed that this could involve forced labor. Second, a survey experiment reveals that direct questioning underestimates the true willingness to rely on trafficking, particularly among women, likely due to the stigma surrounding forced prostitution. Third, individuals willing to consider trafficking tend to have high migration aspirations but low socioe-conomic status – particularly in terms of financial resources and education. Fourth, misinformation does not appear to drive these choices; respondents demonstrate a clear awareness of trafficking risks and provide conservative estimates of potential earnings. Finally, we find no evidence that self-deception or cognitive biases distort trafficking perceptions – those considering trafficking do not selectively downplay risks or inflate benefits.

While our study provides new insights into the motivations behind trafficking, it also has limitations. We measure stated preferences rather than actual behavior – those who say they would consider trafficking may not necessarily follow through. Nevertheless, our findings provide a lower bound for the potential demand for human trafficking, which remains substantial. Additionally, we do not explore the intensity of exploitation within trafficking arrangements. Examining how factors like debt bondage or violence influence perceptions of trafficking remains a critical yet ethically challenging avenue for future research.

Our findings align with the aspirations-capabilities framework (de Haas, 2021) adapted to the case of human trafficking, which highlights that migration decisions are shaped by both the desire to leave and the ability to do so. Trafficking is not chosen because of naivety but rather as a response to constrained migration opportunities. Low capabilities make it less likely that individuals can resort to other forms of regular and irregular migration. For instance, while a lack of financial resources makes the prospect of human trafficking more attractive (because advance money is not necessary), the same lack of financial resources limits human agency by making staying in Nigeria unattractive (due to a lack of economic opportunities) and obstructing alternative modes of irregular migration (e.g., travelling to Europe via plane and then overstaying one's travel visa). That is, becoming receptive to human trafficking or choosing a trafficking arrangement in the face of low migration capabilities (i.e., considerable levels of socioeconomic vulnerability) should not be confused with making the same decision under full freedom of choice.

Trafficking and even sex trafficking from Edo State appear to be surprisingly accepted as a way to make a living and support one's family when abroad. This points to the existence of an established industry of irregular migration that is not just limited to distinct criminal circles as well as to a large divide between people's aspirations and their perceived opportunities. Policy implications follow directly from this. Anti-trafficking awareness campaigns alone may have limited impact since potential migrants are already well aware of the risks. Instead, policies that address the structural drivers of trafficking – such as poverty, limited job opportunities, and barriers to regular migration – are likely to be more effective. Efforts to expand legal migration channels and enhance local economic opportunities, particularly for young women vulnerable to trafficking, could reduce the reliance on traffickers as migration facilitators. Ultimately, human trafficking should not be understood merely as a problem of deception but as a symptom of restricted mobility in a high-aspiration, low-capability context. Addressing this imbalance, rather than simply seeking to dissuade potential migrants, may be the most effective path forward.

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A Variable Measurement

Control Variable	Measu	rement	Year	Table/Figure
Awareness Campaign	Have you listened or come across a ra- dio or tv program at home or else- where talking about trafficking during the past four weeks?	1=Yes, 0=No	2021, 2023	Table 2 (2023 only); Table 3; Table C.1 (2023 only)
Knows Traf- ficked Person	Do you know at least one person who was trafficked and works or has worked in prostitution in another country to support herself and/or her family?	1=Yes, 0=No	2021, 2023	Table 3
Conversation with Traf- ficked	Follow up question on the question cor- responding to "Knows Trafficked Per- son": How many of these did you have at least a conversation with since they have left Nigeria with a trafficker?	1 if respondents reports to have had a conversation with at least one person who was trafficked and works or has worked in prostitution in another coun- try to support herself and/or her family since they have left Nigeria with a traf- ficker and 0 otherwise	2023	Table 2; Table C.1
Risk Assess- ment	After having listened to a short text with information about human traffick- ing, respondents were asked: "For those who are approached by a sponsor, do you think the described exploitation happens to (response options)"	0=No one really; 1=Very few peo- ple; 2=Some people; 3=Most people; 4=Everyone	2023	Table 2; Ta- ble C.1 (both 2023 only)

Table A.1: Control Variable Measurement

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Control Variable	Measu	rement	Year	${\bf Table}/{\bf Figure}$
Migration In- tentions	In 2021, respondents were asked "How much are you considering to move to another location to live outside of Edo ('live' meaning staying there for more than for 3 months). The 2023 survey uses the the same wording but distin- guishes domestic and international mi- gration. We combined 2021 and 2023 responses in the most conservative fash- ion, assuming the lowest value among domestic and international migration intentions to proxy migration inten- tions more generally.	Integer scale from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for "I don't want to move at all" and 5 means "I really want to move"	2021, 2023	Figure ??
Any Fam- ily Member Abroad	Equals 1 if respondents reports any close family member (parent, child, sib- lings, spouses) living abroad and 0 oth- erwise	1=Yes, 0=No	2021, 2023	Table 3
Family Sup- ports Migra- tion	Do you think your family would want you to migrate?	1=Yes, $0=$ No	2021, 2023	Table 3

Control Variable Measurement Continued I

Control Variable	Measu	rement	Year	Table/Figure
Household Economic Situation	Which of the following statements best describes the current economic situa- tion of your household?	0 = We do not have enough money for food; $1 =$ We have enough money for food but not for other basics like cloth- ing, education, or sanitary products; 2 = We have enough money for ba- sics like clothing, education or sanitary products but not enough for expensive durables like a motorbike/power gener- ator; $3 =$ We have enough money to buy some expensive durables like a mo- torbike/power generator; $4 =$ We have enough money to buy almost anything	2021, 2023	Table 3
State of Nige- rian Economy	How would you evaluate the cur- rent economic situation in Nigeria (prospects of finding work, salary, etc.)?	0=Very good; 1= Good; 2=Neither good nor bad; 3=Bad; 4=Very bad	2021, 2023	Table 3
Affected by Violence	During the last 10 years, have you or your close family members been af- fected by violence? By affected we mean you or your close family were threatened by violence, you or one of your close family members was injured or killed or your home or property was destroyed by an attacker	1=Yes, 0=No	2021, 2023	Table 3

Control Variable Measurement Continued II

Control Variable	Measu	rement	Year	Table/Figure
Female	From household member list for ran- dom selection [*]	1=Female, 0=Male	2021, 2023	Table 2 (2023 only); Table 3; Table 4; Table 5
Married	What is your marital status?	1 if respondent is married, 0 else (single, partnership, divorced or widowed)	2021, 2023	Table 2 (2023 only); Table 3; Table 4; Table 5
Age	From household member list for ran- dom selection*	Integer	2021, 2023	Table 2 (2023 only); Table 3; Table 4; Table 5
Education	What is your highest level of education?	0=No formal schooling; 1=Only in- formal schooling (including Koranic schooling); 2=Some primary schooling; 3=Completed primary school; 4=In- termediate school or some secondary school/high school; 5=Completed sec- ondary school/high school; 6=Post- secondary qualifications other than uni- versity; e.g. a diploma or degree from a polytechnic school or college; 7=Some university studies (not com- pleted); 8=Bachelor's degree; 9=Mas- ter's degree	2021, 2023	Table 2 (2023 only); Table 3; Table 4; Table 5

Control Variable Measurement Continued III

*For the random selection of the household members to be interviewed, interviewers were first asked with a chance of 0.5 to enlist the first names and ages of either all female or all male household members. Then one household member was randomly selected from this list. The female and age variables are derived from the selection process directly.

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B List Experiment Diagnostics

37 - 11	Full sa	mple	Con	trol	Treat	ment	37.1
Variable	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p-Value
Female	0.50	0.50	0.49	0.50	0.51	0.50	0.36
Age	32	13	33	13	32	13	0.20
Education	4.76	1.48	4.78	1.49	4.74	1.48	0.68
Married	0.42	0.49	0.43	0.49	0.42	0.49	0.81
Awareness Campaign	0.42	0.49	0.43	0.50	0.41	0.49	0.60
Conversation with Trafficked	0.20	0.40	0.20	0.40	0.20	0.40	0.77
Risk Assessment	0.40	0.49	0.40	0.49	0.39	0.49	0.82
Observations	12	12	56	1	65	1	

Table B.1: Balance Statistics by Treatment Status

Descriptive statistics of demographic controls and potential predictors of misreporting for the full sample, control group and treatment group. The last column reports the p-Value for a two-sided mean comparison t-test.



Figure B.1: Distribution of item count across groups

	Coefficient	Robust SE	\mathbf{Z}	P>z
$\Pr(R_i=0,S_i=1)$	0.030	0.018	1.639	0.949
$\Pr(R_i=0,S_i=0)$	0.098	0.012	8.425	1
$\Pr(R_i=1,S_i=1)$	0.194	0.028	6.884	1
$\Pr(R_i=1,S_i=0)$	0.313	0.024	12.998	1
$\Pr(R_i=2,S_i=1)$	0.073	0.0138	5.295	1
$\Pr(R_i=2,S_i=0)$	0.264	0.024	11.225	1
$\Pr(R_i=3,S_i=1)$	0.014	0.005	3.021	0.999
$\Pr(R_i=3,S_i=0)$	0.015	0.008	1.752	0.960

Table B.2: Test for Design Effects

Notes: Test of the assumption that adding the sensitive item to the list does not change respondents' count of control items (no design effects assumption). The table shows estimates of the joint probabilities of the respondent's answer to the treatment item (S_i) and number of control items (R_i) that the respondent would consider. For each possible item count, we test that our data only allows positive treatment effects whose size corresponds at most to one additional item. Bonferroni-adjusted p-values, where p-values of less than 0.05 would indicate design effects, i.e., that respondents' answers to the control items differ depending on their treatment status. See Blair and Imai (section 3.1 of 2012) for further details.

C Alternative List Experiment Estimates

Our list experiment results suggest that (1) being exposed to the treatment makes it more likely to report a larger number of items the respondent agrees with and (2) there is a heterogeneous treatment effect with respect to gender. Below, we study whether we come to the same conclusion when we use the approaches by Imai (2011) and Eady (2017).

First, Imai (2011) proposed a maximum likelihood estimator for efficient multivariate regression analysis with the item count technique to uncover how respondent characteristics such as gender affect the probability of affirmatively answering the sensitive question.

Second, Eady (2017) extends the approaches of Imai (2011) and Aronow et al. (2015) by using the answers to the direct question (in our case, concerning approval of human trafficking) as auxiliary information to gauge a misreport model. The misreport model allows us to consider how specific covariates such as gender affect the probability of misreporting under the assumption of monotonicity. Here, the monotonocity assumption implies that respondents do not answer the sensitive item affirmatively in the list experiment setting, while answering the direct question negatively, or vice versa. When using the estimator of Eady (2017), we consequently exclude the 10 respondents who clearly violate negative monotonicity, i.e. those who answered affirmatively to the direct question but would consider none of the items enlisted on the long list.

The maximum likelihood estimates associated with the approaches by Imai (2011) and Eady (2017) are reported in Table C.1. The estimates indicate that gender is both a source of heterogeneity in the prevalence of trafficking approval and a source of heterogeneity in the predicted probability of misreporting. While the survey participants' response to the direct question is a useful lower bound concerning approval of human trafficking in Edo State, the list experiment results suggest that underreporting in approval among women is prevalent. Thus, the additional estimates speak to the idea that social desirability bias may matter to individual approval of trafficking, potentially due to the social stigma associated with (gendered) sexual exploitation in the context of human trafficking.

Estimator	Imai (2011)		Eady (2017)	
	Estimated	Estimated	Estimated	Estimated
	approval	approval	approval	Misreporting
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	-0.849***			0.220
	(0.257)			(0.260)
Female		-1.113*	-0.508	1.577^{***}
		(0.629)	(0.402)	(0.529)
Awareness Campaign		-0.867	-0.200	-0.248
		(0.584)	(0.347)	(0.498)
Conversation with Trafficked		0.199	0.453	0.062
		(0.784)	(0.455)	(0.572)
Risk Assessment		0.105	-0.052	0.356
		(0.301)	(0.211)	(0.313)
Observations	1212	1212	1202	1202

Table C.1: Maximum Likelihood Estimates

Notes: Maximum likelihood estimation results for the list experiment where "Treatment" equals 1 for having been shown the longer list including the sensitive item (engaging in trafficking) and 0 otherwise. The dependent variable is the number of items the respondent would consider. Columns (1) and (2) show MLE estimates according to Imai (2011) with the logistic function restricting predicted probabilities to the unit interval. Column (2) shows how demographic characteristics and variables that capture a respondent's information about trafficking (exposure to awareness campaigns, having had a conversation with a returned traffickee and believing that foreign job offers by sponsors lead to exploitative for most or all people) affect a respondent's willingness to engage in trafficking. Columns (3) and (4) show results following Eady (2017) using auxiliary information from the direct question. Observations that clearly violate negative monotonicity, i.e. respondents who answer affirmatively to the direct question but "0" to the long list, are dropped. Column (3), like column (2) shows how different variables predict the willingness to engage in trafficking. Column (4) captures how these variables make a respondent more or less likely to misreport in the direct question. Mean approval in the direct assessment is 24.17 percent. Coefficients can be interpreted based on predicted values or odds ratios similarly to logistic regression coefficients. Constant not reported. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

D Robustness: Correlates of Human Trafficking Willingness

Table D.1: Individual Components of Migration Capabilities Index

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Migration Aspirations	0.046***	0.048***	0.047***	0.048***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Household Income	-0.024***			-0.019**
	(0.009)			(0.009)
Level of Education		-0.018***		-0.016***
		(0.005)		(0.005)
Any Family Member Abroad			-0.009	0.002
			(0.023)	(0.023)
Anti-Trafficking Campaign	-0.006	-0.001	-0.007	-0.001
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Female	-0.173***	-0.180***	-0.171^{***}	-0.180***
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interview Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ward FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,733	2,733	2,733	2,733
R-Squared	0.265	0.266	0.263	0.267

Notes: OLS estimates reported. Demographic controls are gender, age, marital status, number of children and religion. Interview controls are for enumerator and interview date. Constant not reported. Standard errors clustered at the ward level in parentheses. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Migration Aspirations	0.043***	0.047***	0.043***	0.067***	0.039***
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Migration Capabilities	-0.055***	-0.064***	-0.062***	-0.074***	-0.061**
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Anti-Trafficking Campaign	-0.003	-0.008	-0.008	-0.031	0.024
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.026)	(0.025)
Female	-0.175***	-0.171***	-0.169***	-0.076*	-0.189***
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.039)	(0.024)
Female \times Migration Aspirations				-0.035***	
				(0.010)	
Female \times Migration Capabilities				0.039	
				(0.029)	
Female \times Anti-Trafficking Campaign				0.057^{*}	
				(0.032)	
Age	-0.003***	-0.003***	-0.003***	-0.003***	0.002
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Married	-0.005	-0.006	-0.006	-0.003	-0.015
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.033)
No. of Children	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.002	-0.009
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.010)
Family Supports Migration	0.043^{**}		0.041^{**}		
	(0.020)		(0.020)		
Life Satisfaction	0.009		0.008		
	(0.006)		(0.006)		
Current Economic Situation in Nigeria	-0.009		-0.012		
	(0.008)		(0.009)		
Expectations about Future of Nigerian Economy		0.007	0.008		
		(0.006)	(0.006)		
Trust in Other People		0.001	0.001		
		(0.002)	(0.002)		
Knows (Former) Migrant		0.049^{***}	0.048^{***}		
		(0.016)	(0.016)		
Religion Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interview Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ward FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,733	2,733	2,733	2,733	$1,\!673$
R-Squared	0.268	0.269	0.272	0.271	0.301

Table D.2: Additional Robustness Checks

Notes: OLS estimates reported. Religion controls are for Islam, Christianity, other or no religion. Interview controls are for enumerator and interview date. Specification (5) only considers respondent who are 35 or younger. Constant not reported. Standard errors clustered at the ward level in parentheses. *p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

E Robustness: Recall and Confirmation Bias

	Seen as a way out of poverty by families (1)	Material success (2)	Coercion, debt bondage (3)	False promises, sex work (4)	Contact via friends or family (5)	Any item (6)
Would Consider	-0.007	0.065	0.062	0.088	0.074	0.020
Trafficking	(0.029)	$(0.026)^{**}$	(0.029)**	$(0.030)^{***}$	(0.024)***	(0.016)
Sample Average	0.328	0.237	0.447	0.433	0.192	0.831
Further Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ward FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1706	1706	1706	1706	1706	1706

Table D.3: Willingness to Engage in Trafficking and Selective Memory for Those Without Recent Awareness Campaign Exposure

Notes: OLS regression results reported for respondents not exposed to an awareness campaign in the four weeks before the survey. Further controls are for gender, age, education and marital status. Columns 1 to 5 show the correlations between the willingness to engage in trafficking and remembering a specific piece of information about trafficking. Column 6 shows the correlation between willingness to engage in trafficking and a dummy variable being 1 if anything was remembered and 0 otherwise. Constant not reported. Robust standard errors in brackets. * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.