

Slavery Report: Nigeria

Latest Reports

Today, Nigeria has the largest number of people enslaved in the entirety of Sub-Saharan Africa. As of 2018, the Global Slavery Index estimates that more than [1.3 million](#) are enslaved — a massive increase from around [875,500](#) in 2016.

Much of the increase likely results from the recent rise of *jihad* organizations like Boko Haram, who are the main source of contemporary slave [raids](#). The most infamous recent incident of a slave raid was Boko Haram's [abduction](#) of 276 Christian schoolgirls in the town of Chibok on April 14, 2014 which inspired Michelle Obama's "[#BringBackOurGirls](#)" hashtag. Most slaves are young [girls](#), kidnapped and kept as the concubines of the Islamic soldiers.

History and Background

Nigeria has been a major center of black slavery for centuries. The Portuguese and Spanish plied the coast hunting for slaves and making deals with both black and Arab slave raiders as early as [1471](#). But with the spread of Islam centuries earlier, slavery spread as well, as Islamized blacks enslaved non-Muslim blacks. While Europeans likely encouraged the growth of slavery through increasing overseas demand, decades after all white nations banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavery persisted on an enormous scale within the Muslim caliphates. By the nineteenth century, it is estimated that in the northern Nigerian province of Kano alone — the most prosperous within the powerful Sokoto caliphate — as much as [half](#) of the total population were slaves.

Once Nigeria was conquered by the British and all caliphates defeated, slavery was officially abolished in 1916, and then again (in the north) in 1936. With independence in 1960, much subsequent anti-slavery [legislation](#) was passed, but, as in [Mauritania](#), most government action has proved fruitless. Decades of *jihad* on the part of the Muslim population against non-Muslim blacks inevitably caused the slave population to be on the rise once again. In fact, today, Nigerians living in the foothills of the Mandara Mountains near the border with Cameroon [fear](#) the slave raiders of Boko Haram just as much as their ancestors feared [Hamman Yaji](#), the brutal Fulani Muslim chieftain who terrorized the Magdali region in the beginning of the last century, regularly kidnapping and selling his non-Muslim subjects into slavery.

Experiences of the Slaves

As *The Guardian* [reported](#) on October 27, 2014, women captured by Boko Haram tell stories of horrendous treatment:

Testimonies from girls who escaped their captors — along with others abducted in separate incidents who fled or were released — and gathered by Human Rights Watch have built a picture of violence and terror inside Boko Haram's camps....

The women and girls were held in eight different camps for periods ranging from two days to three months, after being taken from their homes, while working on farms, fetching water or at school. The report said that abducted women and girls held by Boko Haram ranged in age from infancy to 65.

“They and many others they saw in the camps were subjected to physical and psychological abuse; forced labour; forced participation in military operations, including carrying ammunition or luring men into ambush; forced marriage to the captors; and sexual abuse, including rape,” [Human Rights Watch’s] [report](#) says. “In addition, they were made to cook, clean and perform other household chores. Others served as porters, carrying the loot stolen by the insurgents from villages and towns they had attacked.”

A 15-year-old girl who was held in a Boko Haram camp for four weeks in 2013 described being forced to marry a militant more than twice her age. “After we were declared married I was ordered to live in his cave but I always managed to avoid him. He soon began to threaten me with a knife to have sex with him, and when I still refused he brought out his gun, warning that he would kill me if I shouted. Then he began to rape me every night. He was a huge man in his mid-30s and I had never had sex before. It was very painful and I cried bitterly because I was bleeding afterwards.”

A social worker who has dealt with victims of Boko Haram violence told HRW that the rape of abducted women had been underreported because of the stigma and shame attached to sexual abuse in northern Nigeria.

A 19-year-old who was raped said: “I could not tell anyone what happened, not even my husband. I still feel so ashamed and cheated.” Another woman with her, who was also raped, “vowed never to speak of it again as she was single and believes that news of her rape would foreclose her chances of marriage.”

While the brutal *jihad* waged by Boko Haram and also Fulani Muslims against the government in Abuja and the 40% Christian [minority](#) account for the most recent increase in the slave population within the country, a great many — as again exemplified by [Mauritania](#) — have likely been bred into servitude over many generations.

Nigeria is also unique in that slavery extends not only to those blacks living within its borders, but also many hundreds of miles away. Nigerians, among many other populations, seeking economic opportunity in Europe are often enslaved by African or Arab traffickers in Libya while they wait to cross the Mediterranean. (See Libya [report](#).)

A January 2, 2018 BBC [report](#) interviewed Nigerians who were eventually deported back to Nigeria after being detained in Libya:

“It’s because of money,” ...said [Agen Akhere], pleading and craning his neck to get closer to the microphone. “My friend, he’s still there. His name is Samson. He’s still there, in Gharyan.”

Gharyan is a prison in the mountains about 100km (60 miles) south of Tripoli. And it is a place where all of the migrants we spoke to were taken before they made it home.

Again and again they tell the same story, of detainees horrifically abused by prison guards, starved, beaten, raped — and traded as slaves.

“They come to our caravans [cells], they pick six persons to do their dirty jobs to do farming, brick-laying work,” says Lucky Akhanene. He returned in the same group as Mr Akhere and was held in Gharyan for four months.

“They give us out to their friends. They don’t pay us. It’s just hard labour, if you’re not fast with your job you get beaten.”

Three separate people spoke about being leased out by the prison for day labour like this. Others said they were sold.

Jackson Uwumarogie and Felix Efe were arrested “on top of the sea,” off the coast of Libya and taken to Gharyan.

They said one night a prison guard came and counted out 20 men, he took them outside and blindfolded them.

Mr Uwumarogie overheard the men talking about a price — 1,000 dinars (\$735; £550). They were put into a van and taken to a farm.

Political Developments

In response to the enslavement of Nigerians in Libya, on August 29, 2018, British prime minister Theresa May [announced](#) a plan which included emergency funding to combat slavery and provide counseling services for former slaves deported back to Nigeria. No nation, including Nigeria, has yet announced measures to free the slaves already within the country, or to stop *jihad* gangs like Boko Haram from continuing to capture new slaves.