From Labor Room to Labor Market: The Paradox of Motherhood and Gender Exploitation in Nigeria's Baby Factories

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Abstract— "From Labor Room to Labor Market: The Paradox of Motherhood and Gender Exploitation in Nigeria's Baby Factories" explores the disturbing rise of baby factories in Nigeria, linking them to deeply entrenched patriarchal and capitalist structures. This article reveals how societal pressure on women to bear children, coupled with the stigmatization of infertility and out-of-wedlock pregnancy, fuels the demand for illicit child acquisition. Vulnerable young women, often economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized, are lured or forced into these exploitative facilities under false pretenses of employment or shelter. The baby factories in Nigeria operate as clandestine networks where women's reproductive labor is commodified—turning motherhood into a transactional enterprise. The exploitation is intensified by capitalist motives, which reduce women to reproductive vessels and newborns to marketable goods. Male children, valued more highly, reflect patriarchal gender preferences. The article critiques how women's reproductive agency is stripped away, situating baby factories within a broader context of reproductive slavery and gendered economic violence. Drawing on Marxist feminist theory, the author argues that capitalism and patriarchy jointly sustain the exploitation, perpetuating a cycle of poverty, dehumanization, and trafficking. The essay calls for systemic change—advocating for sex education, economic empowerment, legal reform, and public awareness to dismantle the structures enabling this crisis. Ultimately, the article asserts that ending baby factories requires confronting the intersectional injustices of gender, capitalism, and poverty to restore women's dignity and ensure reproductive rights and justice. The fight against baby factories is a fight for human rights and social equity.

Keywords: Labor Room; Motherhood; Gender Exploitation; Baby factories.

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INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, there is a strong cultural emphasis on procreation, with the ability to bear children often viewed as a crucial indicator of social rank and personal fulfillment. The social notion of womanhood is inextricably linked with parenthood, placing tremendous pressure on women to fulfill their reproductive obligations. Couples dealing with infertility usually face substantial psychosocial distress, with women bearing the burden of societal expectations (Usendok, et al., 2022). The stigma associated with childlessness and the feeling of marital inadequacy can drive desperate measures, such as the use of so-called "baby factories" to acquire children—often motivated by a desire to produce a male heir (Nwogu, 2014).

Simultaneously, Nigerian traditions forbid pregnancy outside of marriage, rendering many young, unmarried women marginalized and vulnerable. While seeking sanctuary, these women frequently end up in facilities where they are exploited under the pretext of protection and support (Makinde et al., 2017). The complex interplay of rigid cultural norms, socioeconomic inequality, and flawed adoption processes—particularly in southern Nigeria—has created an environment conducive to the proliferation of such operations. Furthermore, the current political and economic climate has led to a rise in human trafficking and kidnapping, complicating the terrain of child acquisition and commodification (Okoli et al., 2020).

Examining the horrific realities of baby factories exacerbates the paradox of motherhood in Nigeria. Teenage girls in these facilities are subjected to unethical gynecological practices, including forced labor and crude methods of delivery (UNODC, 2016; Ota, et al., 2022). A police investigation at Ahamefula Babies Home in Umuaka, Imo State, revealed that teenage girls were confined to dilapidated apartments, surrounded by high perimeter fences topped with broken bottles. They were not permitted to leave and were subjected to sexual assault to maintain continuous pregnancies. During a police probe in 2014, twenty-seven pregnant teenagers were rescued (BBC News, 2014).

The proliferation of baby factories has become so alarming that in 2014 alone, approximately 2,500 teenage girls were rescued from such facilities in southeastern Nigeria (Makinde et al., 2017). A detailed study by Huntley (2013) suggests that many of these girls were deceived with offers of employment or safe abortions, only to be detained and forced to give birth. In some cases, pregnant girls were trafficked before delivery. The issue of baby factories—facilities that produce and sell newborn babies as commodities—is both a national disgrace and a crime against humanity. Like other transborder crimes such as drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and prostitution, baby factories are becoming increasingly prevalent across Nigeria. For example, in 2018, the Lagos State Government closed three baby mills and rescued 162 abandoned newborns (Punch, 2018; Okoko & Ahamefule, 2023). In the same year, the Abia State Police

Command paraded a couple who sold their two-month-old infant, underscoring the systemic failures that perpetuate this illegal trade. Currently, the baby factory industry operates as a black market with clandestine transactions, driven by a range of socio-cultural factors. These include the cultural emphasis on reproduction as a means of preserving genetic heritage and lineage, the demonization of infertility and childlessness, and the stigmatization of adolescent pregnancy and single motherhood (Okoli et al., 2020).

From a Marxist feminist standpoint, baby factories exemplify the commodification of women's reproductive capacities, transforming their bodies into sites of economic exchange and power. Capitalist exploitation intersects with patriarchal oppression, turning women—particularly those who are young, impoverished, and marginalized—into reproductive laborers. The act of detaching women's reproductive labor from their agency demonstrates how capitalist structures exploit their bodies for profit. In this context, women's wombs serve as direct instruments of capital accumulation, while their children are rendered as exchangeable commodities (Federici, 2004). This essay explores how capitalism and patriarchal structures contribute to the growth of baby factories and the exploitation of women's reproductive labor within the capitalist system.

CREATION OF THE BABY FACTORIES BY THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM

The disturbing phenomenon of "baby factories" in Nigeria, where young women are exploited for the purpose of producing children for sale, presents a stark illustration of how capitalist systems, intersecting with local socio-cultural factors, can create an environment ripe for human trafficking and the commodification of life (Huntley, 2013). While poverty and social stigma are often cited as primary drivers, a deeper analysis reveals how the logic of capitalist accumulation, the commodification of reproductive labor, and the legal vacuums that exist within the Nigerian context all contribute to the persistence and proliferation of these horrific institutions. The existence of baby factories underscores a troubling reality: the human body—and the life it can create—can be reduced to a mere commodity within a distorted marketplace of desperation and greed (Federici, 2004).

At the surface level, the "baby factory" phenomenon is fueled by a potent combination of poverty and social stigma. Nigeria faces significant economic challenges, with a large percentage of its population living below the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This economic vulnerability disproportionately affects women, who often lack access to education, financial services, and formal employment opportunities (Makinde et al., 2017; Okon & Ahamefule, 2023). As a result, young women, particularly those from rural areas or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, become susceptible to the false promises of traffickers, who offer them a

seemingly easy means of making money through breeding babies. Simultaneously, the intense social stigma associated with childlessness in Nigeria creates a thriving market for babies among couples desperate to avoid societal ridicule. Giving birth is deeply embedded in the culture, and couples unable to have their own children often face humiliation—even from family members. This high demand for babies by infertile couples, coupled with an unwillingness to engage with formal adoption processes due to additional stigma and bureaucratic hurdles, drives many to seek children through illicit channels such as baby factories (Okoli et al., 2020).

The exploitation of women in baby factories is often attributed to economic desperation rather than true voluntariness. Poverty and limited options push vulnerable women into these arrangements, with financial incentives serving as a powerful lure. However, some scholars argue that moral decadence and materialism, driven by capitalist consumerism, also fuel this issue (Bales, 2007). The erosion of traditional values and the pursuit of wealth exacerbate the problem, making human commodification a disturbing but seemingly inevitable outcome when survival is at stake. Ultimately, both socio-economic hardship and shifting moral landscapes contribute to the persistence of baby factories in Nigeria.

Capitalism's relentless quest to commodify every facet of life has now extended to the most intimate and personal domain: reproduction. In the unsettling reality of "baby factories," young women's bodies are stripped of their humanity and reduced to mere vessels to produce marketable goods—children (Federici, 2004). These women are treated as expendable instruments of reproduction, with some even forced into sexual exploitation and servitude. The commodification becomes starkly apparent when examining the price disparities between male and female babies. Male children are often priced higher, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal preferences that assign greater value to male offspring (Makinde et al., 2017). This harsh reality underscores how market logic infiltrates the very essence of human life, dictating worth based on gender.

To compound this grim scenario, many young girls fall victim to abduction and forced impregnation. They endure unimaginable trauma as they are sexually exploited—even during pregnancy—as part of a brutal cycle of abuse and exploitation. Their existence becomes a tragic tale of violence and dehumanization, driven by the insatiable capitalist appetite for profit. The baby factory phenomenon thus epitomizes the chilling extent to which capitalism can exploit human bodies, exposing the brutal intersection of profit motives, patriarchal norms, and human suffering. In this grim reality, the concept of motherhood itself is distorted beyond recognition. Instead of being a cherished and celebrated role, it becomes a cold, calculated business transaction. The women, often coerced or manipulated into these exploitative arrangements, are stripped of agency and dignity. Their identities are reduced to mere numbers in a ledger, valued solely for their reproductive capacity.

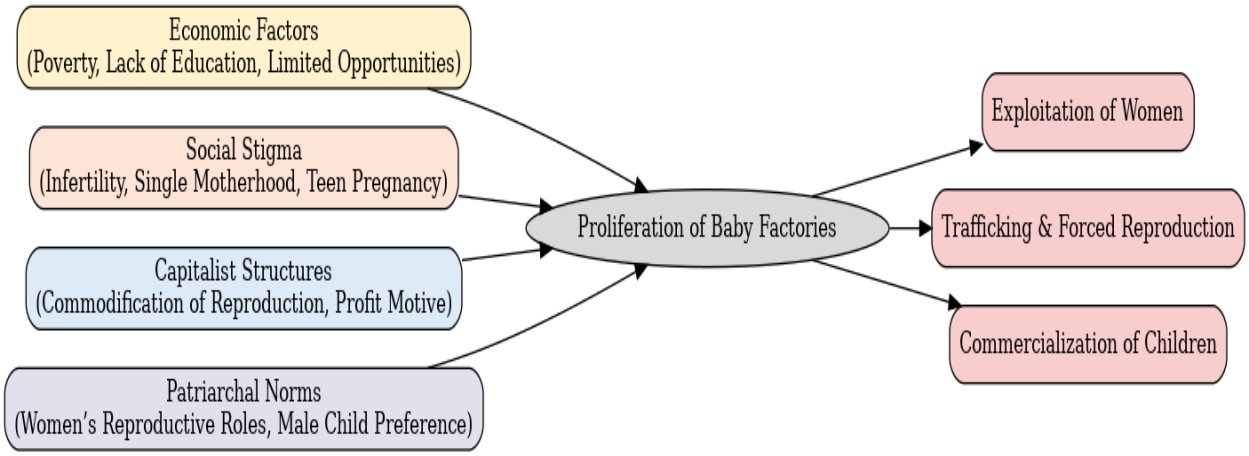
PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURE AND CONTINUITY OF BABY FACTORY

Patriarchy enforces societal norms that limit women's autonomy over their bodies and reproductive choices. Makinde et al. (2017) explain that in many patriarchal societies, women are often viewed primarily as child-bearers, reinforcing the idea that their worth is tied to reproduction. This perception makes it easier for baby factories to exploit women, as they are often coerced, manipulated, or forced into these exploitative environments under the guise of cultural or economic necessity. Mofokeng (2021) argues that patriarchal structures marginalize women in economic spheres, making them more susceptible to exploitation. Women who lack financial independence may be deceived into joining baby factories under the pretense of job opportunities, only to be held captive and forced into reproductive exploitation.

Many women who end up in baby factories are initially lured with false promises of jobs, education, or shelter. Given their limited financial options, they may accept these offers, only to find themselves trapped in exploitative conditions. This aligns with findings from Okunola and Ikuomola (2010), who note that young girls—particularly from low-income backgrounds—are often deceived into baby factories under the pretense of domestic work or apprenticeship opportunities. Further supporting this, Bales (2007) describes how economic desperation often forces women into exploitative labor, including forced pregnancy in trafficking networks. He argues that modern slavery thrives in societies where women have limited economic independence, as traffickers exploit financial insecurity to control their victims. This is evident in Nigeria, where baby factories function as a form of reproductive slavery, preying on women who lack viable alternatives for survival.

In patriarchal societies, girls are often denied education or forced into early marriage, limiting their opportunities for economic independence. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2016) report on trafficking in Nigeria found that most women trafficked for reproductive exploitation had little to no formal education, making them more vulnerable to deception. A study by Olateru-Olagbegi and Ikpeme (2006) also connects gender disparities in education to trafficking, noting that when girls are denied schooling, they are more likely to seek alternative means of survival, often ending up in exploitative labor. The existence of baby factories thus reflects the broader issue of economic dependency, where women's financial reliance on male-dominated structures makes them susceptible to being used as tools for reproduction and profit.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Source: Author

The conceptual framework diagram titled *"Proliferation of Baby Factories"* provides a visual representation of the complex and interconnected causes and consequences of the baby factory phenomenon in Nigeria. At the center of this framework is the proliferation of baby factories, driven by four main systemic factors: economic factors, social stigma, capitalist structures, and patriarchal norms. These causal forces converge to sustain a system of reproductive exploitation, resulting in three major outcomes: exploitation of women, trafficking and forced reproduction, and the commercialization of children.

First, economic factors—particularly poverty, lack of education, and limited employment opportunities—create conditions of desperation among vulnerable women, especially those from rural or displaced communities. Many of these women are lured into baby factories with false promises of employment or safe accommodation, only to be detained and forced into bearing children for sale. Their reproductive capacity becomes a source of profit for exploiters operating within informal and illicit markets. Economic deprivation, therefore, makes women susceptible to manipulation and reduces their ability to resist exploitative arrangements (Adefolalu, 2021).

Second, social stigma plays a dual role in both supply and demand dynamics. On the supply side, stigmatization of unmarried pregnancy or teenage motherhood pushes many young women into secrecy and isolation, making them easy targets for traffickers (IOM, 2021). On the demand side, infertility—particularly among married couples—is socially condemned, with an intense cultural expectation to bear children, especially male heirs. This drives some individuals to bypass legal adoption processes and obtain

babies through underground markets, which indirectly fuels the baby factory business (UNFPA, 2019).

Third, capitalist structures contribute to the commodification of reproductive labor. Capitalism, in this context, treats women's reproductive capacities and children as commodities in a profit-driven system. Baby factory operators prioritize financial gain, often caring little for the health or rights of the mothers. The entire reproductive process—from conception to childbirth—is monetized, with male children typically priced higher due to cultural biases that assign more value to them (Fraser, 2016). This economic logic transforms the act of childbirth into a business transaction.

Fourth, patriarchal norms reinforce gendered expectations and inequalities. Nigerian society tends to define women through their ability to bear children, limiting their autonomy and reinforcing the idea that their bodies exist for reproductive purposes. This patriarchal ideology not only makes it socially acceptable to control women's reproductive functions but also increases the demand for babies, especially boys, as a symbol of masculine legacy and family honor (Ogbonnaya, 2020). These four intersecting drivers lead to three major consequences.

First, the exploitation of women occurs through coercion, confinement, and repeated forced pregnancies. Second, the system fuels trafficking and forced reproduction, where women are abducted, impregnated, and monitored until they deliver. Finally, there is the commercialization of children, where babies are treated as marketable goods and exchanged in clandestine transactions, often without regard to their rights or wellbeing. In sum, the diagram underscores how structural violence, cultural pressure, and economic desperation converge to sustain a system of reproductive exploitation in Nigeria, making the eradication of baby factories not just a criminal justice issue, but a challenge of social equity and human rights.

REPRODUCTIVE EXPLOITATION AS A FORM OF GENDERED ECONOMIC VIOLENCE

Eze (2021) critiques the patriarchal commodification of women's reproductive capacities, arguing that baby factories represent an extreme form of gendered economic violence. In many cases, women in baby factories are treated as mere vessels for childbirth, with no autonomy over their bodies. Their babies are sold for profit, while they receive little to no compensation. This reflects a deeply rooted system where women's reproductive labor is valued only in terms of economic gain.

In pre-capitalist societies, women's reproductive roles, while often constrained by patriarchal norms, were nonetheless embedded within a network of social and communal relations (Federici, 2004). With the rise of capitalism, however, these roles were increasingly separated from the sphere of social reproduction and subjected to the

logic of economic production (Fraser, 2016). This separation paved the way for the commodification of reproductive labor, where women's bodies and their capacity to bear children are treated as resources to be exploited for profit. "Baby factories" represent the extreme end of this spectrum, where young women are essentially reduced to "reproductive machines," their pregnancies and offspring generating income for those who control and exploit them.

The women are treated as expendable instruments of reproduction, or as mere reproductive machines for personal enrichment; some of the girls are used as sex slaves (UNODC, 2022). This is reinforced by the fact that most of the girls are recruited through deceit or false promises. This commodification process strips women of their agency and dignity, turning motherhood into a purely transactional enterprise.

In "baby factories," the concept of motherhood is completely divorced from its traditional social and emotional context and is instead defined solely by its economic value (Ogbonnaya, 2020). The act of bearing a child, traditionally associated with love, care, and familial bonds, becomes a commercial transaction, where the "product" is a newborn infant ready for sale. This commodification extends beyond the act of childbirth itself, encompassing the entire process of pregnancy and prenatal care. Traffickers control all aspects of the surrogate mothers' lives. A typical 'baby factory' is a restricted harbor, with victims often hoodwinked using charms and psychological intimidation (IOM, 2021). The "factory" operators often disregard the health and well-being of the pregnant women, prioritizing profit over the welfare of both mother and child. The result is a perversion of motherhood, where the inherent value of human life is subordinated to the demands of the marketplace.

The reduction of motherhood to a business transaction necessitates a process of dehumanization of both the women and the children involved. To treat women as mere "reproductive machines," it is necessary to deny their individuality, autonomy, and emotional needs. Pregnant girls in 'baby factories' are sometimes abducted and held incommunicado against their will; some young girls are kidnapped and forcefully impregnated (Human Rights Watch, 2020). To justify the sale of infants, it is necessary to disregard their inherent worth as human beings and to view them as commodities to be bought and sold. This dehumanization is often reinforced by the social stigma surrounding unwed motherhood, which allows traffickers to exploit vulnerable women who fear social ostracism. The objectification of women and children in "baby factories" is not simply a byproduct of the economic system but a necessary condition for its continued operation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The commodification of motherhood in "baby factories" is a symptom of deeper systemic problems rooted in capitalist exploitation and patriarchal control (Fraser, 2016). Addressing this crisis requires more than simply shutting down individual "baby factories" or prosecuting traffickers. It demands a fundamental shift in societal attitudes towards women, reproduction, and economic justice. By challenging the patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender inequality, advocating for economic empowerment for women, and creating robust legal frameworks that protect reproductive rights, it is possible to dismantle the structures that allow "baby factories" to flourish. Ultimately, the fight against "baby factories" is a fight for the recognition of women's inherent dignity and the intrinsic value of human life—values that stand in stark contrast to the cold calculus of capitalist commodification.

Unless it is clearly stated that surrogacy is illegal, then there is no way to end the "baby factories." It is therefore imperative that the government act to legally regulate surrogacy and infant adoption. The first step is to ensure that women are aware of safe sex practices and are encouraged to pursue education. In addition, it is important for the government to enact policies that benefit everyone to reduce the desperation that can lead to the baby factory business (UNFPA, 2019).

One of the most crucial steps in preventing the exploitation of women in "baby factories" is to empower them with knowledge about their own bodies and reproductive health. This can be achieved through comprehensive sex education programs that are accessible to all, particularly young girls in rural areas. Such programs must go beyond basic biology to address issues of consent, healthy relationships, and the prevention of unintended pregnancies and STIs (WHO, 2020). By providing young women with the tools to make informed decisions about their sexual health, we can reduce their vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking.

Moreover, poverty forces many women into exploitative "baby factories." Economic empowerment through education, skills training, and employment reduces their vulnerability to trafficking. Governments must support women-owned businesses, promote financial literacy, and eliminate workplace discrimination. The World Bank has allocated $500 million to Nigeria's Women Program Scale-Up to improve women's livelihoods (World Bank, 2023). However, barriers like limited access to finance, markets, and digital literacy persist. True empowerment goes beyond income—it restores agency, enabling women to make informed life choices.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies and investments to create sustainable opportunities for women and enhance their economic independence. Some may argue that focusing on safe sex education and economic policies infringes on personal autonomy, believing women should make their own choices, even if exploitative. However, this perspective ignores how poverty coerces women into baby

factories, leaving them with no real options. True autonomy requires education, economic opportunities, and informed decision-making.

Eliminating baby factories demands government action, women's empowerment, and anti-trafficking policies. Addressing the root causes—poverty and lack of access to resources—can create a future where such exploitation no longer exists. Without decisive action, efforts to combat "baby factories" will remain ineffective, perpetuating injustice and inequality. Therefore, from "Labor Room to Labor Market: The Paradox of Motherhood and Gender Exploitation in Nigeria's Baby Factories," the fight against reproductive exploitation is a battle for women's rights, economic justice, and the restoration of dignity to motherhood.

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