

The Vocal William Wilberforce: An Insignia for Slavery Eradication and the Necessity of Revisiting the Justice Legacy for Modern Slavery Eradication in Nigeria

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Abstract

Modern slavery in Nigeria is a huge concern that calls for attention; research proves an estimated 1.6 million people suffering from modern slavery, this should be about 7.8 people out of every thousand facing and enduring the torture and evil of modern slavery. Nigeria as a country has a high vulnerability score of 76 out of 100; among other nations. The level of modern slavery in Nigeria has crippled the mind of many citizens and renders them fruitless through conflicts, particularly in the Northeast region. The range of forced labor, forced commercial sexual exploitation, child marriage, just to mention a few, has enslaved many Nigeria citizens with no or little hope for survival. This essay weighs the historical evidences, and asserts that efforts invested by William Wilberforce in eradicating slavery can illuminate the mind and give a way-out of Nigerian current state of modern slavery. The justice legacy of William Wilberforce as a figurative insignia of slavery eradication is indeed relevant in this present time.

Key words: William Wilberforce, slavery, Justice, “insignia”

Modern Slavery in Nigeria, An Overview

Modern slavery is a pervasive issue that affects most Nigerians in a way that individuals are forced to act against their will, it is a violation of human rights that encompasses a range of exploitative practices, including human trafficking, forced labor, child marriage, child exploitation, sexual exploitation, and many traumatic experiences. Modern slavery in Nigeria also manifest under the influence of socio-economic challenges, political instability, cultural practices, just to mention a few. This paper argues the historical slavery and its reflections in this recent time as modern slavery, also, factors that contributed to this unpleasant situation where conflict in the northern regions, kidnapping, political power abuse, lawlessness and many of such suddenly becomes normality by vulnerable Nigerians. Obviously, statistics proved that Nigeria has over 83 million people extremely suffering and living in poverty in which report from world bank as at 2021 declared Nigeria as one of the countries experiencing poverty globally (World Bank). Surprisingly, the almighty nation Nigeria blessed with resources continues to increase in

dept while some African countries are declared debt free in the year 2025(Ben. Aigbokhan). This shows a drastic mismanagement in Nigeria economy which is one of the major strategies and weapon for modern slavery in Nigeria. However, vulnerable Nigerians are filled with hope for better opportunities, employment and landscape for better education which has yearly led to exploitation and modern slavery.Has there been? Will there be? Can there ever be a genie voice for Nigeria children? Questions like this kept on ringing in the ears of the researcher base on the rampant cultural manipulations for modern slavery system. The ILO 2019 report established the fact that an estimated 15 million Nigerian children are involved in child labor; the poverty state of some regions in Nigeria has led to the cultural practices of children slavery where families often depend on the income generated by their children for survival. This enslavement also manifests in Nigerians cultural attitudes towards labor and certain social practices in various regions of the country; traditional practices such as "night jobs" or "kafala systems" allow employers to exploit workers without legal repercussions. Such practices are often accepted as part of the social fabric, making it difficult for victims to seek help or even recognize their exploitation (ILO2019). The question here is: can Nigeria still enjoy freedom and true justice just as it were in days of Wilberforce? Other loopholes for modern slavery in Nigeria is through sexual exploitation, it is sadden to know that the source, transit and destination for trafficking victims, particularly woman and girls who are concerned into sex exploitation is from a country like Nigeria. False promises of employment, seeking for a better life and green pasture and more are gimmicks used in forcing many women into sex trafficking, according to reports from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), this indicates that trafficking victims are often taken to European countries through fake promises, this is where they are forced into prostitution under dire conditions.⁵The trauma associated with sexual exploitation leaves deep psychological scars, not only on the victims but also on their families and communities. Though the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act of 2015 addresses human trafficking and sexual exploitation, but enforcement remains a significant hurdle.⁶Also, cultural stigmas surrounding victims of sexual exploitation often prevent them from seeking help or reintegrating into society. Many victims fear societal rejection and, as a result, remain trapped in their exploitative situations which finally end up as modern slavery. Child marriage is deeply rooted in Nigerian culture and is another glaring manifestation of modern slavery, as a matter of celerity, the vulnerability to early pregnancy, domestic violence, and socio-economic marginalization of girls in marriage before the age of 18 increases without control, UNICEF report made it clear that approximately 43% girls in Nigeria are found in child marriage.⁷ Also, in many rural communities, marrying off girls at a young age is seen as a means of economic security for the family. In regions like the North-East, where poverty is rampant, families sometimes resort to child marriage as a survival strategy, selling their daughters into marriage for dowries.⁸ This practice not only denies girls their childhood but also subject them to lifelong psychological and physical modern slavery because such girls are prone to domestic servitude and are often denied access to education, trapping them in a cycle of poverty.The ongoing conflict in Northern Nigeria, particularly due to the activities of Boko Haram and other extremist groups, has exacerbated the issue of modern slavery. The conflict has led to the abduction of thousands of women and girls, many of whom are subjected to sexual slavery, forced labor, and forced marriages.⁹ The violence has created a humanitarian crisis, displacing millions and leaving many families vulnerable to exploitation; as a result, many already became IDP victims. The Internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have fled their homes due to conflict, are often at heightened risk of modern slavery. Many IDP camps

lack adequate shelter, food, and medical care, making residents more susceptible to exploitation.¹⁰ Reports indicate that traffickers have increasingly targeted IDP camps, taking advantage of the dire conditions to recruit victims.¹¹ If kidnapping and banditry is sideline in this argument, then modern slavery matters won't need any attention either. Kidnapping for ransom has become a rampant issue in Nigeria, Armed groups and criminals often abduct citizens predominantly for financial gain which has reached alarming levels in various states, particularly in the North-West and North-Central regions. The existence of this phenomenon has made millions of Nigerians live in fear, as reports of abductions regularly fill the news media. The SBM Intelligence report says

...over 1,000 schoolchildren were kidnapped in the first half of 2021 alone. These kidnappings often involve demands for hefty ransoms, which families are pressured to pay, leading to financial ruin. In many cases, victims are subjected to physical and psychological abuse while in captivity, further perpetuating their trauma even after release. ...the increasing number of kidnappings is exacerbated by law enforcement's inability to respond effectively due to corruption and a lack of resources. Criminal networks often operate with impunity, as many victims' families choose not to report kidnappings to the authorities due to mistrust in law enforcement.¹²

From several reports and the current unending arguments, it is evident that modern slavery in Nigeria has become a complex crisis fueled by socio-economic challenges, cultural practices, political power abuse, and lawlessness. However, the truth be told! This slavery has been for decades and it was only modernized and most Nigerians failed to see the enslavement because of their vulnerability.

The Vulnerable Nigerians

Nigeria as a country is endowed with rich cultural heritage, immense natural resources, and a youthful population, finds itself grappling with a history marred by colonization, economic disparity, sociopolitical instability, and social injustice.¹³ The results are profound vulnerabilities that lead to a perceived acceptance of suffering and, by extension, forms of modern slavery. To comprehend Nigeria's contemporary vulnerability to suffering and subjugation, one must delve into the historical context of colonialism and its aftereffects. The British colonization of Nigeria, which lasted from the late 19th century until 1960, set the stage for systemic inequalities and social stratification that persist today. Following colonial rule, instead of genuine independence, Nigeria experienced a series of military coups, civil unrest, and economic mismanagement.

The experience of slavery, both in the transatlantic slave trade and in the form of forced labor under colonial rule, planted seeds of vulnerability. The psychological and societal impact of these historical injustices can be seen in the mentalities and behaviors of contemporary Nigerians. As noted by scholars such as Adekeye Adebajo,¹⁴ the legacy of slavery and colonization fosters a sense of disenfranchisement that perpetuates cycles of poverty and acceptance of suffering. The psychological impact of vulnerability should not be overlooked; the trauma from socio-economic exploitation, coupled with historical injustices, has led to learned helplessness. Psychologists assert that when individuals repeatedly face uncontrollable situations, they may develop a sense of helplessness, leading to resignation and acceptance of their predicament. This phenomenon is evident in many communities across Nigeria, where modern slavery operates through repeated exposure to poverty, violence, and corruption diminishes hope and agency. Mental health issues stemming from such conditions are

underreported and often stigmatized, further complicating the path to recovery and empowerment. In this context, the psychological effects have created a feedback loop: as individuals feel helpless, they may become less likely to challenge oppressive systems or seek assistance. Furthermore, the lack of access to mental health resources exacerbates this situation, leaving many to navigate their suffering silently.¹⁵ According to a study by the Nigerian Mental Health Foundation, mental health disorders are increasingly prevalent, yet only a fraction of those affected seek help, often due to cultural stigma and a lack of resources.

Addressing the vulnerabilities that lead to the acceptance of suffering and slavery in Nigeria requires an insight into the historic slave trade and William Wilberforce contributions in bringing an end to injustice. Before delving into Wilberforce's contributions, it is necessary to understand the historical context of slavery in Nigeria. The transatlantic slave trade had a profound impact on various ethnic groups in Nigeria, where millions of individuals were captured, sold, and transported to the Americas and the Caribbean. The British operated as a significant player in this horrific trade, which not only disrupted local economies but also caused lasting social dislocation.¹⁶ The impact of the slave trade varied across Nigeria. For instance, in the coastal regions, such as Lagos and Calabar, European demand for slaves heightened the existing inter-ethnic wars, as slave raiders sought to capture individuals to meet the demand.¹⁷ The introduction of Christianity by British missionaries was also interlinked with the abolitionist movement, creating complex dynamics between colonialism and the local cultures.¹⁸ Understanding the context in which Wilberforce was operating is vital for appreciating his contributions.

William Wilberforce and His Historical Contributions to Slavery Eradication in Nigeria

William Wilberforce, an English politician and a leading abolitionist, is best known for his extensive efforts that culminated in the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the British Empire. His work spanned several decades and involved various social and political maneuvers aimed at challenging the prevailing ideologies of slavery.¹⁹ While the direct impact of Wilberforce's initiatives on Nigeria is complex, it is essential to understand his contributions within a broader historical context. According to Richardson's report, William Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759, in Kingston upon Hull, England; educated at Cambridge University. He was deeply influenced by his Christian faith, particularly through his relationships with prominent evangelical figures, which shaped his moral framework and political ambitions. In 1780, he became a Member of Parliament (MP) for Kingston upon Hull, a position he held for nearly five decades.²⁰ His political career was excellent and this contributed to the significant growth of abolitionist sentiments in Britain. He leveraged his position in Parliament to advocate for social reform and the abolition of the slave trade, yet, his first campaign against slavery was launched around 1789. His efforts were met with resistance, but his determination and strategic alliances with time shifted public opinion against the slave trade, which means, he convinced the political influence personnel to stop slave trade through his relentless advocacy in Parliament.²¹ He introduced abolition bills multiple times from 1789 to 1807, in order to discourage slave trade among politicians and that deeply showcase his commitment to ending the trade.²²

Wilberforce's strategic approach included forming alliances with likeminded individuals and groups. He collaborated with Thomas Clarkson, one of the most spirited abolitionists, who gathered evidence and testimonies about the horrors of slavery, which were crucial for persuading public opinion and garnering parliamentary support.²³ Their partnership, alongside support from other prominent figures like Granville Sharp and Olaudah Equiano, created a powerful coalition that significantly influenced the abolition movement. Wilberforce understood

the importance of public sentiment in achieving political change. He was instrumental in mobilizing public support through pamphlets, public meetings, and grassroots campaigns.²⁴ His ability to articulate the moral and humanitarian arguments against slavery resonated with the emerging abolitionist sentiment in Britain. The year 1787 was such a remarkable year which brought slavery to exposure as Wilberforce founded a society that effected the slave trade abolition called “Societal Body for Abolishing Slave trade” (SBST), which was dedicated to the cause of abolishing the slave trade.²⁵ This organization became a central hub for abolitionist activities, recruiting members, disseminating information, and organizing campaigns.²⁶ The SBST played an essential role in consolidating abolitionist groups and efforts across the country, establishing a unified front against slavery.

The Role of Missionaries and Wilberforce’s Legacy

A critical aspect of Wilberforce’s legacy was his connection to missionaries who later ventured into Nigeria. Notably, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was formed in 1799 and received support from Wilberforce and his abolitionist colleagues. These missionaries aimed to spread Christianity and combat slavery in West Africa.²⁷ As missionaries established their presence in Nigeria, they sought to promote education, health care, and social justice. One of the prominent figures in this missionary movement was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba man who had been enslaved and later freed. Crowther became the first African bishop of the Church of England in 1864 and played a pivotal role in establishing the CMS's activities in Nigeria. The missionaries' work helped raise awareness about the dangers of slavery and advocated for the rights of the local populations.²⁸ The missionaries, inspired by Wilberforce’s ideals, aimed not only to spread Christianity but also to challenge local customs that perpetuated slavery and oppression, such as forced marriages and certain traditional practices that devalued women. Their commitment to education led to the establishment of schools, fostering the growth of literacy among Nigerians and empowering them to understand their rights. Education became an essential tool for combating the remnants of slavery and promoting social reform.²⁹ By educating local populations, missionaries were instrumental in instilling new values that prioritized human dignity and freedom, in line with the ideals promoted by Wilberforce. Wilberforce’s legacy as an abolitionist extends beyond the borders of Britain and deeply resonates with post-colonial narratives in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. His efforts contributed to a fundamental shift in the perception of slavery—transforming it from an accepted economic practice to a moral outrage. This conceptual change was crucial in generating support for abolitionist movements globally. Wilberforce’s life and works inspired future generations of human rights activists and guided the development of various international conventions aimed at eradicating slavery in all its forms. His role in shaping the abolition movement showed that persistent efforts, grounded in moral advocacy and social awareness, can indeed lead to monumental change.³⁰

Conclusion and Recommendations

By exploring the multifaceted impact of William Wilberforce on the abolition of slavery and his connections to Nigeria, it is evident that his contributions go beyond the legislative achievements of the early 19th century, influencing culture, education, and human rights discourse that resonate to this day. William Wilberforce’s contributions to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade significantly impacted Nigeria and set a moral precedent against slavery. His tireless advocacy, legislative efforts, and ability to rally public opinion created a foundation that ultimately led to the end of the slave trade and inspired further humanitarian efforts. By fostering

a culture of human rights that influenced missionary activity and education in Nigeria, Wilberforce's legacy contributed to the gradual socio-cultural transition away from slavery in the region. While his movement was not without its critiques and limitations, Wilberforce's role in raising awareness and rallying support against the horrific practices of slavery remains a powerful example of how one individual can impact history. As nations continue to grapple with the legacy of slavery and seek to eradicate modern forms of human trafficking and exploitation, the lessons of Wilberforce's advocacy serve as a guiding beacon for contemporary movements seeking justice, equality, and human dignity. Addressing modern slavery in Nigeria requires a multidimensional approach which includes strong enforcement of existing laws related to human trafficking and modern slavery. This includes training law enforcement officials on best practices for identifying and responding to trafficking cases. Develop comprehensive awareness campaigns targeting rural communities, emphasizing the risks associated with trafficking, child marriage, and forced labor. Engaging local leaders and organizations will be crucial in changing societal attitudes. Implement programs aimed at improving socio-economic conditions, such as vocational training initiatives and micro-financing opportunities for vulnerable populations, particularly women and youth. Establish robust support systems for survivors of modern slavery, including access to psychological counseling, legal assistance, and reintegration programs. Engage with international organizations and NGOs to provide resources and expertise in combating modern slavery. Collaborative efforts will enhance the effectiveness of initiatives implemented on the ground. Develop anti-corruption frameworks and promote transparency within government institutions. Tackling corruption will strengthen efforts to combat modern slavery and enhance public trust in law enforcement.

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