

CHILD TRAFFICKING IS A GLOBAL THREAT: THE CASE OF GHANA

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to ascertain the current status of child trafficking in Ghana. Two key stakeholders in the persons of a parent and an instructor in early childhood education, and a child rights activist were asked to respond to a set of questions on the prevalence rate of the problem in Ghana. They also provided answers to government's efforts at solving the problems through major policies and strategies. The responses and results showed that despite government's efforts to solve the problem through legislation and prosecution of offenders, cultural values, poverty, and over-concentration of government projects and offices, have made the implementation of the policies and strategies very much ineffective. It is recommended that government embarks upon a massive decentralization policy to reach out to all corners of the country. Again, there should be economic empowerment through small-scale industries to get many of the citizens to earn a living so that they stop giving out their children to other people for economic gains.

Key words: *Child Trafficking, Global Threat, Child Rights, Decentralization*

Introduction

Child trafficking has become a global problem for governments and people everywhere in the world. The dynamics of it have changed overtime to the extent that it has become one of the most persistent forms of child abuse and child maltreatment in South-Saharan Africa. According to Hamenoo et al. (2015), "Child trafficking is one of the worst forms of child maltreatment and is often difficult to recognize when it happens intra-country" (p.1)

In the traditional context of Ghana, parents allowed their children to go and stay with relatives sometimes for the entire period of their childhood and adolescent years. This is considered as part of the kinship system, and also as a

way of socializing them into economic skills to prepare them for adult life in later years. Sometimes giving out a child to a relative or friend is premised on the fact that financial constraints and the burden associated with childrearing would be eased substantially.

The level of poverty has over the past years compelled some parents to virtually off-load their children not only to their relatives but also to unknown persons whose identity they can never tell. Such people come with promises of gifts to the parents and most importantly promise them better life for such children who are taken away into captivity. This seemingly unsuspecting human rights abuse has over the years taken on a monstrous nature in the form child trafficking. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM) report (2009), more than 1,000 children were working as slave laborers on fishing boats across the country. Also, Lawrence (2010), has stated that available data on Ghana has divided the problem of child trafficking into six types:

- Abduction of children
- Payment of money to impoverished parents who bond children with assumptions about treatment
- Bonding of children for debt
- Token placement for specific duration or gift
- Fee-based agent-directed domestic work at parents' request
- Deception of parents into enlisting children for education or skill (p. 65).

Ghana has Human Trafficking Act (2005) which was amended in 2010 (Hamenoo et al., 2015). The Act among others defines Human Trafficking as "Placement for sale, bonded placement, temporary placement, and placement as service where exploitation by someone else is the motivating factor shall also constitute trafficking" (p. 104).

Simply asking a parent to give you his or her child to stay with under normal circumstances would not constitute an offense of child trafficking but the magnitude of the transaction and thereafter has become a matter of public concern because of the dimensions that it has taken. Child trafficking takes place in Ghana (Hamenoo, 2015). Not only that, it is a place that also serves as a transit for other nations and cities engaged in the business.

In Ghana, the movement of the children involved in the child trafficking is from the impoverished north to the endowed south, from rural areas to urban areas, from farming areas to fishing areas, and from Ghana to other countries

sometimes outside the continent of Africa. Akateng a fishing community in the Manya-Krobo District of the Eastern Region in Ghana, has been identified as a child-trafficking zone by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs.

It is generally believed that people from the northern part of the country are not well educated as in accessing formal education to be able to read and write proficiently and so over the years people from the northern sector of the country have served as a labor force for other people in the southern sector of the country. This premise of low education has persisted since the colonial days (Accelerated Development Plan, 1951) to the extent that after independence, legislation (Education Act, 1961) was passed to offer people of the north and others of northern descent free education till today when we have had two Presidents coming from the north (Asiedu-Akrofi, 1982).

According to Ornum (2013), although the government of Ghana has made effort at checking the problem of child trafficking, the country continues to be "a major source, transit point, and destination point for child trafficking, and a variety of forms of child slavery and unthinkable child abuse" There is an estimated number of about 30,000 children working as porters, or "Kayaye" in the capital city of Accra (Hamenoo et al., 2015).

Apart from the Human Trafficking Act (2005) (Lawrence, 2010), Child advocacy groups in collaboration with the government of Ghana have been exploring ways and means by which to stop the menace. International, sub-regional, and domestic agencies operate within Ghana and the entire West Africa region trying to adopt a favorable mechanism that would help with the struggle to halt the problem. There are, however, three (3) distinct currents, which according to Lawrence (2010) make sense of a shift towards a legislative remedy for trafficking.

"The first current, child labor advocacy, focuses on internal dynamics such as regional paths of mobility and traditional and new labor demands. Reports originating from national and international agencies are often micro-studies and national surveys; policy recommendations and best practices are suggested in balanced language. The second, the industry self-regulation model, originated externally as a reaction to widespread public discomfort in response to revelations about child labor in the cocoa fields. The third current, a focus on anti-trafficking, emerged in contrast to the first current, and a discourse of crisis is pervasive" (p.70).

Agencies that are seen to be advocates for anti-trafficking use emotional mechanisms to connect with their audience. They show photographs that depict children engaged in horrifying activities. They move around using Cinema vans to show films to people with the view to playing on their emotions and drawing them along to think with them. At points during the show, the advocates stop to discuss the scenes from the films. This idea of open discussion enables all gathered to share ideas on the topic. Sometimes the tone adopted by many organizations conveys fear and panic and sounds alarming (Lawrence, 2010). All these are done to create emotional in-balance in people towards accepting the message that they convey to them.

Though looking at the problem of Ghana, it is important to state that because the problem of child trafficking has become an international headache, the Countries in the West African sub-region adopted a common stance of cooperating and enacting laws that would prevent criminals from using other countries a safe haven. Therefore by 2009, all West African countries had one form of legislative remedy for trafficking (Lawrence, 2010). The legislative approach however failed to account for the flexibility and elasticity of child labor trafficking networks. (77).

By and large, the steps to halt the problem of child trafficking have not been effective because according to Merry (2006), “for human rights ideas to be effective, they need to be translated into terms and situated with local contexts of power and meaning” If the laws stay in the statutes and there are no people on the ground to implement them, they become ineffective. This may account for why the government of Ghana in 2001 set up the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs (MOWAC). The ministry’s work in that regard was not fully realized and so in 2009 Ghana was demoted to the Tier Two Watch List, prompting the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs (MOWAC) to inaugurate the National Human Trafficking Database in February 2010, composed of seventeen members, including representatives from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). (79).

Methodology

The research design was a qualitative one. As part of the process to get this study done, a parent who is an early childhood practitioner, and a child rights activist were interviewed for their views on the prevalence of child trafficking, and efforts that were being made to solve the problem of child trafficking. Following are their perspectives and responses.

Nature of Child Trafficking in Ghana

To the stakeholders who were interviewed, child trafficking in Ghana usually involves sending children to fishing and farming communities or cocoa farming areas to help in fishing and farming. To them, another avenue for child trafficking is prostitution whether in the country or sending them to other countries such as Ivory Coast. They maintained that the problem of child trafficking exists or persists as a result of challenges that some parents face in raising children leading to such parents sending their children away to work and get money to support the family income.

Prevalence rate of Child Trafficking in Ghana.

The stakeholders could not tell the rate of prevalence although they agreed that the problem existed in Ghana. This is summed up in one of the responses from the respondents.

“I am not too sure how prevalent it is in terms of whether it is on the increase or decline. However, I do know that in the coastal areas where fishing is sometimes the main economic activity and the cocoa farming areas, it is a concern. Having said that, it is important to distinguish between children being socialized into everyday life skills activities and child labor”

Though the respondent in the above statement tried to explain circumstances that could lead to the prevalence of child trafficking in Ghana, the respondent was quick to add that we should be careful in drawing the line between what are considered culture-specific and intended to provide skills to the young ones in the community, and what is globally considered to be child abuse or child labor.

Major Policies by Government to stop the problem of Child Trafficking in Ghana

According to the stakeholders the formation of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection is one major commitment by government to protect the vulnerable in the society such as children. Again, the government as a signatory to the United Nations' Conventions on the Rights of the Child also has a commitment to meeting international conventions. Additionally, there is a National Anti-Trafficking Taskforce which checks to eliminate and where possible prosecute child traffickers.

Programs and Strategies put in place to ameliorate the problem of child trafficking in Ghana

Ghana has a Human Trafficking Act (HTA, 2005), and the Ghana Police Service also has an Anti-Human Trafficking Unit. As much as the Act (HTA, 2005) prohibits people from engaging in child and human trafficking, it is the duty of the police as an executive arm of government to enforce the law. Another strategy is the elimination of child labor on cocoa farms through collaboration with various NGOs.

Ways in which programs/strategies put in place by Government have been effective in curbing the problem of child trafficking in Ghana.

The respondents largely agreed that there has been some form of awareness about the challenges that children who are trafficked face. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection has also ensured that children's rights are respected through various legislations. The introduction of the school-feeding program, the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) and other related policies have ensured that the number of school-going age children who are out of school is significantly reduced.

Ways in which programs/strategies put in place by Government have been ineffective in curbing the problem of child trafficking in Ghana.

The lack of education about legitimate household chores a child can help to undertake at home and what constitute child exploitation in the form of child trafficking came up as one of the setbacks to government's effort at curbing the problem of child trafficking in Ghana. Many of the household activities that children do at home are considered normal daily activities for children as they grow up in the community.

Another is the lack of resources. This includes financial and other logistics to enable agencies responsible for ensuring compliance of the laws to monitor and prosecute offenders. The law enforcement agencies would need logistics to be able to track the perpetrators who sometimes use unorthodox routes and avenues for their clandestine activities.

Another point for consideration is reviewing the cultural practices where children are sometimes sent to other relatives or adults to understudy and when it constitutes child trafficking since a child working in a carpentry shop is in effect engaging in a money making venture. Children are most often sent to master craftsmen to become apprenticed to them for a number of years and it is difficult to distinguish between such actions as child abuse or skill training.

Perspectives of stakeholders on the issue of child trafficking and what Government is doing to curb the problem of child trafficking in Ghana.

The stakeholders agreed that there is a need to clarify what really constitutes child labor and educating parents and the general public as to what the difference is between child trafficking (child labor) and everyday socialization of children into certain cultural practices. They summed up their thought in the following:

“There is a need for more education from government agencies regarding what constitutes child trafficking and what does not” This is because of the nature of socialization that takes place in Ghanaian homes such as apprenticeship.

Practical Recommendations to alleviate the problem of child trafficking in Ghana

- a. Making clear the tensions between cultural norms of socializing children into family activities and child exploitation (trafficking). In the Ghanaian context where children are part of the economic life of the family and community in which they live, it is normal to see children do all manner of activities to support the immediate family. Therefore, children moving out of their immediate family and community to engage in economic activities cannot be considered as exploitation or child trafficking.
- b. A sort of lawyer/advocate-students' community service where they hold community meetings and events to explain the various provisions in the Human Trafficking Act (2005) to citizens and members of the community. Sometimes people think that they own the children that they have given birth to and can do whatever they think with them. They simply do not understand that their children are the property of the state and therefore subject to the laws of the country as enshrined in the Constitution of Ghana. They also do not see anything untoward about what would variously be described as child trafficking, child labor, child exploitation, or child abuse. They could decide to sell their children like any of their properties that belong to them. Awareness among the fishing community about the inhuman nature of the problem and encouraging them to reject the sale, buying, and exploitation of such children.
- c. Decentralization of government projects and activities. Decentralizing the activities of government agencies to the rural areas where child trafficking is more prevalent to educate and curb the pull-in factors would be a great step towards solving the problem of child trafficking. The over centralization of government agencies and activities has resulted in the concentration of infrastructure and public employment

avenues in the Southern part of the country leaving the Northern part of the country impoverished. People therefore think that the only means by which they could earn a living was by travelling to the south or remaining in the north but selling out their children for a living.

- d. Economic empowerment through small-scale industries so that parents could earn a higher income to support their families. Despite the deprivation in the northern part of the country, that part remains the food-basket of the nation where all sorts of foodstuff such as rice, yams beans, tomato, meat and sheabutter are produced. All these products are conveyed in trucks to the established market places in the south where they are sold at cheap prices to the market women who determine the prices of the goods and not the owners of the goods. If the government is able to establish some small-scale industries in such areas in the northern part of the country, the living standards of the people would improve drastically and that would also help in solving the problem of child trafficking in Ghana.
- e. Government should establish and sustain partnership with local and international agencies such as Interpol to arrest and prosecute offenders. Since the problem has assumed international dimensions, it would be a futile attempt for government to decide to solve the problem alone. Collaboration with agencies including NGOs would help to rescue and rehabilitate such children who are caught in the problem.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the likelihood of the implementation of my recommendations given the current policy context is that implementation requires a commitment of various NGOs and government agencies to ensure that laws passed are adhered to by all citizens. Those laws which have to do with less financial commitment such as using students to engage in community service within their catchment areas can be implemented.

Again, the issue of decentralization can be done by ensuring that such officials engage in outreach programs instead of remaining in their offices and the district capitals far removed from the problem. When people in the communities where the problem of child trafficking is prevalent see officials from NGOs and other agencies very often and interact with them quite well, the problem would be reduced

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