



Stories from Lake Volta: The lived experiences of trafficked children in Ghana



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ABSTRACT

Child trafficking is one of the worst forms of child maltreatment and is often difficult to recognize when it happens intra-country. This paper presents the narratives of children on their experiences as victims of trafficking in fishing communities along the Volta Lake in the Volta region of Ghana. The narratives were co-constructed with the children through child-friendly participatory approaches which involved drawings, writing, and in-depth interviews. The stories reflect the magnitude of maltreatment trafficked children suffer, which ranges from physical to psychological and emotional. The authors recommend commitment by the government to the implementation of the Human Trafficking Act to deter child traffickers. Further studies on the living conditions of rescued children and the need to implement strategies to prevent re-trafficking are suggested.

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Introduction

The United Nations' (UN) General Assembly defined human trafficking in the Palermo Protocol (2000: Article 3a) as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring 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 labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

The Palermo Protocol (2000) not only recognizes the trafficking of women and girls but also notes the trafficking of men and boys into several sectors other than the sex industry. It also sets the standard for all other legal definitions of human trafficking.

For years, research on human trafficking all over the world has focused on the conceptual and technical definitional inconsistencies within the Palermo Protocol and other legal instruments that prohibit the exploitation of persons (Lie & Ragnhild, 2008; Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008). Organizational reports and other studies have also discussed its nature and scope (Bales, 2005; Feingold, 2005; Martens, Pieczkowski, & van Vuuren-Smyth, 2003; Salah, 2001) and the relatedness of child labor to child trafficking (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2008). Research has also considered the causes and effects of human trafficking (Adepoju, 2005; Agbenya, 2009; Gjermeni et al., 2008; Takamatsu, 2004) and the role of professionals in rehabilitating victims (Pearce, Hynes, & Bovarnick, 2009).

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Gjermeni et al. (2008), in their research on cross border trafficking, gave an account of victims' perceptions of their trafficking ordeals. Focusing on the patterns, recruitment, and reintegration of children trafficked from Albania to Greece for sex and labor exploitation, they interviewed both trafficked and non-trafficked children during their research. The research provides an overview of the abuses that children reported that they had endured. For example, children over the age of 12 years indicated they were jailed by Greek authorities and then deported to the Albanian border where they were left to find their way home. Those who successfully reached their parents found it difficult to adjust to formal education because they were admitted to classes with younger children. A number of the children also reported physical and sexual abuse. For the non-trafficked, the fear of being trafficked was evident.

Further, Adepoju (2005) found that, although women and children from China and other countries are trafficked into Africa, African women and children are also trafficked into European countries. According to Adepoju (2005), each year between 800 and 1,100 women are trafficked into South Africa. He also noted that annually, about 200,000 children are trafficked across borders in the sub-region of West and Central Africa from and into countries such as Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania.

On a regional level, Sossou and Yogtiba (2008) provided some insight into the experiences of abused children in the West African sub-region, both in general and within the context of child labor. Some of the children they interviewed were freed slaves from *trokoshi*, street children and trafficked children on Cocoa plantations in three West African countries.

In Ghana, human trafficking is defined in the country's anti-trafficking legal document known as the Human Trafficking Act of 2005 (Article 1, Clause 1-3, as amended in 2010). The definition is similar to that of the United Nations (2000), but the Human Trafficking also includes the following: "Placement for sale, bonded placement, temporary placement, placement as service where exploitation by someone else is the motivating factor shall also constitute trafficking." In its third clause, the Act recognizes human trafficking as an international and a domestic offense with reference to persons being trafficked within or across the borders of Ghana. This article focuses on the latter.

Although child trafficking is not new, many aspects of the phenomenon remain hidden. For instance, the voices of its victims are difficult to access, especially when the trafficking occurs within a country. Salah (2001) noted this difficulty when she called for rigorous research into all aspects of intra-country child trafficking. This call remains to some extent unanswered in Ghana despite its many trafficking avenues such as the local fishing industry and the stone quarry, where children are trafficked for labor purposes (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2008). The hidden nature of child trafficking, as noted by Salah (2001), may result in part from the ways in which children are socialized in African countries such as Ghana.

Moss, Dillon, and Statham (2000) noted that childhood is universally determined by biological factors, but how the period is understood and treated is socially subjective and achieved "within an active negotiated set of social interactions" (p. 235). In Ghana, a level of work is deemed a necessity to enable children to become responsible adults. There is however, no mention of child labor within legal frameworks until children are 13 years of age (Children's Act, 1998). Child labor is spoken of in relation to the minimum level of work children are permitted to do from the age of 13 years. Given the culture of engaging children in a minimum level of work, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between child labor and child trafficking for labor purposes.

Afenyadu (2010) explained the presence of children on Lake Volta as parents' means of enabling their children to acquire survival skills against poverty in adulthood. The study noted that children from some ethnic origins in Ghana are expected to learn at an early age how to become good fishermen just like their fathers to prepare them for a better future (Afenyadu, 2010). From a child trafficking perspective, Afenyadu (2010) observed that, although children's involvement in fishing is a socio-cultural activity for some ethnic groups in Ghana, it is also recognized as a trafficking activity. In this light, children are offered as debt collaterals by their parents to fishermen and boat owners. In return, the fishermen engage the children in long hours of work on Lake Volta (Afenyadu, 2010). Described by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011) as the most detailed studies ever done on child trafficking on Lake Volta, the work of Agbenya (2009), Afenyadu (2010), and Bales (2005) shed light on the roles played by economic hardship and kin fostering in child trafficking on Lake Volta. The studies also reveal the maltreatment suffered by children working on Lake Volta from the researchers' perspectives.

The plight of children involved in fishing on Lake Volta has attracted more international and domestic attention than any other form of child trafficking within Ghana (Boyefio, 2006; Lafaraniere, 2006). Fishing by children on Lake Volta attracts attention because of its abusive nature and associated trauma. Bales (2005) described how dead bodies of children were washed ashore each morning to the anger of other villagers living along Lake Volta. Disturbingly, the situation reached a point where villagers no longer reported cases to the police. They claim that although the police are aware that fishermen force children to dive into the frigid waters to remove entangled nets, which can result in drowning, they declare such deaths as natural instead of initiating criminal charges against the culprits. As frightening as this scenario may be, children are daily trafficked to serve as fishing hands on Lake Volta. It is estimated that between 5,000 to 7,000 trafficked children are working on Lake Volta under exploitative conditions (Gutnick, 2008).

In a recent World Vision report, Clarke (2010) recounts in an audio report how children are sold by parents in Ghana for \$100 a year. According to Clarke, by 14:00 GMT children on Lake Volta would have worked for nine hours casting fishing nets to catch fish and preparing the daily catch for sale. In an interview with one of the rescued children, it was reported that the children worked from 05:00 GMT to 17:00 GMT daily, seven days a week. The report described a 13-year-old boy whom he had interviewed as having the stature of a six year old because of stunted growth. The child, who spent six years in slavery [According to the Slavery Convention, slavery describes a person's *status* or *conditions* of being rightfully owned by another as a property (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 1926: Article 1.1). A person could

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