

Interplay between Coping/Survival Strategies and Child Trafficking in Fishing Communities in Ghana

Harrison Kwame Golo

Department of Social Studies Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Email address

hkgolo@uew.edu.gh, harrigol@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The interrelatedness between poverty and child trafficking has been widely documented, with poverty being the consequence of child trafficking in West Africa. This paper focuses on poverty coping/survival strategies that relate to child trafficking in three fishing communities in Ghana. This includes two rural coastal fishing communities: Agavedzi and Akorsua village in the Volta and Central Regions respectively, and one rural inland fishing community along the Volta lake Bakpakorfe in the Volta Region. Seventy-eight household heads and five fishermen were interviewed. In addition, one focus group discussion each was held in Agavedzi and Akorsua village. Poverty and desperation of the poor households to survive have compelled some of them to resort to strategies that reinforced pre-existing traditional practices that culminate in the intensification of the trafficking of their children. The three commonly identified coping/survival strategies can be specifically classified under the definition of 'child trafficking' within the study communities. These strategies are 'child bonded labour', 'child domestic servitude' and 'outright selling of children'. There is the need for government and other stakeholders to improve the living conditions in these communities through poverty eradication measures. Human rights awareness or education is also needed to enhance advocacy for the need to respect and protect the rights of children in the prevailing traditional practices exacerbated by abject poverty and vulnerability in especially rural coastal fishing communities.

Keywords

Child Trafficking, Coping Strategies, Poverty, Survival Strategies, Traditional Practices

1. Background and Introduction

Trafficking in human beings for forced labour and prostitution, especially trafficking in children has become one of the fastest growing phenomena in the domain of international criminal activities [30]. It is estimated that about 800,000 to 900,000 men, women and children are trafficked across international borders every year [37]. According to the US Department, approximately 80 per cent of these trafficked victims are women and 20 per cent are minors, with the vast majority of them being girls under 18 years of age as compared to their male counterpart that account for only two per cent. The United Nations on the other hand puts its estimation of the number of people trafficked annually at about a total of 4 million people in general. As far as children are concerned, [38] estimates that

in the year 2000 alone 1,200,000 children were trafficked globally.

In the context of Africa, it is reported that between 200,000 and 250,000 women and children are trafficked annually for sex or labour exploitation in West and Central Africa [11]. There is also ample evidence that in West Africa, trafficking of children within and between countries to work as domestic servants, or on commercial agricultural plantations is very rampant [42]. [42] further indicates that in West and Central Africa, most of the trafficked children are from Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo, and are sent to Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Congo and Cote d'Ivoire [42]. Further research also shows that Nigeria and Benin represent both sending and receiving countries of child workers [11]. It is also reported elsewhere that Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal are the major sources, transit and destination countries for trafficked children and women [2].

The world today needs a rights-based perspective in order to protect and promote human rights in general and children's rights in particular. We must ensure that they not only "survive" but also "live" [20]. During the last decades, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) as well as civil society organizations have shown growing concern and recognition of child trafficking in various ways. The *Convention for the Prohibition and Immediate Elimination of the Worst forms of Child Labour*, (ILO Convention No.182), for instance, was unanimously adopted by ILO in June, 1999. The International Labour Organisation in this direction emphasizes the relationship between trafficking and forced bonded labour, and underlines the human rights goals of anti-trafficking measures [27]. As a further effort, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) in its general principles and specific provisions of Article 32, as indicated by [40], 'recognises the child right to be protected from economic exploitation'. These are indications which demonstrate that greater efforts and resources are being devoted to deal with the problem, and thus make it an increasingly important political priority for many governments and the international community at large.

The [40], however, argues that in West Africa, the recognition of child rights by state parties in their provision of legal approach to combat child trafficking is limited in scope. This is due to the fact that the terms "trafficking", "abduction", or "sale of children" have meant different things to different people. As an attempt to overcome the problem with its implications for policy responses, Article 3 (a) of the *Palermo Protocol* provides a clear definition of "trafficking", which serves as a useful guidance for law reform and criminalisation of the practice. Its sub-paragraph (c) goes further by classifying child trafficking as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered 'trafficking in persons' even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in sub-paragraph (a) of this article [40].

The sub-paragraph thus defines the case of child trafficking in a situation where the trafficking may occur with the consent of the children themselves or the parents.

This section of the protocol tries to clarify what exactly constitutes 'child trafficking' in particular. It stresses the fact that trafficking of children for exploitation through whatever means shall be considered as a crime [37]. In order to achieve greater effectiveness, however, three criteria have been identified to qualify 'child trafficking'. They are: the intervention of an intermediary; the realization of a transaction and; the motive to exploit or exploitation [23].

Transaction here means:

[...]any institution or practice under which young people below 18 years, are handed over by either or both parents, or by a guardian to a third person, whether for a fee or not, with

the intention of exploiting the person or the work of the young person. This does not necessarily mean payment in exchanging for handing over the child. But the mere existence of economic motive - cheap labour for one party and a token sum or payment for a period of time for other, being it parents or other intermediary qualified it as a transaction [23:2].

The two major conventions - the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *ILO Convention on the Prohibition and Immediate Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* - are based on the same definitions of "child". The first one, Article 1 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* says: "[...] a child means every human being below the age of eighteen (18) years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". The second one, Article 2 of *ILO Convention 182* says: '[...] the term child shall apply to all persons under the age of 18' [23:3].

Defining in law the age of children as experienced in the conventions above has been questioned by some scholars. Fyfe (1993), for example, notes that chronological age is less important than local custom when it comes to regions or people where the accurate date of birth does not have much weight on life or is not known at all. According to Fyfe, a child's ability and maturity varies, and defining a child's age by calendar age can mislead people. [18] notes that the concepts of "child" and "childhood" varies according to social, cultural, historical, religious and rational norms in addition to one's personal circumstances. Therefore, disputes over the meaning of child trafficking and the actors involved are inevitable.

Within the Ghanaian society, for example, although a child is legally defined as a person under the age of 18 [15], this does not necessarily determine how a child is regarded in the context of some social practices. Study by [29] shows that the Ghanaian society in most cases considers the ability of the child to live an independent life without depending on the parents. It is also a common practice in the same society for children to be placed with family members living in cities in order that they benefit from the existence of better opportunities such as education and the acquisition of skills through vocational training [15]. Consequently, it is quite difficult to identify a transaction as trafficking of a child, and differentiate it from genuine placement, especially in highly deprived and vulnerable families [4]. However, the definition of "transaction" adopted Article 3 (a) of the *Palermo Protocol* clarifies the complexity and confusion surrounding the definition of 'child trafficking' regarding the Ghanaian cultural practices of child placement, and the legal definition of child trafficking.

A consensus is, however, emerging currently on the link between child trafficking and poverty, especially when viewed from the perspective of widening economic and social disparity. Child mobility, including voluntary and involuntary movement in Ghana and other West African countries, is influenced by poverty and depressed economies, coupled with socio-political crises [2]; [41]. Scholars like [6], [35] and [34] as well as international bodies like the [36] reiterate that disempowerment, social exclusion and

economic vulnerability, resulting from inappropriate policies, constitute the key factors responsible for the trafficking of women and children in West and Central Africa. The [36] further posits that poor people are more vulnerable to trafficking by virtue of exerting little social power and having few income options. Endemic poverty thus serves as threat to children's survival and development as poor families continue to sell their children to traffickers with the hope to improve their circumstances [11].

The Government of Ghana and policy makers in the country increasingly demonstrated awareness that there is a connection between trafficking for child labour and poverty. To demonstrate its commitment, the country took important steps to be the first to ratify the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* adopted at the end of the World Summit for Children in November 1989; its implementation came into full force in September 1990. In order to achieve and sustain the goals of the convention, a programme of action dubbed *The Child Cannot Wait* was introduced in June, 1992, with the aim to provide a policy framework, strategies and programmes that would protect children and see to their survival and development in the country [15]. By doing so, the country has gone beyond legislation to establish institutions to facilitate the social, economic and cultural development as well as the realisation of child rights. These institutions include the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), the Department of Social Welfare, and Ministry of Gender and Social Protection.

Ghana is also a signatory to the *Migrant Worker and Refugee Conventions*. In 1998, the Parliament of Ghana approved a comprehensive Children Act (Act 560), which prohibits children under the age of 15 from working. Then in 2000, the country adopted the ILO *Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour*. Recently, *Ghana's Vision 2020* adopted a more human-centred approach to development by laying more emphasis on social welfare issues connected to trafficking and child labour, poverty and hunger. Moreover, Section 28 of Ghana's 1992 Constitution states that, 'every child has the right to be protected from work that constitutes a threat to his health, education or development'. To deal with the human trafficking menace in the country, a Human Trafficking Act was passed in 2005 to criminalise the offence and mandates the establishment of the Human Trafficking Fund to support the promotion of efforts to combat it.

Nevertheless, child labour and trafficking is still rife in Ghana. The country is currently marked as the source, transit, and destination for children trafficked for forced labour. Children are trafficked within the country to serve as domestic servants, cocoa plantation labourers, street vendors and porters. Studies on the trafficking situation in the country reveal that a large number of trafficked children in the country can be located in the fishing sector, specifically along the Volta Lake where they are engaged in very dangerous and hazardous works [5]; [33]; [32]; [15]; [24]; [39]; [44].

The United Nations Children Fund [40] in its study of child trafficking in West Africa notes that the fishing sector in particular represents an important destination for cross-border migration involving children. It was confirmed by [33] that of the 1,804 trafficked children located in Ghana, about 66 per cent or more were engaged in the fishing sector. Sixty-six per cent (66 %) of boys were engaged as fishing assistants, whilst 52 per cent of girls were involved in the selling and smoking of fish.

Further studies indicate that the coastal fishing communities in the country represent the largest community of origin of both internal and external trafficked children [17]; [25]; [33]. The International Organization for Migration [25] estimates that trafficked children working in fishing villages along the Volta Lake of Ghana can be found in their thousands. Recently, office of the *International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)* in collaboration with the International Organization of Migration (IOM) embarked on project to facilitate the rescue of trafficked children from the various fishing communities around the Volta Lake to their parents. The project involved assistance through micro-credit to both fishermen and the parents [25]. Yet, an administrative census conducted in the Volta Basin confirmed that child trafficking is still highly prevalent within fishing communities in the Volta Region [13]. Volta Care, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), working in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has recently rescued two hundred (200) children from child labour in the Ketu South District of the Volta Region [3].

There are several studies already cited, which indicate that poverty is the major factor behind the release of children by parents to be trafficked. Indeed, without a secured livelihood, poor households are likely to face severe hardships and adopt various strategies to survive. This study is thus sought to: firstly, assess the nature and intensity of coping or survival strategies adopted by people in fishing communities in the Volta and Central Regions in response to poverty and; secondly to explore how coping or survival strategies lead to trafficking in children.

This study is thus expected to highlight the factors that compel parents/guardians to release their children for trafficking. It would also enhance the weak body of data and information on the child trafficking phenomenon in especially fishing communities in Volta and Central Regions of Ghana. The understanding of the child trafficking dynamics of these communities is essential to grasp the socio-economic rationale for livelihood decisions and attitudes concerning coastal resource management in Ghana

2. Livelihood/Coping/Survival Strategies: A Conceptual Framework

Depending on the assets available to them, the structures and the processes that impact on them, as well as the vulnerability context within which they operate, the poor

choose livelihood strategies that provide them with positive outcomes. In other words, households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets to survive and to improve their standard of living [14]. [33] defines livelihood strategies as ‘how individuals, households or groups gain access to, use and exercise control over any number of resources that they identify as important for their well-being’. In sub-Saharan Africa countries in particular, the current economic crises have compelled many households to resort to diversification of income sources and strategies to improve their standard of living.

However, livelihood activities are sometimes introduced as a coping strategy in times of crises, and a growing body of research in rural Africa documents a wide range of livelihood strategies as a response to crises. In their studies of livelihood strategies in Africa during the early 1990s, [12], for example, found that households could be engaged in different household livelihood activities, as micro decision units and partly in inter-household net-works of mutual assistance. The typology of livelihood strategies identified by them include: accumulation strategies (improving the means of production), betterment strategies (improving consumption situation), sustenance or adoptive strategies (social manoeuvring to preserve a consumption and/or wealth level), mechanisms to cope with seasonal stress; and survival strategies to cope with exceptional crises.

There is, however, an on-going discussion about whether one should speak of coping strategies, adaptation strategies or survival strategies. To solve this problem, [10], among others, provides the distinction between coping, survival, adaptive and accumulative strategies. Adaptive strategies are referred to as strategies of consumption failure in response to opportunity [10]. This may be done through the intensification of existing livelihood strategies or by diversification into new activities. Accumulative strategies are those which increase consumption outcomes and stocks of assets. Coping strategies are those strategies that absorb the impact of an adverse shock by drawing down assets and reducing consumption. When there is no respite, coping may lead to survival strategies, which is purely an attempt to ward off destitution, and even death, due to drastic reduction of consumption. [9] vividly explains the concept as follows:

Because of the contextual shocks and stress, livelihood strategies temporarily take the shape of safety mechanisms called ‘coping strategies’. These are short-term responses to secure livelihood in periods of shocks and stress [...]. In the periods of economic stress people are inclined to [...] develop alternative sources of income [...]. Coping strategies are thus short-term or temporary responses to external shocks and stresses. However, because shocks and stresses appear more frequently, the temporary coping mechanisms develop into more permanent ‘adaptive strategies’, which is, in the long-term, considered to be a normal livelihood strategy [9:347].

[7] for their part assert that “survival” or “coping” strategies as a response to adversity and austerity are essentially “defensive” strategies that provide little potential

for changing the environment of households or individuals. This study proposes that positive strategy adaptation is associated with choices that lead to increased security and consumption outcomes, while the negative one, which may be born out of necessity, normally occurs when households are no longer able to cope or subsist [8]. Along this line, [34] posits that the poorest and most vulnerable households are, in some cases, forced to adopt strategies that enable them to survive but do not improve their welfare. Thus, the concept of household strategies is frequently invoked in Third World research to describe what the poor do, as well as explaining why they do it [43].

Numerous studies have testified that the livelihood strategies in fishing communities are diverse and complex, reflecting variation in opportunities available to them [22]; [26]; [28]. This body of scholarly documents revealed that poor fishing communities engage in various livelihood strategies as a way of managing risk. Among these are strategies to: 1. increase family size so as to ensure that children are engaged in productive work at a very tender age instead of schooling. 2. increase resources by relying on more intensive technologies resulting in further degradation, greater competition and indebtedness [22]; [26].

A study by [28] in West Africa also identified two general and fishing related strategies. *The fishing related strategies*, according to him, include (1) the use of flexible and diverse fishing practices to spread risk over various species and markets, (2) seasonal or permanent migration to richer fishing areas to ensure year-round income and, (3) the marketing of different type of products in addition to fish. *The general strategies*, on the other hand, take the form of multiple income earning activities, such as investment in social relations and groups for social security, saving and investing in assets such as land, housing and business to secure security and income in the future.

3. Methods

Three rural fishing communities in the Volta and Central Regions, including three rural coastal fishing communities: Agavedzi, Akorsua Village and Bakpakorfe, a fishing community along the Volta Lake, were involved in this study. Agavedzi and Akorsua Village have been identified among the major areas of origin of trafficked children to be the main destination fishing communities like Bakpakorfe along the Volta Lake. The target population was household heads and individuals, including fishermen.

Household has been one of the most-used concepts in the study of social organisation at the micro level and thus became a basic unit of social analysis. Scholars usually consider it as a complex concept, since it is not a stable entity but varies in space and time [19]. From the perspective of the livelihood framework, the typical unit is the extended household, which includes also members who are away from home but send remittances back home [14]. [16] considers a household to consist usually of a ‘person or group of persons who live together in the same house or compound, share the

same house-keeping arrangements and are catered for as one unit'. For the purpose of this study, a household consists of all individuals, who at the time of the survey were living in the same house or compound. However, the assumption was that it is the household head that sees to the day-to-day affairs of the household. Consequently, the sample frame comprised all household heads in the two selected coastal fishing communities – Agavedzi and Akorsua village in Volta and Central Regions respectively. At Bakpakorfe along the Volta Lake in the Volta Region, however, only fishermen constituted the sample frame. These respondents were chosen on the basis that they would provide an in-depth information on how and why parents/guardian involve in trafficking of their children and the prevailing conditions under which these children work. In all, 76 households were targeted at Agavedzi and Akorsua village. Of the 76 households targeted, it was proposed that half (38) should be allocated to each community. Seven (7) fishermen were also targeted from Bakpakorfe.

The study design used for this research was the descriptive case study employing mixed method. Descriptive case study research was chosen because it helps to ascertain in-depth information on the subject matter and provide a detailed and an accurate profile of it. It was directed to determining the nature of the situation as it existed at the time of the study. The main aim was to describe conditions and situations that compelled people to behave the way they do, and explain why they do it. Data collection for the study spread over almost two years. The first collection period was between February to August 2014 at Agavedzi and second period, October 2014 at Akorsua village and Bakpakorfe respectively.

The first community selected was Agavedzi where 38 households were randomly selected and interviewed. The same procedure was used to select the same number (38) of households and interviewed at Akorsua village. Snow-ball technique was employed in selecting fishermen who happened to be end-users of trafficked children at Bakpakorfe. One focus group discussion each was held at Agavedzi and Akorsua village. Out of the sample size, three households were selected from the coastal fishing communities and were interviewed over a period of about four months. This was to understand the holistic nature of their coping/survival strategies that relate to child trafficking, including the reasons behind the adaptation of such strategies and how they (the strategies) are able to change their (the respondents') life-world. The selection of the three households was based on the survey results and the willingness of the respondents to be interviewed, and to accept repeated visits. Local language was extensively used to enable the interviewees express themselves meaningfully.

In all, survey questionnaire, in-depth interview and focus group discussion (FGD) guides were the three instruments used in the data collection. The analysis was in two sections. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, dealing mainly with percentages. The data from the in-depth interview and FGD were also transcribed and

classified according to common themes using analytic coding, noting and followed with the description of the phenomenon from the perspective of the respondents. Real names of respondents were replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of the respondents.

4. Results

To find out about the intensity of coping/survival strategies that cause child trafficking in the study locations, respondents were asked whether they have heard of cases where parents/guardians exchange their children with money or allow them to live with, or work for, other people. Approximately 91 per cent responded in affirmative. Some of the respondents (20.7 per cent) indicated further that they ever gave one or two of their children out either to live with, or work for, well-to-do people to earn money for the family back home. Out of about 27 per cent reported that their children were staying with a relative or a friend outside the study area in the form of placement. There was no direct reported case of transaction involving outright sell of children from the respondents. The identified causes of child trafficking found through the analysis of the survey, FGD and interviews during the fieldwork are illustrated in table 1 below showing their level of intensity.

Table 1. The identified child trafficking related coping/survival strategies and level of intensity.

Coping/Survival Strategies	Local names*	Level of Intensity
Placing children with relatives or friends	<i>Amegbovi</i> ¹	Very high
Outright selling of children	<i>Kluvi</i> ²	Very low
Placing of children under domestic servitude	<i>Subovi</i> ³	Very high
Placing of children under bonded labour	<i>Awubamevi</i> ⁴	Very high

*These are names used by the respondents to describe the victims of such strategies. The terms are not new but part of the language since generations. Source: Fieldwork (2014).

As shown in the table, 'child bonded labour', 'domestic servitude' and 'child placement' with relatives or friends have been the very remarkable coping/survival strategies in the study locations.⁵ Outright selling of children, according to the table, is however low as compared to placing strategies. The large majority (90 per cent) of the respondents indicated that child trafficking is limited only to a situation where children are sold outright like commodities. To them,

¹ Child servant

² Child slave

³ Hired child servant

⁴ Bondage child

⁵ It is important to note that from the survey, interviews and the FGDs, some households adopt also other coping/survival strategies like salt harvesting, selling of their private property or labour for additional income, reducing household food consumption or number of meals per day, spending days without eating. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to adequately probe into the nature of these strategies. Strategies that encourage child trafficking are the ones which this study sought to further understand.

therefore, other practices of child bonded labour, child servitude and child placement could not be regarded as child trafficking, but part of their socio-cultural practices.

4.1. Child Bonded Labour as Coping/Survival Strategy

Child bonded labour, is a traditional practice whereby poor families allow their children to work for the person to whom the family is indebted for a specific period of time [25]; [24]. A fifty year old man explained that, by this practice (child bonded labour), a child is forced to stay and work for many years to defray the debt owed by the family. Participants during the FGD sessions remarked that the practice has been an indirect supporting system for poor parents or guardians who are faced with severe adversity to get some kind of 'help' from wealthier people in the community. According to them, the aim is to enable such people and their households have a source of livelihood.

However, the institution of child bonded labour, which is part of the local support system, is now being abused by some individuals due to its intensification in the area. This was illustrated in remarks by a respondent that *child bonded labour has become a daily affair and money making venture by some agents who are taking due advantage of the vulnerability and the prevalence of poverty in our communities*. He explained further that the so called 'agents' normally lure many unsuspecting poor parents/guardians with money and petty gifts and recruit their children to neighbouring countries to 'sell' them to other people who then exploit them.

They don't take the children away for free. What they do is that, they convince their parents with an amount of money or gift before taking them away to be transferred to traders and fishermen who are in need of their services for a very huge sum of money. Their parents normally receive between 500 and 800 Ghana Cedis⁶ or more, depending on the number of years the child is to work for his/her master [...] I know some children who have been taken away for some time now but are yet to return [...] their parents are very worried (Interview with Klu).

When they were asked why parents still deliver their children into bonded labour despite its current abuse, respondents noted that the chronic financial difficulties many of them faced would not allow them to abandon the practice. Most of the respondents were also of the view that, since it is their social and moral responsibility to care for their children, delivering some of them into bonded labour to get money to look after their siblings would be better than allowing all of them to suffer and die from starvation.

[...] it is my sole responsibility and as demanded by our society, as a father, to look after my children. I cannot continue to look on helplessly while they suffer. So I do not see anything wrong if I take money from a friend and ask one of my children to go and work for him in return. Is it not

better than leaving all of them here to die of hunger? (Interview with Abadzi).

Many of the participants, however, acknowledged during the FGD sessions that placing their children under such a condition for money is not something that they are comfortable with. Most of them explained that difficult circumstances have left them with no choice than to sacrifice their children that way in order to survive.

Akoli, a fisherman who confirmed that seven of such children have been working for him for the past five years (at the time of the fieldwork) gave a different perspective on the persistence of the practice. According to him, the general notion that bonded children are exploited unnecessarily by their masters is untrue. He explained that even though they enter into an agreement to remit the parents of the bonded children both in kind and cash, they also provide enough food and medical care for these children; a situation which was better than when they were with their parents. Because of this, according to Akoli, most of the children who work for them often refuse to go back to their parents at the end of their contracts. Hence, many parents continue to approach them for help of that nature.

Look, my son, we do not abuse these children, we feed and provide them with better medical care than their parents would have provided them. You see, most of these children did not have food to eat when they were in their various homes. That is why many of them often refuse to go back at the end of their contracts. Because of this, their parents continue to knock at our doors almost every day to bring more of them. You see, they are using one stone to kill two birds at a time. This is because after giving them money, we continue to feed their children for free until the end of the contracts (Interview with Amewodela).

Akorli's explanation was supported by Rose, a single parent, who expressed fears that the current effort by the Government to abolish the practice without any attempt to replace it with a secure income generating activity in the community would put many poor households in a more difficult situation. Like Rose, many other respondents expressed their concerns during the FGDs and in the interviews about the current threat by the Government to arrest and prosecute those who get involved in the bonded labour practice. They explained that bonded child labour contributed to the welfare of many poor households in that many of them used the proceeds to supplement their meagre income and also to establish small-scale businesses. Therefore, as sadly expressed by one of the participants during the FGDs, *the elimination of the "awuba" [child bonded labour] practice will complicate our already difficult situation as it has always been our last hope*.

There was therefore the need to look at the Coping/Survival Strategy Based on 'Child Bonded Labour': The Case of Kofi:

Interviewer: Tell me how you have been coping with life given the large number of children you say you have.

Kofi: Hmmm, my son, it has never been easy for me and my family, but you know what, 'you don't have to dose when

⁶ The exchange rate at the time of the research was 3 New Ghana Cedis to 1 Euro.

you can sleep on the small mat you have'⁷.

The general notion of the poor parents giving out their children to traffickers or placing them under bonded labour and domestic servitude has been well captured by Kofi in using this proverb. The proverb literally means that one cannot be dosing when one has a mat, even if it is small. That is, although the mat is a small one it is better to use it than to continue to dose. Here, the 'small mat' refers to the children who are not of age to work. And the 'dosing' refers to the struggle for survival. So to Kofi, despite the fact that his children are under age, they still have to be used to get some money or income to sustain the family, hence hiring their services to someone for a fee. Kofi is a 41 year old fishing crew who counts himself as one of the poorest of the poor at one of the study locations. He had to survive by sending two of his children into bonded labour. His story follows.

I was the second child of my late father's ten children. My father was once working with a fishing company at Tema but was redeployed in 1985. Because of harsh conditions at home, we left Tema for this place, where we started fishing with my father's friends who owned nets and boats. Initially, life was manageable, since I was able to earn enough income from fishing. However, as soon as I got married, I lost my parents and was given the responsibility of looking after my six siblings. This is how my present predicament started. I became impoverished because of family commitments at home and was not able to make any savings or acquire any assets.

Even though my siblings are now on their own, I presently have twelve children and two wives but without any stable source of income. Life has become very difficult at home, ever since the fishing business became very bad. I was finding it impossible to provide food for my family. I could not cloth them well and even take them to the hospital any time they fall sick. Moreover, I was so much indebted to my friends that none of them was ready to help any longer. Although my wives worked as head porter on every market day at Denu to earn a little money to supplement what I was providing, our living condition was still very bad. We sometimes spent days or a week, especially during the lean seasons without eating any proper food except coconut.

In 2010, one of my children and her mother fell seriously ill. I became so confused. I tried several traditional medicines but their conditions could not change for the better. It was then that I approached a friend in the next village for help. This friend of mine introduced me to a chief fisherman whose name I cannot provide now. This man was ready to help me with Two thousand New Ghana Cedis (GH¢ 2,000) on condition that I allowed two of my sons to stay and work for him for two years. My wives were initially hesitant when I told them. But when I deceived them later that the man had promised to help them [their two sons] go to school during their stay, they gave their consent.

After receiving their mothers' consent, I called my two sons who were then twelve and fourteen years respectively. I

told them that one of their uncles would be taking them to Benin. I took them to the man the following week and received the money as promised. Although our situation has not changed for the better at the moment, at least, I was able to provide treatment for their sister and mother from the money and used some to settle almost all my debts to avoid all the embarrassments I was subjected to by my creditors. My wives are now into petty trading from the rest of the money to provide food and cloth for the rest of the children.

I further discovered during the interview that, although Kofi claimed he has been receiving letters from the 'custodian' of his sons, he had never visited them ever since they were taken away. All the same, he considered the extension of their stay to enable him receive more financial assistance.

4.2. Placement and Domestic Servitude

Just like 'child bonded labour', placing girls as domestic helps and boys as farm or fishing labourers are also common practices in the study area in particular (see Table 1.) and Ghana in general. Generally, these domestic and farm or fishing works are not regarded as being hazardous to their health and education, but rather contribute to their informal training [33]. Thus, poor parents or guardians who face difficulties in taking care of their children normally give them out to well-to-do friends or relatives in towns or cities to serve as domestics. The respondents noted in their remarks that some poor parents/guardian often released their children to relatives or family friends, believing that they (the children) would be better off when they are taken away.

Data from this study further indicated, however, that many of these parents out of ignorance and desperation often give away their children to people who use them in all sorts of activities such as forced labour and prostitution to generate income for themselves.⁸ One of such incidents was confirmed by a parent during the fieldwork.

[...] Selina convinced me that apart from sending us money to look after her siblings, she will also let her go to school over there. She even promised to sponsor her to learn trading after school. That was why I allowed her to take the innocent girl away. Until I was informed, I did not know that Selina's aim was to use my daughter to run a prostitute business in Cotonou (Interview with Joseph).

Joseph's case does not, however, imply that poor households in the study locations do not benefit from placement and domestic servitude strategies. For example, apart from Sarah's case which is used as a case study in the subsequent section, in an interview, a male household head reported that he was able to open a drinking bar and a local restaurant for his wife from the money he got through his son's placement (Interview with Agbota). There was another revealing interview with a successful fish processor/trader and single parent, Mercy. Mercy said she hired one of her daughters to a customs officer, who was then working at the Ghana-Togo border at Aflao, as a domestic servant. It was the

7 Translated from Ewe: 'Abakpui menɔa amesi wo do akolɔe o'.

8 Information from the Department of Social Welfare, Ketu South District

only way she could raise some money to look after her children. She further intimated that her current fish processing business was an outcome of the monies she received from the custom officer.

4.2.1. Coping/Survival Strategy Based on “Child Domestic Servitude”: The Case of Sarah

Sarah is a 47 year old widow. She was the second wife of her late husband and is a mother of eight children: five boys (three to nine years of age) and three girls (five to eleven years old). Her husband spent all his life as a fishing crew but died in 2009 without any property except two thatch houses. Sarah used to earn a ‘very low’ income from the harvesting and sale of salt. She had no other sources of income. As a result, she could not provide sufficient medical care and nutritious food for herself and her children. Due to the growing hardship, she gave one of her daughters to a trader (a woman) in Lome to serve as a domestic worker for five years. The woman rewards her back home with money, food and clothing. The following is what she had to say about her situation:

I am a mother of eight children and the second wife of my husband who passed away two years ago. He was a fishing crew working with one of his friends who owned a fishing company. Therefore, apart from this small house we are occupying now, he could not leave behind any other property for us to live on. Moreover, his brothers are also not in any sound position in terms of finance to support us. Meanwhile, two of my children, the second and the last born were always looking pale and weak. People always advised me to take them to the hospital but I could not do so because I did not register with the National Health Insurance Scheme. I had to keep on borrowing money and begging for alms every now and then from friends before I could buy medicine for them. It had been a hardship and struggle before I could provide them with one meal a day and dress to wear. In fact, there was a time when I could not go out to any social gathering and visit friends and relatives as I did not have any decent cloth to wear. I was like an outcast. Life had completely failed me, my brother.⁹

Somewhere last year, around April, a friend informed me that her business partner in Lome was looking for a house-help to hire. Since life was becoming extremely difficult for me and my children, I had no choice but to release one of my daughters to her. Ever since she left, her madam has been sending us food and money on monthly basis, as we both agreed on, through my friend. She sent us Fifty New Ghana Cedis (GH¢ 50) the very week my daughter was sent to her, and I invested it in kerosene and coconut oil business. Even though I still remain poor, at least my children do not go to bed without food any more. Yes, I also registered all my children, including myself with the National Health Insurance Scheme just last month.

In answer to other questions I asked her, Sarah revealed

that her daughter often complained to her through a friend about how the woman always subjected her to severe physical and verbal abuse at the least provocation. According to Sarah, some of her daughter’s complaints also indicated that she always worked for long hours, went to bed very late and woke up very early. As a result, and according to Sarah, her daughter always wanted to return to the village. However, Sarah’s main concern was that her daughter’s return to the village would shut their main source of livelihood down and this may send her household back to its former situation where they used to go to bed without food.

4.2.2. Coping/Survival Strategy Based on “Outright Sale of Children”: The Case of Mark

Mark and his wife Cecelia were married for eighteen years with nine children. Fishing is Mark’s main source of income although he also engages in salt harvesting with his wife during the dry season. For the past six years, Mark’s life has been plagued with difficulties, including internal shocks: he lost his only brother who used to help him financially a year before his house was completely destroyed by a severe flood. When life was becoming unbearable for the household, Mark who said he was 50 years old at the time of this research apparently sold two of his sons to a fisherman in Gabon to enable him to provide for his household needs. The following is Mark’s story:

I have been a fishing crew for about 35 years now. I do not have any canoe, boat or net and have been surviving on others who have such fishing equipment ever since I started fishing. Initially the fishing business was very profitable as we could catch enough fish throughout the year. The owner of the fishing company I was working with was very supportive. He used to give me loans any time I approached him without asking for early payment. As a result, I was able to save and provide enough for the welfare of my children, including my extended family members. I had a two-bedroom house with enough space where I was keeping a small poultry to support the household. One of my brothers whom I supported in the training college was also remitting us regularly with money and food the moment he started working.

However, my entire life, including that of my household members changed for the worse just one night in July 2005. I lost my house and other properties in a severe flood that affected the entire village. Meanwhile, my brother who would have been my only hope also died the previous year in a motor accident. Since then, I have never been able to have sufficient money and food to feed my family. My children dropped out from school and started working to fend for themselves. My entire family was exposed to hunger and frequent sickness. All efforts to re-organize my life failed as the fish catch in our area also dwindled drastically.

As our living conditions in the house became unbearable, two of my elderly sons and I joined a fishing company in Gabon in 2009. Throughout our stay, my sons’ hard work attracted the attention of other fishing companies over there. So when we

⁹ We were compelled to break the interview with Sarah at this point for almost fifteen minutes because she burst into uncontrollable tears.

were about to return to Ghana, the owner of a Gabonese fishing company expressed interest in them, and approached me to allow them to work with him. Since the man promised that they would be well rewarded at the end of every fishing season, I did not refuse. That is how I left my sons behind.

It is important to point out that Mark did not tell me during our discussions in a 'plain language' that he sold his sons. However, his wife who interrupted the interview at a point interjected, *tell them the truth, Wotodia Kobla and his friend who also work as a fishing crew in Gabon told me two months ago that the fishing company which you claim our sons are working with over there does not exist.* Apart from that, having considered the age of his sons (seven and thirteen years respectively), and his responses to our follow-up questions, one can conclude that he did sell the boys in Gabon. For example, when we asked him whether he had visited or heard from his sons ever since he left them, Mark said no. Moreover, he was also not able to tell us the exact time the boys will return from Gabon when we enquired. All he could say was that they would come back one day. Our further probe into Mark's story also revealed that he collected an undisclosed amount of money¹⁰ from the so called 'employer' of his sons at the time he (Mark) was returning to Ghana.

5. Discussion

The research was conducted to add to knowledge and extend our understanding of factors precipitating child trafficking in especially rural coastal fishing communities in Ghana. Abject poverty has been found to be responsible for trafficking of children in Agavedzi, Akorsua village and Bakpakorfe. Excessive poverty and vulnerability have increased the disposition to accept child trafficking as a survival strategy, which implies that poverty intensified child trafficking in the communities under study. Furthermore, the evidence that all the identified child trafficking related survival strategies are socio-cultural practices that culminate in the full blown child trafficking phenomenon further highlights that culture and availability of 'resources' (in this case children) may determine the methods that poor people employ to survive or cope with excessive adversity. The above findings in this study is in line with other studies [34]; [17]; [2]; and [11], and also in consistent with [7]' assertion that survival and coping strategies are mainly a response to adversity and austerity.

It is evident in this study that the child trafficking phenomenon in the study areas is neatly linked to manipulation by friends and relatives of the poor parents. Friends and relatives lure poor parents with money and gifts and recruit their children for exploitation or re-selling to other people to generate income. The observation seems to be of the economic hardship which has destroyed the social value to protect the family and its members, especially children, within the existing web of relations namely kin, families and friends on which people could fall back for

economic and social security. This is an indication that kin and familial social mechanism that exists within the African societies are no longer reliable in providing security in the present increasingly insecure socio-economic environment. [1] indeed found that the extended family that was once the backbone of the country's society is now losing ground to the nuclear family system which seeks to promote the interest of only a limited number of people. [21] argued along similar line that the obligations required in maintaining active social ties and reciprocity have high costs that occasionally result in eroding social support.

As shown in the study, some of the parents, although are aware of the Government's efforts to incriminate and punish actors involved in the trafficking business, they continued to release their children to be trafficked due to poverty. The above finding in the current study in itself should be seen as an indication that legal approach in curbing child trafficking in fishing communities needs to take into consideration the nature of their poverty and how their strategies to survive interact with their socio-cultural environments. [31] argued that 'the elimination of trafficking is unlikely to be realistically achieved through legislation and declaration of intent, but by improvements in the socio-economic states of the populations'. Certainly, legislations would help but it is equally important to address the main root causes of the child trafficking phenomenon through the development of policies that incorporate the nature and interactions of these factors. Therefore, any legal measure against child trafficking that is based on "top down" approaches is bound to be ineffective. In the context of fishing communities in particular, such approach requires an active consultation with, and participation of community members.

The evident in this study that some of the children in the study area have been trafficked outside Ghana support [39] that children are at times recruited by fishermen from relatives or friends across borders to be engaged in prostitution, domestic servitude and hazardous forced labour or in forced marriage. The cross border trafficking as found in the present study again highlights the fact that relying on national and international legal mechanisms in tackling child trafficking is likely to send the whole practice further beyond the surveillance of the law enforcement agents.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper explored the intensity, type and level of coping/survival strategies that depict child trafficking, using three fishing communities. This includes two rural coastal fishing communities: Agavedzi and Akorsua village in the Volta and Central Regions respectively, and one rural inland fishing community along the Volta lake Bakpakorfe in the Volta Region. Using survey questionnaire, interviewed and focus group discussion, 78 household heads were interviewed at Agavedzi and Akorsua village through random sampling technique, while 5 fishermen were interviewed at Bakpakorfe

¹⁰ Mark declined to tell us the exact amount of money he collected.

through the use of snow-ball sampling technique. As indicated by earlier studies, this study found that abject poverty and desperation of the poor households in the study location to survive have compelled some of them to resort to strategies that reinforced pre-existing traditional practices that culminated in the intensification of trafficking of their children. The three commonly identified coping/survival strategies found within the locations that can be specifically classified under the definition of 'child trafficking' were 'child bonded labour', 'child domestic servitude' and 'outright selling' of children.

Rethinking of intervention mechanisms to combat child trafficking, poverty and vulnerable settlements, such as fishing communities in Ghana is therefore necessary. First, there is the need for government and other stakeholders to improve the living conditions in these communities through poverty eradication measures, such as the promotion and provision of income generating schemes as well as basic infrastructure that can enhance dignified living.

Second, government needs to adopt alternative measures that tackle the root causes of other factors responsible for the prevalence of child trafficking in these and similar communities in the country. These factors must be traced through a multi-level rather than a micro-level analysis of socio-cultural environment and livelihood trends of rural fishing communities and their responses to their changing conditions.

Finally, human rights awareness or education is needed to enhance advocacy for the need to respect and protect the rights of children in the context of socio-cultural practices and poverty that exacerbated trafficking of children in these communities. Effective human rights education and information will further help these poor community members to make decisions with better background knowledge of the potential risks involved in child trafficking. Child rights awareness creation through campaign and advocacy, for example, would go a long way to demonstrate that every individual and the poor community as a whole have a moral obligation to recognize and protect the rights of children.

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