

‘Shock and Awe’: A critique of the Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse

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Abstract

This paper is a critique of the dominant anti-trafficking discourse and activism in Ghana. It argues that the discourse grossly underplays the role of external forces in shaping the conditions underpinning children’s labour mobility in the past and the hardships underpinning the phenomenon today. In place of critical analysis and understanding, anti-child-trafficking campaigns employ melodramatic ‘shock and awe’ tactics and a tendency to blame local culture or traditions for activists’ claims of ‘pervasive’ child trafficking in the country. The paper suggests that dominant anti-trafficking discourse and activism in Ghana thus reinvigorate historic and persistent external causal agents of inequality which drive Ghanaian children’s labour mobility today. The paper demonstrates this problem and offers correctives to it.

Keywords: child trafficking, anti-trafficking, Ghana, history, Volta lake, Africa, fishing

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a radical shift in the field of child rights advocacy in Ghana, marked primarily by a proliferation of organisations and actors coalesced around the issue of child trafficking or ‘modern slavery’ as some characterise it. The child trafficking or ‘child slavery’ problem is said to be prevalent nationwide. The proliferation of anti-trafficking organisations and intensification of their campaigns has had minimal impact on the problem. After almost two decades of campaigns, advocates insist that the situation is in fact deteriorating. Some have

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likened it to an ‘epidemic’¹ while others describe Ghana as ‘a country where modern day slavery is rampant’.² These views are reflected in the recent United States Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report rankings. In 2003 and 2004 Ghana was given a Tier 1 rating.³ The country was deemed fully compliant with ‘the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking’, and continued to ‘excel at victim protection, particularly in regard to repatriating trafficked children and providing assistance to their families’.⁴ From 2005 onwards, alongside the proliferation of anti-trafficking organisations and intensification of their initiatives, Ghana has only managed a Tier 2 rating. Indeed, since 2015, the country has fallen further in the rankings; it is currently on the Tier 2 Watch List as a country that is no longer compliant with the minimum standards.

It seems paradoxical that the ‘trafficking problem’ is deemed to be worsening even as domestic anti-trafficking initiatives have been amplified by governmental and international institutions, NGOs, businesses, churches and other actors.⁵ This observation adds to other concerns expressed about the anti-trafficking discourse in Ghana. Findings from several studies call into question the veracity of claims of widespread child trafficking, as the phenomenon of independent child migration is often misconstrued.⁶ It has also been argued that the emphasis on ‘child trafficking’ renders invisible the diverse forms of children’s mobility in the country.⁷

¹ O Agyemang, ‘Project Update for July to September 2013’, Cheerful Hearts Foundation, 14 October 2013, retrieved 10 July 2017, <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/rescue-100-children-from-child-labour-in-ghana/reports/?subid=36552>.

² B Weiss, ‘Government and Civil Society Unite Against Ghana Child Trafficking’, *Huffington Post*, 2 August 2016, retrieved 10 July 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/free-the-slaves/government-and-civil-soci_b_11294410.html.

³ See: US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, 2003, 2004.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2004, p. 57.

⁵ B N Lawrance, ‘From Child Labor “Problem” to Human Trafficking “Crisis”: Child advocacy and anti-trafficking legislation in Ghana’, *International Labour and Working-Class History*, vol. 78, issue 1, 2010, pp. 63–88.

⁶ See: S O Kwankye, J K Anarfi, C A Tagoe and A Castaldo, ‘Independent North-South Child Migration in Ghana: The decision-making process’, Working Paper T-29, Sussex Migration Centre, 2009; G B Abdul-Korah, ‘“Now if You Have Only Sons You are Dead”: Migration, gender and family economy in twentieth century north-western Ghana’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2011, pp. 390–403; I Hashim and D Thorsen, *Child Migration in Africa*, The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Zed Books, London and New York, 2011.

⁷ A Whitehead, I M Hashim, and V Iversen, ‘Child Migration, Child Agency and Inter-generational Relations in Africa and South Asia’, Working Paper T24, Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty, University of Sussex, Brighton, 2007.

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An additional critique presented by this paper is that the discourse deflects attention from the historic and persistent structures of inequality in the global political and economic order which largely underpin children's labour mobility in Ghana today. I argue that this deficiency presents an obstacle to the formulation of comprehensive solutions to problematic aspects of such movement among other insecurities confronting children and families. The next section of the paper outlines the salient features of the dominant Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse, showing the lack of historicity in anti-trafficking advocates' taxonomy of the causes, scale and features of child trafficking. Next, I present historical material omitted from these diagnoses. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion section, I consider the reasons for this omission, and how the deficit impacts on the characterisation, understanding and responses to child trafficking in Ghana.

Overview of the Child Trafficking Discourse in Ghana

Although many aspects of the Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse are informed by the country's internal socio-cultural, economic and political dynamics, they are firmly rooted in the broader international legislative framework and discourse on trafficking. Ghana's Human Trafficking Act (2005), for example, has been described as a carbon copy of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) (hereafter referred to as the Trafficking Protocol).⁸ In keeping with Article 3(a) of the Trafficking Protocol, Section 1(1) of the Ghana Human Trafficking Act also defines human trafficking as 'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, trading or receipt of persons within and across national borders by (a) the use of threats, force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or exploitation of vulnerability, or (b) giving or receiving payments and benefits to achieve consent'.

Another common thread between the Trafficking Protocol and the Ghana Human Trafficking Act is considerations around consent in identifying a victim of trafficking. The consent of an adult to her or his movement and intended or actual exploitation is deemed immaterial where threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception and other 'unfree' means were used to obtain it. Implicit in this formulation is an acknowledgement that adults may and do 'freely' consent to being recruited, transported, harboured or received for practices which could be

⁸ See: M Sertich and M Meemskerk, 'Ghana's Human Trafficking Act: Successes and shortcomings in six years of implementation', *Human Rights Brief*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2011, pp. 2-7; S Bukari, *Parts Unknown: A critical exploration of fishers' social constructs of child labour in Ghana*, Doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2016, retrieved 2 July 2017, <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/61740/>.

deemed exploitative. The cases of overseas domestic workers and other migrant labourers toiling in appalling and exploitative conditions in different sectors across the world exemplify this point.⁹ In the case of children however, consent is deemed irrelevant both in terms of movement and any ‘exploitative’ outcome from it,¹⁰ and the means do not need to be present to establish the crime. Likewise, the Ghana Human Trafficking Act states: ‘Where children are trafficked, the consent of the child, parents or guardian of the child cannot be used as a defence in prosecution under this Act, regardless of whether or not there is evidence of abuse of power, fraud or deception on the part of the trafficker or whether the vulnerability of the child was taken advantage of.’

O’Connell Davidson’s critical observation about the Trafficking Protocol’s vagueness on what constitutes exploitation¹¹ also applies to the Ghana Human Trafficking Act. For sure, Article 3(a) of the Trafficking Protocol states that, ‘Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.’ However, this accompaniment still fails to offer a precise definition or explanation of exploitation, just as the Ghana Human Trafficking Act also outlines a ‘minimum’ yardstick for exploitation without a ceiling or, better still, a precise definition for it. Both legislative frameworks therefore suggest that any movement of a child (defined by both the Trafficking Protocol and the Ghana Children’s Act 1998 as any person under eighteen years of age) which results in a situation interpreted by individuals or groups as ‘exploitative’, can be labelled as ‘child trafficking’. Identification of child trafficking is therefore largely reliant on what actors deem to be ‘child exploitation’ based on their personal, cultural and political morals or value judgements. This is often the case in the Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse.

This discourse emerged around the late 1990s and gained much traction from the early 2000s. One of its precursors was the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Convention C182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (hereafter, Convention 182) which had entered into force around that same period. Convention

⁹ For a discussion of such examples, see: B Anderson, ‘Migration, Immigration Controls and the Fashioning of Precarious Workers’, *Work, Employment & Society*, vol. 24, no. 10, 2010, p. 303; and D Demetriou, ‘“Tied Visas” and Inadequate Labour Protections: A formula for abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers in the United Kingdom’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 5, 2015, pp. 69–88.

¹⁰ See: International Labour Organization, *Meeting the Challenge: Proven practices for human trafficking prevention in the Greater Mekong sub-region*, Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women, International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, Bangkok, 2008.

¹¹ J O’Connell Davidson, *Modern Slavery: The margins of freedom*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015.

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182 heralded a raft of national, regional and international interventions to end the ‘worst forms’ of child labour as well as ‘child trafficking’ as outlined in Article 3. Children’s work in the West African cocoa sector was particularly high on this agenda following a series of media reports in the early 2000s which suggested that ‘hazardous child labour’, ‘child bondage’, ‘child slavery’ and ‘child trafficking’ were pervasive in this sector.¹² Concurrently, the Trafficking Protocol had also been passed, and both domestic and international child rights actors increasingly repositioned their preventative work against the worst forms of child labour under the ambit of child trafficking. As Lawrance similarly observes, from a ‘problem’ of the worst forms of child labour in the early 1990s, child rights advocates in Ghana now principally talk of the ‘crises’ or ‘scandal’ of ‘child trafficking’.¹³

The metamorphosis occurred for two principle reasons. First, worst forms of child labour campaigns fell on unsympathetic ears and were also mired in disagreements. The local, national, and international actors involved had divergent messages about the nature and permissibility of children’s work in agriculture and other areas of Ghanaian society.¹⁴ Second, there was a long-existing and well-known practice of child and youth labour mobility in Ghana. The intractable controversy encountered by child labour preventative campaigns coupled with existence of children’s labour mobility and the relatively low bar set by the Ghana Human Trafficking Act for defining child trafficking collectively catalysed the reconfiguration of the child labour discourse using the language of trafficking.

Since 2000, the Ghanaian child rights sector has witnessed a proliferation of individuals and organisations which employ child trafficking as a catch-all term for child labour, forced labour, child migration, child prostitution, child marriage and other child rights foci. A related trend which exemplifies critiques by Musto,¹⁵ O’Connell Davidson,¹⁶ and Chuang¹⁷ is the conflation of ‘trafficking’, ‘forced

¹² For a discussion of these news items, see for example: C Lamb, ‘The Child Slaves of the Ivory Coast—Bought and sold for as little as £40’, *The Telegraph*, 27 April 2001; H Hawksley, ‘Meeting the “Chocolate Slaves”’, *BBC*, 13 June 2002, retrieved 31 May 2017, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2042474.stm>.

¹³ Lawrance, p. 74.

¹⁴ See: G M Hilson, ‘Child Labour in African Artisanal Mining Communities: Experiences from northern Ghana’, *Development and Change*, vol. 41, 2010, pp. 445–473; Lawrance, p. 64.

¹⁵ J L Musto, ‘What’s in a Name?: Conflations and contradictions in contemporary U.S. discourses of human trafficking’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2009, pp. 281–287.

¹⁶ J O’Connell Davidson, ‘New Slavery, Old Binaries: Human trafficking and the borders of “freedom”’, *Global Networks*, vol. 10, issue 2, pp. 244–261, 2010.

¹⁷ J Chuang, ‘The Challenges and Perils of Reframing Trafficking as “Modern-Day Slavery”’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 5, 2015, pp. 146–149.

labour', and 'modern slavery' in the discourse. For instance, in an anti-trafficking piece for the *Daily Graphic*, Ghana's leading newspaper, Boyle argues that 'slavery has a different name today—human trafficking'.¹⁸ The child trafficking problem is said to be ubiquitous nationwide across a variety of sectors: 'Both boys and girls are trafficked within the borders of Ghana for forced labour within the fishing and agriculture, for street hawking, forced begging, religious rites, mining, stone quarrying, porters etc.'¹⁹ Although studies of the country's north-south labour migration of children and youth indicate that many of these young people migrate independently or with siblings and peers, Hazelwood suggests that this is another area where 'trafficking occurs regularly'.²⁰ 'Recruiters violate Ghana's Human Trafficking Act by falsely promising the girls a better life in the south through providing schooling, shelter, food, and clothing. While parents may consent to the migration, the Act provides that consent remains irrelevant when the practice involves children. Therefore, parental consent or the girls' willingness to work does not negate the illegality of the migration', she argues.²¹

The fishing industry along the Lake Volta is at the top of the discourse's iconography of child trafficking and child slavery in Ghana. It is difficult to overestimate the volume of research, reports, campaigns, and other initiatives focussed on this area.²² A reliable estimate of the actual number of purported victims of child

¹⁸ L Boyle, 'Child Trafficking: A symbol of poverty and vulnerability', *Graphic Online*, 20 December 2013, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/child-trafficking-a-symbol-of-poverty-and-vulnerability.html>.

¹⁹ C Wenngren, *Causes of Child Trafficking: A case study of Ghana*, Lund University, 2011, p. 16, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=1968825&fileId=1968831>.

²⁰ K Hazelwood, 'Ghana's Invisible Girls: The Child-Kayaye business and its violation of domestic and international child labour laws', *Journal of Global Justice and Public Policy*, vol. 1, issue 77, 2011, pp. 77–159, p. 96.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See the following, for example: E Taylor, 'Freeing the Child Slaves of Volta Lake', *Modern Ghana*, 13 March 2003, retrieved 10 July 2017, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/111880/freeing-the-child-slaves-of-volta-lake.html>; H K Golo, *The Interface of Poverty, Livelihoods, Coping/Survival Strategies and Child Trafficking in Rural Coastal Fishing Communities of Ghana*, Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2012, retrieved 5 July 2017, <http://othes.univie.ac.at/24733/>; K Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery: A Reader*, University of California, Berkeley, 2005; International Justice Mission, *Child Trafficking into Forced Labour on Lake Volta, Ghana: A mixed-methods assessment*, IJM, Accra, 2016, retrieved 1 May 2017, http://challengingheights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/IJM_Ghana_FINAL_single_revised_5.22.pdf; L Agbenya, *Child Labour Trafficking in the Lake Volta Fishery in Ghana: A case of Ogetse in the Krachi West District of the Volta region*, Master's thesis in International Fisheries Management at the Department of Social and Marketing Studies, Norwegian College of Fishery Science, University

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trafficking in this area is impossible to attain; figures ranging from a couple of thousands to tens of thousands have been cited by anti-trafficking campaigners. The anti-trafficking coalition is nonetheless unified on the view that 'significant levels of child trafficking and slavery-like conditions' exist in communities located around the lake, according to the NGO Free The Slaves,²³ and that cases of child trafficking and forced labour are 'common' and 'violent', as asserted by the International Justice Mission (IJM).²⁴

The majority of children working in the Lake Volta fishing industry are said to be ten years old or younger.²⁵ A BBC documentary on this issue in February 2017²⁶ suggested that children are simply given to traffickers or 'slave masters' by parents who are unable to cater for them, or sold for as little as £12, according to Left.²⁷ The children are said to labour seven days a week from 4 am, regularly working for 15 hours daily.²⁸ Girls de-scale fish, serve as 'sex slaves' and perform other domestic chores, while boys mend, cast and hoist nets.²⁹ Following a study commissioned to 'harvest the memories and experiences of children who have been rescued from slavery in fishing communities along Lake Volta', Challenging Heights, an organisation which also plays a prominent role in the Ghanaian anti-trafficking discourse, adds that 'enslaved children' are also often forced into marriage.³⁰ These

of Tromsø, 2009; S E Hamenoo and C A Sottie, 'Stories from Lake Volta: The lived experiences of trafficked children in Ghana', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 40, 2015, pp. 103–112; J K Annan, 'Eliminating Child Slavery on Lake Volta', *Graphic Online*, 31 March 2016, retrieved 1 July 2017, <http://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/eliminating-child-slavery-on-lake-volta.html>.

²³ Free the Slaves, 'New Research Indicates High Prevalence of Child Trafficking and Slavery-Like Conditions in Ghana Fishing Villages', 28 February 2017, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://www.freetheslaves.net/new-research-indicates-high-prevalence-of-child-trafficking-and-slavery-like-conditions-in-ghana-fishing-villages/>.

²⁴ International Justice Mission, 2016.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁶ BBC, 'Ghana's Child Labourers', *BBC World News*, 2017, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3ct0bvk>.

²⁷ S Left, 'Sons for Sale', *The Guardian*, 22 March 2007, retrieved 10 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/22/sarahleft>.

²⁸ G Freduah, *Poverty Mitigation and Wealth Creation through Artisanal Fisheries in Dzemeni Area at Volta Lake, Ghana*, Master of Philosophy Degree in Resources and Human Adaptations, Department of Geography, University of Bergen, Norway, 2008, p. 83.

²⁹ See: Boyle, 2013; International Justice Mission, 2016.

³⁰ K Tsekpo, A Afram, E S Boateng and C Sefa-Nyarko, *Analysing the Experiences of Children who are Thought to Have Witnessed or Undergone Child Forced Early Marriage in the Volta Lake Communities of Ghana*, Challenging Heights, 2016, retrieved 2 May 2017, <http://challengingheights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CFEM-in-Fishing-Industry-on-Lake-Volta-Report.pdf>.

forced marriages to ‘another child slave, or to the slave master or to a member of the slave master’s family’ are in order to keep child slaves in their master’s control when they become adults, or simply to ‘keep older boys in their employment through sexual rewards and marriage’, adds the IJM. Publicity materials portraying these issues and other anti-trafficking advocacy are awash with images of ‘rescued slaves’, harrowing narratives by ‘slavery survivors’ and depictions of children toiling under great strain on boats, at mining sites and elsewhere.³¹

The discourse offers a variety of explanations for the existence of child trafficking in Ghana. Some have suggested that Ghanaian culture ‘provides a conducive socio-economic environment that benefits and nurtures the trafficking phenomenon’.³² The practice of fostering or child placement is said to be at the root of modern-day trafficking in West Africa as a whole, according to the Walk Free Foundation.³³ Others point to poverty and socio-economic deprivation in the decision.³⁴ As Golo argues, ‘Out of poverty, parents become comfortable with sending their children into bonded labour as the shortest means of solving their own economic and social hardships.’³⁵ The causes ascribed by the discourse are far too many to be rehearsed here, but David Kofi Awusi, advocacy manager of Challenging Heights, has summed them up as follows: ‘Through research and over 10 years of operations, the organisation has discovered that child trafficking in Ghana is caused by **poverty, ignorance, poor parental care and lack of support for children**. Furthermore, **weak political commitment** reflected in **inadequate allocation of resources** to combat human trafficking and **weak enforcement of laws** and implementation of national policies and plans, also contribute to the problem.’³⁶

It should be noted that while the Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse largely agrees on all the issues discussed in this section, the field is not necessarily concordant. For instance, an ILO study of child labour in fishing on the Lake Volta casts doubts on the startling aspects of the discourse.³⁷ The ILO study confirms the involvement of children in the sector under dangerous and exploitative conditions.

³¹ See for instance: *Where we Work: Ghana*, Free the Slaves, <http://www.freetheslaves.net/where-we-work/ghana/>.

³² Wenggren, p. 60.

³³ Walk Free Foundation, *Global Slavery Index*, Hope for Children Organization Australia Ltd., 2014.

³⁴ Agbenya, p. 56.

³⁵ H K Golo, *Poverty and Child Trafficking in Ghana: A study of the fishing sector*, M.A. thesis, 2005, p. vi, retrieved 7 July 2017, <http://bit.ly/2v37beN>.

³⁶ D K Awusi, ‘Let’s Eliminate Child Trafficking in Ghana’, *Graphic Online*, 4 September 2015, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://www.graphic.com.gh/features/features/let-s-eliminate-child-trafficking-in-ghana.html> (emphasis added).

³⁷ International Labour Organization, *Analytical Study on Child Labour In Lake Volta Fishing in Ghana*, ILO, Geneva, 2013.

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However, claims of pervasive child slavery, child marriage and others which continue to dominate the discourse were not corroborated: ‘The fieldwork did not identify any significant number of children as sex slaves who are in fishing. An overwhelming majority of respondents of 97 per cent said no such sex slaves are engaged in fishing. Likewise, the investigations into child servitude revealed that no children in servitude (97 per cent) are in fishing. Respondents could not also admit the prevalence of children under early/forced marriages being engaged in fishing. A majority of 97 per cent of respondents said there are no children in that category engaged in fishing activities on the lake.’³⁸

The discourse is also increasingly confronted by the same problems which dogged the child labour campaigns in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Some communities targeted by anti-trafficking campaigns and ‘rescue’ operations have levelled various allegations against these activities. The most recent case concerns the IJM. In June 2017, Betty Nana Efua Crosby Mensah, Member of Parliament (MP) for Afram Plains North in the Eastern Region delivered a statement in the Ghanaian Parliament calling for the return of children allegedly abducted by the IJM staff under the ‘misconception of rescuing them from child labour/child trafficking’.³⁹ The MP argued that organisations such as the IJM erroneously consider children in the area to be victims of child labour and trafficking because they ‘never consulted with stakeholders, traditional rulers or opinion leaders to really understand the cultural setting of the Afram Plains area’. This issue of ill-informed child rights interventions by some NGOs and activists has also been highlighted by other scholars in the context of West Africa.⁴⁰

North-South Children Migration in Ghana: A brief history

As mentioned in the previous section, there is a long history of youth and children’s labour migration in Ghana. To a considerable extent, this migratory practice, especially among youth from the country’s three northern regions, has been shaped by British colonial expansion and contrivance. From 1900 to 1940, gold mining in the then British Gold Coast colony was largely non-industrialised.⁴¹ Manual labour was therefore critical to the survival of the developing British colonial mining industry. However, due to dangerous working conditions, exploitative wages and general distaste for underground work, indigenes of areas where the mines were located

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁹ See report on this story by F Shaibu and D Adogla-Bessa, ‘Return Our Children, You Abducted – MP tells NGO’, *Ghananewspage.com*, 13 June 2017, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://ghananewspage.com/?p=3100>.

⁴⁰ See for the most recent critique: N Howard, *Child Trafficking, Youth Mobility and the Politics of Protection*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017.

⁴¹ Hilson.

refused to take up jobs in the sector.⁴² Facing economic ruin, British mining company owners placed pressure on the British government and colonial administrators to institute a range of coercive mechanisms to compel people to work in the mines. As Thomas⁴³ notes in a more extensive discussion of these measures, the primary measure was the systematic exclusion of the northern half of the country from the construction of roads, schools, hospitals, factories and all other developmental projects in order to force northerners to move down south to work in the mines.

The effect of this ‘scorched-earth’ developmental deprivation policy (and the resultant droves of emigration from northern Ghana) is a cycle of poverty, deprivation and underdevelopment which has been difficult to reverse sixty years after independence. The persistence of underdevelopment and deprivation in the northern half of the country has also been due to International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank-led economic reforms instituted in the country in the early 1980s and still ongoing.⁴⁴ A critical aspect of these reforms was the removal of subsidies and agricultural products under IMF structural adjustment conditionalities. These hit the three northern regions, the Volta region and the Central region the hardest as subsistence agriculture and fishing were the mainstay of many living here.⁴⁵ A recent report by ActionAid on the impact of the IMF’s interventions in Ghana pointedly states that its financial reforms often require the government to reduce spending on health, education, and development: ‘the IMF in effect demands the poor in Ghana to have lower standard of living’.⁴⁶

It is instructive to note that the three northern regions, Volta region and the central region, where anti-trafficking campaigners suggest that child trafficking is most pervasive, are also among the areas worst affected by structural adjustment and other economic reforms in Ghana. Therefore, as Golo argues, the surge in inclusion of children in fishing on the Lake Volta cannot be understood without reference to the twenty years of structural adjustment experienced by Ghana.⁴⁷

⁴² K O Akurang-Parry, ‘The Loads are Heavier than Usual: Forced labour by women and children in the Central Province, Gold Coast (Colonial Ghana), CA. 1900–1940’, *African Economic History*, no. 30, 2002, pp. 31–51.

⁴³ R G Thomas, ‘Forced Labour in British West Africa: The case of the northern territories of the Gold Coast 1906–1927’, *Journal of African History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1973, pp. 79–103.

⁴⁴ O Abena and I Aryee, ‘Investigating Chronic Poverty in West Africa’, CPRC Working Paper No. 28, 2003.

⁴⁵ See for a more detailed discussion: Golo, 2005; A Whitehead, I M Hashim and V Iversen, 2007.

⁴⁶ ActionAid Ghana, *Implications of IMF Loans and Conditionalities on the Poor and Vulnerable in Ghana*, ActionAid, 2010, p. 45, retrieved 23 June 2016, <http://bit.ly/28Slcqi>.

⁴⁷ Golo, 2005, p. 4.

Thus, the reference to Ghanaian culture as a causal factor for trafficking suggests a lack of understanding of the historical and persistent external forces of inequality which shape children's labour mobility in Ghana. Elsewhere in the country, economic liberalisation policies have also resulted in widespread dispossession of rural folks of their lands, forcing many children and their families into precarious artisanal gold mining work.⁴⁸ In these cases too, the children's work is what is often held up as the problem that requires elimination as opposed to the factors that have driven them into precarious labour. The discussion and conclusion section which follows explores the reasons for the Ghanaian anti-trafficking coalition's silence on children's participation in exploitative labour as well as the implications of this silence.

Discussion and Conclusion

The issue of child trafficking has now gained international attention as a 'distinct and egregious violation of children's rights' that needs to be stamped out.⁴⁹ An anti-trafficking coalition has emerged in Ghana in response to this call, asserting that child trafficking and 'child slavery' are rampant in the country. This article argues that while concerns about child rights expressed by these actors are valid, the discourse is deficient because its portrayals and diagnoses lack crucial historical grounding. In the absence of a clear agreement on the number of purported trafficking victims, the discourse conflates distinct children's rights issues to create an impression of widespread 'child trafficking' and 'child slavery'. The coalition's principal modus operandi is the use of emotive language to convey 'shock and awe', or what Lawrance describes as a 'crisis' narrative.⁵⁰ In this sense, the Ghana-centric anti-trafficking narrative is well coordinated with the global anti-trafficking discourse both in terms of legislative framework and the messages they propagate. As other scholars have observed, the global anti-trafficking campaign prioritises 'melodramatics' over complex critical analyses in its advocacy,⁵¹ in a calculated strategy intended to minimise scrutiny of its messages.⁵²

⁴⁸ S Okyere, 'Are Working Children's Rights and Child Labour Abolition Complementary or Opposing Realms?', *International Social Work*, vol. 56, issue 1, 2012, pp. 80-91.

⁴⁹ International Labour Organization, *Unbearable to the Human Heart: Child trafficking and action to eliminate it*, ILO, Geneva, 2002, p. ix.

⁵⁰ Lawrance.

⁵¹ J L Westwood, *The Social Construction of Risk in Child Trafficking Discourses: A study of melodramatic tactics in child trafficking narratives*, Doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Central Lancashire, 2012, retrieved 10 July 2017, [http://clou.uclan.ac.uk/3717/3/Westwood%20Joanne%20Final%20eThesis%20\(Master%20Copy\).pdf](http://clou.uclan.ac.uk/3717/3/Westwood%20Joanne%20Final%20eThesis%20(Master%20Copy).pdf); C Vance, 'Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy', *History of the Present*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 200-218.

⁵² J O'Connell Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand up?', *Feminist Review*, vol. 83, issue 1, 2006, pp. 4-22; O'Connell Davidson, 2015.

The use of shock, melodrama, hyperbole, and accentuation of the most egregious cases to create an impression of ‘rampant’ child trafficking is detrimental to anti-trafficking campaigns. The proliferation of these messages has created the appearance of a moral panic, while campaigners’ ‘neoliberal turn on traditional African parental ideologies’⁵³ relating to childhood, children’s mobility and other practices also brings them into conflict with local communities. The recent statement in the Ghanaian Parliament denouncing child trafficking ‘rescue’ operations exemplifies this point. The anti-trafficking coalition’s reliance on ideology emanating from international legislative frameworks apparently makes its members so convinced of the rightness of their cause that they have become virtually impervious to alternative suggestions for thinking about the ‘problem’, including those from the communities or groups on whose behalf they purport to be working.⁵⁴

I agree with Vance that anti-trafficking organisations find it difficult to fit the role of structural adjustment, enforced free-trade policies and other causal factors of human insecurity in the seemingly realist depictions they promote.⁵⁵ I argue further that omission of these factors and historical analysis in the case of Ghana may also be calculated. The fact is that anti-trafficking organisations and activists in the country and elsewhere are not neutral or disinterested parties in the narratives they present to the public.⁵⁶ They must raise significant sums to pay staff salaries and office costs, publicise their work and undertake campaigns. Many require support from donors, government bodies and politicians for funding, legitimacy and other purposes. Thus, underneath the façade of sheer benevolence and altruism lie deeply personal, material and political interests. To situate the underlying causes of Ghanaian children’s labour mobility in the past as well as the present within the context of global political and economic inequality risks criticising and thus undermining major sources of funding and political support. Some of these sources are governments and institutions which are deeply complicit in the creation of historical and persistent socio-economic insecurities in Ghana.

Additionally, anti-trafficking organisations and campaigners in Ghana seem to have constructed an unending, Sisyphean task for themselves. Even as they continuously share news of successful rescues, they also insist that the country’s child trafficking problem is worsening rather than improving. The most prominent

⁵³ Lawrance, p. 79.

⁵⁴ See Howard, 2017 for expansion of this critique.

⁵⁵ Vance, p. 202.

⁵⁶ Similar arguments have been made by N Piper, M Segrave and R N Moore, ‘Editorial: What’s in a Name? Distinguishing forced labour, trafficking and slavery’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 5, pp. 1–9, and also by J L Musto, ‘The NGO-ification of the Anti-Trafficking Movement in the US’, *Wagadu: A journal of transnational women’s and gender studies*, vol. 5, 2008, pp. 6–20.

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and persistent theme in the discourse since its emergence about two decades ago is the argument that Ghana is being overrun by traffickers and victims. I argue that it is not coincidental that the proliferation of anti-trafficking organisations and advocacy in the country has witnessed a concomitant ‘worsening’ of child trafficking in Ghana, as per the coalition’s own analyses and the US TIP rankings. It is possible that mechanisms for identifying trafficking victims may simply have improved or become more sophisticated over this period. However, it could also be deduced that the scale of the problem (and there is a problem) is being exaggerated by anti-trafficking campaigners for fundraising and other purposes.

The above has serious potential detrimental impacts on the country at large given the role the discourse plays in shaping measurements and statistics on trafficking in recent years. Trafficking rankings such as the US TIP Report, for example, serve foreign policy agendas including sanctions and penalties against countries with a poor rating.⁵⁷ Following Ghana’s fall to the Tier 2 Watch List on the TIP ranking, the United States government has been threatening to punish the country by denying the Ghanaian government access to over USD 500 million in development aid and access to the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact if Ghana failed to adequately address human trafficking, child labour and ‘modern slavery’.⁵⁸ Such sanctions might only worsen the economic situation in a country that is already impoverished and unable to meet the welfare needs of its citizens. Exaggerations in the scale of the problem by anti-trafficking campaigners can therefore inadvertently create conditions which undermine the country’s ability to pursue its child rights objectives among national social welfare programmes.

In light of the above, it is strange and alarming that having failed to take on the global structures of inequality which underpin children’s rights violations in the country, leading figures of the anti-trafficking coalition in Ghana such as James Kofi Annan, have also written in support of the United States government’s threats to impose financial sanctions on Ghana.⁵⁹ Anti-trafficking campaigners

⁵⁷ See for a related discussion: O Enos, *A Call to Review Evaluation Methods in the Trafficking in Persons Report*, The Heritage Foundation, 2015, retrieved 10 July 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/crime-and-justice/report/call-review-evaluation-methods-the-trafficking-persons-report>.

⁵⁸ See: R Adadevoh, ‘Modern Day Slavery Rife in Ghana’, *CAJ News Africa*, 4 July 2016, retrieved 18 May 2017, <http://cajnewsafrika.com/2016/07/04/modern-day-slavery-rife-in-ghana/>; E K Dogbevi, ‘Human Trafficking: US warns Ghana could be downgraded, lose millions in aid’, *Ghana Business News*, 30 June 2016, retrieved 18 May 2017, <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2016/06/30/human-trafficking-us-warns-ghana-could-be-downgraded-lose-millions-in-aid/>.

⁵⁹ See: J K Annan, ‘When Would Ghana See An End To Human Trafficking? A letter to Oye Lithur’, *Peace FM*, 8 August 2016, retrieved 18 May 2017, <http://www.peacefmonline.com/pages/comment/features/201608/288024.php>.



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have unwittingly and in some cases purposefully become complicit in the use of ‘anti-trafficking’ and ‘anti-slavery’ concern as another mechanism of coercion and control wielded by relatively richer, powerful states against relatively poorer and weaker ones. Reference to history and more complex analysis of the factors underpinning children’s labour mobility can provide correctives for addressing this deficit and also result in more holistic and sustainable solutions than the ‘rescue’ model which currently dominates the sector.

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