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**Bridge Over Troubled Water:
A Comprehensive Approach to Reduce Child Trafficking in Ghana's Fishing Industry**

Madeline Olden

The fisheries of Ghana's Lake Volta region are a hotspot for rampant, cyclical child trafficking. At the national, regional, and international levels, organizations and state bodies have made efforts to disrupt this vicious cycle of modern slavery. In the absence of a multi-faceted, internationally coordinated approach to address the problem, regional and national trafficking rings remain prevalent. This paper examines the key driving forces behind endemic child trafficking and determines which national and multilateral approaches are best situated to promote stability and societal empowerment to end child trafficking. While this problem cannot be solved with a single policy approach, taking first steps to discuss and examine the crisis is essential to initiating a worldwide and concerted effort to condemn and prevent trafficking.

There are two main factors that drive the proliferation of child trafficking in the Lake Volta region. First, high levels of poverty often force large families with multiple children to face the heartbreaking choice of either letting their family starve or selling their children to child traffickers. Child traffickers will pay from \$70 to \$200 for each child, which is roughly the equivalent cost of a cow. Some families in Ghana experience such severe poverty that even when trafficked children are returned to them through nonprofit and intergovernmental organizational intervention, they are resold to traffickers and sent back to work on Lake Volta.ⁱ

Second, fisheries in the region, which have historically constituted a major component of Ghana's economy,ⁱⁱ have a high demand for workers. Overfishing is a growing problem in Ghana, and the industry has shifted towards fish farming to keep up with export demand.ⁱⁱⁱ Children are favored as laborers in Lake Volta's fisheries because "their smaller frames and nimble fingers allow them to free the nets more easily."^{iv} Moreover, child workers are almost never paid because they are at a physical disadvantage and can be easily overpowered if they object to poor working conditions.^v While Ghana has child labor laws in place, trafficked

children who are below the minimum legal age for work are not protected by laws and therefore face more vulnerabilities of employer exploitation.

This paper provides a comprehensive background of child trafficking in the Lake Volta region. It examines key vectors of trafficking and current efforts to combat the issue. It analyzes the solutions most likely to spread knowledge and awareness about child trafficking in Lake Volta while also addressing some of the fundamental root causes of trafficking cycles and patterns.

Background

Lake Volta is currently the largest artificial body of water in the world. Filled with submerged forests, Lake Volta is difficult to maneuver, as obstacles such as protruding tree stumps put workers at risk of injury or death.^{vi} Lake Volta's abundant fish supply has made it a central export market for Ghana. With skyrocketing levels of production, fisheries in Lake Volta have opted to use artificial farming methods to increase their yields. Cage farming in Lake Volta is growing in popularity,^{vii} which includes holding fish in a "fish pen" and allows fisheries to keep their fish farms in one concentrated area.^{viii}

The pressing labor demands of Ghana's fishing industry, in addition to the country's high poverty rates, make Lake Volta a hotspot for child trafficking. Parents and relatives are the most common agents for trafficking in the region. A study conducted by the International Justice Mission (IJM) found alarming evidence of how Lake Volta's trafficking rings perpetuate themselves. Victims can spend their entire childhoods working in the fishing industry; as they

grow into adulthood and lose the small stature that was originally so valuable to the fisheries, they become agents of trafficking themselves, exploiting a new generation of children.^{ix} Many victims of child trafficking from Lake Volta who eventually manage to escape have admitted to selling their own children to traffickers operating at the lake.^x

Child trafficking and forced labor is illegal in Ghana, and the national government has ratified multiple anti-child trafficking standards outlined by the International Labor Organization (ILO).^{xi} The Government of Ghana has also supported other international conventions and treaties to combat human trafficking, such as the accession to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC).^{xii} In addition to its participation in international anti-trafficking efforts, the Government of Ghana has enacted laws, policies, and regulations to prevent trafficking and protect victims domestically. The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana (CRG) stipulates that Parliament must have active legislation to protect children against both physical and emotional hazards that might harm their development.^{xiii} Additionally, Ghana's Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection (MoGCSP) is responsible for implementing national anti-trafficking policies, which actively support new anti-trafficking developments and encourage the enforcement of existing policies.^{xiv} It is clear that the Government of Ghana has made an effort to enact anti-trafficking policies, both nationally and internationally. However, these plans have done little to curb an astoundingly high rate of child trafficking in the country's fishing industry.

While child trafficking remains prevalent in Lake Volta fishing's industry,^{xv} Ghana has had some success in curbing underage forced labor. One of the most striking examples of these efforts is the significantly decreased rate of child trafficking in the cocoa industry. In 2003, the Ghanaian Government designed and implemented the National Program for the Elimination of

Child Labor in Cocoa (NPECLC). By 2013, the country was reporting markedly lower rates of child trafficking in Ghana's cocoa industry.^{xvi}

Unlike the fishing industry, the cocoa industry has broad international consumers, retailers, and producers. Cocoa companies are motivated to eliminate child trafficking throughout their supply chains because of extreme buyer demands for corporate social responsibility and government regulations on ethical sourcing.^{xvii} Ghana is a major international producer of cocoa, producing over 20 percent of the world's international cocoa supply and selling to some of the most well-known chocolate companies in the world.^{xviii} This puts increased international pressure on Ghana to ensure ethical and sustainable production. While the push to eliminate child labor in the cocoa industry is a welcomed development, one result is that a disproportionate amount of government anti-trafficking resources is allocated to the NPECLC. Other industries with less international pressure, such as Lake Volta's fisheries, receive much less government attention, leaving them able to engage in child trafficking with fewer restrictions and repercussions.

Literature Review

Human trafficking is a widespread issue that can take different forms, including sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and organ trafficking. In order to comprehend the foundational dynamics about the child trafficking situation in Lake Volta, it is necessary to first examine the existing body of work on human trafficking, including where and how it occurs, how governmental and multilateral institutions combat trafficking, and the remaining gaps in the understanding of this pressing global issue. The interwoven nature of trafficking has created a volatile network of organized crime that has become extremely difficult to combat, in part

because different types of trafficking can take place simultaneously. Children may be trafficked into certain industries where their small size is extremely valuable. A key example of this is Lake Volta's fishing industry, where children's small fingers are used extensively to untangle fishing nets.^{xi} While working in such industries, the same children might be molested by traffickers and other workers. In these cases, children are initially trafficked for labor but eventually are exploited into full-fledged sex trafficking.^{xxi}

Human trafficking is difficult to track and evaluate. Governmental agencies and international organizations have incomplete data which undermines the ability to assess the true depth of human trafficking. As a result, it is easy to underestimate the magnitude of people who are trafficked every year and the number of high-profile figures connected to the issue. Dr. Siddharta Sarkar noted in an international study that nearly "43% of traffickers [worldwide] had links with politicians, businesspersons, state officials, police officers, customs officers, border security officers, overseas recruiters, travel agents, and transport agencies."^{xxii} State officials are often direct facilitators of human trafficking and engage in it for various reasons, including personal gain.^{xxiii} Even worse, primary agents of trafficking can be friends, parents, relatives, and fellow villagers of the victims.^{xxiv} It is clear that child trafficking cannot be addressed solely by government, industry, or community leadership alone. Child trafficking is a whole-of-society problem and requires a comprehensive socio-political solution.

The ever-developing nature of trafficking and the myriad situations that bring children into the system have created a proliferation of organized crime networks that span across countries and industries. The Internet and advancing technology have led to a significant expansion of online trafficking and targeting systems. Policies to combat human trafficking were not fully successful before the Internet, and the sophisticated nature of cyberspace further

reduces the likelihood of tracking and arresting human traffickers. Complexities and developing methods of recruitment and trafficking require more time and resources to be fully understood. Although the amount of funding to support anti-trafficking efforts has increased in recent decades, there is still a considerable lack of empirical and quantitative data on human trafficking. This lack of data presents obstacles for policymakers and law enforcers. Without sufficient data, efforts to combat human trafficking lack coordination and understanding to produce positive outcomes. Scholars engaged in human trafficking discourse have argued for “a need to establish a forum where research results can be exchanged between different scholars as well as shared with policy makers and service providers.”^{xxv}

While national governments and international organizations have generally made good-faith efforts to eradicate human trafficking, their policies and programs have had limited success. Through state-sponsored programs and multi-sector partnerships, the United States has attempted to combat human trafficking in a variety of ways. The U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently collaborated with local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide guides and resources on child trafficking and exploitation.^{xxvi} Nevertheless, the U.S. continues to experience high levels of human trafficking. Although it is impossible to accurately quantify, Polaris Project reported roughly 22,000 survivors of human trafficking in the U.S. in 2019—a figure that omits the victims who remained enslaved or who died at the hands of their captors.^{xxvii}

Intergovernmental organizations, such as the African Union (AU), have developed agencies and plans to urge their member states to combat trafficking. The AU, for example, created the African Union Commission Initiative against Trafficking (AU.COMMIT) to provide member states with a toolkit for initiating reforms at national and local levels to help combat the

root causes of trafficking.^{xxviii} AU.COMMIT acknowledges the surge of child prostitution and trafficking in African countries and emphasizes the implications of trafficking across society.^{xxix}

Government advocacy for treaties and policies can be very effective in international forums and can foster collaboration and mutual understanding on critical topics. For example, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) partnered with the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to advocate for anti-trafficking policies, such as the Palermo Protocol, at international fora.^{xxx} Unfortunately, a lack of consensus on how to define and understand human trafficking has led to an inconsistent framing of the issue as well as disagreements on best practices for combatting it. This is partially driven by significant research gaps.^{xxxi} There is also a disproportionate focus on sex trafficking and female exploitation in anti-trafficking policies and the media. For example, the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) along with its renewals has focused more on sex trafficking than other forms of trafficking.^{xxxii} Both media outlets and anti-trafficking organizations focus significant attention and resources on the sexual exploitation of women.^{xxxiii} This leaves fewer resources to design and implement policies and initiatives to combat trafficking that impacts other genders, age groups, and industries. The media perpetuates an alarming narrative on the widespread diffusion of sex trafficking, which is accurate, but ignores other major forms of trafficking. Labor trafficking is the biggest sector of human trafficking in the world, and when governments and organizations focus mostly on combating sex trafficking, other types of trafficking are sidelined and receive less attention.^{xxxiv}

This perspective brings Lake Volta into focus, a region with high demand for child labor that feeds into trafficking and exploitation. Underfunded state-sponsored programs and underlying factors, such as poverty and poor education, provide multiple opportunities for human

trafficking and exploitation in Ghana. While the Government of Ghana has instituted programs and policies aimed at combatting trafficking, some of the factors outlined above—complicity by state officials, businesses leaders, and family members; poor understanding of the complexity of human trafficking; and uncoordinated national and multilateral responses—have limited the efficacy of these efforts.

Analysis

Two major pitfalls undermine the Ghanaian Government’s efforts to combat child trafficking in the fishing industry. One is a lack of policy enforcement, and the other is a failure to manage the root issues that contribute to child trafficking, such as endemic poverty and poor school attendance rates. There is no singular answer to resolve these issues, but efforts to tackle fundamental instabilities and increase accountability both within government and in communities are productive steps in combating the problem.

International Solidarity

Promoting dialogue on child trafficking and emphasizing that it is an international issue is a critical first step to engaging the international community. Conferences, symposia, roundtables, and strategy sessions stimulate discussions of child trafficking in the Lake Volta region and worldwide. The AU has executed multiple private and public events focused on combating child and adult trafficking. Specifically in 2010, the AU hosted a workshop event for capacity building on the AU.COMMIT initiative in African countries implementing the “Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children.”^{xxxv}

Ghana demonstrates its good-faith effort as a partner in eradicating forced labor by collaborating with regional and international institutions. Engaging in multilateral dialogues is extremely valuable and could lead to a more comprehensive Ghanaian policy plan to condemn and combat child trafficking on a national scale. However, with poor enforcement and accountability in anti-trafficking practices, sovereign countries will need to increase efforts and commitments to counter trafficking in cities and rural areas. International cooperation and dialogue are very important, but do not single-handedly lead to results. Policies and programs emerging from an international dialogue must be accompanied with sufficient implementation efforts. Ghana has ratified multiple treaties and frameworks on anti-trafficking issues but continues to lack enforcement. A vital component of successful implementation can sometimes be increased financial support. In situations where law enforcement officials act as major agents of child trafficking, increased funding for anti-trafficking initiatives, whether that money is committed by the Ghanaian Government or by international partners, is critical.

Engaging Communities

Rampant poverty is directly correlated to higher cases of human trafficking. Many communities in Ghana experience severe poverty, which directly contributes to higher rates of child trafficking to the Lake Volta region. In order to minimize this vulnerability, Ghana should adopt the framework of international development projects that combat threats to peace and security. Development programs put forward by organizations including DOS, United States Agency of International Development (USAID), International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU), and World Bank (WB) are designed to be multi-sectoral, with foreign entities bearing the financial burden. In these programs, nonprofit organizations implement local initiatives and governmental entities provide oversight and support for the program's impact.

Since these programs account for the entire lifecycle of a development initiative, they are much more likely to achieve their goals, minimizing the risk of resources being siphoned off by corrupt officials or appropriated for other purposes. For example, the five-year U.S.-Ghana Child Protection Compact (CPC) Partnership, which was signed in 2015, is a \$5 million program funded by DOS that partners with the Government of Ghana. The CPC Partnership provides resources to support trafficking victims' services and supplies in Ghana.^{xxxvi} It is important to note that while international development projects are mostly helpful, poor implementation and program management can hinder the effectiveness of the intended project goals. International development programs each have their own limitations and drawbacks, but overall they provide a starting point to initiate change at local levels.

Developing effective policies is an important step in addressing the issue of human trafficking, but a top-down approach directed from Ghana's capital, Accra, is insufficient. To effectively combat child trafficking in Lake Volta, Ghana must be able to project enforcement power throughout the country. Given the very real resource constraints Ghana faces in this respect, one option would be to partner with regional institutions on a joint task force against child trafficking. Calling upon the previously established Ouagadougou Action Plan organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (with input from the AfDB and AU), the Government of Ghana can make a formal case to receive funding for a sound enforcement system to address child trafficking in the Lake Volta region.^{xxxvii} Some Ghanaian officials have reported that they were not able to follow up on child-trafficking reports due to simple issues such as a lack of transportation.^{xxxviii} In providing basic administrative necessities, regional institutions would further their mission of obtaining and maintaining peace and security

throughout the African continent,^{xxxix} facilitate the collection and aggregation of better data, and limit the destabilizing impact of human trafficking on families and communities.^{xl}

In requesting funds from regional organizations, the Government of Ghana can better support their task force in completing reports and follow-up evaluations for efficient implementation. Any quantitative or qualitative data collected during the course of these interactions and evaluations related to the process of recruiting, training, or transporting trafficked children could be instrumental in shaping future anti-trafficking policies, both at the national and international levels. The most important component of systematizing these efforts is ensuring that officials deployed to child trafficking cases receive adequate training in requesting, receiving, and recording relevant data points. Data is instrumental in predicting and preventing trafficking in specific populations. In a field that has inconsistent and inadequate data, it is imperative to form a system of collecting and aggregating data on trafficking and victims. Accurate data would allow policymakers to identify populations that are at a higher risk of being trafficked and focus on prevention plans for those specific populations.^{xli} Engaging with local communities is vital not only to combating the root causes and data gaps of human trafficking, but also to strengthening education programs and improving society overall. Utilizing national and international support to design and implement programs is also vital.

Incentivizing Educational Development

While international, national, and community-level initiatives to combat human trafficking can minimize the crisis, child trafficking will never be fully eradicated unless underlying factors are addressed. According to the UN and ILO, poor education and high levels of poverty are two of the major contributing factors to trafficking and forced labor.^{xlii} Poor school attendance rates can ultimately lead to fewer job opportunities that offer a stable living

wage. There is also a strong correlation between people experiencing poverty and those populations targeted by traffickers.^{xliii} While economic stabilization policies are in the hands of national leaders, there are a number of viable programs to increase attendance rates in schools, and therefore empower communities, stabilize families, and support individuals.

One system that has been successful for both governmental bodies and NGOs is conditional cash transfers (CCTs). CCTs are a means of offering financial aid while still ensuring accountability.^{xliv} In the case of educational programs, low- or no-income families can receive financial support if parents can verify that their children are in fact attending school. CCTs are often used in international development programs by foreign and national governments, as well as by NGOs and international organizations.^{xlv} Reviewing past programs can be useful for stakeholders who wish to apply this method to educational advancement as a means to combating child trafficking.

Initially, Ghana would find the most success in partnering with outside organizations to deliver CCTs to the Lake Volta region and other poverty-stricken areas with high rates of child trafficking. These types of partnerships can be mutually advantageous. Internal stakeholders, such as Ghana's Ministry of Finance, have first-hand knowledge of the region and communities. External stakeholders, such as WB or USAID, have flexible funding opportunities and experience in administering international development programs. Together, these partners can create successful, knowledge-based CCT plans.

Conclusion and Discussion

Designing, creating, and implementing a framework of policies to combat child trafficking in the Lake Volta region is an arduous task. Efforts to combat the issue require the acknowledgement and understanding of the root causes and implications of child trafficking in Ghana. Policies and systems at the local, regional, and international levels need to be re-evaluated. Understanding the foundations of policies and procedures, including synergies between national and international efforts, can increase policy efficacy rates.

Child trafficking in Ghana's Lake Volta region requires a well-developed and concerted plan that encompasses national, regional, and international stakeholders. With institutional and financial support from international bodies, Ghana can strengthen policies, accountability strategies, and enforcement mechanisms, and focus greater attention towards the root causes of child trafficking. In the case of Lake Volta, collaboration will be a key factor in the efficiency of new policies and systems set forth by the Government of Ghana. By building stronger partnerships with international and regional actors and increasing the capabilities of government officials and local communities to combat trafficking issues, Ghana and its partners can take the first steps towards alleviating the crisis of child trafficking in the Lake Volta region. These steps can also address the lack of empirical data on child and human trafficking.

Implementing new systems of enforcement to combat child trafficking in the Lake Volta region is essential, and it is equally imperative to emphasize the need for constant research and reporting of findings in all stages of the process. Incorporating the urgent need for data into new anti-trafficking systems will also be extremely useful for other countries and international systems, as most trafficking findings have been based on qualitative data. The recommendations described above offer a plan to build on the existing foundations to combat human trafficking in the Lake Volta region in Ghana as well as for other governments, institutions, and organizations

on an international scale. When these new systems are implemented and sustained by local and national enforcement, the Lake Volta region will hopefully begin to see an end to child labor trafficking.

Acronym List

AfDB – African Development Bank

AU – African Union

AU.COMMIT – African Union Commission Initiative against Trafficking

CCT – Conditional cash transfers

CPC – U.S.-Ghana Child Protection Compact Partnership

CRG – Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992

DOS – United States Department of State

EU – European Union

HTMB – Human Trafficking Management Board

IJM – International Justice Mission

ILO – International Labor Organization

IMF – International Monetary Foundation

MoGCSP – Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, Ghana

NGO – Non-governmental organization(s)

NPECLC – National Program for the Elimination of Child Labor in Cocoa

TVPA – Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000

UN – United Nations

UNECA – United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

UNTOC – United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

USAID – United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

WB – World Bank

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