

Human Trafficking in West Africa: A Case of Sierra Leone

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Abstract

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This study investigates why Sierra Leone is an anchor-spot for human trafficking in West Africa. Through qualitative research methods, criteria for data collection were established, data from a number of different types of sources were collected, and analysis was undertaken to inform the research's findings and conclusions. Reports by organizations such as United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, International Organization of Migration, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees formed part of the data collected in an effort to ascertain the causes of rampant human trafficking in Sierra Leone. This study found that Sierra Leone continues to be an anchor-spot for human trafficking in West Africa because of several key factors. Two of those factors were examined as part of this research in an effort to ascertain why they continue in spite of the fact that they have previously been identified as connected to human trafficking in Sierra Leone. These factors were 1) Unregistered child births and 2) Foster parentage. These key factors also affected or impacted other factors such as arbitrary arrest, lack of awareness about human trafficking, poverty, ignorance of fighting human trafficking, porous borders, civil war in Sierra Leone, and public corruption. The research revealed a number of reasons that contribute to the continuance of these factors, and ultimately operational and policy recommendations are made that may assist in the eradication of this problem.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

This study seeks to identify why human trafficking continues in Sierra Leone. Through its findings, it will be easier for policymakers to come up with appropriate corrective measures to addressing the problem in a sustainable manner. Furthermore, the research seeks to examine what the government of Sierra Leone has been doing in the elimination of the human trafficking problem. It aims to recommend areas that will assist governments and other organizations in solving or minimizing the occurrences of human trafficking. The aim of the research is to provide recommendations that will assist the government of Sierra Leone as well as other players keen on addressing the human trafficking problem in the country.

Human trafficking is a growing social problem in West Africa, and in Sierra Leone, in particular. Different nations in the region experience different forms of human trafficking (Blackburn, Taylor & Davis, 2010). In order to analyze this phenomenon, it is imperative for the various forms of human trafficking to be defined. Different organizations and countries have adopted their own definition of human trafficking based on the international definition, created by the United Nations (UN).

The United Nations definition of human trafficking is:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a

person having control over another person, for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons is not an issue where any of the means set forth in the definition have been used (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2004a).

Since the advent of this international law, several countries in West Africa and other parts of the world have introduced anti-trafficking laws to fight child trafficking. For example, Sierra Leone has passed laws to include labor and sexual exploitation (Anti-Human Trafficking Act of Sierra Leone, Article 2(2), 2005).

In comparison to the United States, the definition of human trafficking is difficult to define because various members of congress promoted their own understanding of what constitute victims of trafficking to include severe forms of trafficking.

The United States defines severe forms of trafficking as:

(1) Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, and coercion or in which a person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age or (b) The recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labour or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (Trafficking and Victims Protection Act (TVPA), 2000 Public Law 106-386).

The United Kingdom on the other hand, defines human trafficking in person as the transporting of people into the United Kingdom for exploiting that person using force, violence, fear, deception, or coercion.

Human trafficking differs from people smuggling because in the latter, people voluntarily request or hire a smuggler, to transport covertly victims from one location to another (United States Department of State, 2010). This generally involves transportation from one country to another, where legal entry would be denied upon arrival at the international border. There may be no deception involved in the illegal agreement between the smuggler and the person being smuggled. After entry into the country and arrival at their ultimate destination, the smuggled person is often free to find their own way. Quite often, smugglers have left behind the sick to die because they cannot continue the journey or smugglers have threatened to hurt relatives if they cannot come up with extra smuggling fees imposed on them.

While smuggling requires travel, trafficking does not (UNODC, 2004b). Much of the confusion rests with the term itself. The word "trafficking" includes the word "traffic," which we often equate with transportation or travel. However, while the words look and sound alike, they do not hold the same meaning. Human trafficking does not require the physical movement of a person but must entail the exploitation of the person for labor or commercial sex. In addition, victims of human trafficking are not permitted to leave upon arrival at their destination. They are held against their will through acts of coercion and forced to work or provide services to the trafficker or others. The work or services may include anything from bonded or forced labor to commercialized sexual exploitation (Amnesty International Australia (AIAU), 2010; UNODC, 2011). The arrangement may be structured as a work contract, but with no or low payment or on terms which are highly exploitative.

Sometimes the arrangement is structured as debt bondage, with the victim not being permitted or able to pay off the debt (AIAU, 2010).

According to these data from the UN agencies, among them the United Nations Children's Fund, Sierra Leone is one of the nations in the world where the trafficking of humans is a rampant problem. The country has experienced the trafficking especially involving children and women (UNICEF, 2005). Human trafficking is a real and major problem in West African countries just as in many parts of the world (Blagbrough, 2008).

Looking from a global perspective, many countries in all regions of the world take an active role in participating in this unlawful activity. Some countries serve as receivers of victims like the United States of America and Saudi Arabia. Poor countries in Africa like Sierra Leone where they are often used for the provision of cheap labor such as farm workers, and as porters (Sawadogo, 2012). In addition, some of these nations have become notable for human trafficking (Blackburn et al., 2010). Those transported to North America and European countries are exploited as domestic workers and for commercial sex. Many people turn out to be victims of harassment and in extreme situations, killed. Handicapped people are also trafficked from Sierra Leone for the purposes of acquiring money through begging on the streets (Surtees, 2005).

Today, Sierra Leone appears to be a safe haven where activities related to human trafficking take place (Sawadogo, 2012). People arrive into the major towns of the country from the rural areas within or from other countries in order to be smuggled to various destinations. Sierra Leone appears to be a country of destination especially for children who are smuggled from surrounding countries like Nigeria, Guinea, Cote d' Ivoire, and Gambia (Surtees, 2005).

They arrive in Sierra Leone as victims of human trafficking and are either exploited in the same country or brought through the same process to other destinations. They have no knowledge of the dangers that they are likely to encounter once they are far from home. Upon arrival in their countries of destination, they go through orientation for various jobs to ensure that they are of value. For example, the traffickers conduct orientation to those who will do the mining of various minerals like diamonds and gold. It is the same for potential prostitution, domestic workers, beggars, porters, and street criminals. There are multiple activities that human trafficked individuals become involved with at their destinations such as fishing and agriculture (United States Department of State, 2012). In the social sphere, some are recruited for forced marriages of which their exploitation occurs, and forced into sex and strenuous work. Sierra Leoneans voluntarily migrate to other West African countries, including Mauritania and Guinea, as well as to the Middle East and Europe, where they are forced into hard labor and prostitution (Guardian News, 2013).

In view of the issue of prostitution, eighteen suspected trafficking offenders were prosecuted, and six were convicted during the previous reporting period of 2011. It appears that the enforcement of the anti-trafficking law is low. For example, the Anti-trafficking in Person act of 2005 prohibits all forms of human trafficking and prescribes a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment or a fine of \$4,650 for both sex and labor trafficking offenses. In essence, the crime of human trafficking must be taken seriously just like others including rape (U.S. Department of State, 2012).

With regard to protection of victims, the Sierra Leonean government demonstrated limited effort to protect child trafficking victims, the most significant population of trafficking victims in the country. In 2011, the government identified four foreign trafficking victims from Nigeria, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gambia but

failed to identify any Sierra Leonean victims. The efforts of the government were not realized since human resources were not at play. The government relied on the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations to identify and provide services for trafficking victims. During the period of 2011, ninety-one victims were identified by NGOs, and there were no reports of anyone detained, fined, or jailed for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of human trafficked. In fact, the government did not make adequate efforts to identify trafficking victims, which may have led to some victims treated as offenders (United States Department of States, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Sierra Leone is one of the countries where activities related to human trafficking takes place. The major towns see people come from the rural areas within the country or other countries in order to be smuggled to various destinations. This is especially true for children who are smuggled from surrounding countries such as Nigeria, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gambia. Nevertheless, the country has put anti-trafficking rules in place. It appears that the law enforcers lack knowledge, power, and goodwill to implement the laws. Another challenge is that the laws also have a discrepancy since they do not address how to deal with human traffickers from outside the boundary (IOM, 2005). The public also lacks knowledge on the dangers of human trafficking. The anti-trafficking laws in themselves are not effective especially given that they have not addressed modern forms of trafficking such as Internet sex trafficking (Kunze, 2010). Recently, the Sierra Leone Police has called on the Government of Sierra Leone to enact legislative instrument or put policy in place to help fight the alarming rate of cyber related crimes like human trafficking (Awareness Times, 2013).

In spite of the government of Sierra Leone being aware of these problems, very little has been done to address the issue. However, the real problem lies with government enforcement. Thus, there has been a failure on the part of both the Sierra Leonean government and the public to effectively address human trafficking (UNICEF, 2005).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate human trafficking in West Africa, in general, but with an emphasis on Sierra Leone, in particular. In essence, Sierra Leone is the case study for the research. The main objective of this study is to analyze relevant trafficking data from Sierra Leone.

Details

- To identify, summarize and analyze data to ascertain the varied reasons for supporting human trafficking.
- To identify measures to be put in place for mitigation of human trafficking.
- To make recommendations regarding how best the human trafficking problem in Sierra Leone can be addressed.

The Research Question

To achieve the objectives of the study, the following research question must be answered:

- Why do factors such as the use of false passports, unregistered childbirths, lack of the existence of data and expertise, and failure to maintain minimum standards, which contribute to the existence of human trafficking, continue to exist in Sierra Leone?

Significance of the Study

The illegal transfer of people has received worldwide attention because it contravenes some provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2013). In Article 4, the United Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms” (United Nations, 2013); and that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” in Article 5 (United Nations, 2013). Slavery, slave trade, servitude, torture, cruelty, and inhuman or degrading treatment are key characteristics of human trafficking. The fact that human trafficking involves cross-border has forced the international community, notable the United Nations to intervene. The United Nations is calling for the different states to take responsibilities to eradicate this dehumanizing behavior.

Sawadogo (2012) observes that the Government of Sierra Leone, just like other countries across the globe, needs to work together with international agencies to mitigate the problem of human trafficking, especially when it involves children who are innocent and vulnerable. Their innocence needs protection (Surtees, 2005). The government has a responsibility of protecting the inherent dignity of everyone. Therefore, policy makers in Sierra Leone must formulate policies that will work towards sustainable mitigation of human trafficking for both the country and the world at large (Sawadogo, 2012). Furthermore, significant stakeholders in the country must pay attention to the minimum standards set by the international community for the eradication of this unethical issue.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) finds that the government has not shown significant effort towards seeking solutions, noting that it has continued to see habitation of notorious human traffickers (United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees, 2012). This is evident in the various reports made by the United Nations every year. There is almost no progress in addressing the matter.

This is the reason why in 2012, Sierra Leone was on the U.S. State Department's human trafficking Watch List as Tier 2. Tier 2, according to the U.S. Department of State, consists of those states that are not showing any progress in actually addressing human trafficking at any given time relative to the same time the previous year. Tier 2 states do not fully comply with the minimum standards as entrenched in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act for the eliminating trafficking of persons.

One wonders why despite the observation by the United Nations of the large number of individuals smuggled in and out of the country, only a few suspects have been charged and brought to court for the crime (Sawadogo, 2012). Even the government has not denied the level of the problem in the country.

Sawagodo (2012) further insists that it is necessary for the various stakeholders to work together in order to eradicate human trafficking in Sierra Leone. The government should take the lead since it falls under the mandate to protect the human rights of her citizens. It has the human resources to do so including finances (Guardian News, 2013). Extra effort needed to adequately put the necessary measures in place in addressing the problem (Sawagodo, 2012). It involves allocation of adequate financial and human resources accordingly. The citizens need to be educated on why they should not involve themselves with human trafficking since it is dangerous. Enough sensitization through information campaign should be done to promote community watchdogs where they will even help create a civil society reporting the human traffickers (Surtees, 2005).