Social contexts and community initiatives on students' justification of child trafficking for financial gains: evidence from a multi-state survey in Nigeria

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200-word Abstract

Child-trafficking is modern-day slavery that thrives in some part of Nigeria despite the numerous state and non-state efforts in curbing the menace. This continues to thrive partly due to some entrenched sociocultural and economic reasons.We implemented a RAPID assessment to examine how parental activities and school/community initiatives influence child-trafficking in selected communities in Nigeria. The study was conducted in five states with the highest incidences of child-trafficking in 2023. A multi-stage sampling was used to select 550 participants from 50 secondary schools spread across rural and urban settlements. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data from students, and interviews were conducted to obtain responses from teachers, parents, and members of community-based organizations. The results show that 24.5% of students justified trafficking for financial gain. Students whose parents did use child labour and who were financially dependent on family members had a 56% and 63% higher likelihood to justify child-trafficking, respectively. Students attending schools where activities were dedicated to educating students about trafficking issues were 25% likely to justify trafficking. Students from communities with a reporting system in place were also less likely to justify trafficking. Evidence-based efforts to target the characteristics that make students justify trafficking for financial gains are recommended.

Extended Abstract

Background

Child trafficking is modern-day slavery, which exploits children for various purposes, including labour, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. A 2023 Global Slavery survey shows that 50 million people globally were in modern slavery, up 10 million since 2016 (1). The issue is pervasive in Nigeria, where an estimated 12 million children are in forced labour, with 80% of sex trafficking victims arriving in Italy estimated to be Nigerians (2). To address this menace, the government of Nigeria, alongside non-governmental organizations, has rolled out several programmes and interventions. However, the issue persists (3), thus raising concerns about the factors perpetuating its acceptability, especially among vulnerable populations like secondary school students.

A significant factor that influences individuals' perception and vulnerability is the socioeconomic environment in which they are raised (4). However, how this affects the perceived justification of the menace of child trafficking remains unknown. Parents often engage in survival strategies in many impoverished communities, such as borrowing from neighbours or relying on others for basic needs. These activities, though seemingly benign, may contribute to a worldview where risky behaviours, including child trafficking, are seen as part of the struggle for survival. This perception may be compounded when financial incentives are involved, plausibly leading some to rationalize or justify trafficking as a necessary evil.

Schools and communities play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes and perceptions of young people (5). Community-based organizations (CBOs) often serve as the first line of defence in sensitizing the public about the dangers of trafficking (6). These organizations can organize outreach programs, workshops, and other sensitization activities to raise awareness and change attitudes toward trafficking. Moreover, the diffusion effect of increasing the awareness of school children on out-of-school children cannot be over-emphasized (6). Given this context, we carried out a RAPID assessment to examine how parental activities and school/community initiatives could influence students' perception of human trafficking for financial gains.

Methods

- Design

The study was a school-based rapid assessment in five states with the highest incidences of child trafficking in Nigeria. These are Benue, Delta, Edo, Enugu and Ogun. A mixed method approach was used to obtain responses from multi-stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students and community-based organizations. A multistage sampling technique was used to select 550 students from 50 schools across the five states, equally divided into 25 rural and urban areas. Communities with concentric incidences of child trafficking were chosen purposively, with no less than three-fifths of the calculated sample allocated to girls, given that available evidence suggests that more girls than boys are victims of child trafficking. Quantitative data were collected from

students using a structured questionnaire adapted from the United Nations Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons. Qualitative data were collected from parents, teachers and community-based organizations using an interview guide.

- Variables

The outcome variable is the "perceived justifiability of human trafficking". It was measured through a yes/no response to five statements examining the participants' views and disposition towards trafficking in human beings. Some of the statements are "Trafficked persons are better off than their peers who live in the community" and "Trafficked people have better life prospects". The responses were composited into "justifying" if a 'yes' response was picked to at least one of the five statements or "unjustifiable" if others. "Unjustifiable" would indicate that individuals perceive trafficking as unacceptable, regardless of the potential financial gains. Respondents who fall into this category reject the notion that economic benefits can justify the act of trafficking.

The study has four sets of independent variables. i. The participants' background characteristics include gender, age, class, religion, and state. ii. Parental factors: these measure how specific activities of parents, such as borrowing or depending on others, could shape teenagers' perception of trafficking; iii. School-specific factors assess the availability of particular programmes and activities that could shape students' perception of trafficking; iv. community factors measure the availability of enlightenment and sensitization programmes by community-based organizations.

- Theoretical Underpinning

Moral Disengagement (Albert Bandura) guided the choice of independent variables. The theory helps understand how individuals might morally justify or rationalize unethical behaviour if they believe it leads to financial benefits (7). It helps explore the cognitive mechanisms that allow people to perceive such actions as justifiable.

- Data analysis

Five logistic regression models were built using Stata 16.0 at 95% confidence intervals. Thematic analyses of qualitative data were carried out using Atlas-ti.

Results

The results show that 24.5% of students justified trafficking for financial gain. This perception was not significantly influenced by the students' socio-demographic characteristics but by their parents' activities and community factors (see Table 1 in the appendix). Specifically, students whose parents did use child labour had a 56% higher likelihood (OR=0.46; CI=0.29 – 0.72) to justify child trafficking for financial gains. The children whose parents were financially dependent on family members were 63% significantly more likely to justify child trafficking for

financial gains (OR=0.37; CI=0.20 – 0.69). This is reflected in a parent's statement, "*Children are very observant of what their parents do. If you make them hawk or work so that you can get money, they may not mind going out to work for other people just to make money. If anyone promises them money for work, they are likely to follow the person. This makes them vulnerable to being trafficked*".

On the other hand, students who had learnt about child trafficking issues in schools had 62% less likelihood of justifying child trafficking for financial gains (OR=0.38; CI=0.23 0.65). Also, students attending schools where activities were organized outside classrooms to educate students about trafficking issues were 25% likely to justify trafficking for financial gains (OR=0.75; CI=0.50 – 0.89). In communities with a system in place for reporting suspected cases of trafficking, children are 53% less likely to justify trafficking for financial gains.

"Awareness raising is very crucial. These children may not even know that they are too young to work. Some consider it normal just because their parents make them work for money. Unless they are enlightened about it in schools, they may follow anyone who offers to give them money for work and even be proud about it."

Conclusion

The activities of the parents around child labour and the efforts of schools and communities in raising students' awareness about child trafficking are crucial in shaping students' perceptions of human trafficking. Evidence-based efforts to target the characteristics that make students justify trafficking for financial gains are recommended.

References

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Appendix

Table 1: The modelled relationship between parent activities, school and community initiatives and students' perception of child trafficking

Personal factors		Model 1 UOR	Model 2 UOR	Model 3 UOR	Model 4 UOR	Model 5 AOR
Gender	Male	1.40 (0.93 2.09)				1.38 (0.87 2.19)
	Female					
Age		0.92 (0.82 1.03)				0.96 (0.81 1.14)
Class	JSS1					
	JSS2	1.56 (0.49 4.92)				1.62 (0.44 5.92)
	JSS3	0.91 0.29 2.88)				1.38 (0.37 5.12)
	SS1	1.42 (0.48 4.18)				1.43 (0.38 5.42)
	SS2	1.14 (0.39 3.34)				1.27 (0.32 5.10)
	SS3	0.57 (0.19 1.74)				0.75 (0.18 3.32)
Religion	Christianity					
	Islam	1.62 (0.87 3.02)				1.00 (0.46 2.17)
State	Benue					
	Delta	0.53 (0.23 1.22)				0.38 (0.15 0.97)
	Edo	2.82* (1.44 5.52)				2.14 (0.94 4.87)
	Enugu	1.80 (0.89 3.62)				1.48 (0.69 3.17)
	Ogun	3.20* (1.64 6.23)				3.31 (1.50 7.32)
Parent Activities						
Parents using school children for child labour						
	Yes					
	No		0.46* (0.29 0.72)			0.90 (0.48 1.71)
Parents depend on family members						
	Yes					
	No		0.37* (0.20 0.69)			0.61 (0.28 1.29)
Parents allowing their adolescent daughters to follow men for money						
	Yes					
	No		0.37* (0.24 0.56)			0.78 (0.43 1.42)
School Initiatives						
Students learnt about trafficking and its danger signs in schools						
	No					
	Yes			0.38* (0.23 0.65)		0.44 (0.24 0.82)
Schools have any policy (e.g. reporting and response system) to keep students safe						
	No					
	Yes			1.37 (0.71 2.67)		1.09 (0.50 2.37)
The school has organized activities outside classroom to educate students about trafficking issues						
	No					
	Yes			0.75* (0.50 0.89)		0.71 (0.43 1.17)
Community Initiatives						
Communities have organized activities to educate people						
	No					
	Yes				0.88 (0.44 1.78)	1.08 (0.48 2.43)
There is a system in place to report cases of trafficking						
	No					
	Yes				0.47* (0.31 0.71)	0.73 (0.40 1.33)

Note: UOR = Unadjusted odds ratio; AR= Adjusted Ratio; CI=Confidence Interval