

**CHILD TRAFFICKING IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA:
AN OVERVIEW**

By

Dr. Rima Salah
UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today at this First Pan African Regional Conference on Human Trafficking aimed at evolving an African Regional Initiative Against Trafficking in Persons. Permit me to begin by commending the efforts of WOTCLEF in convening this landmark meeting and for bringing together an impressive array of regional leaders, thinkers and decision makers to focus on this very important topic. It is an important step towards elevating consciousness among governments and mobilizing for action in Africa. I salute the personal advocacy of her Excellency, Mrs. Titi Atiku Abubakar, wife of the Vice President of Federal Republic of Nigeria for her commitment, dedication and willingness to use her position to champion the cause of the thousands of unfortunate victims whose lives are tragically scarred or destroyed by the cruelty and inhumanity of those who profit by selling people.

For some years now, trafficking in persons has been an issue of concern to the international community. Child trafficking, in particular, is recognised as a serious human rights issue requiring immediate national, regional and global collaboration and action. But the challenge – as we will see – is complex and, to be effective, actions will need to be supported by in-depth research to create better understanding of the factors that drive this practice.

In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly defined child trafficking as the

“illicit and clandestine movement of persons across national and international borders, largely from developing countries and some countries in transition with the end goal of forcing women, girl and children into sexually or economically oppressive and exploitative situations for the profit of recruiters, traffickers, crime syndicates, as well as other illegal activities related to trafficking, such as forced domestic labour”.

However, in recent years, it has been the efforts of international, development and civil society organisations that have focused attention on this modern form of slavery – where children are bought and sold within and across national borders by organised networks.

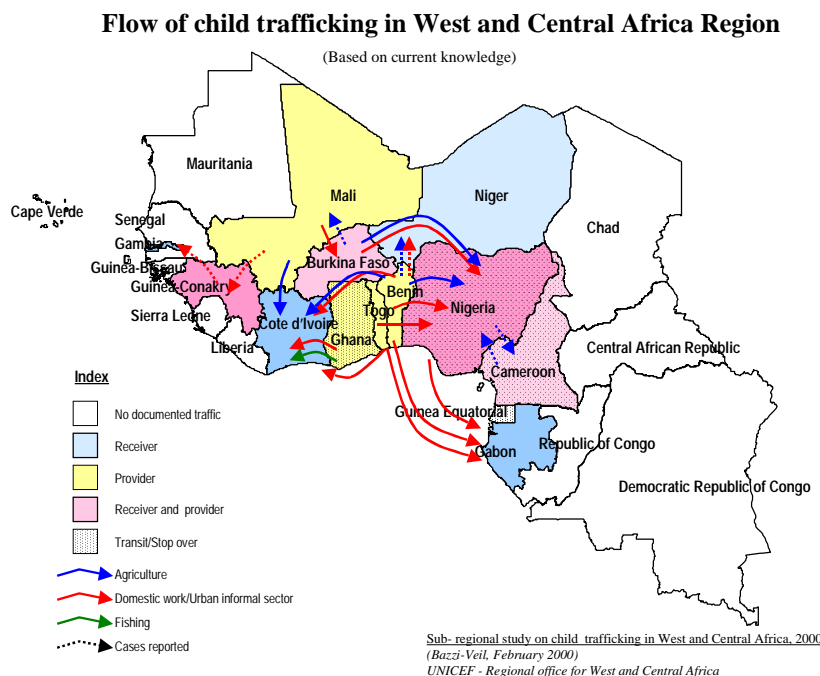
Trafficking of children for economic purposes is closely and inextricably linked to some of the worst forms of child labour. In the underworld of human trade, children are exchanged for prostitution, for begging and soliciting, and for work on construction sites, in small shops, in factories and in domestic service. Hidden from sight and beyond the reach of the law, these children are abused, exposed to hazardous working conditions, confined in the workplace, denied education, denied basic healthcare, denied adequate nutrition, leisure time and the safety and security of their families. Treated like slaves these children often end up working as domestic servants and labourers on plantations, in mines, in the urban informal sector and increasingly in the market of prostitution and pornography where countless numbers lose

their innocence and are exposed to HIV and other health risks. Many pay the ultimate price and lose their lives. All lose their basic human rights.

Current Patterns of Child Trafficking in West and Central Africa

Although, child trafficking is a global problem, the practice is particularly widespread in some regions. Africa and South Asia (especially the Mekong Area) are among the worst. Here in West Africa, millions of youth are affected by this brutal, entrenched trade. Child trafficking is a complex reality and trafficking networks are often informal and secretive in nature. This makes the identification of networks and traffickers extremely difficult. Indeed, in Africa, it is a major challenge just to gather and interpret data on the victims, the children being traded. Added to this complexity is the fact that in some regions, like ECOWAS, where open borders promote free trade, even when cross-border movement of children is obvious, it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between illegal and criminal activities and legitimate family, cross-border migration.

What we do know is that the scale of the problem is enormous. Studies have revealed clearly established trafficking routes involving Benin, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. While some of these countries are suppliers of trafficked children, others are receivers, and others are transit countries. Some countries are both suppliers and receivers. We are still at the very early stages of defining the issues and generating the data that will help us to better understand these movement patterns. We will need to do much more to understand fully the mechanisms of cross-border trafficking and clearly more research is necessary. But, we will also need to expand our conceptual framework to look beyond cross-boarder trafficking to other areas including internal child trafficking, where our knowledge is even more limited. Almost nothing is known about internal trafficking of children except that it is a substantial problem, largely unexplored, but one that places the child at the same risk as those being traded across borders.



Factors Influencing Child Trafficking

Two sub-regional studies undertaken by UNICEF in 1998 and 2000, have given us some insight into the factors that contribute to and drive the practice of child trafficking in the region. Analyses in both studies showed that poverty, cultural values and traditional belief systems all work to weaken the protection of child rights and push children towards traffickers.

I must say that children and women trafficking in Africa is very complex. This reality goes beyond the abuse of traditional deployments or migration for labour. It represents a major paradox of our time especially for children;

- ◆ where our society agrees that children are the most valuable natural resource, yet they are being plundered through exploitative labour and trafficking;
- ◆ where adults agree that children should be given first priority but most economic and political decisions are made without childhood in mind; and
- ◆ Where most families believe those children must be given the best start in life, but children are at a greater risk for poverty than any other societal group.

In this region, West and Central Africa, poverty emerges as a major and ubiquitous causal factor. Indeed, all of our countries are experiencing relatively high level of poverty and large proportions of the population live below the poverty line – the average being 40%, but rising to extremely high levels of 72% in a few countries. Thus, in the context of extreme poverty, the motive for the transfer of children is often economic.

But poverty alone does not explain the prevalence of child trafficking in all countries.

Indeed, some of those most heavily involved in child trafficking do not necessarily have the worst social indicators, nor possess the worst cases of poverty. So, we need to come to grips with the fact that there are other factors – indeed a very diverse and complex list of factors – that contribute to and fuel the business of child trafficking. Let me briefly discuss just a few.

1. **Lack of vocational and economic opportunities for the youth in the rural areas.** Families seeing no economic opportunities at home will often place children with families or friends in areas where they believe the prospects for gainful employment may be greater. Children in these communities become easy prey for traffickers who promise trade and work opportunities.
2. **Insufficient and/or inaccessible educational opportunities.** The motive for moving children from the protective envelope of the family is often the search for education rather than the search for work. Traditional practices of placement and child movement within the extended family circle for educational purposes contribute to this factor.
3. **Ignorance on the part of families and children of the risks involved in trafficking, such as risks of serious maltreatment, rape, torture, exposure to HIV/AIDS and even to psychological risks linked with separation, and emotional isolation.** Sadly, our world in the 21st century is far less friendly and hospitable than we would like. It is an increasingly dangerous and threatening place for children. But for many parents – especially those from culturally insulated families and traditional communities, the idea of harming a child is alien to their reality and frame of reference.

4. **Traditional migration of adults within the framework of economic activities.** Here the problem is rooted in the movement of families, nomadic peoples, and those who leave the protective and insular environment of the village – where everyone keeps the children – to the far less friendly and supportive realm of the urban/peri-urban slum.
5. **High demand for cheap and submissive child labour in the informal economic sector.** Children provide cheap labour and submit to abusive situations. They are often unaware of their rights or are powerless to seek assistance. Their vulnerability and eagerness to please make them attractive targets for the ruthless and greed driven predators in today's world.
6. **Opportunities to travel provided through easy means of communication and transport, experience shows that border areas, or areas situated along major routes, are particularly vulnerable to trafficking.**
7. **The desire of the youth for emancipation through migration.** Studies have shown that children see in migration, not only the perception of becoming a better person, but also, the adventure of personal travel.
8. **Institutional lapses such as inadequate political commitment, non existent national legislation against child trafficking, and absence of a judicial framework allowing for the perpetrators and accomplices of trafficking to be held responsible and punished for their acts.**

Combating Child Trafficking

From a regional perspective it seems clear that a multi-faceted strategy approach will be necessary if we are to make inroads in combating the multi-dimensional causes of child trafficking. These strategies should include:

1. Raising public awareness
2. Promotion of education as a preventive strategy,
3. Strengthening partnerships and cooperation, and
4. Establishing a legal and penal support system

Raising Public Awareness

Raising public awareness requires all hands to be on deck. Relevant government Ministries, Non-Governmental Organisations, religious leaders, community leaders, regional and international organisations all need to be involved and encouraged to carry out public awareness activities in urban and rural areas, in market places, in schools, in churches and mosques and particularly in border towns and villages. WOTCLEF is today setting an excellent example by bringing national and regional focus to this issues. The media, particularly the electronic media, has a key role to play in the sensitization of public opinion. Media coverage on the rights of the child, on child labour and trafficking and on cases of serious maltreatment of trafficked children has been shown to have a great impact.

UNICEF, in collaboration with key partners such as the International Labour Organization has embarked on activities to create public awareness and raise the consciousness of governments. Some of these activities include:

- Mounting vigorous advocacy campaigns among high-level decision makers and support for studies to strengthen knowledge on the situation of child trafficking.
- With the International Labour Organization (ILO), the organisation of a regional consultation in Libreville, Gabon. This meeting improved knowledge of the worst forms of child labour and trafficking for exploitative labour purposes. Twenty one countries participated and adopted a common platform for action.
- As a follow-up to the Libreville meeting, several countries (including Togo, Benin, Mali, Gabon and Nigeria) established inter-ministerial committees to find solutions.
- A transit centre has been established in Sikasso, Mali to receive repatriated children and to give them appropriate services and specific psychological care before their reunification with their families.
- Gabon established a National Commission to combat trafficking in children under the leadership of the Vice-President. And Mali, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Togo, Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Guinea are planning conferences to reconfirm the outcome of the Libreville consultation and to adopt national plans of action.
- The Governments of Ivory Coast and Mali signed a Memorandum of Understanding in September to foster cross-border co-operation in combating child trafficking, repatriation of trafficked children, detection and tracking of networks for trafficking in children.
- The OAU Commission on Labour and Social Affairs meeting held in Algeria recommended placing the trafficking in children on the agenda in future OAU (Organization of African Unity) Council of Ministers meetings.

Promotion of Education as a Preventive Strategy

Education constitutes an effective long-term linchpin strategy to combat child trafficking and women exploitation. Educating and keeping children at school reduce their risk of getting involved in trafficking rings. Similarly, the school could serve as a safeguard for the children continuing their education. However, for education programmes to serve as effective preventive measure for a significant proportion of potential victims of both sexes, emphasis should be placed not only on female literacy but also on vocational training for both girls and boys.

UNICEF has committed itself to promote basic education as a preventive and protective strategy, as well as deploying its communication capacity to advocate the rights of all children. Currently 34 countries, in all regions, are experimenting in tackling child labour through education. Approaches encompass school readiness activities focused on the early years, attempts to reduce school dropout rates through quality improvements, selective economic incentives, and the development of second chance opportunities for working children who have missed out an education.

Strengthening Partnerships and Co-operation

One of the most important ways to accelerate the fight against child trafficking, is the forging of strong partnerships and collaboration among the key players (such as NGOs, governments, regional and international organisation etc) at the local and international level. The role of partnerships and cooperation can not be over-emphasized. As in other parts of the world affected by the phenomenon of child trafficking, the NGOs in West and Central Africa were the first to call the attention of the population and development partners to the existence of

internal and cross border child trafficking. NGOs also play key roles in the care of victims of child trafficking such as the operation of transit camps, family tracing and re-unification of children with their families, management of drop-in centres, and rehabilitation and counselling of victims of trafficking.

However, NGOs often operate under some constraints which limit their effectiveness and these include: inadequate institutional capacities, limited technical competence, restricted coverage and isolated actions and weak co-ordination. To overcome these constraints NGOs working in the area of protecting the rights of children need to build their capacity for effective institutional and programme management. They also need to collaborate and network to exchange information and experiences and for mutual support. Highly visible meetings, such as the one convened today by WOTCLEF, help in forging consensus and enhanced capacity, commitment and capability in the NGO community.

Because of the criminal and cross-border ramifications of child trafficking, the state must necessarily play a leadership role. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the state to define the strategies and measures, and to ensure the implementation and co-ordination of activities with the other partners. Also because child trafficking in its cross-border patterns calls for the responsibility of respectful governments of supplier and receiver countries, there is need for inter-governmental co-operation. Such co-operation between countries, which is usually diplomatic and police-related, usually focuses on the problem of repatriation of victims of cross-border trafficking.

Key partners in the International Community such as ILO and UNDCP have in recent years, been lending support to the effort to combat child trafficking in the region and working closely with several international NGOs.

Establishment of Relevant Legislation or Penal Sanctions

Our discussion of the role of partners would not be complete if we neglect the area where there is no substitute for effective national leadership – and that is in the establishment of a legal framework to protect children from the risk of child trafficking. Beyond creating awareness of the problem, national authorities must see the urgency of establishing legal provision to deter traffickers and serve as a basis for instituting legal proceedings against traffickers and their accomplices. Your Excellency, let me congratulate you and WOTCLEF on the work you have done to move forward in Nigeria on the development of relevant legislation. Your presentation of an “Anti-human Trafficking Bill” to the National Legislature is commendable. It is an example of leadership that we hope others in the region will emulate. Your bill is a call for progressive legislative action to protect the rights of Nigerian citizens that we hope will receive speedy consideration by Nigeria’s elected officials.

For human trafficking to be controlled, it is essential to have a legal framework which accomplishes two things: 1) regulation of the movement of minors, and 2) establishment of penalties for acts that constitute trafficking. Unfortunately, in most countries of the sub-region, there is no legal disposition qualifying trafficking as a punishable offence, defining its constitutive elements and the acts associated with it. We believe that if child and women traffickers are to be prevented from taking advantage of the present legal vacuum to perpetrate their trade with impunity, all countries in the region must put in place sound legislation with appropriate sanctions to serve as deterrents to traffickers and their collaborators.

Key partners in this effort to achieve harmonisation of legal provisions could be the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). It has already been suggested that a goal of this collaboration might be the elaboration of an international legal instrument on child trafficking taking into consideration existing relevant conventions and charters, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the ILO Convention No. 182 and the Recommendation No. 190 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and the Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children as well the Convention against Trans-national organised crime.

Conclusion

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen. Let me again congratulate WOTCLEF for conveying this important meeting and for inviting the participation of UNICEF. Let me assure you that our offices, in Nigeria, the regional office in Abidjan and our headquarters office in New York are fully committed to work to protect the rights of children and women in every country. UNICEF is developing a new agenda for the future, which will move beyond the legacy of the past and will be based on a vision in which a collective global movement is devoted to creating a world in which every child's right to dignity, security and self-fulfilment is achieved. Curtailing the scourge of child trafficking and freeing Africa's children from the threat is a part of that movement and is central to our work. And with strong regional partners like WOTCLEF, we are more confident than ever of success.

Together, let us make certain that Nigeria's children and the children of West Africa grow up safe from violence and exploitation, free from poverty and discrimination and in an environment where they can be health and happy, free to learn and develop to the fullest... and then make their own contributions as committed citizens and caring family members. UNICEF is proud and pleased to have the opportunity to be your partners in pursuing this shared goal.

I thank you for your kind attention.