

Human Rights Implications of Child Trafficking in Conflicts Situations: Case Study of The Conflict in The English-Speaking Regions of Cameroon

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Abstract: The escalation of global conflicts has increased the displacements of people; leaving many impoverished and vulnerable to societal ills like trafficking in persons (TIP). TIP is a gross violation of the fundamental human rights of individuals undermining their dignity. Amongst victims, children are especially vulnerable because they can be easily manipulated and are completely dependent on adults for livelihood and support. Although Cameroon has made significant strides towards curbing the ill through the passing of Law No 2011/024 Relating to the Fight against Trafficking in Persons and Slavery, the phenomenon is more prevalent in the country with the ongoing conflicts in the English-Speaking Regions that began in 2016. This paper addresses the human rights implications of child trafficking on victims and adopts the qualitative research methodology which uses the doctrinal method of content analysis of existing literature.

Keywords: Conflicts, Trafficking in Persons, Child Trafficking, Human Rights

1.1 Introduction

The beginning of each century brings the illusion people are being ushered into an era of peace, hope and prosperity, however as incredible as it seems, mankind still develops practices that not only economically explore their peers but also degrade and debase people to the most abyssal of human conditions, mainly serving as objects of pleasure or profit to others. The Slave Trade which was abolished over 200 years ago has resurfaced today in a more horrific manner in the guise of TIP.

Cameroon had prided itself as a beacon of peace and stability in Africa for several years before the emergence of the Boko Haram Insurgency that became prominent in 2014. In 2016, longstanding grievances flared when lawyers from the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon went on strike, protesting against the gradual erosion of the Common Law System. A few weeks later, English-speaking teachers joined the protests expressing their grievances on marginalization. What initially started as a peaceful protest degenerated into an armed conflict that has brought suffering and pain to many today. The United Nations Resolution 2331 in 2016 and Resolution 2388 in 2017, demonstrated the Security Council's commitment towards fighting trafficking in persons during conflicts.

Child trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, transfer and receipt of persons below the age of 18 years for exploitation. Exploitation could take various forms such as forced child labour, organ harvesting and ritual killings, forced marriages, debt bondage, domestic slavery and the unlawful use and recruitment of child soldiers.

1.2 Implications on Victims

The effect of child trafficking is often relative to the type of abuse and exploitation which victims were subjected to and may be worse depending on the barbaric nature of their traffickers.¹ It violates all the basic rights of children; their rights to life, rights to education, rights to be protected from torture and cruel treatment, rights to health amongst others.

¹ A. Eyumeneh, 'What does the future hold for our children? Child Trafficking in Cameroon and India', Central European University, Department of Human Rights, Published Master's Thesis, 2015 p.16

1.2.1 The Devastating effects on the physical and mental health of children

Every stage of the trafficking process can involve physical, sexual/psychological abuse, violence, torture, and forced use of substances. Unlike most other violent crimes, trafficking usually involves prolonged and repeated trauma on victims. Most of the exploitation and abuse are often recurrent which makes it difficult for victims to fully recover from their damages.² The hazardous work that children are frequently required to perform can cause temporal or permanent disabilities and in extreme cases death. Children trafficked tend to age faster than their mates with the kind of tedious work they are made to do. Sometimes you find them looking so pale, old and dirty. When they engage in sexual activities at an early stage, they wear out easily. Those intended to be used for rituals or organ harvesting end up losing their lives.

More so, victims are deprived of food and access to health services.³ They do not have the opportunity to eat three regular meals per day or enjoy meals which are balanced diet. The foods they eat are usually left overs from their masters and end up suffering from malnutrition. Consequently they may suffer from anemia (shortage of blood). Victims are also prone to diseases such as malaria and typhoid since they usually live in dirty areas and slumps with low hygienic conditions. Some develop dental problems and tooth cavities since they hardly brush up daily. What makes things worse is the fact that victims are hardly taken to the hospital when they fall sick because the perpetrators fear being caught.

During an interview with a victim, he revealed that he could go for days without eating simply because his aunty with whom he was living with refused giving him food. He said he was not allowed to sleep in the house unless he sold all the meat he was sent to sell. If he failed selling all, he was made to sleep on the floor of the verandah as his punishment. He equally revealed some nights he was terribly beaten because he ate some of the pieces of meat he was asked to sell during the day. He was usually tempted to eat some pieces of meat because he left home countless times on an empty stomach and most often will have to beg food from outsiders or beg for 100 FRS from people of goodwill to buy bread and chocolate. Similar narratives were given from some victims in Kumba who explained if they failed selling all the products they were given to hawk, upon returning home their caretakers threw cold water on their bodies and made them to sleep outside in the cold. The children recounted falling sick at some points and had no one to buy drugs for them since they were already considered burdens to their families.

With regards to sexual health, children go through a range of sexual/reproductive health problems such as recurrent urinary tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases like Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea, Herpes, Syphilis and HIV/AIDS. Imagine the burden of a child living with the stigma of having a disease without a cure.⁴ There is also the tendency of victims being caught up in multiple pregnancies and unsafe abortions which continues to risk their lives and decreases their chances of conceiving or having healthy pregnancies in the future. In the long run, unsafe abortions may lead to further health problems such as scarring of the uterus and mutilations. Moreover, girls who give birth at very early ages before their bodies are fully developed, are more at risk of death or terrible bleeding at child birth. In 2007, UNICEF reported a girl below the age of 15 is five times more at risk of dying during child birth than a girl in her 20's.⁵ In addition to maternal health risks, children face tremendous problem such as obstetric fistula. This results when a young mother's vagina, bladder and/or rectum tears during child birth causing urine and faeces to leak out uncontrollably.

Generally, victim's immune system turns to weaken as they are exposed to lots of diseases with little food that cannot produce and sustain their anti-bodies. A victim revealed they had specific days on which they had their baths and that was after every four days because their masters complained of insufficient water. Consequently, most of the children had skin infections on their bodies (eczema and ringworm).

² N. Kristof. , *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women World Wide*, Knob Publishing Group, United Kingdom, 2009 p. 40

³ C. Zimmerman, et al, *Stolen Smiles: a Summary Report on the Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe*, (London: The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2006) pp 12-14

⁴ T. Phuong, 'Human Trafficking and Psychosocial Well-being: A Mixed-Methods Study of Returned Survivors of Trafficking in Vietnam', University of California, Published PhD Thesis, 2014 p.1

⁵ UNICEF (2007), *The State of the World's Children, Women and Children, The Dividend of Gender Equality*, New York available at <https://www.unicef.org> last accessed 30th July, 2021.

The psychological effects of child trafficking are visible such as depression, hopelessness, guilt, shame, flashbacks, nightmares, post-traumatic disorders, loss of confidence, and low self-esteem.⁶ The idea of being separated from their families for long periods affects their psychology.

Another effect on trafficked children is the forced use of drugs and substances. Most often in order to numb their experiences, children are given drugs (cocaine, marijuana, cannabis and tramadol). The use of drugs also destroys organs and may affect a child's ability to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually, and socially in a healthy and normal manner. Children may experience social ostracism and behavioural problems.⁷ They are often isolated from their social circles and mocked by their peers hindering their recovery process. They find it hard trusting adults or are often hostile to people of the opposite gender.

1.2.2 Deprivation of their Rights to Education

The right to education is an inalienable human right for all humans. Child trafficking hinders the full enjoyment of these rights as children held in bondage are not able to go to school like their counterparts. This represents flagrant violations of CRC Article 32 that protects children from "any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education." Most trafficked children were from families with difficult economic situations and had little opportunity for schooling. It is very common that majority of them quit schooling to work for their family's survival. The few who are fortunate to be enrolled in school often find themselves not being regular in school which acts adversely on their academic performance. Many may develop language problems, deficit in verbal/memory skills and grade retention.⁸ Victims fail to attain the first step (basis) towards achieving their dreams-an education. Thus, depriving children of this right is depriving them of their own future since education is a springboard for learning and skills building. The 26 Children who had been trafficked from Ndian to Limbe in early 2021 had been promised education but ever since their recruiters took them, they were not in school until the year after when they were rescued by the National Gendarmerie.

1.2.3 Loss of Identity

All children ought to enjoy recognition in the society but are often being deprived of this basic human right. Most often the identities of victims are concealed in order for them not to be traced. They are given false names and other false identifications. These victims end up losing their identity.⁹ This is particularly common with babies who are taken up for illegal adoption. They may never be able to trace their birth parents nor origin.¹⁰ They are given different identities and made to behave like people they are not. Registration of births is necessary because children are given access to education, medical care, recognized lineage and nationality. Without birth certificate they have no legal identity and are prone to more abuses. Traffickers take advantage of the fact that during the ongoing conflict, many births go unregistered especially for those who gave birth in the bushes. When traffickers get hold of such children, they can easily give them an entirely new personality.

1.2.4 Deprivation of their rights to grow up with their families

The family has always been described as the most basic unit of society and civilization. Traditionally, it is in the family that children learn respect, love, compassion, forgiveness and how to relate properly to others.¹¹ It is a child's introduction to the concepts of communal bond and care for others. The family provides security nourishment for the mind and body. Children have the right to grow up with their

⁶ Y. Rafferty, 'The Impact of Trafficking on Children: Psychological and Social Policy Perspectives', *Child Development Perspectives*, 2008, Vol 2 Issue 1, p. 13-18

⁷ Understanding the Impact of Human Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery, available at www.humantraffickingsearch.org, last accessed 20th March, 2021

⁸ Y. Rafferty, 'The Impact of Trafficking on Children: Psychological and Social Policy Perspectives', *Journal on Child Development Perspectives*, 2008, Vol 2, No. 1, pp 13-18, pg 14

⁹ M. Dottridge, *Kids as Commodities? Child Trafficking and What to do About it?*, Switzerland Terre des Hommes, 2004, p. 57

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Family and Human Trafficking, available at <https://wucwo.org> last accessed 20th June, 2021.

biological parents, siblings or extended relatives where need be. Trafficking strips children of this basic rights as most are transported to far away areas where they know nobody.¹²

They are then forced to start living with strangers and do not have the opportunity to grow up in the comfort of their homes. Such children are indoctrinated and made to behave in the manner in which their exploiters want. Children who grow up with their families have a tendency to be well behaved in the society as opposed to those who are most likely badly brought up in the hands of strangers. They may be found wanting on certain moral and ethical values. Parents, who forcefully marry off their children at their early age, equally deprive their children of the right to grow up with them. During an interview with a civil society activist, he revealed they handled a case of child marriage in which the little girl ran away from her parents' home and that of her supposed husband.¹³ She felt she was no longer welcomed by her parents since they were against the fact that she was refusing to obey their wish. The little girl expressed herself by saying she preferred living in the streets than living with her parents or a man old enough to be her own father.

1.2.5 Deprivation of their Rights to Privacy

Children like every human being have rights to privacy, which is the right for the non-disclosure or publicity of their personal information, the right to be left alone. The increasing sophistication of Information Technology with its capacity to collect, analyse and disseminate information on individuals has introduced a sense of urgency in the need to protect the right to privacy. Information of trafficked victims are sometimes published on the media with or without the knowledge of the trafficked victims concerned. This may have a long-term effect on the child's psychology in some years to come. There is the tendency that information is likely to resurface on media. The honour and reputation of the victims are affected and this may continue to stigmatise the victims throughout their life time. Instead of people sympathizing with them, they may rather make a mockery of them. In the long run, their recovery process is being slowed down. Some go as far as exposing some of the nude pictures and videos of victims.

1.2.6 Corruption of Children

Most often, children become juvenile delinquents and tend to terrorise the society in which they live in. They start to commit crimes because they have been trained in such a manner or may also resort to committing crimes due to the trauma which they suffered. Child soldiers for example are afraid of nothing else, not even death.¹⁴ This may cause them to commit crimes without fear. Those who had already killed will not be afraid to resort to arms again in any least argument. There's a tendency they may become thieves; moving in the neighbourhoods and pickpocketing. Trafficked children may themselves become traffickers in future because they saw and witnessed how their perpetrators treated them. Some have no hopes in life and believe they will continue to treat people the way they were treated as soon as they grow up and have that opportunity since children tend to copy what they see their parents or elders doing. Some of them may become drug dealers, scammers and swindlers because they were corrupted from childhood. They equally become very vulgar when speaking and tend to be abusive to others.

1.2.7 Loss of Liberty and Security

The right to liberty and security of persons is enshrined in Article 3 of the UDHR. The right to liberty is the right of all persons to fully enjoy freedom of movement and freedom from arbitrary detention by others. Simply put, it refers to the freedom from confinement of the body as a result of arbitrary processes. The only time when this right can be lawfully deprived is when a person is convicted for a crime, serious mental health cases and to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This right is lost when children are trafficked. Children held in captivity are often powerless. All their attempts to move are being monitored by their perpetrators. They are in fact not free to move without the permission of their exploiters basically living a life of bondage.

¹² Wylie, G., *The International Politics of Human Trafficking*, Palgrave Macmillan, United Kingdom, 2016.

¹³ An interview with Mr Nji Lucas, Director of Rescue, Recover and Rehabilitation Centre, Buea done on 25th August, 2021.

¹⁴ D. Rosen, Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law and the Globalisation of Childhood, *Children Childhoods and Childhood Studies*, 2007 pp 296-306, 299

Security of persons on the other hand refers to protection from suffering bodily or mental injury by State Actors regardless of whether the victim is detained or not, or by private actors. Trafficking challenges all attempts to ensure the security of victims; constantly putting their lives at risk.¹⁵

1.3 Conclusion and Way forward

Child trafficking exacerbated by conflicts has unquestionably led to varied immediate and long-term consequences. The most affected persons being the victims first, their families next and the nation at large. There is nothing really profitable about child trafficking to victims, family and the society. The only people who seemingly tend to benefit from the heinous crime are those involved in the trafficking chain.

- There is the need to end the conflict plaguing the two English Speaking Regions which is a triggering factor to the increased rate of child trafficking
- There is the need to strengthen collaboration with civil society in continually sensitizing the public on the ill and modus operandi of traffickers.

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¹⁵ M. Clark, 'Trafficking in Persons: An Issue of Human Security', *Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 4, No. 2, July, 2003 pp. 247-263, 247