

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unveiling child trafficking: Local perspectives and context in addressing sustainable development goals in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included the goal of combating child labor and human trafficking, but regional variations complicate efforts to address these problems. In Sierra Leone, the government has taken steps to address these issues, but challenges remain, particularly in relation to access to education, in rural areas, and for young girls. This article examines local stakeholder understandings of child trafficking, and the distinction between child labor and child work in Sierra Leone. Participants included community leaders and those with lived experience of exploitation. Findings identify complex intersections and overlaps in understandings of these terms, and the ways these connect with norms and expectations impacting children and childhood in Sierra Leone. Lessons are drawn out for local and international policy and programming to incorporate structural factors within a wider lens of child protection, reframing anti-trafficking to focus on positive aspects of recovery and resilience.

1 | WHAT'S IN A NAME? CHILD TRAFFICKING AND CHILD LABOR

Global efforts to combat child trafficking have been on the rise in recent years but local norms and context play a huge role in what kinds of work are perceived as acceptable for children. This article presents new evidence from research carried out in Sierra Leone with key informants, community leaders, and those with lived experience of exploitation. It asks how local stakeholders understand child trafficking, and the distinction between child labor and child work. The findings have implications for policy and programming at local and national level, and in relation to progress toward the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8.7, where major funders have shifted their priorities since the early 2000s from a focus on child labor to programs addressing child trafficking (Gleason & Cockayne, 2018).

“Child trafficking” and “child labor” are two forms of child exploitation that can overlap but are not equal. They relate to different forms and degrees of exploitation, and are distinguished from “child work” (that work which is legally carried out by children) through internationally agreed definitions. Addressing child labor has been a long-term priority for the International Labor Organization (ILO), while the trafficking of children and adults comes under the agenda of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Child trafficking and child labor are thus both serious issues that involve the exploitation of children, but they are distinct concepts that have developed over time with key differences.

Child trafficking specifically involves the control of children through illegal means (defined as the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt” of any person under the age of 18 years)¹ for the purpose of exploitation. Child labor is a broader concept encompassing any form of child work that is harmful

or interferes with a child's development. This includes children below 12 years working in any economic activities, children aged 12–14 years engaged in more than light work, or children aged 15–17 years working above the hour limits established by the ILO.

Because child trafficking is often described as a form of slavery, it implies the most severe forms of exploitation. However, there is overlap with child labor because the ILO also incorporates such acts through the Worst Forms of Child Labor (WFCL), which are often considered a form of human trafficking because they include activities that are deemed particularly harmful to children's physical and mental development and well-being. The list of activities given by the ILO for WFCL explicitly includes “slavery” or any “practice similar to slavery,” and human trafficking is described by some governments (e.g., United Kingdom and United States) as “modern slavery.”² However, WFCL also includes any work by children in sectors with “hazardous conditions,” such as mining or construction.

Words and definitions matter because the way something is described or framed can “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). The terms “child trafficking” and “child labor” are constructions of international law and as with all such categories, their adoption and usage has political implications, but they are also each associated with different policy frameworks. Efforts to address child labor may look at economic incentives/disincentives while anti-trafficking measures have historically been more associated with a criminal justice approach. It is less clear how these terms are in turn interpreted and incorporated into discussions about children at the local level, in relation to community engagement. Classifying certain kinds of child work as “child labor” or certain types of child labor as trafficking could therefore have a range of effects. It not only designates what is morally acceptable and unacceptable work for children, but it also has policy implications: raising certain approaches up or down the political agenda, aligning a country's approach to children and childhood with international norms. Some have argued that use of these terms, along with other related ones of forced labor and describing these as modern slavery, can be instrumental, with international political actors staking territorial claims (Chuang, 2014) and combining with conservative political interests to pursue “hidden” agendas against marginalised communities (O'Connell Davidson, 2011). These concerns all share the same logic: labels and categories regarding social problems may be inappropriate and lead to policies purportedly designed to prevent harm doing the opposite. For example, it has been suggested that dramatic claims about “child slavery” in the West African context have been used to avoid more difficult discussions about factors impacting on child mobility and labor (Okyere, 2017), where there is an epistemic gap between local reality and the categories and definitions above,

Policy implications

- There are complex intersections and overlaps in the ways the terms “child trafficking” and “child labor” are understood by stakeholders in Sierra Leone in the context of children, work, and education. For anti-trafficking policies to be effective, they must engage with embedded norms and expectations impacting children and childhood.
- Use of the term “child trafficking” or describing someone as having been “trafficked” has mixed implications for the young people and communities affected. It can be effective in raising the profile of child protection but also risks painting a hopeless picture for community members, resulting in overly negative views, or “othering” of children who have lived experience.
- Policy, programming, and advocacy on trafficking should avoid focusing on the harms and negative impacts and shift the focus toward promoting more positive messages: of individual agency in overcoming situations of exploitation; of recovery and empowerment for children in seeking a better future for themselves and their families; and of strengths-based perspectives from survivors, acknowledging their resilience.
- Findings support an approach to anti-trafficking focused on prevention that is embedded in the wider political priorities for children, linking protection, education, and work, and incorporating understanding of the systematic and structural conditions which drive and sustain exploitation.
- Progress in achieving the SDGs would be enhanced by adopting an evidence-based approach including local communities to integrate anti-child trafficking with understandings of relevant local challenges.
- Anti-trafficking efforts should take a flexible and adaptive approach to terminology, informed by local perspectives and the voices of those directly impacted to improve policy and programming.

which are “alien,” do not resonate with social and historical context, and are in conflict with local norms around childhood, family, and gender dynamics (Berlan, 2013). There is little research, however, focusing on how these terms are assigned different meanings by stakeholders and those directly affected by the problems they are intended to describe.

1.1 | Research questions and structure of the article

This article explores these issues through the case of Sierra Leone, a country with high levels of poverty that experienced a long civil war and more recently Ebola outbreaks, all of which particularly affected children (Devine, Bolotta, et al., 2021; Devine, Samonova, et al., 2021). Our research explored how local stakeholders understand and distinguish categories of child trafficking, child labor and child work. The article presents data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions carried out in 2019–2020. We are particularly interested in understanding the term child trafficking in relation to how it connects with ideas about child labor and child work, how all of these terms intersect with wider ideas about childhood, and the extent to which perspectives differ between stakeholder groups.

This article is structured as follows: The next section provides context via a brief discussion of progress toward the UN's SDGs in relation to human trafficking, and background to situate Sierra Leone's efforts to address child trafficking and child labor. This is followed by discussion of methods and analytical approach before findings are presented. The discussion and conclusions draw out main themes and insights, reflecting on their wider significance.

2 | CONTEXT

2.1 | Anti-child trafficking and sustainable development

The SDGs, launched on January 1, 2016, set out an ambitious agenda for 2030, but since then concerns have been raised that the aims will not be met, or at least will take many decades longer than expected (SPI, 2020). Estimates of child labor (ILO-UNICEF, 2021), human trafficking and “modern slavery” (ILO, Walk Free, IOM, 2022), all covered under SDG 8.7³ are good examples of this challenge, where the global scale of the problem appears to be rising rather than falling as the 2030 deadline looms.

While these developments are troubling at first sight, the global nature of the discussion masks significant regional variation and such indices have been called into question for their accuracy and bias (Farrell & de Vries, 2020). Determining, and then reducing, prevalence of phenomena such as child labor, or human trafficking has been complicated not only by the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 but as with all SDGs, these are issues subject to a range of underlying and complex interdependencies (Nilsson et al., 2016).

Crucially, in the case of child work, child labor or child trafficking, global action—and generation of

global prevalence estimates—depends upon international consensus about the ways different forms of work carried out by children are observed, understood, classified, reported, and recorded. One might expect that in diverse contexts, there will be very different attitudes and expectations about what is right and wrong regarding childhood and labor, where there is likely to be different levels of awareness about the terms themselves, and how these translate or align with local language or terminology on child protection or established policy approaches to children. However, research into progress against the SDGs suggests that one of the key impacts has been discursive: affecting the ways in which political actors understand and communicate about policy issues (Biermann et al., 2022).

2.2 | Children, trafficking, and work in Sierra Leone

Child labor, including the WFCL, and child trafficking, are significant issues for Sierra Leone. In a 2011 survey by Statistic Sierra Leone: 45.9% of all children aged 5–17 years were estimated to be engaged in child labor (SSL, 2014). A subsequent survey, in 2017, estimated 39% of 5–17-year-old children experienced child labor (SSL, 2018). More recent research (carried out in 2019–2020) using a household survey of local “hotspots” in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province (Kono, Kailahun, and Kenema) estimated high levels of child trafficking (including WFCL) affecting between 26% and 45% of children aged 5–17 years (Okech et al., 2022). Common sectors where children were reported to experience trafficking include domestic work, agriculture, mining, quarrying, fishing, and forced begging (DoS, 2023). Sierra Leonean children may be at increased risk of experiencing trafficking if they live in informal fostering situations, are between the ages of 12–17 years, are not enrolled in school, or if they financially contribute to household expenses (Okech et al., 2022).

The approach of the government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) in addressing the WFCL has been described as making “moderate advancement” by the US Department of Labor (DoL) (2022) while prevalence remains high, particularly in commercial sexual exploitation, mining, stone quarrying, and fishing (Ibid. 2022). The country is a signatory to the Palermo Protocol (UN General Assembly, 2000) which sets out the definition and policy framework for addressing human trafficking, and has joined every major international convention related to protecting children from forced and hazardous labor (DoL, 2022). Furthermore, over the years, the GoSL has included measures to incorporate the provisions of these conventions into their domestic laws, such as the Anti-Human Trafficking Act (2005), Child Rights Act of 2007 (Bolten, 2018; GoSL, 2007), which sets the minimum age for full-time employment at 15 years old and

the minimum age for hazardous work at 18 years old (GoSL, 2007). However, children as young as 13 years old are legally able to perform “light work” which according to the law is work which does not interfere with their education or is not harmful to their development or health (GoSL, 2007). Some international stakeholders have raised concerns that GoSL's current legal framework about light work leaves much room for interpretation, which could limit effectiveness of implementation and also leaves a large population of children who work in a domestic setting unprotected (DoL, 2022). There have also been concerns raised about the effectiveness of the anti-trafficking legislation, ultimately resulting in a new law in 2022 that, among other things, is designed to better target child trafficking (Lewis, 2023).

2.3 | Education and child protection

Protecting children from exploitative labor is linked to the right to education in the Child Rights Act of 2007 (GoSL, 2007). Compulsory education applies to children up to the age of 15 years, after which they are eligible to be in full-time employment (GoSL, 2007; article 125). However, given the socioeconomic context experienced by Sierra Leonean children, the government faces considerable challenges in delivering access to education for all. These issues are particularly acute in rural areas, and are likely to impact girls more, who have additional barriers to access due to gendered expectations regarding responsibilities and duties to the household (Devine, Samonova, et al., 2021; Samonova et al., 2021). In the past decade, GoSL has taken steps to increase universal access, a goal for the country since its independence in 1961 (Samonova et al., 2021). The Free Quality School Education program was implemented in 2018 and aimed to reduce financial barriers for children enrolling in school, providing tuition, books, and meals for students in primary schools (tuition only for secondary schools⁴). Although the program has increased access to schooling for some, recent research has reported that the school system is critically under-resourced, with untrained and unqualified staff, problems with teachers getting paid (Thompson, 2020), a lack of adequate and safe spaces or basic supplies for teaching (Samonova et al., 2021).⁵ In addition, families are still reporting having to pay fees and struggle to afford other costs associated with schooling, such as clothing, food, and school supplies (Samonova et al., 2021).

3 | METHODS AND APPROACH

The qualitative data for this study was taken from a larger baseline study collected during a 2019–2020.

This study generated two main datasets, the first from a household survey designed to estimate prevalence of child trafficking, and the second a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather stakeholder views and examine service and policy gaps for children at risk of trafficking. For this article, we analyzed a subset of the second dataset including: focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members ($N=26$) and the national anti-trafficking taskforce ($N=1$) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with community leaders ($N=4$), and NGO officials/staff and governmental officials/staff ($N=13$). Prior to any data collection, we underwent a thorough ethics review with IRBs in the United States and the United Kingdom (at universities where the research team is based) as well as in Sierra Leone. We also gained approval and support from the National Anti-trafficking Taskforce in Sierra Leone and regional and local leaders, such as paramount chiefs and Chairpersons of the District Councils who are responsible for the regions under study. Following ethics approval, data collectors were trained extensively on the study protocol and in research ethics.

Respondents were recruited using snowball and purposive sampling strategies. Key informants were recruited by reaching out to relevant national and local stakeholder organisations who were actively working in the area of child trafficking response either by providing direct services for child trafficking survivors or through policy work. Community leaders introduced the data collection team to community members to recruit respondents for the focus groups. Focus group discussions were conducted by age and gender, meaning that there were FGDs with adult and elder women ($N=6$), FGDs with adult and elder men ($N=9$), FGDs with young adult men ($N=6$), and FGDs with young adult women ($N=5$). FGDs took place in locations within the community where community members felt comfortable. Key informant interviews took place in a location of the respondents' choosing (e.g., an office for professional stakeholders).

Instruments for focus groups and key informant interviews for community leaders included vignettes which described child trafficking, child labor, and children's work scenarios in addition to general discussion questions related to these topics. Following each vignette, the tools included follow-up prompts which asked respondents about their views on the morality of the vignette scenarios and if they would describe these scenarios as forced labor or child trafficking. The key informant tool for NGOs and government officials did not include the vignettes, but did ask specifically about how respondents and their organisations viewed relevant topics: “What is your organization's understanding of child trafficking?”

The analytical approach was to conduct a comparative, thematic analysis using a matrix approach (Gale et al., 2013; Guest et al., 2011). There were four coding

categories: (1) child work expectations, (2) child labor views, (3) child trafficking views, and (4) views of children and youth. Codes were initially applied by focal question where data relevant for each code category could be found. For example, data related to respondents' views about children's work expectations were most often found in response to questions such as: "Describe the expectations that adults have when it comes to children helping to work inside and outside the home." After coding by focal question, some data were coded based on the context of the discussion where relevant topics emerged during conversations in response to non-focal questions.

Following the application of categorical codes, we employed a thematic comparative analysis approach using the Framework Matrix tool in NVivo, where rows were made for each respondent group (i.e., young adult women) and columns were made for each set of relevant categorical code (i.e., child work expectations). Coded data for each cell was then summarised and analyzed. Following completion of the matrix in NVivo, it was exported to Excel, where we explored differences and similarities in perspectives across respondent groups by each coding category. Analytic memoing and diagraming were used to develop themes and explore relationships in the data. Peer review took place at this stage which involved discussion of findings and themes.

4 | MAIN FINDINGS

Among respondents in all groups, we generally encountered strong condemnation of both child trafficking and child labor. However, there were sometimes tense and seemingly paradoxical views about what was considered acceptable children's work and what was condemned as either child labor or trafficking in community discussions. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), there were three critical points of confluence between concepts which continually surfaced throughout group discussions: (1) between children's work and formal education, (2) between children's work and child labor, and (3) between children's work, child labor, and child trafficking. In the following sections, we will explore these intersections and consider tensions, balances, and trade-offs in the moral justifications/condemnations of these different categories and in so doing build understanding about community conceptualisations of child trafficking and child labor.

4.1 | Children, work, and education

Respondents overwhelmingly viewed children's work in terms of responsibility or duty, where children have a responsibility to work to help their families both now

and into the future. Respondents shared that work carried out by children, especially work done for the family, was viewed as integral to a holistic education, often described by respondents as "training." Training in domestic work and agriculture were viewed as important for enabling a child to have a good future and to also be able to support their family in times of crisis.

... education alone is not enough; these will be the people tomorrow that will suffer other people children if they are not taught now how to take care of themselves. I believe every good parent will want their children to learn how to do some work for themselves. You as a parent should know when to be hard on the child and when to be soft.

– FGD # 18, adult and elder women

As illustrated in many quotes that follow, work carried out by children was understood as being acceptable as long as the work did not interfere with schooling, or if there was good justification or extreme circumstances. Respondents described changing expectations with regard to the balance between children's work and children's education, reflecting that children's education is growing increasingly formalised, and that the government is leading the efforts to change expectations for children. The value of formal education was often described by respondents not only in terms of future value for the child themselves and their communities, but also in terms of the negative impacts, "backwardness," from lacking a formal education. However, the value of work was described by respondents as critical for both the present needs of a family (promoting bonding, providing needed resources) and for ensuring future success in family life (due to training in life skills during work). As illustrated in the following excerpt, woven into these discussions about values of education and work, there was a notable dimension rooted in societal and gendered norms.

P4: When it is dawn, the children will have to sweep, wash the pan, wash and go to school. Everybody go where he or she is going. Some go to school. That is a good way because as a woman, when you do not bring up a child well this way, her husband will be abusing her that your mother doesn't train you up. It doesn't mean because a child is going to school he or she should not focus on other work. That child should have time to read and study. This is common here.

– FGD #16, young women

This gendered aspect is important to note in relation to developing effective policies that could have transformational impact. Importantly, some respondents suggested

What is child trafficking?

Intersecting views about child trafficking, child labor and children's work

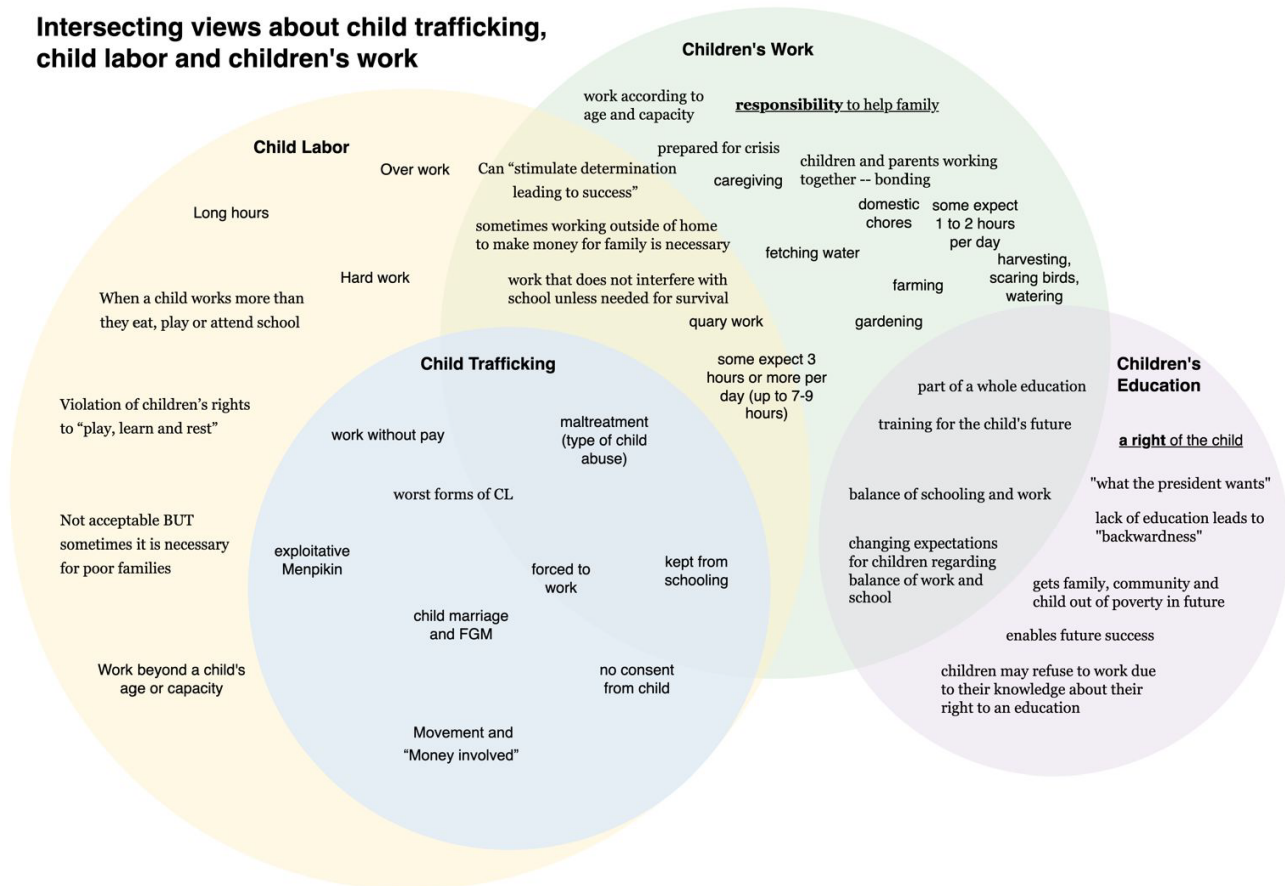


FIGURE 1 What is child trafficking? Intersecting views about child trafficking, child labor, and children's work.

that girls may often be denied an education "because their parents believe a girl is meant for marry and domestic work," rather than to complete their education, and that girls are of "less value in their family" (FGD 26, Young adult women). These narratives highlight potentially harmful gender norms which could promote inequities in access to education and work expectations for girls.

Generally, respondents suggested that a balance of schooling and domestic work carried out by children is preferred. However, they reported that this may not be possible under certain conditions, for example, when faced with a situation that has additional cost implications or when dealing with poverty. Respondents indicated that present needs sometimes outweighed future needs when families considered expectations for children's work versus formal education.

During the drying season when the time reaches for rice to be harvested, all the children will not go to school, because they will be engaging on harvesting the rice. When they finish with the harvest, they will be allowed to go to school.

– FGD 22, young men

Notably, there were indications that communities views of children's rights and responsibilities in relation to working and formal education may be shifting. Among each respondent group, there were some respondents who appeared to embrace changes in support of children's rights, and the rights of girls in particular, suggesting that the "world now has changed" and "this time round the right of children is to being respected" (FGD 14, Adult and Elder men). For some, children's formal education was described as a child's right which positively impacted the child's and communities' future, leading to prosperity. As one focus group participant commented, "children have a right to play, learn and rest" (FGD #3, adult and elder women).

4.2 | Child work or child labor?

Respondents described the accessibility of formal education and the degree of difficulty of work (e.g., hours worked and type of work) as being two major elements which differentiated children's work from child labor. For example, child labor was often described by respondents as forced work, hard work, work for long hours often without pay, or work which

was beyond a child's age and capacity, where a child is kept from attending formal school and does not directly benefit from their work. Respondents also stressed that child labor was a violation of children's rights, not necessarily because of the work itself but rather because of the loss of time for play, education, and rest. Children's work was described as work which benefitted the family, and which did not interfere (or only minimally interfered) with a child's school attendance.

P3: I'm saying it is not good and it is child labor because you give a child work to do that is commensurate to his health and age. When you give a child work in the farm, stone mining, harvesting and not going to school at all times is bad. It doesn't matter whether that child is yours or not it is child labor.

– FGD 20, Adult and elder men

Importantly, there was little consensus about the number of hours which were acceptable for a child to work, suggesting that the concept of working “long hours,” which was noted as an element of child labor, may be viewed differently by different people. For example, when describing expectations for children's work, community members offered a wide range of acceptable hours from less than 1h, 1–2h to 3 or more hours per day. Some respondents suggested that children should work as much as 7–9h per day, which they were expected to do before or after going to school.

M: How many hours do they work for their families?

P1: I think there is a limit to the number of hours a child must work. I believe a child should not work for up to six hours, though there could be certain age levels at which a child should be allowed to work for over six hours.

P2: I think a child should not work all day, and till night hours. A child should work for a maximum of four hours.

– FGD 11, adult and elder women

This difference in opinion regarding children's work hours appeared to be partly generational, where FGD respondents who were young adults typically described expectations for fewer working hours for children than did adult and elder respondents.

Although generally respondents strongly opposed child labor in concept, there appeared to be some reservations about labeling all child labor as unacceptable,

with some respondents suggesting that child labor may be good for children to help them learn how to deal with tough situations, can “stimulate determination leading to success” (FDG 9, young adult men), and may enable a child to have skills for taking care of themselves and their families during a crisis.

Moderator: What are your community's thought on children being overworked or exploited when working outside the home?

Respondent 7- sometimes we think it is good for them because they are to get used to hard work.

– FGD #5, adult and elder men

Relatedly, some respondents suggested that although child labor was not acceptable, it may sometimes be necessary for poor families, where children may be the “only source of livelihood” (FGD 11, Adult and Elder Women) for a family or where children themselves may feel it is necessary to work to have food or materials. There appeared to be some flexibility or pragmatism in regard to moral positions on children and work: Where sometimes respondents would express moral opposition to child labor on the one hand but then simultaneously argue that there are circumstances where this is sometimes necessary or even acceptable.

4.3 | Intersections between child trafficking, child labor, and children's work

Although respondents often defined child trafficking by its relationship to child labor, especially the worst forms of child labor, respondents generally emphasised the means (force, coercion) and the act (movement) rather than the purpose (work). Whereas, child labor was typically defined by the purpose (work). Respondents stressed movement, especially nonconsensual movement, and money exchanged between a trafficker and family members as key indicators of trafficking. Some respondents did not mention child labor when describing child trafficking, but rather focused on other aspects which they felt defined trafficking, such as the movement (of a child) by force (or coercion), without the child's (or guardian's) consent, and without allowing access to schooling.

P8: The child was forced to work, and she was trafficked too. It was money the people offered to the mother of the girl from the start. Taking her and handing her over to the next man in the city who took her away to the suburb...the child ended up working like a slave.

– FGD 28, adult and elder men

As with child labor, emphasis was placed on a child being kept from a formal education, however respondents suggested that trafficking was also defined by abusive treatment, such as physical violence and neglect. Collectively, respondents suggested a view that criminality is an element of trafficking (forced movement, abusive treatment, and without consent), whereas child labor appeared to be viewed as exploitative (and impactful to the child's well-being) but not necessarily criminal.

P5: ...this case is in two folds, it's both child labor and child trafficking. I have also attended some training on this topic. Based on the story you recited this is both child labor and child trafficking. Where the child trafficking comes in, is where the child was taken to the city, without putting her to school, the child labor aspect comes in wherein she was made to work for excessive hours of time, because according to the medical people, excess work is not good for your health.

– FGD 23, young men

Respondents also emphasised exploitive “menpikin” (informal foster placements where a child is sent to live with a relative or family friend in order to work or attend school) as a form of trafficking, which was described as intersecting with children's work and child labor. Although there was agreement on the potential benefits of menpikin (e.g., helping children gain training in domestic duties, relieving a family of financial burden), such children were described by respondents as potentially vulnerable. This was because of possible motives of the foster family and also because biological parents may be unable to monitor the well-being of their child in a placement (due to distance between the placement and the biological family or social concerns related to how monitoring may impact the relationship between the foster family and the biological family). There appeared to be growing support and awareness for the idea that communities should be cautious in agreeing to send their children into menpikin placements for schooling and work, due to a potential for increased risk of experiencing trafficking. However, in parallel to conversations about child labor, respondents suggested that when a family is struggling to support their children menpikin placements, even if potentially exploitative, may be necessary.

4.4 | Perceptions of impacts and outcomes

Exploring community perceptions about impacts and outcomes from child trafficking can deepen our understanding of how the community frames the problem of child trafficking. This can in turn inform how

anti-trafficking advocates and stakeholders meaningfully engage communities in conversations about the problem and develop context-aware solutions. The overwhelming narrative across respondent groups was that child trafficking spoils the child's and the community's future. This spoiling was described as happening at the community level through loss of opportunities and potential and at the survivor level through perceived negative outcomes. Respondents described impacts from child trafficking at three levels: (1) loss of future development (and continuation of poverty) within the community, (2) negative impacts on the family's future and economic well-being, and (3) negative impacts on the child's future and well-being. Respondents also shared perceptions about survivor outcomes where community members reported: (1) having negative views of survivors, (2) fearing negative influence from survivors on children and youth in the community, and (3) suggesting that survivors have limited opportunities after they return home.

Respondents perceived that child trafficking impacts future development of communities because child trafficking is a “drain to the human resources” with long-term consequences as it leads to children living on the streets resulting in serious economic impacts on family and by extension the community. Thus, the family and community remain in poverty in part due to impacts from child trafficking not only because children “return to their community with nothing,” but also because development projects may be slowed or stopped due to perceptions (by outsiders and government agencies) about the community as a hotbed of trafficking.

P8: It has disturbed the community. Bad things are happening in the community and we are at risk. We don't feel happy to live in the community where bad things continue to happen. We don't like the stigma around this community on child trafficking and we don't feel comfortable as we go round with fingers been pointed at us that we are child traffickers.

– FGD 28, adult and elder men

Child trafficking and child labor was also described as having a negative impact on the family's and child's well-being. For example, respondents suggested that if parents do not support their children in the present (by valuing education over working or by not sending them into a menpikin placements), then their children will not support them in the future.

P1: Why I say it is not acceptable because as the father you have made your farm and you don't allow your children to be in school, you don't know if they go to school they will be able to provide for you and even

asked you to stop farming. But if you don't allow them to go to school they will continue working in the farm till they grow old and they will not be able to do anything for themselves.

– FGD 8, young women

Some respondents noted that they had heard, through awareness raising campaigns, that children who are exploited will get sick and need medicine, resulting in a family having to use limited financial resources to secure medicine, suggesting impacts on a family's economic prosperity.

Some respondents described impacts on children themselves especially in terms of social and emotional well-being as well as future prospects. Child trafficking was described as “hurt[ing] a child's brain” and as limiting a child's capacity to fulfill their potential, especially for girls who may be kept from receiving a formal education due to their trafficking experiences. Generally, respondents suggested that impacts on children's well-being can be extreme leading to ill health and even death.

Outcomes for young people who experienced trafficking were generally described as negative, including early pregnancy and early marriage, becoming involved with drugs or gangs, committing violence, and dropping out of school.

It affects our community negatively because, child trafficking only serves to damage a child's future since these trafficked children after being rescued, mostly end up as prostitutes and thugs, which is not good for our community.

– FDS 24, young adult men

Survivors were described by respondents as “destroyed,” “wasted,” “spoiled” youth who will return as “dropouts,” “gangsters,” “robbers,” or “prodigal children.” For example, a paramount chief shared that “They [child trafficking survivors] will never go to school and will not learn skill trade... they grow up to be idlers... these are people who may not be called criminals but potential criminals.” – *KII 8, paramount chief*. Survivors were perceived by some, especially adult and elder community members, as lazy or useless because of a lack of those skills needed by the community. “They are only used to domestic work. Since we are mainly farmers here, we consider them negatively, as idlers serving no useful purpose in life.” – *FGD 28, adult and elder men*.

Related to having a negative view of survivors, respondents also expressed a fear that survivors who return to their communities will bring with them negative influences from trafficking (and big city) experiences. There was a notable tension between on the one hand expecting children and youth to leave the community

to access opportunities (wanting them to have the best life possible), but on the other hand, being concerned with potentially negative outcomes experienced by the child and community from living in a big city as well as from trafficking.

...the integration into the community will not be difficult because people always have their hands together as their children. So, coming back to the village, to the community where you were taken from, the people within the community had no problem with that and I think it is only your attitudes that will make them begin to think otherwise. Maybe when you were in the big city instead of trying to be nice or good boy you indulge yourself in a lot of gangsterism that will make the community frown at you when you are reintegrated, and you are trying to practice the same thin[g].

– KII 7, paramount chief

These findings connect with wider issues around economic development. As others have noted, the penetration of neoliberal economic forces (Devine et al 2021), and the resultant mobility and search for work elsewhere is a disruptive, sometimes risky, but ultimately essential strategy for young people trapped in agrarian poverty (Maconachie, 2017). Trafficking, or trafficked children then becomes a useful term to crystallise and communicate the perceived dangers of the city and increased mobility of young people into new forms of work from the perspective of rural communities.

Those children identified as being trafficked may be stigmatised and face prejudice when they return to their communities, with some respondents suggesting trafficking survivors may “lose control,” dropout of school, end up living on the streets, or negatively influence their peers. However, difficulties for those who had been trafficked in accessing schooling are more likely due to families' limited financial means, lack of an appropriate school facilities in their community, or because they had aged out of school eligibility. So while many respondents expressed concerns about the behaviors of trafficking survivors after they return, this was not supported by evidence or examples.

4.5 | Linking to social change: Children, gender, and human rights

Our findings show that conceptualisations of child trafficking and child labor in Sierra Leone are wrapped up in tensions between tradition versus modernity, present needs versus future needs, and rights versus responsibilities. Tensions with wider notions of human rights were manifested in discussions about changing

expectations for children and families as well as in the conversations about children and their responsibilities where there are different viewpoints about how to support both children's needs and well-being as well as family needs and well-being. Respondents described fears regarding social changes and shifts especially in terms of rights for children and women and the child's changing role in family life. The gendered nature of the moral positions adopted by stakeholders was notable, and these have implications for policymakers.

P14:...I blame the government because they have given child rights and women rights leaving out the fathers. We the fathers have no right, if my wife takes me to the police, I will be put in jail but they will not put the woman in jail.

– FGD 20, adult and elder men

Related to the idea that perhaps women and children have “too many rights,” there were concerns that children's rights may interfere with parental rights “over” children making it difficult to control children (especially when they know their rights).

I want to raise a point that is causing [child trafficking] to happen. Earlier I said it is poverty and the lack of understanding. Thirdly, it is the human right that has made this problem increase...the government asked us to send all our children to school...if you want to beat the child [due to misbehavior in school], the child will say if you touch me I will stab you, and if you take the child to the police, the police will say, Pa sit down there and the child will be looking at you. Human rights has made children to be wayward...

– FGD 14, adult and elder men

In contrast to the perspective that children have “too many rights,” which appeared to be an argument made more often by older adults and elders, young adult respondents (especially young adult women) reported feeling that young people were generally not treated well in community and that children, especially girls, “don't have saying in the family or community” and “lack of voice in decision making” – FGD 26, suggesting that young people may feel that their rights are unrealised.

P10: Most of the challenges faced by young people and children are, they don't have right to say ‘no’ to tradition and they are used to do hard labor by our people.”

– FGD 26, young women

As reported earlier, some respondents indicated that there was growing support for children's and women's rights; however, as indicated in the excerpts above, there was still an underlying sense of mistrust and concern with upholding women's and children's rights, especially among adult and elder men. Our evidence aligns with previous research on Sierra Leone that has identified how ideas about children and childhood, and the shifting balance between work and education, are central to the intergenerational social order (Devine, Bolotta, et al., 2021). For those who see this order as under threat from things such as universal compulsory education, trafficking emerges as evidence of chaos unleashed, a tension between the rights of children, and the needs of the family and community (Ibid. p275).

During group discussions there was also a sense that communities were being judged by outsiders who have determined that children have rights, which were perceived to be in conflict with community views about children's rights. There were also indications that community members may feel singled out or unfairly blamed for children experiencing trafficking from their communities, “we don't feel comfortable as we go round with fingers pointed at us that we are child traffickers.”

The transition toward formal education for children was described as a social change, pushed by outsiders such as government officials, NGOs (authority figures outside of the local community), and non-Sierra Leoneans (in one case outsiders were referred to as “white people”), which appears to value children's rights to a prosperous future (through a formal education) over children's responsibilities toward their family's prosperity now and in the future (through work).

Respondents expressed concerns that if formal education was emphasized, then the traditional ways of educating children through training (e.g., contributing to household work or working for the family) would be devalued. Community members not only described the right to food, housing, not to be maltreated, and to have an education but also to have training for living life (in the form of working) and taking up responsibilities in adulthood. Generally, the changing expectations for children to have a formal education and lessen their work responsibilities in the household was viewed with concern and mistrust by community members because of perceptions that human rights may be in conflict with traditional values.

“P6: There is no child responsibility, only child right all the time. That is not helping the situation. What they should be doing for their parents in return for all the struggles these parents undergo for them to be better persons tomorrow. The children should also assist the parents with those little, little work around the house.”

– FGD #4, adult and elder men

Collectively, these discussions suggest that the changing expectations for children around education are seen as directly in tension with those around work and responsibilities to the family, emphasising the challenge for policies which are based on children's individual rights.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

The anti-trafficking field is one where problems of implementation have been identified as significant, and blamed for the lack of concrete progress (McDonald, 2014). Partly in response to this, there have been calls in this area for more community-based programming that is more inclusive of local leadership, equitable partnership, and enables those with lived experience to have their voices heard. It is important that this engagement is meaningful and leads to things being done differently: Policy and programming must be sensitive to local context (Asquith et al., 2022).

This article provides an empirical contribution by documenting and mapping the context for anti-trafficking work in Sierra Leone. It showed how intersections between ideas about child work, child labor, and child trafficking operate, and how these connect not only with wider societal norms with regard to human rights, gender, and family, but also processes of reintegration, or marginalisation and stigma. These findings not only have significant implications for policymakers and practitioners in Sierra Leone, but also more widely in the international development community and in relation to global efforts to achieve the SDGs.

At the local and national level, there are lessons for the design and rollout of awareness-raising campaigns, and with regard to ensuring the appropriateness of policies designed to protect children. Community engagement is normally associated with a preventative strategy, and for such activities to be effective, they should have a flexible approach, avoid imposing terminology, and seek to take into account the local perspectives on the broader surrounding social and economic issues. Donors seeking to fund anti-trafficking work should include provision for preparatory engagement work with appropriate stakeholders and those directly affected to establish the linkages between trafficking and wider societal issues such as poverty and attitudes toward gender and childhood.

The lessons from the evidence presented here relate to the ways that child trafficking is discussed and framed. While impactful in terms of awareness-raising, the term “trafficking” or “trafficked” is associated with serious criminality, exploitation, and trauma.

These connotations (and sometimes the equation with “modern slavery”) are intentionally invoked by usage of the term in legal and policy frameworks, as part of international political agenda-setting (Quirk, 2011). The term serves a different purpose at the local level, acting as a sort of lightning rod for describing and highlighting social (dis)order and intergenerational tensions. However, for those directly affected this framing risks painting a hopeless picture, resulting in overly negative views, or “othering” child survivors. Policy, programming, and advocacy on trafficking should be aware of these issues when focusing on the harms and negative impacts and consider shifting the focus toward promoting more positive messages: of individual agency in overcoming situations of exploitation; of recovery and empowerment for children in seeking a better future for themselves and their families; and of strengths-based perspectives from survivors, acknowledging their resilience. An approach to anti-trafficking that is focused on prevention and is embedded in the wider priorities of child protection should incorporate understanding of the systematic and structural conditions which drive and sustain exploitation. This could shift the conversation toward the best ways to support children and youth generally, especially those who need to leave for work or education in the city and who may return, and away from fears that those who return are damaged and will not fulfill their potential.

At the international level, the epistemic gap between international legal concepts and local understandings in relation to child trafficking and the distinction with child labor, speaks to one of the key design problems of the SDGs. The SDGs were more comprehensive and participatory at the point of development (in contrast to the Millennium Goals) but as others have argued, they remain top-down and lacking in specifics, particularly with regard to the terminology and categories that are employed (Seryaes, 2021). The risk is that without an evidence-based approach that brings in local perspectives to policy and programming, international normative frameworks are poorly implemented in contexts where a nuanced approach may be more effective, based on a solid understanding about what is appropriate, or not appropriate, for furthering the best of interests of children and the communities in which they live.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors whose names are listed here certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organisation or entity with any financial or nonfinancial interests in the subject matter or materials discussed in this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Palermo Protocol (2000).

² As in the context of West Africa, there is no legal meaning of the term “modern slavery,” the focus throughout the article is on the terms “child labor” and “child trafficking”

³ SDG Goal 8.7: “Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labor in all its forms”

⁴ This program was exclusive to government and government-assisted schools.

⁵ The GoSL has made efforts to address some of these issues with the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Database System (IPPDS) and “Comprehensive and Harmonized National Teacher Policies” <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/National-Teachers-Policy-for-Sierra-Leone.pdf>

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