

Putting Childhood in Its Place: Rethinking popular discourses on the conceptualisation of child trafficking in Ghana

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Abstract

Popular discourses on child trafficking are generally characterised by unverifiable statistics, melodramatic representations, and emotional reactions. More so, notions of poverty, exploitation, and the protection of children from harm have driven educational and sensitisation campaigns that seek to address trafficking in children. The ensuing status quo blurs diverse cultural conceptions of childhood and its moral representations of acceptable and unacceptable labour. Drawing on qualitative data from a Ghanaian fishing community, this paper reviews the impoverished and hazardous representation of children's transportation to other fishing communities for work. It contends that the prevailing conceptualisation of child trafficking fails to account for the socio-cultural underpinnings of children's movement to other fishing communities for work. Consequently, this paper argues that it is important to situate popular discourses of child trafficking within fishing community's conceptualisation of childhood in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within those communities.

Keywords: childhood, child trafficking, child returnee, socio-cultural factors, legal framework, Ghana

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Introduction

Globally, the nature and status of children has received tremendous attention from the twentieth century onwards.¹ This is particularly evident in the unanimous support for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1990 and other parallel conventions mostly promulgated by the International Labour Organization (ILO).² This ensuing trend has led to the institutionalisation of a global model of childhood based on child rights and the abolition of worst forms of child labour (and child trafficking) in order to protect children from harm.³ Not surprisingly, state interventions within the sphere of childhoods have gained more prominence with the introduction of the aforementioned international legal frameworks.⁴ The renewed interest in the lives of children has been made possible by the contemporary description and representations of the spheres of childhoods, resulting in the creation of a typology of childhoods based on western ideals.⁵ This western bias is reinforced by the dominance of white (predominantly male) scholars in the theorisation of childhood and construction of children's rights.⁶

Consequently, what prevails is the *othering* of childhoods—the disregard for unique childhoods across different geographical spaces (for instance in Sub-Saharan Africa) and the focus on western childhoods as the ideal standard.⁷ Thus, all *other* forms of childhoods are secondary and should strive to meet the standards of *the new global model*. As a result, a much more comprehensive picture

¹ A James and A Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 3rd Edition, Routledge, New York, 2015.

² See, for example, ILO Convention No. 138 and Convention No. 182.

³ T C Nhenga, 'Application of the International Prohibition on Child Labour in an African Context: Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2008, retrieved 8 June 2019, https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/item/4601/thesis_law_2008_final_phd_thesis_tc_nhenga.pdf.

⁴ E Manful and E Cudjoe, 'Is Kinship Failing? Views on informal support by families in contact with social services in Ghana', *Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 23, issue 4, 2018, pp. 617–624, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12452>.

⁵ T Abebe and Y Ofosu-Kusi, 'Beyond Pluralizing African Childhoods', *Childhood*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2016, pp. 303–316, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568216649673>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1; K Hanson and N Peleg, 'Waiting for Children's Rights Theory', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 28, issue 1, 2020, pp. 15–35, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02801005>.

⁷ See, for example: S Balagopalan, *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, labour and schooling in postcolonial India*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014; A Twum-Danso, 'From the Singular to the Plural: Exploring diversities in contemporary childhoods in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Childhood*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2016, pp. 455–468, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568216648746>.

of African childhoods is often veiled,⁸ while African childhood experiences are largely belittled.⁹ This is particularly seen in the portrayal of African childhoods as realms of vulnerability and crisis,¹⁰ mostly exemplified by the statistics on high infant and child mortality, exploitation, child labour, physical and psychological abuse, street children, or trafficked children, among others.¹¹

This *othering* of childhoods has been followed by the promulgation of several international legal frameworks aimed at relieving children from vulnerabilities that may be detrimental to their growth and development. Needless to say, these global legal frameworks are etched in western cognitive categories about the distinction between childhood and adulthood. It follows the *romantic ideal* of childhood which seeks to restrict children from full societal participation as in the case of adults. For instance, children are considered out of place when transported to other places for work, and are better off growing up within their families.¹²

The UN Trafficking Protocol is one such international legal framework that has been ratified and transplanted into the legal frameworks of member states.¹³ For instance, Ghana enacted the *Human Trafficking Act*, 2005 (Act 694) to address human trafficking within, to, from, and through Ghana.¹⁴ The Act prohibits the transportation of children (persons under 18 years of age) from their communities of origin to other communities for economic activities. This prevailing prohibition—entirely influenced by the Trafficking Protocol¹⁵—is part

⁸ M Kesby, F Gwanzura-Ottmüller and M Chizororo, ‘Theorising *Other*, “Other Childhoods”: Issues emerging from work on HIV in urban and rural Zimbabwe’, *Children’s Geographies*, vol. 4, issue 2, 2006, pp. 185–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280600807039>; Twum-Danso, 2016.

⁹ Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹¹ Twum-Danso, 2016.

¹² M Bourdillon, D Levison, W Myers and B White (eds.), *Rights and Wrongs of Children Work*, Rutgers University Press, Middlesex County, New Jersey, 2010.

¹³ United States Department of State, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, Washington DC, 2017, retrieved 31 October 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2017>.

¹⁴ M Sertich and M Heemskerk in collaboration with the Enslavement Prevention Alliance – West Africa, ‘Ghana’s Human Trafficking Act: Successes and shortcomings in six years of implementation’, *Human Rights Brief*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2011, pp. 2-7, <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/vol19/iss1/1>.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly, *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2000.

of global efforts aimed at the universal construction of childhood. However, this universal construction of childhood is in direct contrast to the meaning and conception of childhoods in African societies.¹⁶ Thus, the representation of African childhoods as *crisis childhoods* is problematic and fails to adequately account for the diverse nature of childhoods across different locations.

Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi have argued that the portrayal of African childhoods as *crisis childhoods* is predicated on the hegemonic discourses that describe Africa as the *dark continent* bereft of technological, economic, and political development that characterises the *developed world*. Consequently, research and scholarship primarily focus on a uniform childhood framed after existential challenges that flatten children's varied experiences and render childhood as a sheer site of intervention.¹⁷ Nonetheless, extant studies on child trafficking have indicated that attempts to frame trafficking or child labour within western discourses of childhood sit uneasily with cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁸

This paper presents preliminary results of a pilot study conducted as part of a PhD research. The study departs from the *dark* portrayal of African childhoods that emphasise how Africa is *an unusual place* to instead explore the contextual conceptualisation of childhood and how it informs the understanding and description of child trafficking within a specific community. Moreover, the paper responds to the still relevant call by scholars of human trafficking to provide more systematic and empirical data on the phenomenon.¹⁹ We aim in this paper to contribute to the discourse of child trafficking and western-informed legal and policy responses at the regional and national level.

Child Trafficking in Ghana

Trafficking of children within Ghana is relatively more common than transnational trafficking,²⁰ although an ILO/IPEC study indicates that children are trafficked

¹⁶ See, for example: Nhenga, 2008; M J Kehily, *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*, 3rd Edition, Open University Press, Berkshire, 2015.

¹⁷ Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi.

¹⁸ N Howard, 'Teenage Labour Migration and Anti-Trafficking Policy in West Africa', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 653, issue 1, 2014, pp. 124–140, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716213519242>; S Okyere, "'Shock and Awe": A critique of the Ghana-centric child trafficking discourse', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 9, 2017, pp. 92–105, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121797>.

¹⁹ S X Zhang, 'Beyond the "Natasha" Story—A review and critique of current research on sex trafficking', *Global Crime*, vol. 10, issue 3, 2009, pp. 178–195, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440570903079899>.

²⁰ Sertich and Heemskerck.

to Ghana from neighbouring countries, too.²¹ Statistics on the phenomenon of child trafficking are provided by the government through the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international non-governmental organisations (IGOs). Figures provided by the GSS usually lump the incidence of child labour and child trafficking together. In 2003, for instance, the GSS indicated that between 1 and 1.4 million children were involved in child labour. The report identified specific cases of child trafficking and slavery, and suggested a qualitative assessment within communities to evaluate the extent of child trafficking.²² Additionally, an ILO/IPEC survey revealed that child trafficking is pervasive within fishing communities living along Lake Volta.²³ Similarly, a mixed methods research conducted by the International Justice Mission (IJM) on child trafficking in communities living along Lake Volta classified 57.6 per cent of the working children (444 out of 771) as trafficked.²⁴ The aforementioned research thus failed to indicate the number of children trafficked to the communities along Lake Volta, even though cases of child trafficking were identified.

Additionally, victims of child trafficking are often identified through a number of factors, including the lack of schooling, working conditions (long hours of work, and being assigned difficult, intense, or hazardous duties), and inappropriate clothing and shelter.²⁵ Child trafficking is generally perceived to be occurring in the agricultural sector (cotton, cashew, and cocoa farming), deep-water fishing, and artisanal or small-scale mining.²⁶

In reporting the factors that drive the incidence of child trafficking in Ghana, poverty remains the major cause. Left reports that children are sold for as little as USD 21,²⁷ and subjected to strenuous hours of work on a daily basis under

²¹ P A Kukwaw, *Analytical Study on Child Labor in Volta Lake Fishing in Ghana*, International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), Geneva, 2013.

²² GSS, 'Ghana Child Labour Survey', 2003, retrieved 15 January 2018, https://www.statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/glss6/GLSS6_Child%20Labour%20Report.pdf.

²³ Kukwaw.

²⁴ K Singleton, K B Stone and J Stricker, *Child Trafficking into Forced Labour on Lake Volta, Ghana: A mixed methods assessment*, International Justice Mission, October 2016, <https://www.ijm.org/documents/studies/ijm-ghana-report.pdf>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁶ J Einarsdóttir and H Boiro, 'The Palermo Protocol: Trafficking takes it all', *The Icelandic Review of Politics and Administration*, vol. 10, issue 2, 2014, pp. 385–396, <https://doi.org/10.13177/irpa.a.2014.10.2.10>.

²⁷ S Left, 'Sons for sale', *The Guardian*, 22 March 2007, retrieved 8 June 2019, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/mar/22/sarahleft>.

conditions of forced labour, physical abuse, and malnutrition.²⁸ Fosterage has been implicated as another causal factor in the trafficking of children.²⁹ Hashim has indicated that the traditional practice of fostering is progressively changing from its caring image into an exploitative route for confining children to hazardous labour.³⁰ This has consequential implications for defining the boundaries between trafficking and legitimate child placement or fostering³¹ and the potential weakening of genealogical ties given the abuse of fostering by traffickers.

Whilst the literature on child trafficking in Ghana provides a broader picture on the phenomenon, it is nevertheless fraught with several challenges and gaps. For instance, there is no specific agreement on the numerical estimation of trafficked children. Whilst the GSS estimates that there are 1.2 million children involved in hazardous labour, a comprehensive identification of trafficked children is not made in the report.³² Even when community-based surveys are conducted to determine the nature and scope of child trafficking, the quest to ascertain the numerical estimates typically leads to the erroneous conceptualisation of specific migration of children to other communities as trafficking.³³ Okyere avers that conventional Ghana-centric anti-child trafficking campaigns utilise melodramatic tactics in establishing the incidence of child trafficking, while charging local culture and traditions for the occurrence of the phenomenon.³⁴ Whilst we agree that poverty and fostering may act as a driver and facilitator of child trafficking, we nonetheless argue that the transportation of children to other communities should be understood within a specific historical and socio-cultural context in which children have contributed to the income of their households. Consequently, we aimed to explore the extent to which the

²⁸ L Agbenya, 'Child Labour Trafficking in the Lake Volta Fishery of Ghana: A case study of Ogetse in the Krachi West District of the Volta Region', Unpublished Master's Thesis, Norwegian College of Fishery Science, University of Tromsø, 2009, retrieved 8 June 2017, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7f31/ce58c8d0734de7be4dd59c849130f2735a9b.pdf>.

²⁹ See, for example: UNICEF, 'Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children', UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy, 2005; I Hashim, 'The Positives and Negatives of Children Independent Migration: Assessing the evidence and the debates', Working paper T16, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, UK, September 2006, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08c4640f0b652dd001214/WP-T16.pdf>; Sertich and Heemskerck.

³⁰ Hashim, 2006.

³¹ UNICEF, 2005; Einarsdóttir and Boiro.

³² GLSS, 'Ghana Living Standard Survey (Round 6): Child Labour Report', August 2014, <http://www.ilo.org/ipecinfo/product/download.do?type=document&id=25515>.

³³ Kukwaw; Singleton, Stone and Stricker.

³⁴ Okyere.

conceptualisation of childhood informs the conceptualisation of child trafficking within a fishing community in Ghana.

Research Methods

Research Design

This paper is based on an exploratory qualitative pilot study that utilised the basic qualitative research design. This research design entails a general and simple framework that allows for flexibility in respect of time and methods. It aims to construct meaning and interpret the world of the study participants.³⁵ Thus, the study was fundamentally interested in (i) how individuals interpret their experiences, (ii) how they construct their worlds, and (iii) what meaning they assign to their experiences.³⁶ Given that the study entailed a pilot exploration of a fishing community's conceptualisation of childhood and trafficking, the choice of this research design was appropriate.

Study Area and Setting

The study was conducted in selected fishing suburbs of Winneba in the Central Region of Ghana. Winneba is the district capital of the Effutu Municipality, one of the Central Region's twenty districts. It is the only urban settlement in the municipality, with a population of 40,017 people, making up 58 per cent of the district's population.³⁷

The major source of livelihood is craft and related trading activities (31.4 per cent of the working population in this area), while 16.1 per cent are engaged in agriculture, forestry, and the indigenous fishing industry. The fishing season lasts only for a very limited period in the year—mainly from August to September.³⁸ It is usual to see children playing along the beaches and interacting with the fishermen who are mostly their own parents, relatives, and acquaintances. Other activities undertaken by children along the beaches include pulling and

³⁵ S B Merriam and E J Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A guide to design and implementation*, 4th Edition, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., San Francisco, August 2015.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ GSS, *2010 Population and Housing Census: Summary report of final results*, Accra, May 2012.

³⁸ C Sefa-Nyarko, *Ten Years On: Impact evaluation of programmes and activities of Challenging Heights in Ghana*, Participatory Development Associates Ltd., 23 November 2016, <https://challengingheights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Challenging-Heights-Impact-Evaluation.pdf>.

maintenance of nets, and swimming in the shallow waters for leisure.³⁹ This builds the competence of children for specific roles within the indigenous fishing industry, making them attractive assistants for fishermen on Lake Volta. In several research reports, the municipality has been cited as a *source community* for the trafficking of children to settlements (Yeji in particular) along Lake Volta.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the selection of the municipality as the site for the pilot study was justified.

Research Participants and Eligibility Criteria

The study utilised the non-probability sampling technique, particularly, purposive and snowballing sampling, in recruiting participants from the research setting. Given the study's focus on the constructed realities of research participants, the researchers purposively selected participants who have stayed within the research setting for at least five years (adult participants), while children who have returned (child returnees) to the study community after living and working with fishermen along Lake Volta were selected utilising a snowballing technique. The adult participants were biological parents and guardians of child returnees. In addition, the study engaged key informants (a traditional leader, an NGO worker, and a Community Child Protection Member, CCPC) who had stayed in the community for at least five years. In line with Ghana's *Children's Act*, 1998 (Act 560), individuals who were below 18 years of age were selected as children participants. In all, the pilot study engaged 14 research participants (five parents, six children, and three key informants).

Data Collection

The qualitative study design generally collects data through interviews, observations, documentary analysis, or a combination of these.⁴¹ Interviews were conducted with the aid of a semi-structured interview guide. Interview questions were based on the objectives of the PhD research. Access to the field was obtained through the help of a gatekeeper (community volunteer) who assisted in the selection of the research participants. Some of the issues discussed included the definition of a child, community perspectives on childhood, and the conceptualisation of children's transportation to other communities for fishing. Interviews were conducted at the homes/work places of the research participants. The interview sessions lasted for an average of 35 minutes, and were conducted in Fante (the common local dialect) and audio-recorded with

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁴⁰ Singleton, Stone and Stricker; Kukwaw; Sefa-Nyarko.

⁴¹ Merriam and Tisdell.

the consent of the research participants. Data collection concluded on the fourteenth interview, when the researchers discovered that no new information was reported; accordingly, data saturation was adjudged to have been attained.⁴²

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data in the basic qualitative research design involves identifying recurring patterns that describe the data. Largely, the interpretation of the data represents the researchers' understanding of the participants' perception of the phenomenon of interest.⁴³ Audio-recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The researchers listened to the audio recordings and translated them from Fante into English. Additionally, the researchers conducted a quality check to ensure that the transcribed data reflected the audio recordings. Following the quality checks, the first author read through the transcribed data to identify the pattern of responses. Similar codes were assigned to familiar ideas and responses such as 'teenage', 'physicality', and 'morals'. The codes were grouped into categories, which were then collated into initial themes and further refined to reflect the research objectives. For instance, codes such as 'teenage' and 'pre-teen' were combined into the theme 'age definition'. The interview data was managed manually.

Ethical Issues

The researchers respected the rights of the respondents and ensured that informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. With respect to child participants, consent was obtained from their parents or guardians before the interviews. Additionally, the status of research participants ('child' or 'parent') and pseudonym (Kojo or Akosua) were used to ensure confidentiality in the reporting of the research results.

Reliability and Validity

The study followed best practices of social research in ensuring reliability (consistency) and relevance (validity) of the data collection tools used. The study utilised a uniform semi-structured interview guide in the collection of qualitative data during the conduct of the interviews. The first author conducted the interviews, which ensured a uniform collection of data across the various research participants. Additionally, the researchers shared emerging themes with selected CCPC members and NGO officers in order to obtain useful feedback about the results and ensure the study's trustworthiness.

⁴² A Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th Edition, Oxford University Press Inc, New York, March 2012.

⁴³ Merriam and Tisdell.

Findings

Conceptualisation of a Child

The definition of children within specific contexts informs the scope and nature of their socialisation process. Accordingly, this preliminary study explored the definition of children among fishing community members. The question of ‘who a child is’ evoked three different themes: ‘age definition’, ‘moral definition’, and ‘bodily definition’, respectively. The themes are discussed below.

Age Definition of Children

The definition of children by specific age categories emerged as the dominant theme among study participants’ conceptualisation of children. This entailed the situation of children within specific age categories. Specifically, most of the study participants in this category defined children as persons who have not yet attained 13 years of age, with a few others indicating that children are individuals who are yet to attain the age of 12. A study participant described a child as follows:

I believe that at 13 years of age one ceases to be a child, and that children are mostly persons who have just been born. (Ama, mother)

Similarly, a CCPC member indicated that once an individual attains 13 years of age, they are no longer considered a child:

I believe that one ceases to be a child when the person turns 13 years old. Generally, when an individual attains 13 years of age, they are not considered as a child anymore within this community. (Kofi, CCPC)

Whilst the thirteen-year benchmark remained the most attested age category, one of the research participants indicated that childhood ceases at 12 years, as individuals who have attained 12 years are capable of working:

When a person attains the age of 12, they have crossed the stage of childhood. In this community, even children as little as nine years are seen at the seashore working. (Akosua, mother)

When further probes were made with respect to children’s economic activity, study participants indicated that when individuals attain 13 years of age, they are considered capable of undertaking work within or outside the community:

Some of the children (13-year-olds) within the community work without going to school, so it is not abnormal when they are taken to Yeji to stay and work with fishermen. (Kojo, child returnee)

These quotations are indicative of how children are conceptualised within the study community. Evidently, the conceptualisation of children as under-13-year-olds by most of the study participants represents a major divergence from the definition of children provided in the UNCRC and Ghana's *Children's Act*, 1998 and the *Human Trafficking Act*, 2005, which all define children as persons below 18 years of age. More so, the personality of a *child* was aligned to specific incapacities such as the inability to work or undertake specific economic activities. Accordingly, once an individual's *body* had attained a specific number of years (in this case at least 13 years), they were adjudged to be fully capable of work, thus crossing over to the realm of adulthood with respect to work.

Moral Definition of Children

Another significant theme that emerged from the data analysis is the moral definition of children. This perspective was held by child returnees and their biological parents. Specifically, study participants indicated that children are persons who cannot differentiate between right and wrong behaviours and are mostly incapable of taking care of themselves. One of the child returnees explained as follows:

A child is someone who cannot differentiate between good and bad behaviour. I believe that if one attains 13 years of age, one can differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. (Kofi, child returnee)

Additionally, one of the parents included the concept of vulnerability in the definition of children. Specifically, he indicated that children are vulnerable and incapable of providing adequate care for themselves:

A child is anyone who cannot decide between what is right and wrong, and mostly cannot take care of themselves. (Kojo, parent)

Furthermore, moral maturation was aligned to specific capabilities such as the ability to take care of oneself or live independently with little or no supervision from an adult. Consequently, such persons may sometimes be transported to other fishing communities to assist fishermen. One of the child returnees explained:

Children are taken at a very young age to Yeji to live with fishermen and help them in the trade of fishing. I was transported to Yeji to live and work there as a fishing assistant when I attained 13 years of age because my parents said I was mature. (Kvame, child returnee)

It appears that the definition of children significantly informed their lived experiences within the study community, as 13-year-olds are transported to other communities for work (in this case fishing). For children within the study community, work within the local fishing industry starts at a young age

(10 years) with diverse responsibilities, including the pulling and mending of nets and canoe pushing. Consequently, when such children attain the age of 13, they are considered mature for work in fishing. This is indicative of how the conceptualisation of childhood may inform a specific practice (the transportation of children to other fishing communities in Ghana for work) that is summarily described as trafficking within Ghanaian legal frameworks.

Bodily Definition of Children

Whilst the bodily definition of children registered as the least articulated perspective among the study participants, it nonetheless represented another unique description of children within the fishing communities studied. This definition related to the development of physical characteristics of adults and children, respectively. Specifically, once individuals develop bodily statures akin to those of adults, they are no longer deemed to be children. This definition was provided by children who had returned to the community after living and working with fishermen along Lake Volta. Child returnees indicated:

Children from 10 years of age onwards are expected to work in this community and on Lake Volta, especially when they develop muscular bodily features like adults. They are considered as grown-ups who have passed the stage of childhood. (Kofi, child returnee)

Similarly, one of the child returnees compared the community's perspective of children to the legal definition provided in Ghanaian legal frameworks:

I have been taught that the law says a child is someone who has not attained 18 years of age, but in this community and Yeji, when one develops bodily and physical features, they may start to work from 10 years of age and is mostly not regarded as a child in that sense. They believe you are capable of working. (Kvame, child returnee)

For child returnees, the development of an adult-like body offered reasonable grounds to be considered as persons who have moved from childhood into adulthood. Similarly, this definition related to specific capabilities such as the ability to engage in work like fishing, or enrolment in apprenticeship training which could bring economic benefits to the individual. This description of a child, too, represents a departure from the legal definition in Ghana of a child as someone under 18.

These themes provided an insight into community perspectives on the definition of a 'child', which differed considerably from the UNCRC, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), and the *Children's Act* of Ghana. In what follows, we delve into the implications that these local community definitions have for the conceptualisation of child trafficking within the study community.

Conceptualisation of Children's Transportation to Fishing Communities for Work

In this sub-section, the study explored the conceptualisation of children's movement to other communities (in this case Yeji) for fishing. Three major themes emerged from the data analysis: 'work socialisation', 'assistance to kin', and 'sold as commodities'. Detailed descriptions of the various conceptualisations are presented below.

Work Socialisation

The majority of the study participants conceptualised children's transportation to other communities for fishing as a form of work socialisation. Basically, study participants described the practice as an old phenomenon that has served as a route through which individuals are trained for the indigenous fishing sector. Consequently, the phenomenon was not regarded as criminal by community members even though it has been criminalised with the enactment of the *Human Trafficking Act*. The views of study participants have been presented below:

Most of the adult males in the community have worked in fishing in the past, even if they have stopped, so they see this as a way of training. They call the phenomenon "ntetee" (training) in Fante. So they see this as normal, and they give the children to their aunts or relatives, who subsequently hand them over to fishermen who work on the Volta Lake. (Albert, NGO officer)

Similarly, one of the child returnees indicated that most fishermen had gone through the same form of training; consequently, they did not consider the practice as unlawful but a form of training that could benefit them to attain an economically independent adult life.

Most of the fishermen were trained like this. They were taken to Lake Volta in their early years as children and stayed with other fisherman till they were old and started their own vocation. So, they learnt the art and way of fishing through the same mode; consequently, the practice is not considered as illegal. (Kofi, child returnee)

This was affirmed by another child returnee who shared his experience while living and working with a fisherman in Yeji:

I know that my master was trained like this because he was also taken to Yeji at a very early age to stay with another fisherman. So the practice is not regarded as unlawful within Yeji. (Kwame, child returnee)

Additionally, one of the study participants indicated that parents and guardians mostly believe that children are leaving for other communities for work and not necessarily for exploitative purposes. The mother of one of the child returnees

explained as follows:

In this community, children who are transported to Yeji by their parents or guardians are regarded as working children and not as sold. They are taken to Yeji to live and work with fishermen. (Ama, parent)

These quotes are indicative of the way community members conceptualise children's transportation to other fishing communities for work. Specifically, they see it as based on the norms and cultural practices that have characterised children's involvement in fishing. Consequently, community members had not yet come to terms with the criminalisation of the phenomenon.

Assistance to Kin

Apart from work socialisation, a significant number of study participants indicated that children leave to other fishing communities to assist extended family relations (uncles and grandparents) in their fishing vocation. Accordingly, they argued that it is erroneous to label all cases of children's movement to other fishing communities as cases of trafficking. They indicated that children's movement from the fishing suburbs of Winneba to Yeji to assist their kin in fishing is an old practice that has thrived over the years. One of the parents of the child returnees explained:

I don't agree that I sold my child because I sent him to stay with my brother so he can assist him in his fishing work for some time, so I don't agree I have committed any offence at all because at 15 years he can work. (Akosua, mother)

Similarly, another study participant indicated that her (14-year-old) child's deviant behaviour informed her decision to take him to her brother in Yeji:

My child was sleeping at the beach among the fishermen, and he was not coming home most of the time, so I took him to my brother in Yeji who is a fisherman. So he stayed with his uncle and assisted him till the NGO brought him back. He was 14 years old before he left for Yeji. (Ama, mother)

One of the child participants affirmed that he was transported to Yeji to live with his father's brother after he had requested him from his father:

Money was not paid to my parents before I was taken to Yeji, so I went with my uncle after my father agreed for me to join him. I don't think I was sold but I was working every day without schooling. (Kwesi, child returnee)

It is evident from the interviews that children are occasionally transported to other fishing communities to assist extended family when a request is made for them.

While the involvement of kin does not immunise children from exploitation or trafficking, study participants did not consider the practice as trafficking since money was not paid to induce the movement of children. It is also probable that they considered children safe with extended family members as their biological parents have access to them and can monitor their development. The extended family is conceptualised in these communities as a basic unit for nurturing and caring for the child; consequently, children are not considered as exploited when they live with and assist other family members in their fishing vocation.

Sold as Commodities

Whilst this was the least attested theme, it registered as another conceptualisation of children's transportation to other fishing communities for work. Some child participants indicated that their parents received money when they were transported to other fishing communities for work, leading to the description of such children as commodities. One child said:

For me, I think it is a bad practice for those cases that involve money because I consider the children involved as sold. However, there are others who join a family member or relative and I don't think those cases are trafficking. (Nenyin, child returnee)

Another indicated that he was sold because he was treated like a commodity:

I believe I was sold when I was taken to Yeji because I was treated like a commodity by my father's friend. I was not going to school and I was working all day. (Kojo, child returnee)

Evidently, some child returnees indicated that children's transportation to other communities for fishing was in some instances facilitated by the payment of an initial amount, and they considered such children as victims of exploitation as per the *Human Trafficking Act*. More so, children who were placed with fishermen who were not their relatives reported issues of abuses and maltreatment during the field work. Consequently, their conceptualisation of the practice ('sold as commodities') aligned with the definition of the phenomenon as child trafficking.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed varied conceptualisations of childhood based on age, body, and morality. This reflects the argument that childhood is a variable concept and differs across specific locations.⁴⁴ Impliedly, it is problematic to ascribe a universal definition of children as persons below 18 years of age

⁴⁴ Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi; Twum-Danso, 2016.

to all Ghanaian societies since their conceptualisation of childhood may differ significantly from the typology of childhood prescribed within Ghana's *Human Trafficking Act*. Put differently, whilst the local definition of children is based on their ability to utilise their bodies to undertake economic activities (in this case fishing), the legal definition has simply been transposed from the UNCRC, ACRWC, and their implicit Western ideal of childhood.⁴⁵ Consequently, it fails to take into account children's own desires and their rights to work as it pertains to the fishing community in this study.

Childhood is diversely conceptualised within some legal frameworks in Ghana. For instance, whilst the minimum age for sexual consent is 16 years of age, the acceptable age for marriage is 18 years.⁴⁶ This shows that it is possible to conceptualise childhood more flexibly depending on context. The normative practice of development practitioners applying standard minimum age criteria to childhood, whether it be a mandatory threshold for paid work or, in this case, children's movement to other communities for economic activity,⁴⁷ is problematic given that the norms and values that characterise childhood within specific communities may differ considerably. As it stands, the standardised construction of childhood ignores specific socio-cultural notions of childhood that inform the phenomenon of trafficking in children. Not surprisingly, Clark-Kazak has called for the consideration of *social age* by development practitioners engaged in child rights programmes and interventions.⁴⁸

This pilot study also revealed mixed perspectives on the conceptualisation of children's transportation to other communities for fishing. Whilst the practice is clearly identified by anti-trafficking stakeholders as a form of trafficking under the *Human Trafficking Act*, and to such a degree that over half of the working children in these communities are considered to be trafficked,⁴⁹ community members generally did not view it as such since adolescents (13-to-17-year-olds) are not regarded as children in terms of work (fishing). These findings are similar to Howard's, which indicated that community members in Southern Benin regarded the transnational movement of under-18-year-olds to Abeokuta (Nigeria) for mining as a normal practice that allows adolescents to demonstrate their capability

⁴⁵ Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi.

⁴⁶ A Twum-Danso and R Ame (eds.), *Childhoods at the Intersection of the Local and Global*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012.

⁴⁷ See, for example: Bourdillon *et al.*; R Huijsmans, 'Child Migration and Questions of Agency', *Development and Change*, vol. 42, issue 5, 2011, pp. 1307–1321, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2011.01729.x>; Howard, 2014.

⁴⁸ C R Clark-Kazak, 'Towards a Working Definition and Application of Social Age in International Development Studies', *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 45, issue 8, pp. 1307–1324, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220380902862952>.

⁴⁹ Singleton, Stone and Stricker.

as able members of their families.⁵⁰ This is indicative of the apparent conflict between the values regarding childhood within the study community and the provisions of international legal standards (UNCRC, ACRWC, and the Trafficking Protocol) adopted in Ghana. While international child rights legislation and western scholarly construction of childhood portrays children's lives within the study community as *other* and *lesser* childhoods, community members contested this *othering* by emphasising that in their communities' knowledge systems, these children were, rather, conforming to tradition. They were, thus, not different from the norm. Unsurprisingly, Ghana's *Human Trafficking Act* has remained ineffective in respect to arrests and prosecutions in fishing communities.⁵¹

Nevertheless, it is significant to note that some of the study participants aligned to the international legal standards on children's rights as they argued that such children had been sold like commodities. This conceptualisation can be attributed to the effects of anti-trafficking campaigns and activities by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within the study community. Studies have indicated that anti-trafficking policy is characterised by NGO intervention within specific communities designated as trafficking endemic.⁵² Still, we argue that the designation of children's mobility for fishing as child trafficking is an imposition that does not sit well within the socio-cultural norms of the study community.

Additionally, whilst studies have indicated that the practice of sending children to other fishing communities for work (whether by kinship arrangements or not) may be detrimental to their wellbeing (particularly, health and schooling),⁵³ the research community's construction of the hazardous nature of fishing was based on the number of accidents or injuries that occur to children who work in fishing. Given that engagement with fishing activities starts at a very young age, acculturation to fishing may be attained during the period of adolescence. Thus, once adolescents are able to safely engage in fishing activities with little or no assistance from adults, they are not considered as children in that regard, leading to a different conceptualisation of the phenomenon by local people; the work is not perceived as 'hazardous' and thus, not as exploitative, under the above conditions. Moreover, children are considered capable members of their families within fishing communities and required to contribute economically to their

⁵⁰ N Howard, *Child Trafficking, Youth and Labour Mobility and the Politics of Protection*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017.

⁵¹ See for example BN Lawrance, 'From Child Labour Problem to Human Trafficking Crisis', *International Labor and Working Class History*, vol. 78, issue 1, 2010, pp. 63–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000128>; Sertich and Heemskerck.

⁵² Howard, 2014; Howard, 2017; Lawrance.

⁵³ Singleton, Stone and Stricker; Kukwaw; Sefa-Nyarko.

families.⁵⁴ Twum-Danso asserts that the responsibilities of children in this regard are intergenerational and evokes Article 31 of the ACRWC, which declares that every child has a responsibility towards their family⁵⁵ and may occasionally leave their communities for work elsewhere. Thus, childhoods in Africa are not fixed spatially and the problematisation of children's economic mobility is erroneous.⁵⁶ Clearly, the legal and policy framework on children's involvement in fishing in Ghana lacks adequate insight into the local context within which children's lives and their mobility for work in fishing coincide in their communities.

In summary, this study has challenged the taken-for-granted conceptualisation of childhood and the problematisation of children's mobility for fishing in Ghana. These conceptualisations are indicative of the exclusionary nature of child rights laws in Ghana, which do not reflect significant socio-cultural values on childhood and child-rearing within specific communities. Consequently, it is important to situate child trafficking in fishing communities within the contextual understanding of childhood. Practically, this calls for the consideration of a *social* age category within existing child rights laws in Ghana by way of legal reforms. This will have specific implications for anti-trafficking policy as the focus of interventions will shift from an abolitionist agenda to a protectionist one that reduces the risk of harm for children rather than removing them completely from specific economic activities (such as fishing), as has been the normal practice. Besides integrating the local conceptualisations and understandings of what children can and cannot do in to legal frameworks—improving the extent to which trafficking laws are experienced as legitimate by local communities—this would also minimise child exploitation and enhance the sustenance of indigenous industries in Ghana, such as fishing, on which so many communities depend.

⁵⁴ E T Sackey and B O Johannesen, 'Earning Identity Through Work: A study of children involved in fishing and farming practices in Cape Coast, Ghana', *Childhood*, vol. 22, issue 4, 2015, pp. 447–459, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568214566079>.

⁵⁵ A Twum-Danso, 'Reciprocity, Respect and Responsibility: The 3 Rs underlying parent-child relationships in Ghana and the implications for children's rights', *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 17, issue 3, 2009, pp. 415–432, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157181809X430337>.

⁵⁶ Huijsmans; see also J Boyden and N Howard, 'Why Does Child Trafficking Policy Need to Be Reformed? The moral economy of children's movement in Benin and Ethiopia', *Children's Geographies*, vol. 11, issue 3, 2013, pp. 354–368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.817661>.

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