

SIERRA LEONE



NEW RESEARCH ON CHILD TRAFFICKING & CHILD LABOUR IN KAILAHUN, KENEMA, AND KONO: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

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Helen Bryant, Dr. Alex Balch, Dr. Anna Cody, and Dr. Hui Yi



UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA



UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL



BACKGROUND

A major child trafficking baseline study conducted by APRIES and its partners in 2020 provides new evidence on the nature of the child trafficking problem in Sierra Leone and insights into service and policy gaps. It includes an estimate of the prevalence of child trafficking in Eastern Province “hotspots”—Kailahun, Kenema, and Kono.

The data used in support of the following recommendations was collected through household surveys, targeted interviews with key stakeholders, and focus groups. This policy brief outlines key findings from this research and makes recommendations for addressing local forms of child trafficking and child labor injustices.

The African Programming & Research Initiative to End Slavery (APRIES) at the University of Georgia’s Center on Human Trafficking Research & Outreach (CenHTRO) is an international consortium of anti-slavery researchers, practice and policy specialists, and staff from the University of Georgia, the University of Liverpool, and various partners in Guinea, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

Through funding by the US Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP Office), our goal is to reduce the prevalence of modern slavery in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) by transforming the capacity of community-engaged agencies to implement prevention, prosecution, and protection strategies.

We use data that identifies service and policy gaps of trafficked children to inform collaboration with local implementation partners with the goal of measurably reducing the prevalence of child trafficking. This report pulls on data produced through a baseline mixed-methods, community-based research study conducted in Sierra Leone by APRIES in partnership with continent-based research partners ResilientAfrica Network and Conflict Management and Development Associates between 2019–2020.

This policy brief is a collaboration between APRIES and the University of Liverpool Policy CoLab. Its authors are Dr. Alex Balch and Helen Bryant from the University of Liverpool and Dr. Anna Cody and Dr. Hui Yi from the University of Georgia. They wish to acknowledge the insight and support of Dr. Claire Bolton, Dr. Tamora Callands, Dr. Jody Clay-Warner, Umaru Fofanah, André Gallant, and Dr. David Okech.

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A full version of the Sierra Leone Baseline Report is available.



RESEARCH SUMMARY

NEW PREVALENCE ESTIMATES FOR EASTERN PROVINCE, SIERRA LEONE

The rate of child trafficking in 2019–2020, based on a household survey, was estimated to be 33% overall in the Eastern Province. In the three hotspot districts, 45.7% of children in Kono, 32.9% of children in Kailahun, and 26.6% of children in Kenema were estimated to have experienced trafficking. The rate of child labor in 2019–2020, based on the household survey, was estimated to be 44.6% in the Eastern Province. Our data indicates that 52% of the children aged five to seventeen in Kono, 41.4% in Kailahun, and 35% in Kenema perform work that is classified as child labor. Overall, child trafficking is strongly condemned by community members in the study. However, child labor was generally viewed less negatively by respondents, as children were expected to perform many domestic duties which aligned with gendered and age-specific expectations and work scheduled around school hours was considered acceptable.

Children between the ages of twelve and seventeen, children who have lost one or both parents, and children who are not enrolled in school were found to experience a comparatively higher risk of trafficking and labor exploitation and thus represent particularly vulnerable populations. Although both male and female children may be at relatively equal risk of experiencing trafficking, the circumstances which result in trafficking or increase trafficking vulnerability may differ depending on a child's gender role as determined within their traditions. Results from the household survey indicate that male and female children are likely to experience trafficking at relatively the same rate. Overall, there were slightly more male children experiencing trafficking than female children, with an overall odds ratio of 1.14 across the three regions. However, some participant survivors in the qualitative interviews perceived gender-based violence and gender norms expectations they experienced as key factors in causing their trafficking experience. Additionally, participant groups considered other risk factors, including poverty and lack of access to education. Key informants, including government stakeholders, reported challenges faced by parents, demand for cheap labor, corruption, and criminality as key causes for child trafficking. Key factors reported by survivors, parents of survivors and community members included bereavement, gender norms expectations, and gender-based violence.

The most common situation of child trafficking described by survivors and parents involved the relocation of children away from that child's biological family with the promise to send the child to school. This arrangement results in an informal fostering system referred to as menpikin. Survivors reported they were often placed in a menpikin arrangement without their knowledge or consent and that their parents or guardians did not often communicate or check on their well-being while they were living as a menpikin. In interviews, survivors and their parents reported that these situations sometimes led to domestic work and street vending. Some participants also reported experiences with hazardous work, forced begging and criminality, commercial sex, and sexual exploitation.

Across the target region, 19.2% of child trafficking victims reported experiencing exploitation involving force, fraud, or coercion. This includes instances of violence, abusive relationships, isolation, denial of basic needs, and psychological manipulation used by traffickers in order to maintain them in the situation of exploitation¹.

¹Portering, Fishing, Mining and Construction were found to be the most prevalent labor sectors for child trafficking in sampled households for all three hot spot areas. Commercial sex and manufacturing were found to be the least prevalent labor sectors for child trafficking among the households surveyed.

**CHILD
TRAFFICKING
RATES**

**46%
KONO**

**33%
KAILAHUN**

**27%
KENEMA**

Survivors commonly reported leaving or escaping the trafficking situation by getting help from family. Some survivors also reported getting help from strangers, neighbors and friends, or leaving on their own. Very few survivors indicated they received help to escape from authorities (such as law enforcement). Our data shows survivors can often not get help or redress from formal or informal systems of justice (state level authorities or local customary authorities) until after the trafficking experience has ended. Survivors reported unaddressed needs post-trafficking, which put them at risk and increased their vulnerability to re-trafficking or exploitation. Medical support, support for psychological trauma, and access to education and vocational training have all been identified by survivors and parents as some of the needs and challenges post-trafficking. Study participants who had engaged in criminal activity, commercial sex, or experienced sexual abuse reported facing stigmatization from family members and the community during reintegration.

As part of this study, APRIES conducted an analysis of policy and service gaps through discussions with key informants. This highlighted a tendency to rely on awareness raising campaigns, which were viewed to be less effective due to a lack of sustainable and coordinated enforcement structures. Participants also reported a lack of collaboration and partnership, especially between local customary authorities and state level authorities. Key informants indicate that NGOs who carry out much of the protection work may not have the capacity to address child trafficking comprehensively and sustainably. Participants also reported that community-based structures already in place, such as child welfare committees, are ineffective. Despite this, there is an overwhelming suggestion that community structures, including secret societies and committees, need to be included as part of a collaborative approach to both protect survivors and at-risk children.

Though there are weaknesses in prevention and protection services, prosecution was identified as one of the most challenging areas in anti-trafficking efforts in Sierra Leone. Reports from key informants and community members during our focus groups indicate a lack of collaboration and trust between local (such as paramount chiefs) and governmental authorities. This results in an uncoordinated response to child trafficking, difficulty in reporting incidents of child trafficking, and disruptions and delays in prosecution of traffickers (due to low capacity and resources in the judicial system). Key informants described four areas which they view as impacting effectiveness of prosecutions: minimal punishment enforcement for traffickers, inconsistent enforcement of the law between local communities, families seeing no benefit from engaging in the prosecution process, and a culture of silence which impacts reporting of child trafficking.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, our study indicates that a high proportion of children in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone are likely to experience child trafficking or be engaged in risky (or worst forms of) child labor prior to their eighteenth birthday.

The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), NGOs, community members, and advocacy groups have taken critical steps towards addressing trafficking. Notable and significant legislation has been passed (such as the Anti-Human Trafficking Act 2005) and programs such as the Free Quality School Education Program (FQSE) have improved children's access to schooling.

Additionally, initiatives such as the Hand's Off Our Girls Campaign² have begun the difficult work of breaking the culture of silence around gender-based violence, doing so by sparking community conversation and initiatives to end sexual violence against children and women. But our research suggests that much more could be done to improve the effectiveness of these actions and wider responses to child trafficking.

Building from our study findings, we recommend that policy makers, government agents, community leaders, the justice sector, religious leaders, community members, survivors and parents collaboratively consider enhancing policies and services in the following priority areas:

Effective enforcement of current anti-trafficking laws.

Break the culture of silence that stops survivors from getting support, prevents prosecutions of suspected traffickers.

Access to justice services for victims and their families.

Sustainability of locally based anti-trafficking programs through collaboration.

²<https://statehouse.gov.sl/sierra-leones-first-lady-takes-hands-off-our-girls-campaign-to-the-united-nations/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Include children at risk of trafficking in relevant education policy initiatives. Those who have lost one or more parents or are living away from biological parents should be included in the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education’s (MBSSE) National Policy of Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021).**

This 2021 policy³ sets out provisions to increase justice and equity in peoples’ lives by creating an educational environment that supports marginalized groups in formal education, but it does not currently cover children whose access to education is jeopardized by having lost one or more parents or who are living away from biological parents. Our findings indicate that children at risk of experiencing trafficking may be disconnected from their families. The results of our research also overwhelmingly point child trafficking risks driven in part by a lack of accessible, local schooling, as well as a lack of financial resources for families to purchase basic school supplies. Therefore, including these groups of at-risk children into this policy would help prevent trafficking.

- 2 Expand adult education and vocational training through Community Education Centres in rural areas for young adults who may have been denied an education due to trafficking and have since aged out of school eligibility.**

Survivors in our study indicate they were unable to attend school, post-trafficking, leaving them potentially at increased vulnerability to re-trafficking. We recommend MBSSE consider increasing development and access to educational opportunities for survivors of trafficking, especially those who have aged out of eligibility for traditional schooling. Survivors interviewed for our study indicate they would welcome increased vocational programs and opportunities, especially in their home communities. Survivors report continuing to struggle post-trafficking and indicate that vocational programs may support them in building independence and decrease their re-trafficking risk. Community members echo survivors’ perspectives and indicate that more vocational programs in their local communities would reduce trafficking. Programs would benefit from co-development with survivors in local areas to assess education and skills gaps and ensure uptake. NGOs and local child welfare committees could hire survivors and parents as peer supporters. This could strengthen services by making survivors’ perspectives central to programming, as well as provide survivors with a vocational opportunity. It could also allow local communities to develop a sustainable network of support which could reduce re-trafficking or further exploitation of children.

CHILD
LABOUR
RATES

52%
KONO

35%
KAILAHUN

29%
KENEMA

³<https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>

3 Improve safeguards for children in informal fostering care.

We recommend community leaders, government officials from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), and agency staff collaboratively build a record-keeping system for children who are living in menpikin arrangements in order to support efforts to ensure their safety and well-being. We also recommend that parents who feel they must send their child to live in a menpikin placement be encouraged to maintain direct contact with their children while they are living away, to check on them regularly, and to seek help if their child is not being properly treated. In addition, appropriate and targeted awareness-raising for community members could encourage the reporting of child abuse and child trafficking to authorities.

4 Encourage and foster a culture of support for reintegration of survivors.

Interviews with key informants and community members reveal many child services, especially those directly serving child trafficking victims and survivors, are under resourced and understaffed. Survivors and parents report receiving very little to no support post-trafficking to help with re-integration. We recommend service providers, such as FSUs and Child Welfare Committees, collaborate with service users to develop and provide comprehensive post-integration services for survivors and their families to ensure successful re-integration and decrease risk for re-trafficking. Survivors indicate they would particularly like to see increased psychological support, financial support, and education or vocational training opportunities.

5 Provide for appropriate forms of justice and redress that are more survivor-centered and informed.

Findings from interviews with key informants and community members indicate a need to strengthen prevention, protection, and prosecution efforts—specifically, the sustainability of local programs serving survivors and parents. Participants report a lack of access to justice services and indicate that enforcement of anti-trafficking laws vary between communities. Participants also highlight a “culture of silence,” described as when community members remain silent about child trafficking rather than reporting or seeking to help a victim. Given these findings, we recommend that justice services increase collaboration with local leaders, government officials, and survivors with an aim to ensure equity in access to justice for survivors across Sierra Leone. Through these collaborations, local leaders and officials can raise community awareness about the importance of supporting survivors and victims of child trafficking by speaking up when a child is being mistreated or exploited. Though Magistrate and High Courts dealing with cases such as trafficking now sit in district headquarter towns, our findings indicate that justice and other support services may be challenging for survivors and family members to access, especially when survivors are living in rural communities. We recommend that justice and support services prioritize learning from the experience of survivors and parents.

Collecting robust data about access to justice and support services, including a feedback mechanism for survivors and parents, would provide better understanding of where there are gaps in access. We recommend that government agencies enhance and strengthen data collection on service access for survivors and families. Feedback from these groups could include mechanisms for monitoring and incorporating learnings into programming and intervention at every level. Our findings indicate that survivors and parents have experiences with services which could offer critical insight into gaps, challenges, and what is working for people who are seeking or receiving support during or following a trafficking experience.

6 Improve effectiveness and resilience of prevention via systematic collaboration between key social actors.

Prevention of trafficking depends on cooperation between non-government stakeholders (survivors, parents, paramount chiefs, councils of elders, local child welfare committees, mothers' clubs) and relevant government agencies. Interviews with key informants suggest collaboration between stakeholders, especially local leaders and GoSL leaders, could be greatly strengthened. Collaboration is viewed as critical for ensuring programs, services, and policies are equitably enforced and implemented. Survivors and key informants strongly suggest meaningful engagement between themselves and support agencies in developing programs and policies. Paramount chiefs could consider appointing young people, especially young women and individuals who have experienced trafficking, as sub-chiefs and advisors. For example, young people could support paramount chiefs in adopting and developing community bylaws which are meaningful for young people and more effective in preventing and reducing trafficking.

CONCLUSIONS

The overall figures for child trafficking (33%) and child labor (44.6%) found by our research are very high and suggest there are deep structural issues involved which are not being addressed. Our research and analysis of policy and service gaps indicate that prevention and protection should be prioritized in order to reduce trafficking risks and harms. Current prevention efforts focus on awareness raising, which does not always effectively respond to the needs of communities and has not been shown to reduce prevalence, with prosecution and protection services lacking capacity. Our suggestion is to emphasize context specific approaches to anti-human trafficking processes that are community-based and collaborative in order to improve prevention. As we go forward with our research, we expect to continue to our understanding of human trafficking in Sierra Leone and the processes in place to support policy developments that can ultimately reduce prevalence.



Center on Human Trafficking Research & Outreach

CENHTRO.UGA.EDU

cenhtro@uga.edu

University of Georgia
317 Herty Dr. Athens, Georgia 30606

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