

The Hidden Scourge of Child Trafficking in Freetown: A Call to Community Action

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If a total stranger were to walk up to you and ask that they adopt your 5 year old daughter, how would you react?

My guess is you will be fuming with rage. In the unlikely event you are tempted to entertain the thought, you will have a thousand questions for them. You will want to know everything about them, where they live, what they do, and most importantly whether they are someone to be trusted.

Harsh Reality

But what if you are a struggling farmer in Loko Masama, Port Loko District with 10 kids to raise. And this total stranger offers to take one of your kids to Freetown to be educated and given opportunities? Would you be tempted? If you answered yes, you are not alone.

Each year, thousands of struggling families across Sierra Leone entrust their precious children to relatives and sometimes complete strangers on the promise that they will be educated in Freetown. Although some of these promises turn out to be true and some foster kids are raised with love and kindness, sadly they are few and far between. In the majority of cases, these kids are trafficked into Freetown, coerced into domestic servitude and denied all the basic rights of childhood. Instead of being sent to school and allowed to grow up as normal children, these kids are subjected to repeated physical, emotional, and sometimes sexual abuse leaving them with lifelong traumas.

Since there is little or no enforcement of the laws protecting children, it means that perpetrators are free to do whatever they want thereby perpetuating a culture of impunity for child traffickers.

Personal Encounter

Take the case of Marie (not her real name) for example. This was a young girl who lived in our neighborhood in east-end Freetown where I grew up. She had been “adopted” at birth in Kenema. Her adopted mom had promised her biological family that Marie would be raised as her own in Freetown. But instead of the good life, Marie was subjected to a systemic pattern of physical and emotional abuse. She was routinely beaten, starved, and abused both by her foster mom and the adults in her household. Marie would be up every morning around

5am, doing all the chores the adults found hard to do for themselves. She would fetch water all day, do laundry, and cook. Nobody in my community ever confronted Marie's adoptive family. People rumored about the abuses but no one ever spoke up or offered to help her.

Laws vs Reality

I have often wondered why abuses like Marie's continue unabated in our communities even though we have enacted several laws to address this issue. In our law books, we have the Anti-Human Trafficking Act, and the Child Rights Act which are supposed to protect the sanctity of childhood. Part IV Section 15 of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act for example, makes it a crime to obtain a parent's consent to adoption by fraud. This means that if you lie to a parent to induce them to give you their child, it is a crime which upon conviction carries a sentence of 10 years imprisonment. Sierra Leone is also a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Palermo Protocol on Human Trafficking. Yet, child trafficking remains a major challenge in our communities. Delays in prosecuting cases, judicial corruption, and lack of resources for the police have meant that the laws are widely ineffective.

The Role of Communities

So, since the laws are not effective in curbing child trafficking, what do we do? I think there are a number of things we can do at the community level to help reduce child trafficking.

Firstly, we need more people in our communities to speak up against child trafficking. The attitude of "not my business" does not apply to this heinous crime. If you see a child fetching water at odd hours of the night or peddling goods when they are supposed to be in school, that is outrightly wrong and it is your business to speak up. Most times, the

victims of child trafficking are incapable of speaking up for themselves. So, it is our duty as members of the community to speak up. Speaking up is legally and morally the right thing to do and doing so might just save a life.

Secondly, we need robust sensitization around the dangers of entrusting your kids to strangers and even some family members. It is better to raise your kids in poverty than to surrender them to abuse. If economic conditions necessitate entrusting your kids to strangers, you must do due diligence by checking on your kids regularly and making sure they are being well taken care of. The psychological and physical harms of child abuse are often irreparable. Prevention is better than cure.

And lastly, communities must do more to identify, report, and address issues of child trafficking. One easy way to do this is to simply ask suspected victims of child trafficking about their wellbeing and whether they are in contact with their biological families. If they answer in the negative, offer help to reconnect with their families or connect them to child rights organizations such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, Don Bosco Fambul, Children's Forum Network, or the Center on Human Trafficking Research & Outreach (CenHTRO).

If we do this consistently, we might still not completely eradicate child trafficking, but we would have gone a long way in reducing this scourge.

Marie

Few years ago I visited my childhood community in east-end Freetown and happened to see Marie . She appeared mentally unstable and paced constantly. She said she had 3 kids. She could not make eye

contact. The scars from years of physical abuse are still visible on her arms and face, constant reminders of the horror she experienced as a child. I could not stop thinking about how our community let her down.

Will your community let down its trafficked children?

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