“Xale Buur La” or “The Child is King”:
The Importance of Culture in Preventing and Prosecuting Child Trafficking in West Africa

By Sara Thiam
Executive Summary:

Human trafficking resulting in modern child slavery is occurring in unprecedented numbers globally. A recent estimate by the International Labour Organization (ILO 2012) suggests that over 5.5 million children are exploited at any given time through forced labour or sex work. Estimates of child trafficking in Africa alone are off the charts, and increasing annually - affecting at least 2.5 million African children, most from West Africa (UNODC 2012; ILO 2012). Activist groups are increasingly drawing the world’s attention to the plight of trafficked children, and global agencies are pushing nations to adopt anti-trafficking legislation and ramp up enforcement efforts. Anti-trafficking efforts, however, despite succeeding in raising awareness about the problem, have failed to reduce child trafficking from or within the region in any significant way.

The act of obtaining children for trafficking in West Africa is entangled within numerous historical, socio-cultural and economic practices – all of which must be taken into careful consideration in order to curb the practice in the region. In fact, typical anti-trafficking measures, such as restricting child movement and youth work, have proved wholly ineffective on the ground in West Africa. This policy brief proposes that a significant reduction in child trafficking in West Africa is possible, but only by shifting policy toward approaches adapted to the West African context. This would require, as a long-term strategy, a significant investment in qualitative and quantitative empirical research directed at understanding the complex ways in which child trafficking is taking place in the region, something which is currently lacking. Yet, in the short term, culturally-grounded research already in existence can provide strategy options to reduce child trafficking immediately, including re-focusing the crime and its prosecution on the exploitation of (or intention to profit from the exploitation of) a child in whatever context it might occur, while decriminalizing socially and culturally legitimate movement and work of young people of varying ages. Urgent action on this issue is imperative to ensure that West African children gain their rightful opportunities to fully participate as active citizens in tomorrow’s globalized world.

Policy Brief Overview:

Policy Goals:

This policy brief:

- Highlights how a current lack of consideration of West African realities within global instruments to combat child trafficking has had real life impacts on the adoption, implementation, enforcement and overall effectiveness of anti-trafficking policy in the region.
- Draws on and presents a review of critical academic literature examining child trafficking policy in West Africa, traditional movements of children, and/or child work, in order to formulate more appropriate definitions of child trafficking and exploitation as adapted to the regional context. Understanding how and why children move in West Africa, and what is locally considered legitimate movement and work, can clarify how to better define trafficking in the region, identify real life occurrences, and determine appropriate reactions.
- Provides concrete examples of on-the-ground anti-child trafficking policies and their outcomes to illustrate the points argued. These case examples were collected from various academic
studies as well as drawing on the author’s original research on child trafficking in Senegal and between Mali and Senegal.\(^1\)

- Recommends culturally-grounded anti-trafficking policies which would decriminalize, and better regulate, child movement and work in West Africa, so as to better root out exploitation with the imperative cooperation of children and communities.

**Significance of the issue being addressed:**

This issue is in need of urgent consideration because:

- The trafficking and exploitation of children in any form is a grave infringement of their human rights, and is likely to cause long-term developmental and/or social repercussions to individuals;
- This repression of human capital accumulation in terms of poor health and educational attainment is likely to have negative long-term economic effects for the region;
- The number of children identified as trafficked and exploited in West Africa is increasing exponentially; and
- Persistent poverty throughout much of West Africa renders many children and families particularly vulnerable to socio-cultural argumentation used to extract children from their homes. Culturally-adapted interventions are needed to prevent thousands more children from ending up in the hands of exploiters every year.

**Canada’s interest in the issue:**

- The elimination of child exploitation and slavery in any form, and particularly through human trafficking, is among the top-stated priorities for Canada as a nation at the forefront of efforts to create a more equitable and just world, and for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA\(^2\)) as a prominent global agency.
- It is widely believed, both in academic research as well as in the world of global policy, that promoting the healthy and safe development of the world’s children today can help shape a more peaceful and stable future for the global community by promoting quality education and healthful populations (Sen 1996).
- CIDA’s sustained support and concern for the health, economic development, education, and security of West African nations is demonstrated through its funding of numerous past and ongoing projects in the region. The recommendations in this policy brief regarding the importance of considering West African culture to combat child trafficking can help to assure that future CIDA-supported projects can best achieve their full potential to effect change in the region.

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\(^1\) The author is a PhD candidate in anthropology at McGill University. She draws on 10 months of independent ethnographic fieldwork in Senegal and Mali in 2010, as well as her Master’s thesis research conducted for 10 weeks in Senegal in 2007. Her research examines children’s rights and humanitarian interventions directed at a population of children known as “taalibes”, known by some as migratory Qur’anic school students, but by others as victims of human trafficking and exploitation through forced begging. She focuses on how the promotion of rights for these children plays out on the ground.

Policy Recommendations:

With the ultimate goal of reducing the incidence of child trafficking and exploitation in West Africa, this policy brief recommends the following specific courses of action as a means to incorporate an understanding of West African socio-cultural realities into anti-trafficking policy:

- **Continue CIDA strategies which seek innovative ways to address the underlying causes of child trafficking in West Africa**, including striving to reduce the pervasive poverty plaguing so many families, and increasing access to quality education for children in rural as well as urban areas.

- **Make the act of child exploitation the principle target, rather than children’s movement or work.** Increase efforts to regulate labour and root out child exploitation in all its forms - not simply focusing on movement or crossing borders - by increasing the capacities of child-centered social services and police units to respond to child exploitation. This should be done through state and non-state partnerships to increase program transparency and efficacy.

- **Avoid criminalizing youth migrants, labourers and other potential victims of trafficking**, as they are often participating in activities that they and their communities view as beneficial and not criminal.

- **Mount consciousness-raising campaigns which condemn the exploitation, abuse and maltreatment of children, and praise their inherent dignity.** Rather than focusing awareness campaigns on trying to change people’s behaviors with respect to cultural and social practices of child movement, stress the need to protect children from abuse and exploitation, thereby drawing on the cultural values of the populations in question.

- **Make sustained efforts to discover the wishes of the youth survivors of trafficking**, in order to incorporate them as best as possible in the rehabilitation process, to respect their rights as actors, and to avoid their later re-trafficking or independent migration into risky situations. Service providers should also consider the ages of the survivors and the children’s understandings of the reasons for their initial movement when making arrangements for repatriation and/or accommodation. For example, if the initial movement of an adolescent was done with their willingness and with the promise of certain rewards, their simple return home may prove to be ineffective as a long-term strategy.

- **Invest in participant-observation based research** in order to understand the complex ways in which children are trafficked within and from West Africa, how anti-trafficking interventions actually play out on the ground, and how to better prevent child trafficking and assist child trafficking victims.

Policy Paper:

**A Trade in Children in the 21st Century? Simply Unacceptable.**

Child trafficking is considered among the worst and most widespread violations of human rights known to be in existence today. It is a modern form of slavery; children are bought and sold like chattel, held
against their will, and forced or coerced to perform acts harmful to their physical and psychological development. Profiteering individuals prey off of the social and physical vulnerabilities of children, and manipulate, threaten or batter them into compliance. Continued demand for child exploitation keeps traffickers’ endeavors highly profitable: sex economies feed off of young people and unscrupulous employers profit from slaves at sewing machines or on plantations.

Yet what is perhaps most disturbing is that in this age of unprecedented global consensus regarding the inalienability of an individual’s basic human rights, human and child trafficking has been described as dramatically increasing, not decreasing. Official ILO (2012) estimates say that there are 3.7 million people engaged in forced labour and sex work in Africa – that is 4 people out of every 1,000 inhabitants. Surely representing a significant portion of these forced labourers are the overwhelming 65,064,000 child labourers aged 5-17, representing one quarter of the children in the region of Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO 2010:9). The ILO (2010:12) found that by 2008, 15.1% of children in Africa were performing hazardous tasks, figures which increased for the region between 2004 and 2008, while decreasing in all other regions.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime claims that human trafficking for “forced labour” only represents 85% of the trafficking cases in Africa and the Middle East (49% forced labour and 36% sexual exploitation) (UNODC 2012:76). There are another 15% of cases of trafficking for other reasons, including serving as child soldiers, in rituals, and for organ removal. This policy brief focuses on child trafficking in West Africa, where a UNICEF estimate from 2000 claimed that there were up to 200,000 children trafficked annually, although this statistic has remained ungrounded (Adepoju 2005:77; HRW 2003:8). In West Africa, most human trafficking takes place domestically or within the region – although a still-shocking 2,300 West African victims of trafficking were officially identified in West and Central Europe from 2007-2010 (UNODC 2012).

Myriad transnational organizations are decrying this trade in humans, but their efforts are still far from achieving its eradication. Despite increasing efforts to combat human trafficking, there were still less than 8,000 prosecutions and 4,000 convictions worldwide in 2011 – not even making a dent in the estimated $32 billion a year industry (US Dept of State 2012; UNOCID 2012). Traffickers in Africa can earn anywhere from $50-$1,000 for the initial transfer of a child, and a single child trafficked from West Africa to North America can yield up to $20,000 according to US government estimates (Fitzgibbon 2003). It is clear that human trafficking in West Africa is a scandalously lucrative business with relatively few risks.

Yet simply increasing the dollar investment in anti-trafficking measures is not enough to alter this trend. The root cause of the problem is the endemic poverty that West African families, communities, and nations are dealing with (Sawadogo 2012; Adepoju 2005). Nearly half (48.5%) of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa, that is 413.7 million people, live on $1.25 per day or less. Basic development indicators demonstrate the effects of this poverty relative to North America, with the region of West and Central Africa suffering the world’s highest under-5 child mortality rate, 143 per 1000 live births, as compared to

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Correspondingly, the region has the lowest life expectancy at birth, 53 years, and the highest rate of child labour in the world, with UNICEF reporting 34% of children ages 5-14 engaged in excessive economic activity (UNICEF, 2012:123). The financial desperation that many families feel under these conditions of poverty renders them vulnerable to scams offering better prospects for their children in far off lands, and puts children dangerously at risk of economic exploitation. Many West African children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking through the co-opting of the widely-practiced, long-standing survival strategies often described as the “circulation of children” for social, educational or economic reasons. This may take the form of sending a child out of a village to stay with relatives nearer to schools to study, or “giving” a child to a childless relative for household support. I will describe these practices in detail below and show how, because of this regional cultural particularity, standardized anti-trafficking policies restricting and discouraging movement are not enough to reduce levels of trafficking and exploitation of children in West Africa.

How can global development agencies such as CIDA contribute to a real reduction in child trafficking and exploitation in West Africa? First of all, it is imperative that CIDA’s policies continue to strive for a more equitable economic development throughout the region over the long term through initiatives such as the West African Regional Program as well as through individual country-based projects, particularly in the CIDA Aid Effectiveness Agenda “countries of focus” of West Africa, including Senegal, Mali and Ghana. Continued uneven and under-development are prime factors fueling mass child movement and exploitation in the region. Second, evidence suggests that the practices of child circulation could be reduced if adequate educational opportunities were more widely available and practically accessible (Archambault & de Laat, 2010; Akresh, 2009; Castle & Diarra, 2003). CIDA’s long-standing commitment to increasing access to high quality primary education in Senegal and Mali, for example, must therefore be continually renewed and adapted to shifting realities.

But in order to reduce the incidence of child trafficking in the short term, this policy brief proposes that CIDA support socially and culturally adapted approaches to the prevention and prosecution of child exploitation in West Africa. The CIDA-funded project, “Fight Against Child Trafficking in West Africa” carried out by Save the Children Canada from 2003-2010, is evidence of CIDA’s interest in finding effective solutions to the specific problem of child trafficking in the region. But the completion of this project, and its now dated scope of intervention through primarily raising awareness of trafficking risks, suggests that CIDA must renew its commitment to eliminating child exploitation in West Africa by drawing on the advancing social science research accessed here. The remainder of this brief, therefore, discusses current social science literature on child trafficking in West Africa and describes in detail specific steps that could be taken to pursue a culturally-informed policy to combat child trafficking in West Africa today.

Child Trafficking and Culture in West Africa - Background/Context

Child Circulation in West Africa
In West Africa, conceptions of childhood and the role of children in society tend to vary dramatically from those in the West. As a tradition continued from time immemorial, up to 25% of children in communities throughout the region are in “circulation” – that is, in constant flow from household to household, often within kinship networks, in order to create demographic balance, gain training, perform domestic service, pursue schooling, or engage in employment (e.g. see Archambault & de Laat 2010; Akresh 2009; Vandermeersch 2006, 2002; Verhoef 2005; Alber 2003; Jonckers 1997; Bledsoe 1990; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Goody 1982; Isaac & Conrad 1982; Etienne 1979). Some studies have found that up to 50% of adults of a given community have at some point in their childhood lived away from their biological parents as foster children or in places of instruction or work (Zimmerman 2003; Bledsoe 1990; Isiugo-Abaihe 1985; Goody 1982). This tradition-based child movement questions the universality of the Western-style nuclear family, where children are assumed to be better off with their birth parents. It therefore contradicts what many Western actors assume is in the best interests of West African children.

In fact, the right, “as far as possible”, “to know and be cared for by his or her parents” is written explicitly into the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the primary international instrument delineating children’s rights (UNCRC 1989: Article 7). In North America, social practice tends to mirror this objective, with parents seen as the ideal caretakers, and fosterage situations as a last resort. But this is not how fosterage or child movement is seen by West Africans, nor should it therefore automatically be seen by those intervening in the region. West African cultural practices of child circulation for education or work are not inherently problematic, and they were certainly not intended to deprive children of anything – quite the contrary. They are frequently defended by West African populations and social scientists alike as strategies to boost rates of schooling, to redistribute household economic burdens, or to strengthen kinship ties (Akresh 2009). In some cases, parents will “lend” their children to childless family members, where the child helps out but may also gain a close companion and a larger share of household goods and food (Etienne 1979; Notermans 2008). Or, a child may be sent for a period of years to extended kin or others to live nearer to a school (Archambault & de Laat 2010). This movement facilitates school attendance, and the child will generally be expected to help out with domestic labour to earn their keep. Some older children travel seasonally or for a year or two to work on farms or as domestic servants, to earn cash for socially desired items or materials to prepare for marriage (Castle & Diarra 2003).

The Corruption of Culture – Child Circulation and Child Trafficking

With all of its strategic functions, as described above, it is clear why forms of child movement like fosterage and labour migration are so exceptionally widespread in the region even today. It is for this reason that anthropologists with extensive experience in West Africa have been skeptical about recent claims made by transnational activists and NGOs that “traditional” patterns of child circulation have been corrupted and are now basically just a cover for child trafficking and exploitation. These anthropologists argue, rather, that it is more a question of perspective – that the traditions themselves, which are much the same as they were in the past, have become criminalized only under Western scrutiny (Howard 2011).
That being said, there is evidence that some of the stopgaps that existed historically to limit the exploitation of circulating children have indeed disappeared as West African societies undergo rapid social and economic change. Exchange has increasingly monetized, drawing adolescents to seek waged labour and facilitating the clandestine accumulation of profit derived from children’s activities (Alber 2011; HRW 2010; Jacquemin 2006; Castle & Diarra 2003; Goody 1982; Etienne 1979). Traditions of child circulation can provide culturally-savvy exploiters with modes of access to children – through cultural and religious rationalization of the act of extracting children from their families in pursuit of opportunities for them. Practices of child circulation can therefore inadvertently render children vulnerable to traffickers, and their social support and defense can shield actual traffickers from prosecution (Sawadogo 2012; Adepoju 2005). My own long-term ethnographic research in Senegal and Mali corroborates this observation, as I found that actors responsible for preventing and prosecuting cases of child trafficking used cultural and religious explanations to normalize practices flagged as trafficking, thereby reframing them as legitimate forms of child movement rather than criminal acts.

International actors and West Africans alike are rightly raising red flags as they witness countless children undergoing dangerous and exploitative labour and forced begging. The question is not whether exploitation is okay if it takes place within cultural practices of child circulation, but rather how can one separate the good from the bad? The solution to dealing with potentially contaminated city water is certainly not by shutting it off. All parties agree that the water may be tainted, but they still need it despite risks. Rather, one proceeds to educate the population as to how to make the water safe, and authorities pursue avenues to detect and eliminate the source of the sanitation breach. West African traditions of child movement are real-life responses to continued economic strife, and even if contaminated in parts, blocking this circulation without first effectively dealing with the root problems, can exacerbate family and child suffering, and push too many families and children into “criminality” as a result of pursuing their economic survival.

West Africans, who are known for highly valuing children, are not selling them, as the language of trafficking might suggest: they are engaging their children in fostering agreements or youth migrations legitimized by history and social norms, with hopes of future wealth and prosperity (Piot 2011; de Lange 2007; Castle & Diarra 2003). Traffickers know this and are profiting immensely. Yet anti-trafficking interventions which aim to secure borders and broadcast trafficking risks are frequently unable to penetrate into these culturally-sanctioned family-based networks which move children. But it is within these socio-cultural networks that exploiters, who may even legitimately or illegitimately claim distant kin relations with the families, approach parents to successfully extract children (Manzo 2005).

A Review of Anti-Trafficking Policies in the Context of Circulating Children in West Africa

Increasingly Broad Definitions of Trafficking Lead to Unenforceability on the Ground

The United Nations, through the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children of 2000, commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol, has effectively set the global definition of child trafficking as, “The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation” (UN 2000, Article 3). The protocol defines children as
any person under the age of 18, and precludes the possibility of their consent to the actions under scrutiny. Inasmuch, none of the means of force or deception listed in the definition of “trafficking in persons” in general (including coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, or giving or receiving payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person) apply to the case of children, and so are irrelevant.

In other words, if the child is exploited through work or sexually, she/he is considered a victim of trafficking under the Palermo Protocol, whether or not she/he “chooses” to participate in the arrangement. Such language is based in the recognized vulnerability of children to manipulation, threat and luring – so that simply seeking the consent of a child to participate will not somehow legalize or legitimize their exploitation.

But I argue that despite the laudable goal of devising a broadly applicable definition of the crime of child trafficking to thereby achieve a broader impact globally, this approach does not, and likely will not, lead to more condemnation and prosecution of child exploitation in West Africa. Rather, because these acts deemed crimes of trafficking often occur within the context of activities seen as acceptable or even beneficial for so many communities - like child fosterage or seasonal work - the anti-trafficking laws themselves become irrelevant locally, resulting in governments neglecting their use entirely (US Dept of State 2012; HRW 2010).

In order to uphold the rights of their children as spelled out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified throughout the region, West African nations indeed need to revisit the language and enforcement of their laws pertaining to labour, marriage age, access to schooling, and other protections. But in order to achieve enforceability, there need to be cultural shifts concurrent with changed legislation, not simply a condemnation of practices based on global standards (Merry 2006).

One such example is with respect to child work. The ILO has recognized that many children in developing countries want to or are expected to work in waged or domestic labour to help families survive economic hardships, and has adjusted minimum age requirements accordingly. Recent ILO statistics reveal that in 2008, 28.4% of children in Sub-Saharan Africa ages 5-14 years were engaged in employment, either inside or outside of the home, a figure that had increased since 2004. Unfortunately, most of these employed children are reported to be engaged in “child labour,” a category which accounts for and excludes those engaged in permissible amounts of light work at appropriate ages. In fact one fourth of all children ages 5-17 in Africa are considered child labourers, and an alarming 15.1% of the continent’s children are working in hazardous conditions (ILO 2010: 5-12).

In West Africa, the demand for domestic labour in cities and seasonal agricultural work in rural areas remains high, and the number of families or youths in need of wage income are many (Sawadogo 2012;

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4 The ILO Convention 138 on the minimum age for work declares that light child work can be permitted for those aged 12 and over—on condition that it does not interfere with the child’s education or vocational training. It further stipulates that the minimum age for regular work is approximately 14 for the developing world, as long as the work is not harmful to a his/her physical or cognitive development (ILO 1973).
The reality is, in the current economic climate, West African children are working, whether or not they are permitted to. This complicates the question of determining when a child is to be considered a legal worker or a victim of trafficking. While the Palermo Protocol’s definition of child trafficking is quite clear in that it applies to any sort of exploitation of a child under age 18, regardless of consent - judging the boundaries of “exploitation” remains difficult. Labour regulation in general is sorely lacking throughout West Africa, and children and adults alike, working in virtually any sector of the economy, may be experiencing some form of exploitation by global standards.

Is the youth a “worker” who consented to or even sought out employment away from home, and is in need of labour regulation and support for workers’ rights? Or is she/he a victim of trafficking - a designation which can apply to anyone under the age of 18 who is exploited, and where the consent or willingness of the child is considered irrelevant? Furthermore, a child who is fostered out may be put to work in the house or at a family business – is this practice, which is so ubiquitous, to be called a trade in children for exploitation? Looking at these socio-cultural particularities, it becomes clear that instead of attempting to identify particular types of child movement or exploitation as “trafficking”, it would be more fruitful to focus on defining the boundaries of what constitutes child exploitation versus legitimate work within the population, and work toward enforcement of the accompanying legal protections.

Elaborating on the ways in which global definitions of child trafficking have proven ineffective for devising policy in the West African context, in the next two sections I outline the limitations of efforts at reducing child trafficking through: 1) increased border control; and 2) awareness campaigns stressing the criminal and risky nature of child movement.

Border Control – Pitfalls of Restricting the Movement of Children Under 18 Years Old

Interventions directed at preventing child trafficking often target borders (UNICEF 2002). NGOs and transnational agencies work with national governments of West Africa to implement transit documentation requirements, train border guards, and set up community border patrols. This is meant to enable border officials to identify potential cases of child trafficking, prevent children from crossing borders without required identification cards and paperwork, and invite border communities to be vigilant against traffickers or children attempting to skirt around official border posts.

This control of so-called “international borders” however, is taking place in a region where the boundaries of ethnic and linguistic groups disregard political divisions, and adults and children alike find themselves in a continual migratory processes, historically and today. Beyond porous, as they are often described - suggesting stable boundaries allowing some movement - West African borders can best be described as fluid. Efforts to control the movement of young people over borders in West Africa are likely to continue to fail to prevent trafficking, and may in fact make youths more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

In 2000, Mali was at the forefront of anti-trafficking legislation in West Africa when it adopted a “National Emergency Plan to Fight against Child Trafficking”, and soon after mandated that all minors under 18 years of age be in possession of a titre de voyage travel document in order to exit the country (UNICEF 2002). The police chief in the border region of Kayes, Mali, explained to me repeatedly as he
paged through his register of travel documents issued, that any child leaving Mali absolutely needs one of these yellow cards to pass over the border. “If he does not have it, he will be turned back. Even if he is with his parents” (personal interview July 20, 2010, Kayes, Mali).

This statement, however, I find to be more of an ideal than a reality. As I approached the border between the Malian region of Kayes and Senegal, my vehicle was only briefly stopped by Malian border guards and quickly waved through without any requests for travel documents, despite travelling with two young children. Before I approached the Senegalese entry point, I exited the car, walked across the international line and spoke with several young Qur’anic student boys who were similarly crossing on foot. I saw with my own eyes that it would not be a challenge for a child to cross that particular border if she/he wanted to, even right in front of the border post, let alone along the vast spans of unpatrolled border between the landlocked Mali and its seven border countries.

Related to this general lack of enforcement of border crossings for children is the fact that the official titre de voyage is often out of reach for youths in rural communities who desire to travel. They would need to go to their regional capital, with consenting parents, to purchase copies of the necessary documents, and obtain several signatures. Most aspiring youth migrants can fulfill none of these requirements, and so travel without the cards. Malian government officials from the ministry responsible for children’s issues openly acknowledged this widespread lack of compliance (personal interview Bamako, Mali, June 30, 2010; personal interview Kayes, Mali, July 20, 2010). Yet the official criminalization of youth movement without such paperwork makes them more vulnerable to traffickers or exploitation through bribery (Huijsmans & Baker 2012; Whitehead & Hashim 2005; Jacquemin 2006; de Lange 2007; Castle & Diarra 2003).

Sarah Castle and Aisse Diarra’s (2003) survey of child labour migration between Mali and Cote d’Ivoire revealed how hundreds of children, aged 10-18, crossed the border without carrying a titre de voyage: either it was simply not requested or required, or they or their intermediaries bribed officers to allow them to pass. In other words, the paperwork requirement did not prevent children from crossing borders for labour migration in Castle and Diarra’s study - the practice of which is deeply culturally-entrenched and akin to a rite of passage for so many adolescents in the communities concerned (de Lange 2007; Jacquemin 2006). But worse - it potentially made border crossing easier for youths accompanied by intermediaries willing to corrupt officers, than for youths attempting to cross of their own initiative without money. This is an invitation for traffickers to become involved.

It must be recognized that at their destinations, youth migrants are indeed at risk of exploitation, bribery and poor health (Busza, et al. 2005). In Castle and Diarra’s study, however, the anti-trafficking policies in place to prevent their movement exacerbated these risks rather than quelled them. First of all, the criminalization of travel and labour intermediaries as potential child traffickers led more youths to leave home alone, foregoing help from trusted adults to negotiate terms of employment upon arrival. Many youths reported approaching or being approached by unknown adults for assistance with border crossing, usually in exchange for cash or debt to the future employer upon arrival. Moreover, the community “surveillance committees” set up in border villages to prevent children from skirting around official border posts scared some young migrants away from seeking food or lodgings en route as was
done in times past, further endangering their travel. Finally, the criminalization of youth movement led to a fear among youth migrants themselves of real or imagined consequences of being discovered as underage. This prompted low rates of access to health and support services at their destinations (Busza, et al. 2005; Castle & Diarra 2003).

This discussion suggests that pushing culturally-entrenched youth labour migration underground, rather than recognizing and regulating it, provides endless opportunities for abuse and exploitation – as has similarly been remarked by anthropologists studying with child workers in other regions (Nieuenhuys 1998; Montgomery 2001). Voluntary youth migration for labour in West Africa is a current social, economic and cultural reality. The criminalization of this movement leaves youths highly vulnerable to trafficking as they search for increasingly clandestine ways to migrate away from their homes and communities in search of employment. And as I will describe below, even when properly informed of the illegality of their movement without proper documentation, and the potential risks they might encounter, many youths will determine that labour migration is imperative and will pursue it despite any risks or contestations from their parents (Jacquemin 2006; Castle & Diarra; de Lange 2007). The following section examines how awareness campaigns are attempting to prevent youth movement, suggests weaknesses in current campaigns, and proposes ways in which they could be improved to better function to prevent trafficking.

Targeting Behavioral Change: Raising “Consciousness” Rather Than “Awareness”

Informational campaigns adapted to community media forms are underway throughout the region of West Africa to stress the dangers of child trafficking, teach people about anti-trafficking laws, and stop them from sending their children away for fosterage or permitting them to make labour migrations (UNICEF 2002). But these campaigns have not served to significantly curb the socially and culturally-entrenched practices of child circulation and movement described above - often carried out in response to continuing economic need or as a social advancement strategy.

Why? Two reasons: First – the perceived benefits still outweigh the perceived risks of child circulation and movement for many youths and families (Marshall 2011; de Lange 2007; Castle & Diarra 2003). And second, a social resistance to activist messages which condemn culturally-sanctioned movements that are still utilized by many families as survival and advancement strategies has enabled a space for traffickers to defend attempts at displacing children. The extraction of children, therefore, is defended in the name of local culture or tradition, in the face of modern imperialism. So rather than helping to reduce the occurrence of trafficking by flagging the dangers of child and youth movement, campaigns neglecting the socio-cultural realities of the populations concerned can actually serve to exacerbate risks.

Anthropologists note how anti-child trafficking and children’s rights campaigns tend to stress the victimization of children, disregarding the real life challenges that they face and try to overcome by seeking out employment (Alber 2011; Nieuenhuys 1996; Jacquemin 2006; Reynolds, et al. 2006; Busza, et al. 2004; Montgomery 2001). Economists Kaushik Basu and Pham Hoang Van (1998) flagged early on how seemingly well-intended policy interventions meant to curb child labour globally can have
unintended consequences by pushing children who need to work to supplement their family income into unregulated and harsher conditions of employment. This marked disconnect between children’s lived realities and outsiders’ perceptions of their situations can similarly lead to the dramatic failure of anti-trafficking campaigns, with children continuing to migrate out of villages for employment, or re-migrate even after being re-integrated into home communities and educated about trafficking risks (Castle & Diarra 2003; Nieuwenhuys 2007; Bagayoko (personal interview, June 16, 2010, Bamako, Mali); Saka (personal interview, October 14, 2010, Dakar, Senegal)).

Erdmute Alber (2011:88), an anthropologist who has been observing kinship and child fosterage practices in Benin for the last 15 years, illustrates this point when she recounts her interaction with a village mayor eager to combat child trafficking. In the course of their discussion, however, the mayor mentioned that he himself sometimes arranged for young women in his own family to go to the capital to work as domestic servants. This is an act specifically targeted by activists today as child trafficking. But the mayor did not see any connection between that sort of child placement for work and the “child trafficking” he was pledging to combat in his village. Social science literature and my own research corroborate that striving to narrowly eradicate such child placements in the region, without first effectively addressing their roots in poverty and economic inequality, is neither beneficial nor likely to succeed. The idea simply does not make sense to most people. So campaign messages advising people to stop circulating their children are falling on deaf ears.

There indeed needs to be a great investment in awareness campaigns among the populations concerned, but not necessarily in campaigns advocating for a drastic change in cultural behaviors, such as stopping child circulation all together. Rather, it could be much more effective to harness the widespread West African cultural elements that value children and stress the necessity to protect them from danger and exploitation, and to plan for their future success. Children throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, although they occupy a low rung on the social reverence ladder – as respect comes with age – are nevertheless highly valued emotionally, for their assistance within family and social units, and as the future of lineages and nations (Cheney 2007; Gonzalez, Oloo & DeRose 2010). The Wolof people go so far as to call the child “king” in their oft-cited proverb, xale buur la, and many strive to adapt their caretaking in accordance.

A successful “awareness campaign” in West Africa would not attempt to diametrically change peoples’ customs, beliefs or practices to fit with global anti-trafficking statutes. Instead it would be more of a “consciousness campaign” and focus on the peoples’ own beliefs in the inherent dignity of the children in question, while taking into consideration the practical limitations on the decision-making and actions of the children and families involved (Marshall 2011). The remainder of this policy brief draws on the above research-based critical analyses of anti-trafficking strategies to propose culturally-rooted ways to reduce child trafficking in West Africa, delineating the social assistance and enforcement-related policies that would be needed to legally support a shift in community behaviors and a consequent reduction of exploitation and trafficking.

*Developing Effective Policy: Shifting the Focus from Child Movement to Child Exploitation to Combat Trafficking in West Africa*
Policies aimed at curbing child trafficking and exploitation in West Africa need to focus on rooting out child exploitation in all its forms, both through increased child-centered police enforcement and social services, as well as through culturally-adapted consciousness campaigns promoting children’s rights which unequivocally condemn child exploitation and mistreatment. My readings and research reveal that, despite differing ideas about a child’s displacement or a child’s proper role within a family or society, particularly with respect to paid or unpaid work, Western donors and West African aid recipients widely agree that children have inherent rights to protection from exploitation, including being made to labour at dangerous or overly-strenuous tasks, work without adequate compensation, or at the expense of a useful education.

By reinforcing the social values condemning the mistreatment or exploitation of children, campaigns can build on already established deeply-held beliefs to encourage social vigilance to root out abuse - tracing its occurrences to homes, foster homes, places of work, schools, and anywhere else it may occur. By effectively defining and focusing on the exploitation itself, no one is safe from condemnation through recourse to kin relations, fosterage agreements, or historical precedence. Under such a policy, for example, people are legally permitted to foster-out or foster-in children, but if caught exploiting children, or facilitating or profiting from the exploitation of children – the perpetrator will be prosecuted for child trafficking.

This may at first seem to be simply a question of enforcement of child trafficking laws currently in place. But in reality, what this policy brief proposes is a significant break from current anti-trafficking strategy in West Africa. It recommends a shift away from standard anti-trafficking policies criminalizing and attempting to restrict the movement of children, and focuses instead on drafting new conceptions of child trafficking based on global and West African understandings of acceptable and unacceptable behavior toward children. This requires clearly delineating what constitute regionally appropriate and enforceable types and levels of work, and acceptable versus unacceptable reasons for child movement. From this perspective, the exploitation of children becomes the source of wrong-doing. And building from this as a starting point, new, locally-derived anti-trafficking strategies can be devised which will seek ways to reform and regulate child fosterage and migration for work, education or among kin.

One NGO I observed in Senegal, named Tostan (which means “breakthrough” in the Wolof language), has successfully used a community value-based approach, similar to the one I am proposing, to combat female genital cutting. Tostan’s program assists mobilized community actors who want to eradicate the practice themselves. Now called the “Community Empowerment Program”, this strategy is used to promote human rights of various kinds in several countries by providing interested communities with guidance and some means to cultivate respect for human dignity and seek community consensus on human rights issues. This scheme inherently eliminates the problem of cultural differences between aid agendas and communities, as local actors only receive assistance if and when they approach the NGO - because they want to make changes themselves, using their own cultural strategies and values to effect change in their neighborhoods or villages. Tostan’s program to combat female genital cutting has been widely heralded in academic and aid circles as being perhaps the only initiative to have made real progress on this sensitive issue in the region, having already helped 6,400 communities to officially abandon the practice (UNICEF 2013; de Sam Lazaro 2013; Gruenbaum 2009:416).
But beyond mobilizing local actors to promote positive cultural change, a community-based approach to ending child exploitation would need to foster an environment where children who experience exploitation or abuse can feel that their complaints will be taken seriously by law enforcement officials and social service providers, even if the accused perpetrators are the child’s foster parents or kin relations, and that those children will not be found criminal merely as a result of their movement or employment. In other words, children need to be educated about their rights, but more importantly they need to be encouraged to feel like rights-bearing individuals with access to legal and civil recourse in cases of abuse (Merry 2006).

In order to make this exploitation-centered focus viable, development aid needs to facilitate West African states, non-state organizations and communities to: 1) decriminalize youth movement, while still not encouraging it, considering health and social risks; 2) establish awareness campaigns which cultivate a culture of shame toward any individual caught abusing or exploiting a child; 3) ensure that all children and youths themselves know their rights - in their communities as well as in movement; and 4) expand the capacities of child social services and “children’s brigades” to investigate, respond to, and prosecute cases of child exploitation using appropriate child-centered strategies.

**Conclusion: Turning to Social Science Research to End Child Trafficking**

Fatalistic accounts of child trafficking or exploitation in West Africa often pit global efforts to save children from abuse against “traditional” beliefs and practices which legitimize or facilitate this exploitation. As a result, debates about children’s rights are often centered around changing or eliminating popular support for these allegedly outdated traditions or problematic cultural beliefs. But as I demonstrated above, modern and persisting West African “traditions” and “cultural beliefs”, themselves ever-changing and dynamic with respect to fluctuating economic and social circumstances, do not inherently condone the exploitation or maltreatment of children any more than global actors’ proposed courses of action would. In fact, as described above, implementing culturally inappropriate anti-trafficking policies, such as restricting child movement through imposing unrealistic document requirements or prohibiting child work, can end up endangering children even more.

Therefore, academic research suggests that rather than trying to change particular local practices to fit global expectations of action, assuming it would reduce the possibility of exploitation, global actors must work with West African communities and governments to reform the system in which people are currently living by rooting out child exploitation, everywhere and in whatever form it occurs. This can be done by continuing to strive for poverty reduction and economic equality in the region, and specifically through increased investment in child-centered law enforcement and community social response capacities for cases of child exploitation and maltreatment.
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Alber, Erdmute
As an anthropologist, Alber draws on long-term research in Benin to provide a contemporary critique of anti-child trafficking campaigns in West Africa today. In this brief article she argues that the socio-cultural practices of child movement for work are too often confused with trafficking, and so campaigns need to focus more on understanding children’s complex realities in order to be more effective.

Archambault, Caroline, and Joost de Laat
This anthropological article provides a clear illustration of how cultural child fostering practices, often confused with or used to cover up child trafficking, are so prevalent in many African communities and how they can function socially to provide children with educational opportunities.

Castle, Sarah, and Aisse Diarra
2003 The international migration of young Malians: tradition, necessity or rite of passage. London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, http://sarahcastle.co.uk/docs/Traffickingreport_final_October.pdf, Accessed May 7, 2013.
This highly-cited document is the report of a qualitative research study commissioned by Save the Children UK and UNICEF, and funded by USAID, on labour migration and child trafficking between Mali and Cote d'Ivoire. The study finds that the high rates of adolescent movement from rural Mali to work on plantations in Cote d'Ivoire are mostly the result of voluntary labour migrations rooted in historical practice, social aspirations and current economic realities, rather than child trafficking, and therefore it recommends the decriminalization of regional borders.

De Lange, Albertine
This scholarly article touches on many of the issues addressed in the Castle & Diarra 2003 report, describing the historical and socio-cultural roots of adolescent labour migration in Burkina Faso, and how this child-centered movement should be better understood so as to distinguish it from child trafficking.

Fitzgibbon, Kathleen
At the time of publication, the author of this policy-oriented piece was the Senior Reporting Officer for Africa in the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons of the US Department of State. The article profiles the high frequency and high profitability of child trafficking in West and Central Africa, dangerously coupled with low conviction rates, and pleads for increased global engagement and regional political will to combat the phenomenon.

Jacquemin, Mélanie
This anthropological article, through vivid vignettes, provides a window into the lived realities of girls migrating to the capital, Abidjan, from impoverished rural areas in Cote d’Ivoire in a constant quest for employment as domestic workers. Jacquemin recommends that interventions on behalf of children’s rights focus on protecting the rights to safety and fair wages of children who work, rather than criminalizing their employment.

Manzo, Kate

This article presents a critical review of the conflation of the terms trafficking and slavery in global anti-trafficking literature and media coverage used to draw attention to the problem. Drawing on the West African context, Manzo illustrates how trafficking, as slavery, exploits labour, but trafficking often involves coercion and even the consent of the trafficked, but it may not involve force, and therefore may go undetected if conflated with images evoked by the historically-charged term ‘slavery’.

Marshall, Phil

This instructional document draws on behavioral theory to add a level of complexity to thinking about awareness campaigns aimed at preventing child trafficking, considering the perceived risks and potential benefits of child movement among children and parents.

Merry, Sally Engle

Chapter 6 of this ethnography maps out the process of how the Hawaiian female victims of domestic violence in her study experienced “shifting subjectivities” toward seeing themselves as rights-bearing individuals who can legally reclaim their rights in a court of law. Merry points out that, despite activist messages promoting women’s human rights, it was only after the police, justice institutions, and social service providers changed their enforcement and treatment behaviors to take women’s rights-based claims seriously that this subjective transformation could occur, and women began to access legal recourse on a broader social scale.

Sawadogo, Wilfried Relwende

This policy-oriented article draws on the various diverse and diverging perspectives of human trafficking in West Africa to present an in-depth analysis of the causes and consequences of the phenomenon, from socio-economic to politico-institutional. Sawadogo recommends enhanced regional cooperation among West African states to facilitate information-sharing and reinforce legal mechanisms to prevent and combat human trade and exploitation.

UN (United Nations)

The treaty, often referred to as “the Palermo Protocol” for its place of adoption, defines the crime of human trafficking and delineates global standards of prevention, protection and prosecution.

US Dept of State (United States Department of State)

The annual report produced by the US Department of State which consists of an introduction discussing the phenomenon of human trafficking, and detailed country profiles of trafficking throughout the world.

*Report on the state of trafficking in the world, with updated statistics by region with respect to gender, age, type of trafficking, and trafficking movement flows.*