Reframing the reintegration of trafficked children, centering the role of family and community

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ABSTRACT

Reintegration programs and policies informing them in West Africa are framed within Western notions of childhood and child development, which fail to account for relationships within family and community contexts that influence a child's movement away from home. The paper is informed by ongoing research with trafficked children from West Africa, residing in shelters, or who have returned home to their identified family members or guardians. It draws on interview data and personal narratives that highlight both the diversity and complexity of children's experiences across trafficking, rescue, and reintegration phases. The study found that on returning home, survivors are confronted with the trauma of their trafficking experiences, familial blame, silencing, shame, exclusion, and pressure to endure exploitation for the benefit of family honor and survival. The paper calls for reintegration practices for survivors of trafficking to be context-dependent processes that interrogate family and community interactions rather than assuming that they are supportive of survivors and their recovery. It emphasizes that reintegration efforts should be survivor-informed, culturally grounded, and designed to accommodate the unique needs of each child. The findings support family-and-community-inclusive interventions that transcend reunification to prioritize survivor narratives, address histories of power imbalances, stigma and coercion, and the nature of family obligations.

Keywords: *Child trafficking, reintegration, survivor narratives, family, community, West Africa, NAPTIP, holistic reintegration, 'rescue' from trafficking.*

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Highlights of this paper

- The narratives of child survivors challenge stereotypical assumptions about trafficking.
- Returning children home to their families and communities may not always provide the safe or supportive space envisioned for survivors of trafficking.
- Reintegration must move beyond physical reunification to include the lived realities of child survivors within cultural, social, political, economic, familial, and community contexts.

1. HUMAN TRAFFICKING, PERSISTENCE AND 'RESCUE' OF AFFECTED PERSONS

Human trafficking is a global problem with far-reaching effects. The ILO reports that in 2021, in any given day, about 28 million people were trapped in forced labor (ILO, 2024). Human trafficking generates annual profits of approximately US$236.4 billion with US$172.6 billion earned from forced commercial sexual exploitation and US$63.9 billion from forced labor exploitation (ILO, 2024). These earnings explain why the illicit enterprise of exploitation of persons for economic purposes thrives. Despite inadequate statistics on the number of trafficked persons in Africa (Adesina, 2014), the continent was reported as the region with the highest trafficking flows (UNODC, 2024). The majority of trafficking victims within the region are children, boys and girls that were exploited for forced labor (UNODC, 2021, 2024). Several factors have contributed to the growing vulnerability to trafficking in the region. These include living in villages facing armed conflict, as seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and South Sudan (International Organization for Migration, 2022); armed conflicts and associated violence, including the loss of family and community ties (UNHCR, 2007); loss of livelihoods within families (UNHCR, 2007); and the susceptibility of young persons, including forcibly displaced persons in transitional camps (UNHCR, 2020), to traffickers hoping to profit from family-level vulnerabilities (UNHCR, 2007). While an increasing number of girls are recruited for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2024), children, especially boys, have also been recruited for armed or terrorist activities (UNODC, 2024).

The four main approaches or pillars for addressing human trafficking - prevention, protection, partnerships, and prosecution (USICE, 2025), also contribute to the challenges of eradicating the problem in Africa. There is particular focus on prosecution, protection of victims, and partnerships, while prevention of human trafficking receives the least attention. Prevention is largely shaped by the narratives of trafficking survivors, often relying on stereotypical imagery of "typical" trafficked persons (Radeva, 2015; Sharapov & Mendel, 2018), as well as evidence from law enforcement and research with trafficking survivors, both of which remain limited (Van Rij, 2023). Some researchers argue that the effectiveness of these pillars is location- and time-specific, with their impact declining over time and requiring regular review in light of contemporary changes in the nature and extent of trafficking (Radeva, 2015; Van Rij, 2023). Human trafficking is commonly viewed through the lens of human rights violations (Demeke, 2024; Rijken, 2009), criminalization, national security (Farrell & Fahy, 2009), and the humanitarian approach that is dominated by campaigns using celebrities as poster persons for creating awareness (Haynes, 2014). Also, the human rights, criminalization and humanitarian approaches are frequently founded on assumptions about poverty within families, which make children and parents more susceptible to exploitation by others (Mbakogu, 2015). Addressing human trafficking effectively requires isolating and responding to its underlying drivers. The dominant discourse is often framed within ideological debates on morality, gender, victimization, and the vulnerability of sexually exploited women from developing countries (Doezema, 1998; Outshoorn, 2005), as well as on race, power, and economic control (Doezema, 1999; Mbakogu, 2015). These themes are also embedded in the fundamental principles of abolitionist feminism, modern anti-slavery, and celebrity humanitarianism. Some proponents conceptualize human trafficking as simply a new form of slavery (O'Connell Davidson, 2010), while abolitionist feminism introduced the idea of sex trafficking by identifying all practices of prostitution as the sexual enslavement of women, thereby conflating trafficking with prostitution (Doezema, 1998; Lobasz, 2009; Outshoorn,

2005). The use of the terminologies *'slavery'* and *'enslavement'* can be confusing for some parents and affected children, particularly those children who left home willingly to pursue opportunities to support their families or to advance their education (Mbakogu, 2015). Nonetheless, the emotive power of these terms triggers broader responses, including media attention, increased government engagement, expanded NGO funding from development agencies (Dougnon, 2011), and a heightened drive to 'rescue' affected children (Okyere, Agyeman, & Saboro, 2021).

Celebrity humanitarianism provides platforms for global and African personalities to label human trafficking as modern-day slavery and present it as an urgent social issue, often positioning themselves as advisors to policymakers (Hart & Tindall, 2009; Haynes, 2014), and becoming the voice(s) of affected persons. Personalities or prominent persons are featured in documentaries, films, and television series as fighting for the 'rescue' and rights of trafficked women and girls (Dottridge, 2007). With recent trends, it remains debatable whether the adoption of celebrity humanitarianism leads to sensationalization of the problem with more positive or negative outcomes. For instance, explored within the context of international trafficking, sensational media reporting has led to increased deportation of affected persons with ineffective reintegration processes attached to their deportation, tighter surveillance and border controls, and the growing criminalization of migrant journeys that are often linked with trafficking. It is also questionable if celebrities have the expertise and knowledge to speak for survivors and proffer solutions or policy directions for ameliorating human trafficking. Moreover, giving celebrities the platform to speak for survivors may detract from centering the voices of those with lived experience, along with their preferences for post-trafficking solutions (Hart & Tindall, 2009).

Many trafficking efforts in West African are rooted in the mission of 'rescue,' which is a confusing concept as it is shaped by Western understandings of child development, child work and welfare (Mbakogu, 2015). An essential part of the 'rescue' approach is the arrest and prosecution of traffickers to align with the U.S. Tier Structure for global trafficking review, known as the *Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report*. The report classifies each country's effort based on how they fare on the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking as defined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 as amended (TVPA) (USDOJ, 2023). Accordingly, countries seek to demonstrate active engagement in anti-trafficking through policies and laws (Carrington & Hearn, 2003), and for those in the Global South, positioned themselves to receive international funding for their 'rescue' and rehabilitation projects. The U.S. Tier Structure has been criticized for adopting a broad definition of human trafficking (Uy, 2011), more focus on criminalization and national security than the protection of victims of trafficking (Carrington & Hearn, 2003; Farrell & Fahy, 2009), prototype of the ideal offender and victim (Uy, 2011; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016), based on unreliable data (Chuang, 2005), strengthening the global socio-economic dominance of the U.S. (Desyllas, 2007), forcing countries with limited resources to meet expectations, and absence of structural and systemic solutions to human trafficking. Regardless of the approaches adopted, the number of persons removed from trafficking remains significantly higher than those prosecuted for trafficking offenses (Okyere et al., 2021; Radeva, 2015; Sertich & Heemskerk, 2011). Many survivors are also reluctant to continue with their cases, due to the involvement of family members (Mbakogu, 2015; Mbakogu & Odiyi, 2021), threats to the lives of survivors and family members (Mbakogu & Odiyi, 2021), the need to forget that period of their lives (Dottridge, 2008), the extended period of court deliberations (Mbakogu, 2015, 2021), tensions within families resulting from the prosecution, and isolation or stigmatization of trafficking survivors for testifying against a family member (Mbakogu & Odiyi, 2021).

2. THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S DEPARTURES AND RETURNS

When children are 'rescued' from trafficking, temporary rehabilitation is provided for them in shelters run by anti-trafficking agencies (ATAs) or NGOs, as applicable within the country's context. The transitional assistance offers space to investigate their (children's) circumstances and to provide medical care and counseling support. At the end of the transitional assistance, other long- or medium-term plans are conceived that involve reintegrating children with family members or other socio-economic support, as discussed and agreed with affected persons (IOM, 2018). Moreover, there are conflicts between the requirements for ATAs to 'rescue' and reintegrate children and African characterizations of childhood and the rites or rituals of practice leading to adulthood (Laird, 2002). African notions of childhood differ in the conceptualization of activities and practices that children should be engaged in for nurturing and shaping them into adulthood (Abebe, 2019; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Mbakogu, 2015, 2021). For instance, children in different parts of West Africa have traditionally left home to engage in economic activities that augment family or household income (Bastia, 2005; Hashim & Thorsen, 2011), and sustain their own learning (Mbakogu, 2015, 2021). When professionals 'rescue' children from identified exploitative activities, it is intended to save the affected children from 'harm.' These acts of 'rescue,' in some cases, reinforce the vulnerability of children (Hashim & Thorsen, 2011; Heissler, 2013; Huijsmans, 2011) by undermining their voice and agency (Mbakogu, 2015; O'Connell Davidson, 2016). It is problematic to address human trafficking without applying approaches that interrogate the foundations of survivors' involvement, vulnerability, and endurance. Moreover, research and policy efforts should be directed at systemic and structural factors that increase the susceptibility of children to human trafficking.

Children in African households belong to and are nurtured by family members and the community (Mbakogu, 2015, 2021). There is a collective responsibility-sharing process that moderates the well-being and pathways that children follow into adulthood (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Manful & Cudjoe, 2018). When one family member is unable to withstand the weight of care for their children due to the death of a partner, loss of employment, family size, ill health, or temporary inability to perform their parenting roles (Mbakogu, 2021), the extended family system is built to direct other relatives to provide substitute parenting referred to as kinship fostering (Mbakogu, 2021). Kinship support or fostering, which is a crucial part of the African communal welfare system, could take different forms. It may involve the movement of children to alternative homes offered by their foster parents (Goody, 1982; Hashim & Thorsen, 2011) for their professional development by learning a trade or what is called kinship apprenticeship (Mbakogu, 2015, 2021) for educational purposes, to provide additional care in the absence of parental support (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Mbakogu, 2015, 2021), or for health reasons. However, the cultural practices informing the movement of children away from home are gradually misappropriated by family members, relatives, friends, and other community members, to coerce children away from home into exploitative practices now categorized as trafficking (Mbakogu, 2015, 2021). Regardless of the implication of kinship practices in the trafficking of children (Derby, 2012; Einarsdóttir & Boiro, 2014), the context of children's departure from home is increasingly equated with negligence and exploitation of children by persons within their family, neighborhood or communities.

In the bid to 'rescue' children from their involvement in trafficking, often linked to poverty in their homes, there is a tendency to ignore the political, social, historical, religious, and environmental realities in several African countries that affect the majority - such as the effects of conflicts, HIV/AIDS, and disasters that have created several homes headed by older children, who are responsible for their younger siblings (Pearce, 2011). Children may leave home to access opportunities for their personal benefit (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; De Lange, 2007), including health care, education, and vocational skills (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Mbakogu, 2015, 2021). Ineffective integration of

the role of the family or family relationships in the decisions that children make about leaving home may contribute to the failure of interventions for addressing the problems that survivors face on returning home after trafficking. Family members are usually initial drivers of children's movement away from their homes. Indeed, there are different aspirations for children's movement away from home. In some cases, children are taken away from home for their benefit, which could involve relocating them from rural to urban settings (Mbakogu, 2022) with more opportunities for education (Mbakogu, 2015), and economic activities (De Lange, 2007; Mbakogu, 2015). Children could be convinced to leave home for the benefit of others, in which case children may embark on journeys where they are exploited for sexual or labor purposes (Mbakogu, 2015). Considering the interwoven nature of relationships in African families, unless children were abducted or kidnapped from within or outside their homes, it is unlikely that some family members would be unaware that the children were leaving home for interactions now classified as trafficking. Children's movement away from home does not lead to the severance of family ties (Walmsley, 2008; Whitehead, Hashim, & Iversen, 2007). Families can connect with their children using easily accessible cellphones and WhatsApp calls.

3. METHODS

Children who have experienced trafficking are at the core of this study's design. The study adopted a purposeful sampling technique to select participants across gender, age, educational, religious, ethnic, and class contrasts that moderated their experiences with trafficking. The study relied on Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP) and partner agencies for access to trafficking survivors and their families. Persons eligible to participate in the study were: children residing in anti-trafficking shelters; children who had moved away from the anti-trafficking shelter; and parents, guardians or family members of children who have moved away from the anti-trafficking shelter. Child survivors who were resident in shelters were between the ages of 7 and 17. Some trafficking survivors were over 18 years old at the point of re-engagement, when they narrated their post-trafficking experiences. Child survivors were citizens of Nigeria, Togo, Ghana and Republic of Benin. Over 100 trafficked persons and their identified family members participated in the study.

The study adopted a mix of qualitative data-gathering tools comprising documentary analysis, individual and group interviews and arts-based methodologies such as drawing, drama, music or singing, and storytelling or writing to enable participants to share their experiences. Interview sessions with child survivors of trafficking focused on their reasons for leaving home, experiences of trafficking, shelter services and reintegration processes, and the impact of these experiences on their future aspirations. Family members were also interviewed about their involvement in the child's trafficking journey, from departure to the child's 'rescue' and reintegration processes, including family-child interaction after reintegration. In addition, the researcher gathered perspectives from personnel at ATAs and partner NGOs on human trafficking, and the effects of related policies and programs for the removal and reintegration of survivors.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board prior to beginning the data collection process. Participants were made aware that their consent to participate could also be withdrawn at any point during the research process. To foster participant confidentiality, numbers or aliases were used to identify child and adult participants in the study. Interviews with trafficked children and their family members, were organized and analyzed to provide themes that reflect narratives of their experiences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings and discussions build on the narratives of participating children to show the range of activities that are categorized as trafficking, and the range of persons implicated in the child's departure from home: initiators, those involved in and affected by the trafficking activities.

4.1. Understanding Contexts for Children's Journey Away from Home

There are different contexts for children's entry into trafficking. Children should not be perceived as unable to speak to their trafficking experiences and in need of researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and celebrity poster persons to speak on their behalf. The researcher found that children exhibited a form of release when they were sought out and provided with spaces to share their stories and suggest ways to raise awareness among potential at-risk persons or prevent the persistence of similar occurrences. Although children may be potentially 'rescued' from trafficking and brought to transit places or shelters, the nature of their departures from home, offers insight into the differences in their within-trafficking experiences which may require the application of different reintegration decisions. In essence, reintegration should not be a one-size-fits-all approach, where some children are returned (willingly or unwillingly) home, and socio-economic support is provided for a few. Children's narratives provide themes that offer insight into reasons for their departure from home, some of which move beyond the general notion of poverty, to false promises, violence, kidnapping, and the search for employment, all of which are exploited by traffickers who may be persons familiar to them.

4.1.1. Too Innocent for Callous Reality Checks

Annabelle who is 17 years old, shared how she sought employment with her 16-year-old cousin as salesgirls in a hotel in a different region of Nigeria. The contact for the salesgirl position was a close friend and neighbor whom they had no reason to distrust. Annabelle sought employment to attend to her own needs and those of her mentally ill mother. She said she could not leave those responsibilities solely to her grandmother. She lived in the family house with her mother, and her relationship with the uncle who would have helped was strained.

> *Yes, when we came, they brought us to the X hotel. We were thinking it is a hotel not a brothel. When we reached there, we spent the night there. Then the next day, they asked us to leave our things in the room and took us to another room. The person that brought us told us that the job is no longer a salesgirl position, that things have changed. So, we were now like what is the new job because we don't want to do any other job and want to go home. They were now like we cannot go home because they have paid 300,000 Naira each on our head. They took us upstairs and locked us. I didn't know what the woman and the man were discussing. Afterwards, the woman opened the door for us to come down but did not tell us where we were going. Our things were in the room we slept in the first night.*
>
> *They said we should leave our phones in the room. The woman said she will collect the phone later. They now said we should bathe. We bathed and changed to our underwear.*

Annabelle explained that they left home without informing anyone of their plan. They hoped to surprise everyone on returning home after having earned some money to rent an apartment and attend to their needs. Unfortunately, the salesgirl position was non-existent, and they were prevented from returning home as they were told that some money had been collected by their friend for connecting them with the owner of the brothel, debts they were expected to repay through the exploitation of their bodies.

4.1.2. False Promises

The story shared by 16-year-old Nancy illustrates a different trend that falls within two themes of departures from home. Nancy was having private chats with a 23-year-old man. She did not disclose this relationship to her mother or siblings. When the man invited her to his home to pick up the gift of a smartphone, she only shared this with her schoolmate, who encouraged her to visit his home to collect the smartphone.

> *The boy is 23. So, we were chatting, but at that time I didn't have a smartphone, and this boy promised to give me a smartphone that I should collect. But I refused at first. I didn't know who to speak to because at that time my mom and I were not on good terms. He says he is done with his university and staying with his parents. He was staying with his friend, but he lied to me that he's staying with his parents. When I got to the house, it was his friend's place but at that time no one was in that house. So, he gave me the smartphone. It was getting late in the evening. He now offered me a drink and suya. After I ate and drank that day, that's how I slept and the next day I saw myself in Lagos. So, I asked this boy, "What am I doing in Lagos?"*

Nancy's visit to his home revealed that the young man had lied about several things, including living with his parents (a lie that Nancy believed as it made her comfortable enough to visit his home). While Nancy received the promised smartphone, her food and drinks were laced with drugs, and she never made it home. Nancy had no reason to leave her caring home environment. She made the wrong decision in hoping to receive a smartphone from someone she barely knew. She also left home without informing her family or providing them with the location or contact details of her male friend.

4.1.3. Kidnapped

Nancy's experience draws attention to an emerging pattern in trafficking journeys, where children are forced to leave home after being kidnapped or abducted by familiar or unfamiliar persons (Mbakogu, 2015). Nancy was drugged, forced to sleep and wake up in a different part of Nigeria.

> *He told me that I should follow him to buy clothes to open a boutique. I said, but you had not told me about these things before. I was now disturbing this boy that he should take me back home. He said, since I am disturbing him that he will put me in a vehicle that will take me back to Benin. This boy put me in a private vehicle that was taking me out of the country to Burkina Faso. When we were on the way, I asked the driver, "Why are they speaking French here?" He told me that in some parts of Lagos, some people are close to the nearest country, so they speak French. I kept quiet. But at that time, I was afraid. That was how the journey continued for four days. They also added a girl in the vehicle with me. She was kidnapped by this minibus too. So that's how I became very afraid.*

The underage girl pleaded to be returned home to her family. However, her abductor put her in a vehicle that was not heading to Benin, Nigeria, but Burkina Faso. She was also shocked to find another girl enduring similar circumstances as her travel companion on the four-day drive to Burkina Faso.

4.2. Understanding Contexts for Children's Compliance with the Demands of their Journey Away from Home

Children move away from home and find themselves facing different circumstances. Some children encounter situations that they can control because they are also allowed to decide whether they want to remain or leave. Other children face unexpected situations, as their departure from home was driven by lies and false promises, their escape is facilitated by negotiations, with outcomes that could be positive or negative. Still, other children, face life-threatening situations, where they are forced to comply with their traffickers' expectations, with their escape possibly facilitated by paying off debts they were previously unaware of, or only when they are released following the intervention of law enforcement officers or ATAs.

4.2.1. Forced Compliance

Some children, like 17-year-old Annabelle, left home under false promises of employment and were forced to comply with the expectations of their traffickers, now madams. The penalty for non-compliance was death. This compliance took the form of coerced recruitment into prostitution within a brothel.

> *We started the job. We were told that if we ran away its either we will die, or something will happen to us. They said we were going to take an oath in Benin. They shared condoms. Every day they will give us condoms, tissue and lubricating liquid. They told us that we are supposed to use it to remove condoms and clean ourselves and give it to the customers to clean themselves after sex.*
>
> *So, any man that sees you and likes you will ask for the price. The price was 1000 to 20,000 naira for sex. I stayed there for six days. She collects the money. In a day I make like 20,000 Naira - 30,000 Naira. By sleeping with 10-15 men in a day. Some of them [older girls] will come and give advice. Every girl has her own room. So, you go downstairs somewhere like a parlor and stand, and a man will see you and ask your price. But they said that we should not act like sisters. That we should act like we don't know each other. We were talking to each other but secretly.*
>
> *There was a time somebody slept with me and injured me. The person's penis is too big, and the person was trying to force his penis inside me. I had boil in my private part. My madam gave me medicine. The NGO that I was staying with [after removal from trafficking during the raid], they gave me medicine to treat it. It has stopped hurting me.*
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> *We were still new in that place, so they did not start treating us badly. Maybe if we had stayed long, we would have been treated badly. Sometimes, the madam will ask them to pick pins till the next morning because they did not make much money or because a customer ran away with the used condom.*

Annabelle explained that the madam of the brothel groomed her and her cousin in practices for managing both their personal care and that of their clients. The cousins were also forced to deny knowing each other. At the time of her interview with the researcher, Annabelle remained overwhelmed by the physical impact of one particular sexual encounter, which required additional medical treatment. This treatment was provided by the NGO-managed transitional shelter. Despite the sexual exploitation they experienced during their six-day stay at the brothel, Annabelle stated that they were not treated as harshly as the older girls. Additionally, Amanda's account of being trafficked across national borders also reflects a case of forced compliance.

> *I traveled through a friend to Togo. They were disturbing me with prostitution. I refused, so he came up with an option that I would go to work in a hotel. I started working for my madam. In a day, I sleep with more than five to six men. Then at the end of the day, the next morning, I will count all the money and give it to my madam, and she will give me 2000 CFA.*

Amanda recounted that her close friend tricked her into prostitution by handing her over to a driver who transported her from Lagos State, Nigeria, to Togo. According to Amanda, she later discovered that her friend and the driver were business partners who had sold her to the madam.

4.2.2. Loss of Autonomy

Nancy's account illustrates that a single child's trafficking experience may involve multiple pathways. No child's experience should be reduced to a stereotypical narrative or viewed through the lens of a 'typical' trafficked child. Nancy left home, not because her parents could not provide for her needs, which challenges the assumption that parental poverty drives children into trafficking (De Lange, 2007; Mbakogu, 2015), but because she had begun chatting with a stranger who enticed her with a gift, drugged her, and transported her across regional borders.

> *So, the guy said, "Okay." Then my parents sent the money, so that I can go back to my home. But after the next day, he said that I'm not going anywhere, that I am supposed to work with them here. And he said, I'll be doing prostitution*

over here. So, I told him that I can't do that kind of work, that he should take me back home. Instead, he took me to a woman. She was a Nigerian woman, and the woman said, I should be working for her as a prostitute. Then I spoke to the woman.

Nancy lost all sense of self and independence, and was ultimately forced to bargain for her release. She was fortunate to be granted a phone call to her parents, who were asked to pay her supposed debt in order to secure her freedom. Although her parents sent the money and learned that their daughter had been taken out of Nigeria, the trafficker still intended to sell her to another madam for the purpose of prostitution.

4.3. Understanding Contexts for Children's 'Rescue' From Locations of their Journey Away From Home

The concept of 'rescue' remains contested. Are ATAs and other support organizations rescuing children who actually want to be removed from their situations, and offering services that both they (children) and their families consider necessary and appropriate to justify such intervention? Or are these agencies intervening in the lives of children who did not seek 'rescue' because their situations are negotiated arrangements, based on expected benefits or timelines? Where children are 'rescued' from clearly exploitative situations, both they and their families expect that the children will receive adequate social welfare support to facilitate recovery and reintegration. However, if children who were in nurturing fostering or apprenticeship situations are 'rescued' from these spaces and returned home, then the goals of 'rescue' and reintegration become faulty and impede the psychosocial adjustment of affected children.

4.3.1. Helpless Until a Raid Occurs

Annabelle and her cousin endured six days of forced compliance under their new madam, engaging in prostitution to repay their supposed debt before they could be released. Fortunately, there was an uproar in the neighborhood that resulted in a police raid of the brothel. Aware that she was housing some underage girls, the madam tried to intimidate Anabelle and her cousin into lying about their age.

We were there until police officers came. They came in a group and said they were looking for area boys who stole something. We were sitting outside, eating the bread that somebody bought for us. They [police officers] came inside. The brothel owners asked everybody to stand up and go to the parlor. When we went to the parlor, they told us that if the police officers asked us if we have madams, we should say we don't have madams. They were now like we should say that we are like 20, 21 years when we are asked of our age. We now said "Okay." Then, the madams started denying us, saying that they don't know us. They now brought us to Navy area office. And we were announced by MTN [phone network].

After the raid, their pictures and personal information were posted on social media, a clear violation of their rights, particularly those of minors. They were moved from police custody to a transitional shelter managed by an NGO where medical services were provided. NAPTIP was contacted to verify their case and to process modalities for prosecution and reintegration.

4.3.2. 'Rescued' After Fleeing from Beating

Ruky, aged 13, left her home in Akwa Ibom State after an aunty from the village expressed a desire for a girl to assist her with caring for her daughter in Abuja. Ruky arrived in Abuja and was enrolled in school by the woman. She was in her second year of secondary school.

One day, one of my clothes and her daughter's clothes got missing. They started looking for the clothes. She asked me where I was taking the clothes to. I told her that I don't know where the clothes are and she told me to look for the

clothes. Maybe they got mixed with other clothes. I told her, "Okay, mommy." I scattered all the clothes in the house and didn't see the clothes. When she came back from work, she asked, if I have seen the clothes and I said, "Mommy, no, I haven't seen the clothes." She said, let me tell the truth. I told her that I don't know anybody here that will take my clothes. When she came back from work, she beat me. When she beat me, she beat me with wire, and I fainted. I laid down for almost, five minutes. When I woke up, and saw them moving far away, I ran from the house to one village there, the name of the village is S. I saw a man speaking my tribal language. He asked me what happened. I reported what happened to the man and the man brought me to the police station.

Ruky was enrolled in school as negotiated by her parents but the abuse she endured and the physical scars it left were unbearable. Studies show that children put in kinship care often face severe maltreatment (Abdullah, Cudjoe, Emery, & Frederico, 2020; Mbakogu, 2015; Mbamba & Ndemole, 2021) by their relatives. Ruky felt that if she did not escape, she might die at the hands of her aunty. The young girl was fortunate to meet someone who spoke her language while fleeing. The stranger reported her case to the police, and it was later transferred to NAPTIP. Ruky's experience highlights the misuse of kinship fostering practices in Nigeria (Mbakogu, 2021).

4.4. Understanding Contexts for Children's Reintegration and Recovery from their Journey Away from Home

Children's narratives show different reintegration pathways, some articulated by the children themselves, others proposed by those facilitating their return home or to alternative spaces. Some children can express or negotiate a desire to return to their home of departure, relocate to a different home, acquire professional skills, or continue their education. Considering the limited resources available to NAPTIP, there are constraints to the level of support that can be provided to child survivors seeking alternative reintegration pathways.

4.4.1. Role of NAPTIP in Recovery

Juliette, a family member, shared how NAPTIP enrolled her 17-year-old sister Tracy in a catering school after her return from trafficking and later supported her by procuring a restaurant space and providing the necessary tools:

So, my mom was looking for money to support her. But my mom never had money to support her before NAPTIP came into the picture. So, they [NAPTIP] helped my sister by opening a restaurant for her. They did a lot of things for her. They bought some things for her, for the restaurant. When she told us that, that was what NAPTIP did for her. we had to thank them for the wonderful things they did for us.

The family expressed gratitude for the support received as their mother lacked the funds to help her daughter pursue her dream of opening a restaurant to help reduce memories of her past encounter with trafficking. On the other hand, 15-year-old Rachel, expressed to NAPTIP her preference to acquire vocational skills:

So NAPTIP took me to their shelter. They asked me what I would like to do. I told them I would like to learn and work to learn some skills, so they took me to an orphanage where I learned, tailoring, shoe and bag making. After that I have to choose between them. Because I love fashion, I chose fashion. I now told them [NAPTIP] that I would go to school. That's why they brought me here.

Her wishes were respected, and through the support of an NGO, she was able to learn tailoring. At the end of the skill acquisition program, Rachel felt that her sewing skills would be better supported with formal education. Again, her wishes were respected and at the time of the interview with the researcher, she was residing in a supported home (with other children) from which she attended school.

4.4.2. Denial and Self-Blame

Some survivors returned home and maintained relationships with relatives or friends who were involved in their trafficking. These survivors held on to the belief that it was not the fault of their traffickers, but rather their own, because they believed the traffickers were trying to help them. This was the case for 17-year-old, Mimi, who was trafficked to Abuja for commercial sexual exploitation by her brother's girlfriend.

> *She came to my house. I told her I was looking for work to do, so she told me that there was work here in Abuja. So, I told the girl that I need to work because my mother is too old to feed me.*

Although Mimi asked for job connections, she expected to be recruited for domestic work. Mimi felt that her desperation for a job made the situation her fault.

> *It's not her fault, oh, because I don't want these people to catch her. It is not her fault because I am the one who begged her to bring me here. Even if I do the work, the prostitution work, the money is my own.*

Mimi justified her claim that it was not the trafficker's fault by noting that the money earned from prostitution belonged to her. It is difficult to understand why Mimi, who had recently been 'rescued' from trafficking in Burkina Faso, a situation known to her brother's girlfriend, would defend someone who had deceptively recruited her for further commercial sexual exploitation under the pretense of domestic work in Abuja. Following Mimi's initial 'rescue,' from trafficking, the reintegration process should have been holistic, taking into account the context of her lived realities (Hynes, 2010; Ramachandran, 2019), and designed to reduce her vulnerability to re-trafficking, as also emphasized by Golo and Eshun (2019) in a study with participants in fishing communities in Ghana. Amanda, likewise, defended the friend who had deceived her into travelling to Togo for sexual exploitation, stating that he remained close to both her and her brother. Like Mimi, she claimed: *"It is not his fault."* This raises the question: what constitutes effective reintegration for children who are still in denial and self-blame, and must return home to live and interact with persons who initiated and possibly benefited from their exploitation during trafficking?

4.4.3. Role of Family in Recovery

If children must return home after trafficking, then discussions between transit points after the 'rescue' should ensure that their homes are places that support their return (Mbakogu, 2015). It is counterproductive to return children to homes that are triggering, where their aspirations are crushed, and each day reminds them of what they have lost or who they might have become. Juliette narrated how the entire family committed to supporting 17-year-old Tracy as she launched her restaurant.

> *Because I'm the one that's very close to her. So, my mom was the one that helped her, that supported her. When she came, she told me she didn't think she could concentrate anymore. So, my mom said she would help with any little she had. Before she left, she already knew how to bake (catering stuff), and anything related to catering. I help her serve customers, wash plates, and clean the restaurant.*
>
> *Yeah, my mom was a trader, so sometimes if she didn't want to go to the market, she would come to the shop and join us there. But she is no longer alive.*

The family recognized that ensuring the restaurant was functional would contribute to their younger sister's recovery. They felt an added responsibility to support her, as their mother, who would have led this role, had passed away, and they did not want Tracy to be reminded of this additional loss.

5. CONCLUSION

The narratives of child survivors demonstrate that understanding trafficking and its contexts requires the participation and guidance of survivors or others with lived experience of the issue. Survivors should be key

contributors in framing reintegration processes, rather than being tokenized merely as people who were 'rescued' from trafficking and returned home as the presumed end goal of reintegration or family reunification. When survivors of trafficking are actively included in guiding anti-trafficking efforts and advocacy, we cultivate a diverse pool of persons with lived experiences of recruitment into various forms of trafficking activities that will inform policy and program design. Furthermore, the idea of 'rescuing' trafficked persons is problematized for its failure to understand trafficking from the perspectives and cultural contexts of those being 'rescued' and returned to their homes (Countryman-Roswurm, 2015; Mbakogu, 2015). Such returns, when handled without cultural and contextual sensitivity, may be traumatic for affected survivors.

Interventions that are adopted to address child trafficking especially in West African countries when rooted in the 'rescue' model, become built on individualistic notions of care. These models neglect the collective foundations to life, adjustment and recovery of survivors and their families within their communities of belonging. This calls for an approach that understands survivors and their problems within the complex social, familial, and communal structures that moderate their entry into trafficking. This paper does not dismiss the laudable efforts made by ATAs to remove children from trafficking and support their reintegration. Rather, it argues for an expanded and inclusive framework that accounts for the stages of recruitment, children's involvement and journeys during trafficking, their removal, interactions with anti-trafficking professionals or agencies in shelters or transitional spaces, reunification with family members, and their eventual societal reintegration and recovery. Regardless of the model or framework used to address trafficking in Africa or elsewhere, the scope of interventions should be broadened to reflect the effects of trafficking on survivors, their family members, and the communities into which they hope to be reintegrated, including dependent children, where applicable, for survivors of sexual exploitation.

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