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Trafficking and Exploitation of Children in Fragile Environments: Is Prevention Possible?

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Abstract

Children's vulnerability increases and child protection systems are weakened in fragile states due to fragmentation of services and severe resource gaps. In the pursuit to identify and recommend preventative interventions, this study presents the multifaceted and transnational connections between, and mechanisms behind, child exploitation and trafficking and fragile states. The causes of exploitation in fragile contexts are best understood using the socioecological approach. Within this approach, protective factors such as school and parents can be risks in certain circumstances. Thus, in developing prevention interventions, both protective and risk factors should be assessed and analysed together. In addition, findings of this study show that effective responses to child exploitation and trafficking in fragile environments can be ideally found within these environments. In conclusion, acts of child exploitation and trafficking in fragile states are not always random, but they can be predicted. If they can be predicted, then they can be prevented.

Key implications for practice

- Fragility, conflict and exploitation present critical development and child protection challenges.
- Exploitation transformation requires a response to the consequences and simultaneous engagement with the root causes and prevention mechanisms.
- Prevention and early interventions for exploitation in fragile contexts call for the creation of effective synergies and mainstreaming of child protection with other sectors and related issues.

Keywords: child exploitation, child trafficking, fragile states, prevention

Introduction

Conflicts, disasters and fragility worldwide have impacted negatively on children's lives and overstretched child protection systems in different countries. Trafficking in persons, also widely referred to as human trafficking, as a part of transnational organised crime is a global challenge, and it flourishes in fragile and insecure states, subsequently posing threats to stability, security and human rights. In addition, in fragile and insecure contexts, threats to children being exploited and trafficked present particular challenges requiring innovative responses (Locke, 2012) and preventative multilevel and multisectoral actions (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2021).

Article 3(a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (2000) defines trafficking as "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of

force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving and receiving or payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at minimum, the exploitation of prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs".

Several studies on fragile states and contexts reveal the connection between human trafficking and fragile or conflict-affected contexts being multifaceted and transnational (Ali et al., 2014; Cockayne & Walker, 2016;

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Submitted: 20 January 2021 **Revised:** 05 August 2021
Accepted: 29 December 2021 **Published:** 31 May 2022

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How to cite this article: Warria, A., (2022). Trafficking and Exploitation of Children in Fragile Environments: Is Prevention Possible?. *Intervention*, 20(1), 5-13.

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
www.interventionjournal.org

DOI:
10.4103/INTV.INTV_1_21

Gozdziak, 2021; Shelly, 2010). The vulnerability of conflict-affected and fragile states may provide conducive conditions for transnational organised crimes to flourish (Miraglia et al., 2012). Koester et al. (2016) looked at donor support in fragile contexts and their recommendations include addressing chronic underinvestment in gender, strengthening coordination between donor agencies and government, by ensuring programmes address root causes of inequality and fragility as well as the complex links between gender, conflict and fragility. Gender and fragility have been addressed by Dudwick and Kuehnast (2016) in their recommendation of reimagining and rebuilding fragmented structures as “openings for renegotiating gender roles and establishing the basis of an inclusive and more stable society”. McLean and Modi’s (2016) study recommended a multilevel empowerment approach that takes into consideration the socioeconomic and personal realities, expectations and aspirations of girls when working with them in fragile contexts. In their study on the impact of war/state collapse on Somali men, El-Bushra and Gardner (2016) recommended a policy shift towards a gendered political economy approach within conflict settings. The study by El-Bushra and Gardner (2016) contributes to the argument presented in this study that lives of children in fragile states need urgent priority and the children will never recover unless adults recover too. Realising the impact of conflict on trafficking, in December 2015, the United Nations Security Council held its first ever debate with that focus and sought to understand the connections between the two as well as discuss possible interventions to address the issue.

Child exploitation and trafficking in fragile contexts can be prevented. According to the Global Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR), the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2020), preventative actions can be applied to both preparedness and response phases of humanitarian action in fragile states. This denotes a change, as interventions towards child exploitation and trafficking in conflict settings have been responsive in nature. Against this background, this study contributes to knowledge gaps and debates on child exploitation and trafficking prevention in conflict and fragile contexts.

Children matter in international development because investment in children promotes their survival, enriches their quality of life and it is crucial in developing and supporting broad-based economic growth (Boyden & Dercon, 2012). In fragile contexts, children are among the excluded, fuelling inequality in fragile contexts and subsequently having major repercussions for continued fragility. Child protection in fragile contexts is gaining momentum and has become progressively crucial to global development and security discussions (Ali et al., 2014; Cannent et al., 2010). Fragility is a development challenge globally due to its links with multiple and complex inequalities (Anten et al., 2012; Sweetman & Rowlands, 2016). The impact of the coronavirus on fragile states or

those at risk of fragility and within conflict, humanitarian-emergency contexts has been recently highlighted (Wagner & Hoang, 2020). Sustainable Development Goal 16 aims to create peaceful societies based on inclusive and effective governance and thus it is crucial to tackle challenges presented in fragile and conflict states.

Methodology

This study is based on a desk review of the literature. The aim of the desk review is to understand child exploitation and trafficking in fragile states and conflict areas and how it can be prevented. The goal was not to sketch the state of the art on prevention activities, programmes and policies, but to identify selected approaches that can be recommended.

Print sources and grey literature were searched to identify the available research evidence. Peer-reviewed manuscripts, news reports and reports commissioned by various organisations were reviewed. The initial web-based search for literature was conducted using the following key words: “Human Trafficking AND Fragile States”, “Child exploitation AND Fragile States”, “Trafficking AND Prevention AND Fragile States”, “Exploitation AND Fragile States and Prevention”, “Education AND Emergencies AND Girls”, “Trafficking AND vulnerable children” and “Trafficking AND Child Protection AND Rights”. However, it should be noted that this list is not exhaustive of the key words used. Some of the databases that were used for the search included Science Direct, Google Scholar and PubMed. A grey literature search was also conducted and additional papers were identified from the list provided in the reviewed manuscripts.

The search of the published literature used some elements from systematic reviews, but the aim of the study was not to conduct a systematic review. This is a limitation of this study as the criteria for selecting the literature presented were limited. In addition, only publications written in English were included in the study. This means pertinent studies written in other languages might have been excluded.

Contestation of Definition(s) and the Meaning for At-risk and Exploited Children and Prevention Interventions in these Contexts

The World Bank estimates that more than 800 million people (including children) are residents of countries whose development outcomes have been impacted on by fragility and/or conflict (World Bank, 2014). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; as cited by World Vision, 2012) indicates that currently there are 1.5 billion children who live in either a conflict-affected or a fragile state. According to Holmund (n.d.), 46% of global poor will be living in fragile and/or conflict settings by 2030.

The World Bank (World Development Report, 2011, p. xvi) defines fragile states as “periods when states or institutions lack the capacity, accountability, or legitimacy to mediate relations between citizen groups and between citizens and

the state, making them vulnerable to violence". OECD (2013) further mentions that fragile states lack the ability to facilitate plain governance functions and to advance reciprocal constructive relations with society. Similarly, World Vision (2012 as cited in Delap, 2013, p. 10) says, "fragile contexts may be defined as situations where governments cannot or will not fulfill their responsibility to protect and fulfill the rights of the majority of the population". The definition has been contested in recent years by researchers such as Nay (2012), Schuit and van Dorp (2015) and Sweetman and Rowlands (2016), who have argued that there is no single or standard definition of "fragility", "fragile states", "failed states", "high-risk areas", "conflict-affected", "fragile contexts" and that they are often used interchangeably. These interchangeable terms have different meanings and implications across various fields and the preferred definition is often influenced by the topic being studied, for example, efficiency of public administration, international versus national security, human rights abuses, wellbeing of local populations or legitimacy of government institutions (Nay, 2012).

These tensions also influence the definition of children and their experiences of exploitation and can shape the design of interventions. For example, childhood is defined and understood differently contextually, developmentally and culturally and violence transformation requires acknowledgement of, response to the consequences of violence, and understanding how violence is learned, lived and becomes entrenched in society (Abidi, 2021; Boyden et al., 2012). Likewise, childhood experiences require assessments on the individual mediating factors as well as the social, political, cultural and economic contexts that act as mediators (Warria, 2017; Warria, 2018). Otherwise, some forms of exploitation are rendered invisible and the children fall through the cracks and miss the required assistance.

Interestingly, Cammack et al. (2006 in Bird, 2008, p. 1) argue that the term "fragile states" is seen through the prism of donor priorities encompassing western development, security strategy, stability, role of political marketplace and service delivery, with the definition based on states' functionality, outputs and links with donors. Exploitation and trafficking of children in conflict states are usually viewed through the prism of donor priorities encompassing a focus on girls and women, implementation of western- based programmes and programming based on donor- dictated outputs and links (Anten et al., 2012). Prevention interventions in fragile states that have a narrow focus are not culturally sensitive and/or do not take into consideration contextual realities and historical factors may not be sustainable and can be an impediment to children's wellbeing (Boyden et al., 2012).

The definition and use of fragile states are highly contested especially by governments in the Global South (Schuit & van Dorp, 2015). Nay (2012) argues that most studies on fragility are based on a uniform, one-dimensional examination and analysis of political institutions and embedded in western, developed economies which are

then subsequently transferred to poor conflict-affected countries. This further supports work by Bilgin and Morton (2004) and Hagmann and Hoehne (2009) who criticised assumptions about state uniformity. In an attempt to improve the conceptualisation of the notions of fragile and failed states, four overlapping categories, namely "collapsed state", "weak state", "war-torn state" and "authoritarian state/regime", are suggested in Nay's (2012) article.

On the other hand, there is acknowledgement that fragility is not the only way a state can be defined, as there have been countries that have been peaceful but experiencing economic stagnation (Schuit & van Dorp, 2015). However, Miraglia et al. (2012) argue that definitions of fragile states vary and the two components that feature in most definitions are lack of capacity and legitimacy. A more universal approach that indicates a shift from a single categorisation of states to one that incorporates resilience is needed in assessing fragility. However, for the purposes of this study, the terms "fragile states" and "fragile contexts" are used interchangeably to refer to situations where the government lacks capacity and legitimacy leading to the population's rights being easily violated and not being protected.

Fragility is transnational (World Development Report, 2011). Instability can be due to interconnectedness and cross-border pressures, for example, as a result of civil war in Syria, Boko Haram-generated instability in Chad, Cameroon and Niger, and continent-wide struggles as reported in the refugee crisis in Europe. According to Ridsdel and McCormick (2013, p. 5), "fragility is often closely interlinked to emergencies with periods of crisis commonly followed by periods of fragility, and extended periods of fragility often prevent communities from having the capacity to deal with crisis".

Nonetheless, Nay (2012) argues that the current discourse on failed states focuses on internal characteristics of states and fails to consider external dependencies such as global political and economic structures and historical interdependence, which may contribute to fragility. From a socioecological perspective, examples of this include proliferation of weapons, funding-linked implementation of international laws (CP AoR et al., 2020) and the history of colonisation.

Tracing the roots of exploitation of children in fragile contexts indicates that the intersectional process of "othering", that is, viewing and treating people as different on some basis can create risks with local children being vulnerable to sexual exploitation. These risks emanate from the lack of access to resources that others have and through the convergence of intersecting vulnerabilities and issues such as age, ethnicity, gender and class. Furthermore, globalisation can create inequalities and a lack of balance of opportunities, which can lead to inter and intracountry conflicts, and exploitation meeting the need and demands for cheap labour with use value, exchange value and price value. In all these, race and ethnicity become critical and relevant in trafficking-fragile states-critical studies debates based on:

(1) the construction of women who are of certain races/

- ethnicities as exotic and desirable,
- (2) the construction of underprivileged women of certain races/ethnicities as cheap,
 - (3) the historical and continued patriarchal domination and violence against women of particular races/ethnicities and
 - (4) the economic and social barriers faced by women particularly those of colour (Williamson, 2017, p. 6).

In this way, racist ideologies intersect with sexism to create stereotypes, which are subsequently transmitted and perpetuated by patriarchy, globalisation and exploitation.

Elements within Fragile States that Make Children Vulnerable

As mentioned earlier, fragile contexts are vulnerable environments. However, some hidden opportunities emerge in these kinds of contexts, while some of them are displays of resilience. In addition, even in fragile states, there may be functional parts that if supported could contribute to development and stability (Anten et al., 2012). In-depth discussion of resilience is beyond the scope of this study and thus this section will focus on elements that make children vulnerable. According to Ali et al. (2014), Locke (2012), Messner et al. (2016) and Sweetman and Rowlands (2016), in fragile contexts:

- (1) There is lawlessness as governance is contested, weak or it has broken down;
- (2) There are high capacity deficits;
- (3) Rival factions entice residents and expect resources, financial or military support;
- (4) Where conflict overwhelm and interfere with resource distribution and services;
- (5) The population is unable to claim human rights;
- (6) There is high reliance on nongovernmental and traditional support structures and processes;
- (7) There are major internal divisions, weak infrastructure, high poverty rates and subgroup resentment towards the state;
- (8) There is evidence of social and economic inequalities and hardships;
- (9) Criminal legitimacy is embraced;
- (10) Social capital and networks have been eroded by insecurity and
- (11) It becomes a breeding place for crime as there is no law and order and police protection.

The above cited conditions affect basic effective child protection measures being undertaken (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013), food security and there is disruption to existing state interventions and community support measures (Wagner & Hoang, 2020). In addition, such dysfunctional contexts create ideal settings for child trafficking and exploitation (Sweetman & Rowlands, 2016) and contribute to traffickers and other perpetrators becoming threats to nation building and peace building (Locke, 2012). Recently, Wagner and Hoang (2020) highlighted new forms of trafficking (such a child solders) and new actors (such as peacekeepers as perpetrators) that emerge from such fragile contexts.

According to Locke (2012), governments in fragile states are classified as corrupt, easy to infiltrate and influence and in competition - which subsequently influences transnational organised crimes. Corrupt states do not have viable economic opportunities and trafficking networks transact with government officials in businesses. Secondly, the state leadership *is captured* and it becomes a criminalised state in which the leaders are part of criminal activities, as they dedicate state resources to the criminal projects. Thirdly, when in competition, the trafficking networks are openly at odds with the state and they provide public services and stability through armed force and other activities that further undermine the state. The aim of any or all of these strategies is to show vulnerability and weakness of the state. The criminal networks often do not rely on one strategy as they pursue multiple strategies, simultaneously, to ensure high-risk mitigation. In addition, their ability to adjust and transform is a characteristic “of their business model and must be anticipated regardless of the context . . . they can form, dissolve, and create new partnerships as opportunities arose and challenges shifted” (p. 4-6).

Trafficker risks are twofold, that is, judicial and economic. These risks limit exposure to arrest and prosecution when guaranteeing extreme success and profits. To counter these risks, high priority is placed on trust, diversification of products/services and on use of entrenched social networks to facilitate transnational organised crime business. In her study on globalisation and trafficking, Williamson (2017, p. 6) indicates that corruption and organised crime groups influence the trafficking industry with trafficking perpetrators getting away due to their corrupt links with various frontline officials such as police officers. Free sexual and labour services from trafficked victims are used as bribes. The lack of an effective and efficient legal framework aids the activities of perpetrators and their illegal crimes. These aspects need to be considered when developing prevention interventions on child exploitation in fragile contexts.

Results: Child Exploitation and Trafficking in Fragile Contexts

Questions have been asked if trafficking is a cause or an effect of fragility (Miraglia et al., 2012). According to research by Schuit and van Dorp (2015), human rights abuses may intensify conflict which leads to continued human rights abuses. World Vision (2012) conducted research in five fragile states and reported that there is an increase in child protection risks in these settings, with children being vulnerable to child labour, sexual abuse and early or forced marriages. Research findings by Schuit and van Dorp (2015) and World Vision (2012) support earlier research by Plan International (2011) on the impact of disasters on girl children especially in Ethiopia and Bangladesh. Children are at risk of being abused and exploited in fragile states as child protection measures become nonexistent or are strained (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013). This section discusses select causes of exploitation in fragile contexts using the socioecological approach when noting both risk and protective factors. This is because protective factors

can also be risks and thus they should be assessed and analysed together, where possible (CP AoR et al., 2020).

Child exploitation and trafficking in fragile contexts is influenced by global criminal expansion (e.g., diversification of trading routes, ease of communication) and social fragmentation (weak interpersonal ties and social capital; creation of kinship-based criminal organisations). In addition, social and economic inequalities and a poor functioning state (i.e., public sentiments tolerance in the absence of other economic activities) fuel exploitation. Criminal legitimacy (i.e., trafficking as a coping mechanism in poor rural or marginalised urban areas with scant government presence, socioeconomic hardships or trafficking as a means of survival acquiring legitimacy) facilitates exploitation of children in fragile state (Ali et al., 2014; Warria, 2020; Williamson, 2017).

Although there is a clear link between forced/early child marriages and exploitation in fragile contexts, policy makers are not giving it the attention it deserves (Lemmon, 2014). Nine out of 10 countries on the OECD list of fragile states have the highest child marriage prevalence (OECD, 2013). Fragile contexts become ungoverned spaces of diminishing choices. It is worth noting that not all early marriages are forced, nonconsensual and exploitative in nature. For acts of sexual violence and forced/early marriages to be looked at as trafficking, the following conditions should be evident: violence and abuse, a life of bondage, lack of consent, economic transactions, violation of rights and socioeconomic vulnerabilities (Kakar, 2020; Warria, 2017; Warria, 2018). For example, families might sell assets or enter into exploitative bargains to survive such as “famine brides” in Uganda. Children are at risk of families’ coping strategies such as economic survival through child/forced marriages in exchange for money or other resources (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013; Sweetman & Rowlands, 2016; Warria, 2017) or as a means to protect the girl in unsafe contexts. Forced exploitative child marriages may physically protect the girl, but on the other hand, it violates her rights, reinforces poverty, limits academic aspirations and future economic opportunities and stagnates economic progress (Lemmon, 2014, p. 3).

According to McLean and Modi (2016) and Ridsdel and McCormick (2013), a key risk for girls and young women are the diverse forms of sexual violence perpetrated. Sexual violence as a weapon of war has been used in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Bosnia and Rwanda to destabilise communities, frighten and destroy identity, dignity and existing social fabric (Baaz & Stern, 2013; Smith-Spark (n.d.); Van Wieringen, 2020). Furthermore, in many of the fragile contexts, the poor infrastructure and limited public transport make navigating the setting dangerous as it requires girls to negotiate crowds, small alleys and poorly lit spaces where few know them (McLean & Modi, 2016; Pereznieto et al., 2017). This can also be a risk to girls accessing education. Therefore, families decide to keep girls at home to ensure that they are secure, as is the case in Nigeria with Boko Haram abducting girls from schools (Abayomi, 2015). In

Sri Lanka, parents kept children at home instead of sending them to school to avoid the children being recruited into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and avoid the “divisive curriculum that demonised the ethnic other and inequitable access to education based on ethnicity and class” (Levi, 2019, p. 3). Girls are also married off so that the husband and his family can physically protect her and provide for her financially. In addition, sometimes marriages are arranged to “save the honour” of alleged or actual rape survivors (Lemmon, 2014).

Trafficking for body parts has been reported in fragile states. Body parts are trafficked out of and through conflict-affected areas (Cockayne & Walker, 2016). Recent reports have highlighted the harvesting of migrants’ body parts in North Africa in inhumane ways and without the migrants’ consent.

Human trafficking has been used as a military strategy. Children are recruited by armed groups and used as soldiers, sex slaves and in supporting bondage roles such as cooks, porters, lookouts and intelligence gatherers (Cockayne & Walker, 2016). Children are attractive because they are less likely to question orders, are unable to discern the nature of acts they perpetrate or subsequent consequences due to age thus susceptible to indoctrination. Furthermore, their small size and agility makes them good candidates as spies and decoys, as a source of easy replaceable labour, and the army might not want to hurt them based on their perceived innocence as children (Bird, 2008). Children have been recruited into armed forces in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Uganda and Chad and the recruitment can be voluntary or forced. Even if it is not forced, few have any alternatives but to join the forces especially if their current situation is dire, that is, livelihood strategies aimed at basic survival (Bird, 2008; Stites & Bushby, 2017).

Children can also be sold by families out of hunger and poverty and with some forces actually paying the families wages. Multinationals operating in fragile areas are of particular concern in relation to human rights abuse, for example, business activities benefit or support certain parties to the conflict such as obtaining and supplying resources from rebel-held territory. Victims face major obstacles to access justice such as high legal costs, complex corporate structures, challenges in gathering evidence and reluctance of home countries to exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction over violations perpetrated in countries of operation (Taylor et al., 2010).

Poverty can be a driver of child trafficking. Survival in fragile contexts is harsh. Families have limited capacities to either provide for or to take care of their children (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013). There are extraordinary levels of unmet basic needs for people in the form of commodities and essential services. Limited economic opportunities for both the children and their caregivers and weak social institutions to protect the children increase their chances for sexual violence. The children end up being observed as potential economic earners either through labour or in early marriages. For example,

a child is “developmentally” protected by being married off early and the family benefits financially from the bride price (Warria, 2017). The child may also start engaging in transactional sex to survive (McLean & Modi, 2016). The child becomes a commodity that can be exploited for sex, labour or other slavery related activities. These norms and practices should be contextually understood and the responses must protect and uphold the children’s rights and dignity (Sweetman & Rowlands, 2016).

The state might have a strong legislative framework, but issues of low resource provisions and lack of capacity to use resources might hamper the care and protection of children (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013). An example of this could be the human smuggling networks in Kenya. Mombasa and Eastleigh in Nairobi have been identified as hubs for smuggling, trafficking, child prostitution and other forms of forced labour, with links to Somalia and the refugee camps in Kenya (Miraglia et al., 2012). Exploitation that takes place within refugee reception centres and camps renders the child protection system ineffective. Exploitation in spaces that are supposed to be safe indicates that vulnerable populations fleeing conflict can become easy victims of trafficking.

In times of fragility, justice systems weaken and often lose legitimacy. Communities may look at culture as a way of protecting children and may ignore the existing legal framework during times of fragility. In addition, weak penalties and nonexistent law enforcement allow communities to disregard formal laws (Lemmon, 2014) and make perpetrators even more brazen such as in the case of *The Prosecutor versus Alfred Musema* (case number: ICTR-96-13-T in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda court). Musema, a director of Gisovu Tea Factory in Rwanda, transported armed attackers, including his employees, and ordered them to attack Tutsis. He took part in the killings and acts of rape.

Bird (2008) introduces the notion of education paradox and discusses education as both a mitigator of and a contributor to conflict and fragility in states simultaneously. Ideally, schools can be safe havens and offer protection, advance economic development, strengthen humanitarian action, contribute to state building and security and mitigate the impacts of the conflict (Winthrop & Matsui, 2013). However, learning centres can be agents of indoctrination and recruiting grounds (Bird, 2008) and part of repressive regimes giving rise to silencing (Levi, 2019).

Education is one way to transform conflict and gender inequality within a society, that is, transformative potential of education in conflict. Education planning should therefore be a core protective component when planning programmes in fragile contexts as it can provide physical protection, psychosocial protection and cognitive protection (Bird, 2008).

According to Shah (2016, p. 1-2), children in fragile states are

extremely vulnerable as they depend on a strong protective environment to ensure their safety, devel-

opment and wellbeing. During emergencies, the protective environment or the layers of the child’s ecology that support and influence children’s development, can be weakened and unbalanced thereby affecting normal development.

Violations of child protection have immediate, medium-term and life-long negative consequences for children but they can also affect the ability of the communities and families to be resilient and cope with conflicts in future (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013). This is based on the socio-ecological model as a conceptual framework that views child development and wellbeing (and violence/exploitation) as dependent upon contextual factors such as family, community, sociocultural, economic and political influences and the services and structures that surround them (CP AoR et al., 2020). All levels are interconnected and interdependent.

Implication for Preventative Interventions

According to Sweetman and Rowlands (2016, p. 337), development, humanitarian work and social work interventions in fragile contexts should have a dual focus that is in relation to both people (children included) and the institutions they are contingent on. The purpose of social work in fragile contexts should be a three-pronged, supportive approach that empowers children, their families and communities in ways that support and empower the state and other institutions to realise good governance aims of respecting human rights and creating settings where stability and security prevail. Based on the socioecological model, it is crucial to note that at each level, there are risks and protective factors that can influence children’s protection, development and wellbeing (CPAoR et al., 2020). These need consideration when developing prevention strategies and interventions for exploited and/or trafficked children in fragile contexts. Grounded on a system strengthening approach, prevention and early interventionists should ensure that no matter how broken and/or fragmented a part of a system is, all parts of the child’s system are taken into account in addressing the child exploitation and trafficking risks.

Child protection in fragile states relies on customary laws which in many contexts do not prioritise children (Ridsdel & McCormick, 2013), or it trumps formal law especially in circumstances where the state’s reach and influence have collapsed (Lemmon, 2014). That said, preconflict informal actors could still be identified to assess their influence and consider their contribution to solid child protection services. This calls for assessment on what might still be in place and supporting that for further development (Anten et al., 2012).

In countries where there are laws to protect children, institutional breakdowns and lack of a framework or case management system exacerbate child exploitation and trafficking. Countries should have knowledgeable, dedicated, child protection experts and child protection action plans which speak to times of fragility and conflict that the country might experience. This also includes building a (community-based) workforce that is resilient

and one that is able to protect children even during times of fragility. Children can be resilient and research shows that children's experience can change from negative to positive development trajectory and outcomes, especially if they receive positive input in the form of nutritious food, trusted responsive and nurturing caregiver(s) in the community, and access to education and psychosocial stimulation through play and other activities (Shah, 2016). In addition, it calls for the creation of effective synergies and main-streaming of child protection and child trafficking/exploitation prevention with other sectors and other related issues (Girls not Brides, 2017). For example, considering children's safety and wellbeing in other services such as attention to the distance from schools (and flexi-learning hours), water and sanitation, ensuring families basic needs are met and working with families and communities to encourage cultural norms which protect children and addressing those that influence child trafficking.

According to Koester et al. (2016), policies and programmes in fragile contexts should address the complex links between childhoods, conflict and fragility. This calls for a greater understanding on how childhoods are shaped not only by conflict but also by a wider set of fragility issues. Thus, "understanding the strategic significance of children in relation to long-term peace and security requires the protection of children's rights to be centralised as a foundational indicator for global peace" (Abidi, 2021, p. 7).

Violence transformation on issues of exploitation and trafficking in conflict situations still requires partnership and contributions within the African relational framework of *Ubuntu*, that is, everyone is seen, appreciated and connected to one another. Children are central within a relational framework as their viewpoints, lived experiences are unique in comparison with that of adults, and they can identify and communicate risks, needs and key actors that are crucial in prevention approaches.

Policy responses to trafficking must be framed locally. In conflict situations, trafficking is driven by local communities' sense of who offers them protection. Therefore, traditional development and criminal justice approaches will yield short-term gains as opposed to structural incentives and power dynamics where illicit trade of trafficking thrives. The strengthening of connections between state structures and traditional societal structures is imperative. The robust ties between customary and statutory structures and systems can dissuade families from taking part in exploitative activities or assist them to improve their understanding of vulnerability and potential resilience to trafficking threats (Locke, 2012, p. 14).

Social protection can tackle socioeconomic risks and vulnerabilities and when applied to a fragile context, it requires adaptation (Harvey et al., 2007; Koehler & Mathers, 2017). Families are impoverished by conflict and the circumstances are such that they struggle to look after their children because they can hardly pursue everyday livelihoods. Damage to the social fabric leads

to social insecurity which might then lead to social exclusion, thus restoring social connections in fragile states can be a strategy to protect children. Access to capital, development of value chains and innovations in microfinance and microcredit programmes are also important (Stites & Bushby, 2017). Investigating and implementing innovative programmes to help prevent girls being abducted and married off such as cash transfers or programmes that offer relief to the families and give them greater opportunities can be helpful. An income-based support and social work support where social workers can accompany the roll out of cash schemes like in Myanmar can be adopted as a best practice model (Koehler & Mathers, 2017).

Fragile contexts can provide opportunities for transformative work (Abidi, 2021; Levi, 2019). However, if the work is ineffective, it may end up causing more harm. For example, from a socioecological model, providing services to child victims of exploitation must embrace progressive work with the children, their families and with the greater community to raise awareness on rights, care and protection violations, challenge traditions and social norms that encourage harmful practices. From an advocacy perspective, social workers should condemn efforts by nonstate armed groups to normalise slavery, exploitation and trafficking. Occupational social workers can put pressure on the International Criminal Court to hold corporate managers criminally responsible for severe human rights violations committed by their agents, employees or business partners (Schuit & van Dorp, 2015). It is crucial to include child trafficking as a discussion item with regional organisations and in peace and security documents (Abidi, 2021).

Conclusion

Child trafficking and exploitation in fragile and conflict-affected contexts include a wide variety of illegal dehumanising activities. Many people, including children, survive in fragile contexts by trusting their own efforts, adapting or relying on networks and systems. From a resilience perspective, further research is warranted in this area, focusing on resilient livelihoods (Stites & Bushby, 2017) and children's resilience in fragile environments.

The recognition of the complex nature of child trafficking and exploitation in fragile contexts and conflict-affected areas calls for a wide-ranging, preventative, multidimensional and transnational child protection approach and response. The increase in child trafficking and exploitation in fragile contexts mirrors the changing aspects of social dysfunction, economic and financial opportunism, global integration and governance deficits. Although one single prevention approach cannot address all these aspects, all interventions ought to consider them.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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