Surviving Human Trafficking: A Case for Strengthening the Escape Routes Adopted by Victims of Trafficking in Uganda

Jacqueline Nakaiza*

** Makerere University, Uganda*

Characterized as modern-day slavery, human trafficking has attracted the attention of scholars, legislators and law enforcers in many countries. A major gap in efforts to curb the problem, however, relates to the fact that attention is being paid primarily to legislation; prosecution and punishment of traffickers; and rehabilitation of the survivors of trafficking. Efforts to support people who are still trapped in trafficking situations are generally non-existent. This paper reports the findings of a study that attempted to respond to the need to support these people by generating information on the routes by which victims of trafficking in Uganda escape bondage. Using interviews, data was collected from twenty-six survivors of trafficking on the ways through which they escaped and the factors that supported their escape. The findings showed that the victims of trafficking had escaped by: (a) acquiring the (financial) resources they needed to escape the bondage of forced labor; or (b) getting referred to organizations where they obtained the support that they needed to exit the bondage. Yet, it was also found that information on support for the victims of trafficking is generally unavailable and victims accessed it after they had been bonded in trafficking situations for a while. The paper concludes that the limited availability of this information is a major factor in sustaining the bondage of the victims of trafficking because it ensures that victims are unable to seek and obtain help even if it is available. Hence, the study urges the government, faith-based organizations and civil society organizations providing support for victims of trafficking to expand the reach of information on the support services that they offer.

Keywords: Escape routes; Human Trafficking; Opportunities; Strategies; Surviving; Victims

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, a rapidly expanding body of literature has emerged on the subject of human trafficking (Adepoju, 2005; Lee, 2007). For instance, while writing on best practices to counter human trafficking in Africa, Truong and Angeles (2005) reference a rich body of literature and resources. Among others, two key things are prominently discernible from this literature. First, the fact that the problem of human trafficking is intricate, horrendous and rising. Human trafficking is intricate because it touches on a wide range of issues including, as Truong and Angeles (2005) observe, migration management, crime control, labor standards, poverty reduction and communities at risk. According to Nambatya and Gubo (2016: 159), "child trafficking is one of the fastest growing global crimes against children, placing children more and more in danger". Among other authors, Kasirye (2007) expositions the horrendous and rising aspects of trafficking (with specific reference to children in Uganda) thus:

> Children are mainly taken to work as child domestic workers, bar/restaurant attendants, sex workers, strippers, and vendors. Others are taken to work at fishing/landing sites and agricultural plantations, between 25,000-30,000 children were abducted and recruited in [to] the Lord's Resistance Army rank and these children usually suffer a myriad of problems including depression and trauma. Others actually are killed. Cross-border trafficking appears to be increasing. Trafficked children from Uganda are usually taken to Sudan, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and DRC, while others are taken to Dubai, UAE, Europe and America. Trafficked children were subjected to intolerable, inhuman and [the] worst forms of degrading treatment. Children were forced to fight as combatants, kill innocent people, smuggle drugs and work as drug conduits while others were sexually abused many abducted children were involved in other hazardous activities including carrying heavy luggage, ammunitions, wounded soldiers, merchandise and loot. Most children were maimed and suffering from a myriad of psychosocial depression and sexual trauma (Kasirye, 2007: v).

The second theme notable from the literature on human trafficking is that actors at local, national, regional and international levels are working to prevent human trafficking and to liberate its victims from the scourge. In Uganda, for instance, the 1995 Constitution (as amended in 2002 and 2006), The Children Act 2000 (Cap 59), The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2009, The Employment Act (2006) and the National Action Plan for Prevention of Trafficking in Persons in Uganda (RoU, 2020), among other laws and policy instruments, all seek to prevent human trafficking in various ways (cf. Walakira et al., 2015).

The literature further indicates that the intricacy of the problem of human trafficking is multifaceted, considering both the victims and the perpetrators of the

vice as well as pertinent policies and the implementers of these policies (see, for example, Kasirye's (2007) exposition of the assumed role of guardians in facilitating the trafficking of vulnerable children). Thus, actors working towards eliminating human trafficking need quality information about each of these facets, to develop and implement effective panaceas against the problem (Nambatya and Gubo, 2016). To address this need, organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations (UN) and United Nations African Research Institute for the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders (UNAFRI) regularly generate and disseminate information on human trafficking with a view to highlight its increasing magnitude and excesses and to empower policy-makers and implementers to confront it.

In Uganda, this information has been the basis of useful interventions against human trafficking. Notwithstanding these interventions, a notable gap in the information relates to the fact that it focuses primarily on the incidence of human trafficking – describing why and how people are trafficked and victimized. Four country-level studies from Kasirye (2007), Nambatya and Gubo (2016), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (2014) and Walakira et al. (2016), reference this point. Walakira et al. (2016) focus on estimating the incidence of human trafficking, with an attempt at understanding the enormity of the problem of human trafficking and how victims are trafficked from the north-eastern to the central parts of the country. Specifically, their report highlights the scale and nature of trafficking in children; recruitment, transport means and destination of child trafficking; victims, factors contributing to and sustaining child trafficking; knowledge and perceptions on child trafficking; and programs and resources to address child trafficking. On the other hand, in a rapid assessment, Kasirye focuses on the incidence of child trafficking into the worst forms of child labor, discussing in detail the recruitment, transporting, deployment and confinement of trafficked children. Articles by Nambatya and Gubo (2016) and Ondieki (2017) are largely similar in content scope. These and other reports typify Truong and Angeles' (2005: 1) observation that, "in general, the existing body of knowledge about human trafficking serves to raise public consciousness about the issue, but remains insufficient to lend support to a more comprehensive action program for addressing different dimensions of the problem".

In all these reports the current ones on trafficking in the country, little (in some cases no) attention is paid to the strategies that the victims of trafficking adopt to deal with and to escape their enslavement. Consequently, legislation and interventions against human trafficking that are being adopted are targeted at prevention – primarily by prosecution and punishment of perpetrators (cf. RoU, 2009). As Truong and Angeles (2005: 2) point out, "current policy for counteracting human trafficking falls into three categories: (a) prevention and deterrence, (b) law enforcement and prosecution of traffickers, (c) protection of trafficked persons, 'rehabilitation' and assistance in social reintegration".

Scant attention has been paid to the need to strengthen the strategies through which the victims of trafficking cope with and liberate themselves out of

the trafficking. This paper contends that this is an important knowledge/policy gap because despite the indisputable need for preventing human trafficking from occurring in the very first place, people continue to be trafficked. Additionally, owing to the intricate nature of trafficking, many victims may not access formal support mechanisms against the problem, the inference being that they have to navigate their own escape pathways. Moreover, although policy and legislative attention is paid primarily to deterrence, prosecution and punishment, 'profits' emanating from trafficking remain high and risk of arrest and conviction remain low (Fitzgibbon, 2003), which serves to sustain the victimization of people into trafficking. The inference here is that in addition to what is being done to prevent trafficking, greater efforts should be made to strengthen escape routes, so that those who are trafficked could benefit from regaining their freedom.

In that case, governments and others involved in mitigating the incidence of human trafficking, need to strengthen these pathways. However, this need has not been addressed, because information on the coping strategies and escape routes adopted by victims of human trafficking (especially those trafficked locally within their own countries) are generally non-existent. It is within this context that this paper reports on the findings of a recent study that undertook to generate this information, cognizant of the need to "channel the narratives as well as insights of trafficked persons as 'knowing subjects' into scholarly knowledge and the policy field" (Truong and Angeles, 2005: v). Grounded on a tracer study of former victims of human trafficking and actors involved in mitigating the practice, the study presents qualitative data on the coping strategies and escape routes adopted by victims of human trafficking in Uganda. In the discussion that follows, the data is cross-referenced to related literature, legislation and policies. Subsequently, pertinent gaps are exposed and recommendations are articulated.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved 26 participants (see Table 1). These included both males and females who originated from over six districts of Uganda. Most (42%) of them were aged 15 or above, had some formal education – primary (46%) or secondary (31%) – and hailed from single parent-headed households (46%). The geographical spread of the districts from which the respondents originated, which covered all the regions of the country, suggests that the incidence of human trafficking is likely in all the parts of the country. The sample also suggests that trafficking is likely for both males and females, especially teenagers. The modal age group of the sample appears to link the problem of trafficking to child labor in a way that most of the persons who had been trafficked tended to fall in the group that has been deployed in child labor in the country.

Table 1: Profiling of the victims of child trafficking (%, n = 26)

Gender	**%**
Male	58
Female	42
Total	100
Age	**%**
5–10	23
10–15	35
15+	42
Total	100
Origin	**%**
Luwero	8
Iganga	12
Mbale	23
Kyotera	12
Masaka	15
Kabale	8
Others	23
Total	100
Occupation	**%**
Bar attendant	12
Sex worker	23
House girl	27
House boy	8
Petty trader	12
Others	19
Total	100
Education	**%**
Never attended school	15
Primary	46
Secondary	31
Vocation	8
Total	100
Family type	**%**
Child-headed household	11
Married	15
Widowed	46
Single parent	15
Others	12
Total	100

All the participants were survivors of child trafficking. Survivors were characterized using the definition of trafficking given in the United Nations Protocol to Prevent,

Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons and the National Action Plan for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons in Uganda. This includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of threats, use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Therefore, this paper assumes victims of trafficking to be persons who, as Walakira et al. (2016) explain, had been subjected to any of the following: (a) an employer who threatens the person's family if he/she left; (b) isolation from the public by being kept under confinement or surveillance; (c) an employer who confiscates the identity card, academic papers, or travel documents of the person; and (d) bonded servitude.

Participants were identified through snowball methodology. The snowballing started at a non-governmental organization that provides support to victims of child trafficking. This method was extended to three civil society organizations and two faith-based organizations, where survivors of trafficking had been traced. Data was collected during the first quarter of 2017 (January to March). This was done using structured interviews, during which the survivors of trafficking were asked to describe their experiences. They provided details of their backgrounds (before trafficking), the trafficking process, and the strategies and opportunities they exploited to escape the trafficking situations.

Eleven key informant interviews were also conducted with policy-makers and staff of some of the organizations through which the survivors of trafficking were traced. These interviews were conducted with the view to make better sense of the responses that the survivors of child trafficking had provided. To this end, they were conducted after analyzing the data elicited from the survivors of child trafficking. The qualitative data collected was analyzed using content analysis and NVIVO 11– a qualitative data analysis computer software package – and the results were presented following an interpretative and constructivist approach. The study found the general lack of understanding of the concept of trafficking among the key informants as a limitation because a significant amount of time was spent clarifying what constitutes trafficking.

STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES EXPLOITED TO ESCAPE TRAFFICKING

In relating their experiences, the survivors of trafficking described the confinement and vulnerability that held them in bondage. Regarding confinement, at least a quarter of the respondents explained that their captors restricted their movements and interactions with the public. Two respondents indicated that in addition to holding them in an environment where interaction with members of the public was highly restricted, their captors threatened them with physical harm if they contemplated leaving (see the responses cited below).

On the other hand, respondents related their vulnerability from a more familiar

perspective. They described being held under conditions of forced labor after being trafficked. That was primarily because they did not have the means to strike out on their own, to return to where they had been trafficked from or to start new lives in the neighborhoods where they were being held in the trafficked situations (see Table 2).

Table 2: Factors of vulnerability in trafficking situations

SN	Source	Count
1	Ignorance of where I was	9
2	Ignorance of where I came from	3
3	Lack of money (to travel back to where I came from)	17
4	Lack of money (to consider a life of my own)	9
5	Lack of contacts (friendly and familial) that might help	10

Note: N = 26; Multiple responses elicited

In their quest to escape from the bondage of their ordeal, the former victims of trafficking described two main opportunities that they exploited: (a) attainment of independence; and (b) connection to support towards exiting the trafficking situation.

Attainment of independence

The victims of trafficking developed the ability to strike out on their own and they exited from the trafficking situations. Typically, the respondents explained that they obtained money that enabled them to either return to their home villages or to start small businesses and sustain livelihoods of their own. The young people spoke candidly:

> After working for about 4 months, I managed to save 30,000 Uganda shillings which I used to buy a charcoal stove, charcoal, a packet of baking flour, cooking oil, a tray of eggs and other ingredients which I used to start my own rolex business which is similar to the one I was running for my boss. I did not even move very far away from the place where I was working from, so I retained a bigger percentage of my customers (15-year-old boy who had been trafficked from Bugiri).

> I was collecting scrap and I would save my daily earnings in a small savings box. In the evenings I would go to a nearby garage that repairs motorcycles. I befriended one of the men working at this garage and after some time I asked him to teach me how to repair motorcycles. Luckily, he accepted; so, every day after collecting scrap, I would go to this garage and learn about repairing motorcycles. I also learnt [about] the different spare parts and where I can

> buy them easily because my friend would send me to buy them for him from different places, which helped me to get connected to the industry. So, now I am a motorcycle mechanic (15-year-old-boy from Mbale).

> I worked as a nanny for 3 years. In these years I never went back to the village to see my family. My boss was very tough and would quarrel about anything small. But I knew I had a target that I was working to achieve. I was saving all the money I was being paid in a small box. I used not to buy clothes or even send my family money. Actually, they did not even know where I was because we had lost touch. But after the 3 years when I went back for Christmas, I never returned to my workplace. Instead, I went to a lady who I had befriended in the neighborhood where I used to take my boss' daughters for hairdressing. I paid her 1.5M for teaching me and accommodating me. She taught me for 6 months and after the 6 months, because I had learnt hairdressing, she gave me a job. I plan to work here for the next 3 years as I save money to start my own salon (16-year-old girl from Masaka).

It is evident that in the majority of these instances, the respondents raised the monies from the very work in which they had been deployed while under bondage. It is noteworthy that the respondents would leave to continue practicing the same trades, albeit on their own. This usually happened after they were fairly acclimatized to both the trade and the environment in which they conducted this trade, often including or having built a possible client base. The respondents who cited this exit route had been bonded for a period ranging between two and five years.

Connection to support

This pertains to a situation in which the respondent received information from someone who directed them to a place where they might obtain assistance that liberated them from the trafficking situation. This 'connecting' person was typically an acquaintance or neighbor who happened to learn of the victim's plight but also had some idea about where the victim might obtain support. The different respondents narrated their experiences thus:

> Our neighbor was a good lady; she would greet me kindly once in a while. Then one day we had a conversation and I explained to her what I was going through and that my boss would not be happy if she got to know that I had talked to her. Because my boss was not giving me any money, she gave me money for transport, advised me to go and report to a nearby police station and even directed me where to find it. I went to the police station and a police probation officer in charge of family and children took me to a child welfare NGO (15-year-old girl from Kabale).

> One of the girls who used to work close to where I was staying, used to see how abusive my boss was and the way she used to mistreat me. She was 'born again' and used to pray from a nearby church. She advised me to go and talk to the senior pastor of that church. I went there and explained to the pastor what I was going through. He welcomed me and told me to go and bring my clothes and offered me accommodation at the church. He told me to work with the other people who were staying at the church in cleaning that church, washing church linen, washing the chairs and setting up the church for the different services. I have lived here for the past seven months (15-year-old girl from Kyotera).

> When I was in P6, I was forced to drop out of school because my step-mother was mistreating me and I did not have scholastic materials like books and a uniform. So, one of the teachers at school got me a job at his friend's farm in Mubende to go and look after his cattle and goats. But while at the farm, I was working hard and I was also humble. One of the people who used to come to the farm frequently with the boss to supervise, had observed me for some time. He was also a very good man. He called me and advised me to go back to school. He even got me a place and a bursary in a church school. So, starting next year, I will be going back to S2. I am still working at the farm, as I save up money to buy myself the necessary requirements like a mattress, bedding and other requirements (13-year-old boy from Mbale).

It is clear that the above respondents were informed about a place from which they obtained assistance (typically police, civil society organizations and faith-based organizations). Unsurprisingly, therefore, access to information played a pivotal role in creating opportunities for exiting trafficking situations. The respondents were asked to specify when they obtained this information, to gain insights into how likely victims of human trafficking were to have the information they required to avoid or exit trafficking situations. The findings showed that the respondents got the information once they got into contact with the people who gave it to them. They did not know about the availability of this support until they were told about it. This is an important finding, considering that, as indicated in Table 2, their captors endeavored to confine them, thereby limiting their likelihood to learn about the availability of support.

During the key informant interviews, staff of the organizations that helped the victims of trafficking to exit forced labor were asked to explain whether and how they routinely disseminate information on the availability of support for victims of trafficking. The salient responses are captured below:

> We as an organization, our mandate is to support the children and youth who are vulnerable to all forms of exploitation. So, we periodically go to places

> which we suspect to have the victims of trafficking. We sensitize the youth and the community about the programs we offer that can help those who are experiencing exploitation and even those who are at risk of exploitation out of their current situation. Actually, community leaders know our work and many times have referred victims to the organization. We also have specific programs intended for trafficked girls involved in transactional sex and sex workers. These programs are geared towards skilling them (hairdressing, tailoring and baking) to enable them to become financially independent as well as to rehabilitate them psychologically, empower and boost their esteem (Community Development Officer, Uganda Youth Development Link – UYDEL).
>
> The police and other community leaders know our work with protection of child rights. We also invite them to our sensitization meetings periodically which we hold in communities with other stakeholders (Social Worker, African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect – ANPPCAN).
>
> We work with different media houses, newspapers, radio stations and television stations who broadcast community sensitization programs and talk shows with partner organizations on the availability of support services for the victims of trafficking and how to access support for the victims (Family Affairs Officer, Ministry of Gender).

These findings suggest that on the whole, the organizations that provided support to the victims of trafficking do not routinely provide information on the support that they offer in this regard.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The finding that the victims of trafficking exit the bondage of trafficking when they are informed about organizations providing support, corroborates the findings of authors like Bell and Banks (2018: 363) affirming that these organizations "are in a strong position to influence trafficking outcomes and policies". However, since these organizations do not routinely provide information on this support, this finding points to an insight that has implications for efforts to salvage and support the victims of human trafficking. People are held in the bondage associated with trafficking due to information asymmetry between them and their captors, who endeavor to confine them from the public (where they may obtain the information that they need on the availability of support). This observation rhymes well with the studies on human trafficking in Uganda (see for example, Kasirye, 2007; Walakira et al., 2016) wherein the authors conclude that disempowerment arising from the lack of information on support, bonds victims of trafficking in abusive situations.

The finding that some of the respondents had escaped bondage through gaining the financial capacity to strike out on their own, concurs with Truong (2005), who links bondage in trafficking to poverty and vulnerability. While some of the respondents indicated that they escaped the trafficking situations by developing the capacity to get out and survive on their own (typically through devising means of earning a livelihood), promoting this approach to escaping trafficking situations is difficult because of the intricate (in principle cloak-and-dagger) nature of trafficking. It is inherently challenging to reach the persons trapped in trafficking situations, to provide them with the economic empowerment they may need to escape their bondage. In fact, some of the activities by which the victims of trafficking escaped (e.g., prostitution) are deemed maladaptive and illegal.

Despite the practical challenges, the dissemination of information on the availability of support for victims of human trafficking is not impossible. If implemented through the mass media, the dissemination of such information will ensure that the victims of trafficking are connected with the information that they require to obtain support in good time. However, the study found that the organizations that provided support to the victims of human trafficking were not routinely disseminating information about their services. Indeed, a review of the literature on human trafficking in Uganda (in particular the work of Walakira et al., 2016) shows that attention has been paid primarily to legislating against the practice (cf. Republic of Uganda (RoU), 2009), prosecution and punishment as deterrent measures but not on the provision of information that is targeted at supporting the escape routes that those who are already victimized, might benefit from. This observation concurs with Truong and Angeles (2005) who decry the incidence of discrepancies between the needs of the victims of human trafficking and the approaches of organizations working to support them. Therefore, the organizations providing support for the victims of human trafficking in the country (e.g., Uganda Police, civil society organizations and faith-based organizations) are urged to integrate a strong component of public information in their programing, to ensure that persons requiring their support are aware of its availability and means of accessing it. Informing the leaders of these organizations that would-be beneficiaries of their support are not aware of the existence of this support, is an important starting point.

Beyond Uganda, it is recommended that wherever they are in the world, organizations providing support for victims of trafficking, integrate a strong component of public information in their programing. This is because there is ample evidence that the disconnect of the victims of trafficking from support noted by this study, exists in other societies, given the covert nature of human trafficking and the broad syndrome of vulnerability that typifies the experience of the victims of human trafficking.

REFERENCES

Adepoju, A. 2005. Review of research and data on human trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa. *International Migration*, 43(1-2): 75-98.

Bell, S.R. and Banks, V. (2018), Women's Rights Organizations and Human Trafficking. Social Science Quarterly, 99: 362-376. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12396

Fitzgibbon, K. 2003. Modern-day slavery? The scope of trafficking in persons in Africa. *African Security Review*, 12(1): 81-89.

Kasirye, R. 2007. Rapid assessment report in trafficking of children into worst forms of child labor, including child soldiers in Uganda. International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour. Geneva: ILO.

Lee, M. (Ed.). 2007. *Human trafficking*. Oxford: Routledge.

Ministry of Internal Affairs. 2014. Annual report on the trend of trafficking in persons in Uganda: 2013. Kampala: The Coordination Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Nambatya, S. and Gubo, Q. 2016. A comparative study of child trafficking causes between China and Uganda. *Developing Country Studies*, 6(6): 159-170.

Ondieki, J. 2017. Human trafficking and its impact on national security in East Africa: A case study of the vice in Kenya. Unpublished Master's Research Project. University of Nairobi, Kenya.

Republic of Uganda (RoU). 2009. Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2009. Entebbe: Uganda Publishing and Printing Corporation.

Republic of Uganda (RoU). 2020. National Action Plan for Prevention of Trafficking in Persons in Uganda 2019- 2024. Kampala

Truong, T. 2005. Poverty, gender and human trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa: Rethinking best practices in migration management. Paris: UNESCO.

Truong, T. and Angeles, M.B. 2005. Searching for best practices to counter human trafficking in Africa: A focus on women and children. Paris: UNESCO.

Walakira, Bukenya and Nyanzi-Ddumba (2015); U.S. Department of State. 2012. "Uganda," in Trafficking in Persons Report- 2012. Washington, DC; http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2012/ index.htm.

Walakira, E.J., Bukenya, B. and Dumba-Nyanzi, I. 2016. Child trafficking in Kampala, Iganga and Moroto Districts: IRACT Project Final Evaluation Report. Kampala: Terres des Hommes Netherlands.