Knowledge of and Attitudes toward Child Trafficking in Wolaita Sodo, Southern Ethiopia: Insights from the Origin Community

Tigist Solomon[1], Darge Wole[2], and Abebaw Minaye[3]

Abstract

Child trafficking is a serious violation of children's rights under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Research on this issue in Ethiopia is limited, with few studies assessing public awareness and attitudes. This study aims to examine the knowledge and attitudes of residents in Wolaita Sodo town regarding in-country child trafficking using a mixed-methods approach with 448 participants. The research team collected data through structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. For data analysis, the researchers used SPSS 26.0 software, applied descriptive and inferential statistical analysis wherever applicable, and analyzed qualitative data thematically. The findings revealed that the majority of participants (55%) lacked adequate knowledge about child trafficking, with the qualitative results supporting this finding. In contrast, 55.9% of participants exhibited positive attitudes toward child trafficking. A significant correlation was found between knowledge levels and attitudes, with education and personal experiences playing a critical role. Multivariate analysis revealed that individuals with a first-degree education or higher were 3.25 times (1.21-8.81, p<0.05) more likely to possess a good knowledge of child trafficking compared to those who were less educated. Additionally, individuals with trafficked family members had 3.36 times (1.59-6.81) greater knowledge of child trafficking. In a similar vein, participants who had a first degree or higher educational qualification were 2.31 times (1.29-4.34, p<0.05) less likely to harbor negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-trafficking initiatives compared to their less-educated counterparts. Furthermore, individuals with family members who had been trafficked were 0.44 times (0.47-0.27, p<0.05) less likely to display negative attitudes than those without such experiences. Despite their positive attitudes, most participants lacked comprehensive knowledge of child trafficking, highlighting the gap between awareness and actionable understanding. This suggests that positive attitudes may not translate into informed action without adequate knowledge. The study recommends targeted educational initiatives to bridge this gap and improve public understanding and engagement.

Keywords: child, in-country trafficking, awareness, attitude, multivariate analysis, Ethiopia

[1] Doctoral candidate, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Corresponding author. ✉ tgsol1999@yahoo.com
[2] College of Education and Behavioral Studies, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
[3] College of Education and Behavioral Studies, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Child trafficking is a grave injustice that strips children of their rights, safety, and future. "Child trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child for exploitation, regardless of the use of illicit means, either within or outside a country" (UN, 2000). Traffickers prey on children's vulnerability, driven by profit and an industry that thrives in secrecy. The true scale of the problem is difficult to measure, as many cases go unnoticed, leaving many children trapped in cycles of exploitation. It violates fundamental human rights, which are guaranteed to children under international law, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Faulkner, 2023).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) estimates in its 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons that a substantial proportion of identified trafficking victims are children, constituting almost one-third (28%) of identified cases. It remains a pervasive issue across Africa, particularly in East Africa, where poverty, conflict, and weak institutional responses exacerbate the problem. It constitutes a complex transnational challenge, wherein countries function as origin, transit, and destination points for victims. Intra-regional and international migration patterns are exploited, leading to the movement of vulnerable individuals across borders. According to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (UNODC, 2024), in East Africa, children make up 69% of detected victims. Studies have systematically attributed the pervasive issue of child trafficking in Africa — and East Africa in particular — to a constellation of socio-economic factors. For instance, research by Terre des Hommes Netherlands (2024) and Munialo (2018) found that economic hardship, limited educational opportunities, and displacement due to conflict contribute collectively to a situation in which children are rendered particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Such vulnerabilities facilitate their recruitment into forced labor, domestic servitude, and sexual abuse, all of which result in severe physical and psychological trauma, the loss of childhood, and prolonged social exclusion.

Over the past decade, both national and international communities have done a lot in the fight against this crime, with transnational trafficking emerging as a notably critical aspect of the problem (Mapp, 2020). On the contrary, in-country trafficking has not received much attention, despite remaining attractive to perpetrators due to the ease with which children can be relocated without the need for legal documentation. The absence of stringent border controls allows traffickers to operate their businesses at minimal costs (Rahel, 2016; Mengstie, 2018). This issue is especially significant in Ethiopia, where child out-migration is a common practice. For example, in regions such as the Wolaita zone, child trafficking is intricately linked with migration dynamics in which marginalized children, particularly those affected by poverty, displacement, or migration, are disproportionately targeted.

Several studies (e.g., Gecho and Worku, 2018; Kastro and Dullea, 2018; Tadesse and Mengistu, 2021) indicate that southern Ethiopia, particularly the Wolaita zone, has become a major source of child migrants, many of whom face risks of exploitation

and trafficking. While economic hardship, notably limited agricultural resources, small landholdings, and food insecurity, is a key driver (Zergaw and Asale, 2019; Kassa, 2021; Tsegay, 2021), migration is also deeply embedded in the region's cultural and social practices in which families often view migration as a path to economic success, sometimes overlooking the risks involved (Candido et al., 2016).

Children's migration in southern Ethiopia cannot be fully explained through the traditional "push-pull" framework, as it is shaped by complex social and cultural dynamics beyond economic hardship. Their migration decisions are influenced by aspirations, family expectations, peer pressure, institutional structures, and prevailing sociocultural narratives. Research highlights children's agency in migration, showing that they participate actively in decision-making rather than being passive actors. Numerous studies (e.g., Kerilyn and Fransen, 2018; Zeleke, 2020; Genovese et al., 2021; Van der Gaag et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2022; Hitzer et al., 2025) underline children's agency in making decisions related to their migration.

Studies indicate that a significant number of Ethiopian youths express a desire to migrate, with urban centers being the most preferred destinations, reflecting broader socio-economic trends. In this regard, Schewel and Fransen's (2018) analysis of data from the Boyden et al. (2016) longitudinal study in Ethiopia, found that two-thirds of the participating youth expressed a desire to migrate. Among these young individuals, nearly 60% identified specific preferred destinations, favoring predominantly urban areas in Ethiopia. The findings illustrate a clear gradient in migration aspirations, with larger urban centers emerging as the most appealing destinations for young people. This trend reflects broader socio-economic and structural influences on patterns of internal migration.

While some children migrate without parental knowledge (Zeleke, 2020), others are encouraged by their families, often due to financial pressures or the promise of remittances (Gecho and Worku, 2018). Social influences, including peer encouragement and brokers, further drive migration, often without full awareness of the associated risks. A lack of knowledge about trafficking and exploitation increases children's vulnerability to forced labor, abuse, and homelessness (Abraha and Woru, 2021).

Generally, much attention has been given to this issue over the past decade by both national and international communities, as documented by extensive research and literature. While the international trafficking of children to destinations such as the Middle East, South Africa, and Europe is well recognized, in-country child trafficking continues to pose a significant problem. Despite being a lucrative opportunity for traffickers, this form of trafficking remains underexplored and insufficiently addressed by scholars, governmental bodies, and non-governmental organizations dedicated to combating this problem.

Moreover, despite extensive research on child trafficking, most studies focus on its scale, causes, victims' experiences, and government responses, leaving a gap in understanding the knowledge and attitudes of origin communities. This perspective

is crucial in combating child trafficking in Wolaita Sodo, as societal perceptions can either enable or resist trafficking. Without insight into the community's awareness, misconceptions, and attitudes, interventions may prove ineffective. Given the urgency of the issue and the lack of data, this study aims to explore this community's perspectives, assessing the knowledge, prevailing attitudes, and associated factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge of and attitudes toward trafficking

Child trafficking represents a severe violation of human rights, involving the exploitation of children for purposes of forced labor, sexual exploitation, or illegal activities (Skeels and Bashir, 2024). It robs children of their safety, education, and future, often ensnaring them in cycles of abuse and poverty. Despite national and international efforts to combat this crime, child trafficking and migration persist. This is a widespread problem in Ethiopia, driven by factors such as poverty, lack of awareness, and inadequate law enforcement (Mengstie, 2018; Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2023).

Gaining insight into the knowledge and attitudes of communities regarding child trafficking is essential for effective prevention and intervention strategies (Hynes, 2013). Studies (e.g., Kastro and Dullea, 2018) highlight that communities play a crucial role in identifying victims, reporting cases, and providing support to survivors. Thus, by examining their knowledge and attitudes, policymakers and organizations can tailor educational campaigns, strengthen legal frameworks, and enhance protective measures. Numerous studies (e.g., Gezie et al., 2021; Tekalign, 2021) have shown that gaps in knowledge and misconceptions about trafficking, attitudes, beliefs, norms, values, and societal structures contribute to the prevalence of child trafficking in Ethiopia.

Cultural practices, including traditional child fostering, early marriage, and migration play a critical role in shaping children's behaviors and decisions. Many are influenced by peer pressure and societal expectations to seek employment in urban areas, which renders them particularly vulnerable to traffickers who promise them lucrative job opportunities. This dynamic significantly contributes to child trafficking in Wolaita and intensifies the overall susceptibility of children (Gebu and Ararso, 2016; Gecho and Worku, 2018; Kastro and Dullea, 2018). Moreover, poverty and limited economic opportunities elevate the risk of trafficking, while broader issues of discrimination and societal inequalities exacerbate the problem.

Social challenges, such as family conflicts, exposure to violence, low levels of awareness, and limited education play critical roles in facilitating child trafficking (Tefera, 2019; Tekalign, 2022). The movement of children, whether through migration or trafficking, is driven by a complex interplay of economic imperatives and sociocultural norms, particularly those related to gender roles and child labor, which can inadvertently normalize and facilitate trafficking. For instance, Candido

et al. (2016) highlight that migration within the Wolaita community is deeply rooted in cultural and social practices. Complementing this perspective, research by Zewdie et al. (2024) shows that migration is widely perceived as a pathway to achieving economic success and social mobility. In many rural areas, child-labor migration is considered essential for household survival.

However, these cultural norms mask the significant risks that migrant children face. Studies, including those by Van der Gaag et al. (2021), reveal that migrant children are frequently subjected to various psychosocial challenges, such as exploitation and harassment. Moreover, many child migrants endure harsh working conditions characterized by employer mistreatment, underpayment, and frequent breaches of contractual agreements, leading to wages that are often lower than promised or not provided at all (Balcha, 2018; Zewdie et al., 2024).

Research indicates that traffickers play a significant role in placing migrants in exploitative labor conditions, including low wages. The relationship between traffickers and suppressed wages is typically intertwined within a broader network of intermediaries that facilitate labor migration and employment. Traffickers, along with brokers, recruiters, and employers, are often complicit in systems that exploit workers and perpetuate conditions of forced labor. In many instances, traffickers prey on vulnerable individuals, including children, by promising them well-paying jobs. Once these individuals are recruited, they may find themselves trapped in exploitative circumstances where their wages are withheld, reduced, or manipulated to ensure their ongoing dependency. This practice can be part of a larger framework of exploitative labor, in which intermediaries benefit from the vulnerabilities of these workers (Fernandez, 2013; Paraskevopoulou et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a lack of knowledge, education, and community tolerance further intensifies the issue. Thus, understanding attitudes and knowledge about this problem is crucial for identifying misconceptions and empowering communities to recognize and report suspicious activities. The literature suggests that inadequate knowledge plays a significant role in the continued prevalence of child trafficking within vulnerable populations. For instance, Martinho et al. (2021) found that knowledge gaps regarding trafficking processes, including recruitment strategies and victim mobility, were prevalent among the Portuguese community. Similarly, Exeni McAmis et al. (2022) conducted a study examining healthcare professionals' awareness and preparedness in identifying victims of human trafficking. Their findings revealed that respondents generally assessed their knowledge of trafficking as ranging from average to below average.

Numerous studies (e.g., Azage et al., 2014; Botchkovar et al., 2016; Sabita et al., 2021) have shown that vulnerable populations, especially those at an increased risk of trafficking, often have limited awareness regarding the issue. Sabita et al. (2021) found significant gaps in knowledge among participants, with nearly 40% demonstrating an inadequate knowledge of trafficking. Similarly, Davy and Metanji (2022) conducted a survey aimed at assessing the knowledge, attitudes, and engagement of

youth in anti-trafficking initiatives across four regions in Albania. They discovered that 40% of respondents believed that trafficking occurs within the country, while 51% acknowledged its prevalence in foreign nations. This study further highlighted that, although participants had a solid awareness of the risks associated with human trafficking, notable gaps still existed, particularly regarding recruitment strategies and less-commonly recognized forms of exploitation.

Research consistently demonstrates that various factors significantly influence individuals' knowledge of and attitudes toward societal issues. Studies conducted by Davy and Metanji (2022), Cunha et al. (2019), Sharapov (2019), Exeni McAmis et al. (2022), and Wangsnes (2014) highlight the impact of key variables such as gender, place of residence, educational attainment, and socio-economic status on people's understanding and perspectives. These factors not only determine individuals' level of knowledge but also shape their attitudes, responses, and engagement with pressing social concerns. For example, Davy and Metanji (2022), alongside findings from Cunha et al. (2019), indicate that women generally possess a greater knowledge of human trafficking and exhibit more favorable attitudes toward combating the problem, compared to men.

In contrast, Sharapov (2019) and Mobasher et al. (2022) found that men exhibited significantly higher levels of knowledge regarding trafficking than women. Furthermore, research by Mazumdar and Mukherjee (2022) suggests that girls possess limited knowledge about child trafficking. However, other studies have found no significant differences between genders regarding knowledge of trafficking (see Wangsnes, 2014; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022).

Research indicates a positive correlation between educational attainment and knowledge of and attitudes toward child trafficking. In essence, individuals with higher education levels are generally better informed about the complexities of child trafficking and are more likely to adopt critical perspectives regarding its underlying issues. Findings from various studies (e.g., Azage et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2019; Sharapov, 2019) revealed that those with higher educational qualifications possess a more comprehensive understanding of trafficking in persons, including its root causes, prevalence, and ramifications. Building on prior research, Adhikari et al. (2023) further highlight the significant role that sociodemographic factors play in shaping individuals' knowledge of human trafficking. Their findings reveal that aspects such as education level, economic status, and place of residence are linked positively to possessing sufficient knowledge of the issue. This suggests that individuals with greater access to education and financial stability, as well as those residing in more resourceful environments, are more likely to develop a deeper awareness of human trafficking, its causes, and its consequences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employed the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) model as a theoretical framework. The KAP model is a well-established tool for understanding

and predicting human behavior in various contexts, including public health (Poddar et al., 2022), environmental conservation (Wang et al., 2013), education (Wagithunu, 2014; Moti et al., 2016), gender equality (Jahan, 2021), and risk communication (Mushi et al., 2021). In this study, the model is applied to the domain of child trafficking to examine the knowledge of and attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking activities.

The concept of child trafficking knowledge encompasses the information, awareness, and understanding that individuals possess regarding issues related to child trafficking. For example, research indicates that the prevalence of child trafficking in Wolaita zone is linked significantly to a lack of comprehensive knowledge on the problem (Gecho and Worku, 2018). Although there is general awareness of human trafficking among the population, existing evidence does not demonstrate a profound understanding of the severity of its impact on victims' livelihoods and overall quality of life. Lack of knowledge can lead to misinformation and increased vulnerability among at-risk groups (Wangsnes, 2014).

Attitude is an important psychological and social construct in the fight against child trafficking. A community's attitude toward a particular issue encompasses its emotional responses, behavioral tendencies, and underlying beliefs, which may be either positive or negative. In the context of child trafficking, the collective attitude of a community plays a fundamental role in shaping its perceptions about the problem and the victims, responses, and level of engagement with efforts to combat the phenomenon. The disposition of individuals within a community toward child trafficking significantly influences their willingness to acknowledge its severity, support preventive measures, and contribute to interventions aimed at mitigating its adverse effects. For instance, in some communities, exploitative migration practices may be normalized, causing the severity of the issue to go unnoticed due to cultural beliefs (DiRienzo and Das, 2017).

Additionally, Munialo (2018) highlights that cultural acceptance of migration can unintentionally raise trafficking risks, as families might overlook potential dangers. The practice aspect explores the behaviors and actions that arise from knowledge and attitudes, such as prevention strategies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems for victims. The current research focuses specifically on knowledge and attitudes, recognizing that a community's knowledge of and attitudes toward trafficking are vital to addressing the issue effectively. Without sufficient knowledge, awareness, and shifts in attitude, changes in behavior are likely to be limited. The practice component, which explores how residents' level of engagement in preventive practices is the focus of a separate article currently under review in another journal, enables a more comprehensive examination of community responses to trafficking.

METHODOLOGY

Study design and population

A mixed-methods study was conducted in Wolaita Sodo town, the capital of the Wolaita zone, located approximately 380 kilometers southwest of Addis Ababa, from January to April 2022. Based on the 2007 population census by the Central Statistics Agency (CSA), the town's population was estimated at 132,000. This area was purposefully selected, since the town has been characterized as a source of child trafficking to urban centers and, to a lesser extent, rural areas. The study population comprised residents who had lived in the town or had been residents for a minimum period of six months. This population is deemed relevant due to their direct exposure to local issues, with their awareness shaped by community interactions and influenced by sociocultural norms. Their familiarity with trafficking patterns and the contributing factors enables them to offer reliable insights into the ongoing persistence of this problem in the town. Furthermore, they have access to pertinent information sources, which ensures that their responses reflect a well-informed understanding of trafficking.

Sample size and sampling technique

The quantitative study employed a multi-stage sampling technique to select participants from Wolaita Sodo town. This involved the random selection of one kebele (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) from each of the town's three sub-towns, resulting in three kebeles. The researchers then used systematic random sampling to select every 35th individual from the resident lists of these three kebeles, which collectively had 15,476 residents. The sample size for the study was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula, considering the population size and desired level of precision.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$
$$n = \frac{15476}{1 + 15476(0.05)^2} \approx 390$$

Assuming a 95% confidence level and p =0.5, we get the sample size as 390 individuals. In addition to these 390 individuals, the researchers added 15% to the sample size to ensure an adequate sample in case some participants dropped out or provided incomplete information; the final sample size was 448. The selection of 448 households was carried out using a systematic random sampling method to ensure representation from the broader community, rather than targeting only households that have experienced child trafficking directly. The aim of the study is not limited to examining trafficked children or households with first-hand experiences; instead, it seeks to assess the knowledge and attitudes surrounding child trafficking within origin communities. Given Wolaita Sodo's role as both a source and transit hub

for trafficked children, residents, regardless of their direct involvement, were likely to have encountered or developed perceptions of trafficking through community interactions, media exposure, or indirect experiences.

In the study, 448 individuals completed a questionnaire, which was complemented by interviews with two adult and five child key informants, and discussions with eight participants in focus groups. The researchers employed a purposive sampling method to select participants for both the interviews and the focus group discussions (FGDs).

Measures

This study used qualitative and quantitative data collection tools to complement the results from different sources. The internal child trafficking knowledge tool was adopted for this study from items used in the Trafficking Awareness Survey (2003) and Sharapov's study (2019). The researchers took careful steps to ensure its reliability, accuracy, and relevance within the study's specific context. To ensure the study's effectiveness and cultural relevance, the research team translated questions into the local language while preserving their original meaning. The content was modified to fit local customs and beliefs, promoting honest responses. Response scales were adapted to align with culturally appropriate ways of expressing attitudes, enhancing accuracy. The researchers conducted a pilot test with a sample of the target population to identify and resolve comprehension challenges and refine the survey for clarity and relevance.

The instrument has two sections: the first evaluates sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, socio-economic status, years of residence, and education), while the second assesses knowledge of internal child trafficking. Following the initial compilation of items, the structure and validity of the instrument were evaluated using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). A Promax rotation was applied, yielding five distinct factors, which collectively accounted for 66.05% of the variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.82, indicating a strong basis for factor analysis, while the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$), confirming the suitability of the dataset for factor extraction. Additionally, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78, ensuring reliability in measurement.

The principal component method provided initial communality estimates, with five factors having eigenvalues greater than 1 retained in the final solution. The five extracted factors were: knowledge of the definition of child trafficking (24.87% variance; eigenvalue = 3.48), knowledge about the victim's profile (16.92% variance; eigenvalue = 2.37), knowledge about the psychosocial plight trafficked children experienced (8.83% variance; eigenvalue = 1.47), knowledge about the vulnerability to child trafficking (8.50% variance; eigenvalue = 1.23), knowledge about the traffickers (6.91% variance; eigenvalue = 1.15).

Similarly, the child trafficking attitude scale was developed for this study. After initial item compilation, an exploratory analysis with Promax rotation extracted three factors, explaining 64.35% of the variance. KMO was 0.82 and the Bartlett test was significant (p < .001), indicating factorability. The items were face valid and verified by a panel of experts. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .83, which indicates satisfactory internal consistency. Moreover, the study used 11 semi-structured interview guides for key informants, 10 for child interviews, and 10 semi-structured FGD guides for FGDs to facilitate effective discussions and encourage sharing of personal experiences. Moreover, the knowledge items were face valid and verified by a panel of experts.

Data analysis

The study employed concurrent triangulation to embed the quantitative findings with qualitative findings. The qualitative data analysis was done side by side and followed Creswell's (2014) spiral model. The research team initially transcribed and organized data from interviews and FGDs and subsequently conducted a thorough reading of all transcripts to gain an overarching understanding of the data. Concurrently, memos were written to capture initial insights and emerging themes. Finally, the researchers analyzed the patterns and relationships between these themes to draw meaningful interpretations. The research team analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS software, focusing on descriptive statistics and logistic regression to assess the association between variables while calculating odds ratios at α 95% confidence interval (CI).

Ethical considerations

Before the study, participants or their guardians provided informed verbal consent after the researchers briefed them on the objectives. The research team interviewed only those who consented and collected data anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The study obtained ethics approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Addis Ababa University to protect participants from potential harm.

RESULT

Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants

Out of 448 study samples, 444 participants completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 99.10%. As shown in Table 1, among the respondents, 269 (60.2%) were male, 103 (23.0%) had completed high school, 18.8% had post-secondary training, and 7.2% had first degrees or higher. The demographic analysis reveals significant insights into the socio-economic characteristics of the study participants. The majority (53.2%, or 238 participants) reported a monthly income ranging from 2,600 to 6,500 ETB, indicating a concentration within this income bracket. Additionally, the majority (92.9%) had resided in the town for over four

years, suggesting strong community ties and potential familiarity with local socio-economic dynamics. In terms of self-perceived socio-economic status, a notable distribution emerged: 15.4% considered their status better than most people, 45.6% viewed it as comparable to the majority, and 29.3% perceived their socio-economic status to be in a lower position. These findings underscore the varied economic experiences within the community and highlight the importance of socio-economic factors in shaping individual and collective perspectives.

**Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants**

Variable	Label	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	269	60.2
	Female	175	39.1
Education level	Illiterate	70	15.7
	Read and write only	86	19.2
	Grades 1–8	69	15.4
	Grades 9–12	103	23.0
	Post-secondary training of less than 3 years	84	18.8
	First degree and above	32	7.2
Socio-economic status	Better than most people	69	15.4
	Same as most people	244	45.6
	Worse than most people	131	29.3
Income per month	<1,000	36	8.1
	1,001–2,500	150	34.3
	2,501–6,500	238	53.2
	>6,500	20	4.4
Residential period	.5–4	29	6.5
	>4	315	92.9

Source: Authors' own work

Knowledge of in-country child trafficking

As depicted in Figure 1, the majority of participants (243 or 55%) scored below the mean for adequate knowledge of internal child trafficking, indicating a knowledge gap in this area.

Figure 1: Level of knowledge of internal child trafficking
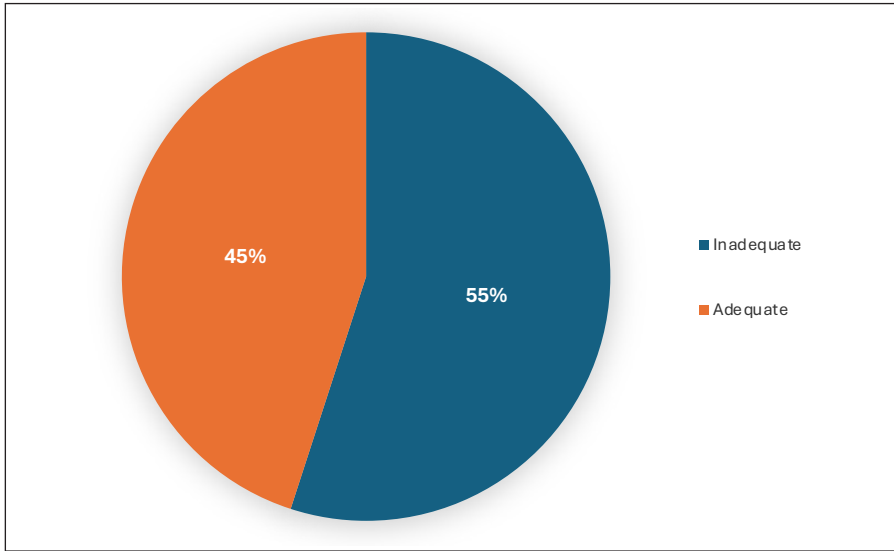
Source: Authors' own work

Participants scored an average of 8.57 (SD = 3.53, Min = 3, Max = 14) out of a possible 14 points on their knowledge of internal child trafficking. The highest scores were in knowledge of victims (M = 2.15, SD = 1.41), followed by knowledge of vulnerabilities (M = 2.07, SD = 0.89), and traffickers and their methods (M = 1.63, SD = 0.62). In contrast, lower scores were noted in defining internal child trafficking (M = 1.45, SD = 1.32) and understanding the psychosocial struggles faced by children (M = 1.06, SD = 0.80).

The findings highlight a significant gap in knowledge in defining the features of in-country child trafficking among participants. When presented with its definition encompassing the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of children within national borders for exploitative purposes, 314 (70.2%) of participants failed to recognize it as accurate. Similarly, when presented with the statement, "In-country child trafficking involves the exploitation of a child," 255 (57.4%) of the participants incorrectly rated it as false, despite its factual accuracy. When asked to assess the statement, "In-country child trafficking may involve abuse of power or a position of vulnerability," 252 (56.4%) participants incorrectly rated it as false.

Participants demonstrated a reasonably solid knowledge of several key indicators of child trafficking. Specifically, 231 (51.7%) correctly recognized that abused child domestic workers are victims, 263 (55.5%) identified that children forced to work excessive hours fall under trafficking, and 277 (62.6%) acknowledged that wage withholding constitutes exploitation. These figures indicate a generally

high awareness, particularly regarding forms of financial exploitation. However, it is noteworthy that 259 participants (57.1%) did not recognize that children working to repay a loan can also be considered victims of in-country child trafficking. Participants' knowledge of the abuse encountered by trafficked children was assessed using separate items on physical and psychological abuse. Results revealed that 177 (62.0%) of participants correctly identified that victims frequently experience physical abuse, while 181 (62.8%) acknowledged that psychological abuse is likewise prevalent.

The study also assessed participants' knowledge regarding vulnerability factors for in-country child trafficking using three items rated as correct or incorrect. The item stating that children from urban areas are vulnerable was rated as correct by 63.8% (n = 285) of participants, while 68.7% (n = 307) agreed that children from poor families are most at risk. The highest recognition was observed for the statement that children from poor families are more vulnerable, with 74.0% (n = 331) rating it as correct.

Finally, the study assessed participants' knowledge regarding traffickers and recruitment techniques using two distinct items. One item addressed the identification of potential recruiters, stating that acquaintances, strangers, friends, neighbors/family friends, relatives, and private companies could be involved, while the other examined the tactic of recruiting children through false promises. The results indicated that 352 participants (78.7%) correctly identified the potential traffickers and 374 participants (84.2%) accurately recognized false promises as a recruitment strategy (see Table 2).

Table 2: Knowledge of internal child trafficking

No	Categories	Correct N	%	Incorrect N	%
A.	**Knowledge about the definition of child trafficking**				
1.	In-country child trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of children within a country for exploitation	130	29.3	314	70.7
2.	In-country child trafficking involves the exploitation of a child	189	42.6	255	57.4
3.	In-country child trafficking may involve abuse of power or a position of vulnerability	192	43.0	252	56.4
B.	**Knowledge about the victims' profiles**				
4.	Victims of in-country child trafficking are children forced to work to repay a loan	185	41.4	259	57.9
5.	Victims of in-country child trafficking can be child domestic workers who are abused by their employers	231	51.7	213	47.7
6.	Children who are forced to work longer hours than was promised can be victims of in-country child trafficking	263	58.8	181	40.5

7.	Working children who do not receive wages or have their wages withheld by their employers are victims of in-country child trafficking	277	62	167	37.4
C.	**Knowledge about the psychosocial plight experienced by trafficked children**				
8.	In most cases, victims of in-country child trafficking experience physical abuse	277	62	167	37.4
9.	In most cases, victims of in-country child trafficking experience psychological abuse	281	62.9	163	36.5
D.	**Knowledge about the vulnerability to child trafficking**				
10.	Children from urban areas are vulnerable to in-country child trafficking	285	63.8	159	35.5
11.	Children from rural areas are most often vulnerable to in-country child trafficking	307	68.7	137	30.6
12.	Children from poor families are more vulnerable to in-country child trafficking than other children	331	74.0	113	25.3
E.	**Knowledge about the traffickers and techniques**				
13.	Acquaintances, strangers, friends, neighbors, family friends, relatives, and private companies could be among recruiters	352	78.7	92	20.6
14.	Children are recruited into trafficking through false promises	374	84.2	70	15.7

Source: Authors' own work

Similarly, the findings from the FGDs indicate a significant knowledge gap regarding child trafficking. The data from FGDs indicate that the participants tended to conflate child trafficking with child exploitation, labor, and forced begging. For example, (FGDP1) said, "Child trafficking is when children migrate from their town/village and work for others for free or very little." Equating child trafficking with migration and related concepts was evident among most of the participants.

In a similar vein, the child participants were asked questions concerning what child trafficking is, whether they have — or anyone they know — ever experienced or witnessed child trafficking, who the recruiters are, and the tactics used by the traffickers.

Of the five participants asked, two reported that they had heard about child trafficking. A 16-year-old male participant who migrated from Boditi village to Sodo when he was just 12 years old, shared his understanding of child trafficking in the following way: "Child trafficking is the exploitation of migrant children. It is when employers make children earn money but pay them a little while keeping the rest of the money for themselves."

Regarding the gender of trafficked children, participants were asked in the semi-structured questionnaire which gender is more trafficked in their locality. As

depicted in Figure 2, the majority (66.8%) indicated that both boys and girls were perceived as vulnerable to child trafficking, 24.3% of participants identified girls as being more frequently trafficked in their local communities, whereas 9% reported boys as the most frequently trafficked gender.

Figure 2: Vulnerability to child trafficking based on gender
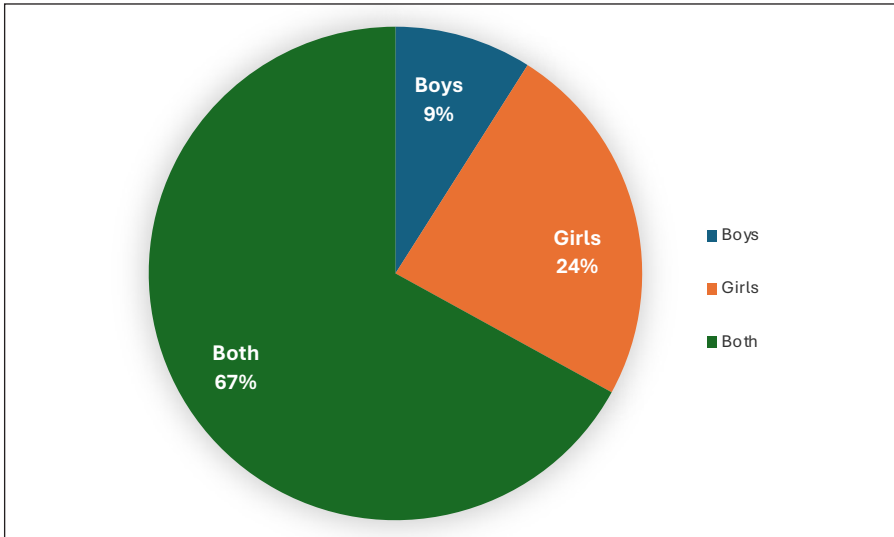
Source: Authors' own work

Key informants indicated that children from impoverished rural families, school dropouts, or orphans are at high risk of trafficking. They further added that street children, those from dysfunctional or abusive households, and children with disabilities are also among those at high risk of trafficking. For instance, one of the key informants, a police officer from a child protection unit, narrated the following:

> Children of poor rural families are always at risk. Many disadvantaged rural families are willing to send their children away, hoping that their children will get an opportunity for education and new skills. Some send [them] away with the hope of getting economic support from the remittance (KI1).

The FGD findings confirm the above findings, emphasizing similar characteristics of children. Seven out of eight FGD participants noted that being an orphan increases children's vulnerability to trafficking due to the lack of parental care, making them more susceptible to exploitation. Both boys and girls are at significant risk of trafficking; however, the nature of exploitation differs by gender. Boys are more frequently trafficked to fulfill specialized roles that demand particular skills or

physical attributes, while girls are exploited predominantly for domestic labor and related services.

The interviewed children reported experiencing a range of exploitative practices, including wage theft, long working hours, physical and psychological abuse, and denial of medical care. In this regard, a 15-year-old child participant shared his experience of trafficking and reintegration:

> I was taken to Hawassa by a maternal relative who assured my parents that he would provide me with an education in exchange for my assistance. He pledged to enroll me in school and meet all my basic needs. However, these promises were entirely false. Instead, he transferred me to another individual who subjected me to extensive labor as a weaver, requiring me to work from early morning until late at night. After several months, I was eventually rescued by labor inspection officers from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (CI5).

The results of the study also showed that traffickers often use family, friends, close and distant relatives, neighbors, and brokers to recruit children by exploiting children's dreams of a better life elsewhere. According to one of the child participants,

> There are some individuals (facilitators) who are considered "big brothers." These individuals come back to the village during the "Gifata" with children who previously migrated from different areas (CI3).

Moreover, the findings of the FGDs and key informant interviews indicate that traffickers employ deceptive tactics to attract children and convince parents with promises of better opportunities in urban areas. However, reality often contradicts these promises, leading to exploitation and profound disappointment. The understanding of child trafficking among participants varied, with some providing detailed explanations and others focusing on specific aspects.

Sources of information

The data collected from participants showed that multiple media platforms serve as channels for information regarding internal child trafficking. As shown in Table 3, more than one-third (35.6%) of the participants cited radio programs as primary sources, followed by social networks (30.6%) and television programs (17.4%). The internet (6.7%), documentaries (5.4%), and movies (3.1%) also served as sources of information and played a role in raising awareness among participants. The findings highlight the significant role of various media platforms in disseminating information about internal child trafficking.

Table 3: Sources of information

No		Frequency	Percent
1.	I personally know someone who was trafficked	137	30.6
2.	Someone I know told me about it	2	0.4
3.	I watched a news program on TV	78	17.4
4.	I watched a documentary on TV	24	5.4
5.	I watched a film on TV	14	3.1
6.	I listened to a program on the radio	159	35.6
7.	I read about it on the internet	30	6.7

Source: Authors' own work

Participants' attitudes toward internal child trafficking

For 10 items to assess attitudes toward child trafficking, the scores ranged from 22 to 46 (mean = 3.08, SD = +.50). The majority of the participants, n = 248 (55.9%), tend to score above the mean in attitudes measure scores. The overall attitudes of the residents of Wolaita Sodo town concerning internal child trafficking are illustrated in Table 4. More than half of the respondents (233 or 52.4%) expressed their concern about in-country child trafficking, and 225 (50.6%) believed that the indicators of child trafficking in Wolaita Sodo town are easily identifiable. The majority of participants exhibited a positive attitude toward taking action, showing an interest in attending workshops focused on identifying and preventing child trafficking, as well as a willingness to report suspected cases to the authorities. However, nearly half of the participants expressed a negative attitude toward the victims of child trafficking.

Table 4: Attitudes of participants toward in-country child trafficking

No	Items	SA	A	DK	SDA	DA	Mean	S. D
		F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)		
1.	In-country child trafficking is a serious problem in Wolaita Sodo town	50 11.3	184 41.4	104 23.4	76 7.1	30 6.75	3.47	0.91
2.	If I suspected a child was being trafficked, I would be hesitant to report it to the authorities for fear of being wrong	38 8.6	176 39.6	135 30.4	88 19.8	7 1.6	3.33	0.94
3.	It is not difficult to identify a child-trafficking situation in Wolaita Sodo	97 21.8	168 37.8	133 30	46 10.4	0 0	3.71	0.93
4.	Children who end up being trafficked do so by their own choice	30 6.8	138 31.1	97 29.7	132 41.4	47 10.6	3.15	0.93
5.	If those trafficked children were poor to start with, at least now they have a job	25 5.6	101 22.7	117 26.4	191 43	10 2.3	2.86	0.98
6.	People I know say children who are trafficked deserve what they get	40 9	109 24.5	91 20.5	180 40.5	23 5.2	2.49	1.13
7.	I would be willing to report suspected cases of child trafficking to the authorities	60 13.5	176 39.6	139 31.3	68 15.3	1 0.2	3.51	0.92
8.	I would be willing to display informational materials about child trafficking in my home or business	38 8.6	101 22.7	114 25.7	186 41.9	5 1.1	2.96	1.02

9.	I would be interested in attending a workshop on how to identify and prevent child-trafficking	83 18.7	154 34.7	142 32.0	65 14.6	0	3.57	0.96
10.	I would feel comfortable talking to my neighbors about child trafficking prevention	107 24.1	141 31.8	161 36.3	34 7.7	1 0.2	3.72	0.92

Note N= 444, SA= strongly agree, A= agree, DK= don't know, DA= disagree, SDA= strongly disagree. The decision was based on a weighted average of 33.38/10= 3.34

Source: Authors' own work

While some participants viewed child trafficking as voluntary migration driven by opportunities, others recognized it as trafficking. Despite their concerns, some participants justified it as beneficial migration. For example, FGD participant 3 reported:

> Migration benefits children differently. In addition to earning money of their own and developing their social network, it also helps them to be self-reliant, since they have to do a lot of things by themselves. I believe that it helps children to be strong and self-reliant and helps them build other qualities that would help them in their adult life.

The movement of children, often perceived as a pathway to better opportunities, can sometimes result in their exploitation. Societal perceptions, shaped by misleading narratives and idealized expectations, may obscure the challenges children face. However, these experiences can be significantly more difficult than initially anticipated. Participants in FGDs expressed concerns about the severity of the issue, whereas the interviewed children framed their experiences as migration journeys, emphasizing their resilience, despite facing abuse and exploitation. Child interviewee 3, a 16-year-old female, said the following:

> When a child leaves home, the burden on the family is somehow eased, since you entirely depend on your parents for every need, whether they are capable of providing it for you or not. On the other hand, some children are brave enough to make savings in all the hardship and exploitative conditions they have been through, and they make some contributions at critical times. Some of them saved for a couple of years to buy their family cattle, which can help them produce better on their farm.

The interviewed children value independence and self-reliance, even if it comes at the cost of their well-being. Despite the hardships, they view their experiences as educational and beneficial, believing it has helped them understand urban life and the value of their labor in generating income. This underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of child mobility and the challenges faced by vulnerable individuals.

Factors associated with knowledge of and attitudes toward child trafficking

Multivariate logistic regression analysis shows that education level, having trafficked family members, and information sources are significantly associated with knowledge of child trafficking. Participants with a first degree and above are 3.25 times (1.21-8.81) more likely to have good knowledge of child trafficking than those with lower levels of education. Those with trafficked family members are 3.36 times (1.59-6.81) more likely to be knowledgeable. Additionally, those who reported knowing someone who had been trafficked are 1.41 times (1.44-1.85) more likely to be knowledgeable than those who relied solely on the internet as a source of information. Those who followed television news are 1.58 times (1.38-1.76), more likely to be knowledgeable than those who relied solely on the internet as a source of information, while those who reported movies as a source of information are 1.75 times (1.44-1.85) more likely to be knowledgeable than those who relied solely on the internet as a source of information. Those who identified the radio as their primary source of information are 1.34 times (1.35-1.79) more likely to have higher levels of knowledge of child trafficking than those who relied solely on the internet (see Table 5).

Moreover, having adequate knowledge of child trafficking, education level, family history of trafficking, and information sources were associated with positive attitudes toward child trafficking and anti-trafficking activities. Participants with a first-degree education or higher were 2.31 times (1.29-4.34) less likely to hold negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices compared to those with lower education levels. Those with trafficked family members were 0.44 times (0.47-0.27) less likely to exhibit negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices than those without trafficked family members. Similarly, participants with an adequate level of knowledge were 1.26 times (0.86-1.85) less likely to have negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices compared to those with inadequate knowledge.

Furthermore, participants who reported knowing someone who had been trafficked are 4.87 times (3.86-6.85) less likely to hold negative attitudes than those who learned about child trafficking from the internet, while those who reported learning about child trafficking through watching television news are 3.27 times (2.88-3.75) less likely to hold negative attitudes. Moreover, those informed by a wide range of media sources are less likely to have negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices than participants who identified the internet as their sole source of information. Those who reported learning about

child trafficking from television documentaries are 3.78 times (2.42–4.63) less likely to have negative attitudes toward victims of child trafficking and anti-child trafficking practices than participants who identified the internet as their source of information, whereas those who reported learning about trafficking from movies are 2.59 times (1.43-3.85) less likely, and those relying on radio programs are 1.82 times (1.65-1.97) less likely to hold negative attitudes compared to those who reported learning about child trafficking from the internet.

Table 5: Factors associated with knowledge of and attitudes toward child trafficking

Variables	Knowledge OR 95% CI		Attitude OR 95% CI	
	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower
Better than most people (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Same as most people	0.87	0.37–20	0.39	0.51–3.01
Worse than most people	0.77	0.32–1.84	1.94	0.88–7.68
Level of education *				
Illiterate (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Read and write only	0.90	0.354–2.29	0.31	0.49–2.87
Primary education	0.99	0.49–1.98	0.41	0.61–3.30
Secondary education	1.08	0.50–2.32	0.29	0.08–3.81
College diploma	0.88	0.40–1.94	1.16	0.66–2.43
First degree and above	3.25	1.21–8.81	2.31	1.29–4.34
Knowledge**				
Inadequate (Ref.)			1	1
Adequate			1.26	0.86–1.85
Have trafficked family members**				
No (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Yes	3.36	1.59–6.81	0.44	0.456–0.271
Sources of information*				
Internet (Ref.)	1	1	1	1
Knew someone trafficked	1.41	1.27–1.89	4.87	3.86–6.85
Television news	1.58	1.38–1.76	3.27	2.88–3.75
Television documentary	1.45	1.57–1.89	3.78	2.42–4.63
Television movies	1.75	1.44–1.85	2.59	1.43–3.85
Radio	1.34	1.35–1.79	1.82	1.65–1.97

**=p<.01, *=p<0.05, Ref. = reference category
Source: Authors' own work

DISCUSSION

Regarding child trafficking knowledge, residents presented an inadequate level of knowledge, with a lower score in knowledge about the defining features of in-country child trafficking. In contrast to previous studies (e.g., Gonçalves et al., 2019; Davy and Metanji, 2022; Adhikari et al., 2023) where participants displayed a good knowledge of the issue, the participants of the current study obtained a lower score on overall knowledge of child trafficking, in accord with other studies (see Gezie et al., 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022; Mazumdar and Mukherjee, 2022).

Significant gaps in understanding persist, as many study participants did not recognize the defining features of in-country child trafficking. The qualitative findings, except for the key informant interview results, all lend support to this finding, which shows the common misconception that trafficking is synonymous with migration, child labor, and forced labor, with some individuals even equating child labor with child trafficking. However, it is important to note that not all instances of child labor equate to child trafficking. This finding aligns with numerous previous findings (e.g., Winrock International Cambodia, 2012; Gecho and Worku, 2018).

Consistent with the earlier findings of Sharapov (2019), participants displayed a good knowledge of the victims' characteristics. In line with previous studies, the current finding shows that a significant majority (79%) of participants recognized the fact that traffickers can come from diverse sources, including acquaintances, strangers, friends, neighbors, family friends, relatives, and private companies. The current finding also aligns with previous research by Gecho and Worku (2018) that revealed that individuals within a child's immediate social environment such as friends, peers, brokers, relatives, family members, and neighbors often serve as key agents in the trafficking process in the Wolaita zone as well as with findings of Sabita et al. (2021) and Manju et al. (2024). However, these findings contrast with those of Davy and Metanji (2022), where only 48% of participants recognized that family members might also act as traffickers.

Regarding information sources, numerous channels provide information, including mass media and social networks. The findings reflect the unique information ecosystem and media consumption habits of the study population. Primary sources, including trusted local institutions and community organizations, appear to be the principal channels for information on child trafficking. This likely stems from these sources' ability to offer reliable, context-specific insights, which resonate deeply within the community. Additionally, the significant role of social networks (30.6%) highlights the importance of interpersonal communication, where word-of-mouth and personal connections play a vital role in shaping understanding. In contrast, the relatively lower influence of television, the internet, documentaries, and movies may indicate both regional media preferences and variations in access or trust in these formats, further emphasizing that information dissemination is context-dependent.

The study also explored factors influencing knowledge about child trafficking, specifically focusing on gender and socio-economic status. It found no significant differences linked to these variables, which aligns with the findings of Exeni McAmis et al. (2022) and Wangsnes (2014). This outcome contrasts with earlier research by Davy and Metanji (2022), Cunha et al. (2019), and Gonçalves and Matos (2021), all of which indicate higher trafficking knowledge among females, and Mazumdar and Mukherjee's (2022) finding, which reported a lower level of knowledge among female participants.

In contrast to previous findings of Azage et al. (2014) and Adhikari et al. (2023), which reported a positive association between socio-economic status and knowledge, the current study did not reveal any significant differences based on the socio-economic status of the participants. This discrepancy may be attributed to the larger sample sizes used in the earlier studies, compared to the smaller sample size observed in the current study for each group. Furthermore, individuals with higher education levels had significantly more knowledge about internal child trafficking compared to those with lower educational status. This supports previous findings (Botchkovar et al., 2016; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Sabita et al., 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022; Mazumdar and Mukherjee, 2022) but contradicts Wangsnes (2014), which found no significant differences based on education level.

Knowledge of internal trafficking is also associated with factors such as having family members who have been trafficked and sources of information, in which those who have trafficked family members seem more knowledgeable than those who do not. Participants who reported knowing someone who had been trafficked, coupled with their reliance on television news and movies seem to have more knowledge than those who used the internet as their primary source of information. This finding is in line with the findings of Thainiyom (2011), Shrestha et al. (2015), and Sharapov (2019).

Regarding attitudes toward child trafficking victims and anti-child trafficking practices, the residents expressed a higher level of concern about child trafficking in their locality and showed empathy toward victims. It challenged harmful beliefs, such as children's complicity and victim-blaming, while highlighting a willingness to engage in preventive measures. However, the perception of migration as a normal practice complicated the understanding of child movement. This finding is analogous to earlier work on attitudes toward human trafficking (e.g., Botchkovar et al., 2016; Sharapov, 2019; Davy and Metanji, 2022).

Nevertheless, the qualitative findings highlight participants' disagreeing attitudes toward child trafficking, where it is often confused with migration and seen as a way to escape poverty and an opportunity to gain skills and knowledge. This finding aligns with previous studies (Walakira et al., 2015; Zewdie et al., 2024) that indicate that sending children to towns and cities to improve household income is common.

Consistent with previous findings, significant associations were found between demographic factors and attitudes toward child trafficking, revealing that education level, knowledge of trafficking, perceived socio-economic status, having family members who had been trafficked, and information sources were associated

positively with attitudes toward the issue (Oyeleke et al., 2018; Sharapov, 2019; Davy and Metanji, 2022). Conversely, this study's findings contradict several others (see, for example, Winrock International Cambodia, 2012; Cunningham and Cromer, 2014; Rajji, 2015; Botchkovar et al., 2016; Mazumdar and Mukherjee, 2022).

The finding of the study indicates that there is a statistically significant association between knowledge and attitude. Participants who possessed adequate knowledge about child trafficking tended to have a desirable attitude toward victims of trafficking and a willingness to engage in preventive practices. This finding is supported by previous findings (e.g., Winrock International Cambodia, 2012; Cunningham and Cromer 2014; Sharapov, 2019; Omoregbe and Aghahowa, 2023) that indicate that good knowledge about human trafficking is associated positively with a desirable attitude toward phenomena, and individuals with adequate levels of knowledge about trafficking were less likely to blame the victim for their situation. On the other hand, the current findings do not support some previous findings. For instance, research by Rajji (2015) revealed that despite awareness of the negative consequences of human trafficking, positive attitudes toward the practice persisted. Similarly, Mazumdar and Mukherjee (2022) found that individuals demonstrated a higher level of knowledge about child trafficking but failed to exhibit the corresponding attitudes and behaviors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined knowledge and attitudes among the residents of Wolaita Sodo town, southern Ethiopia. It found that many residents had inadequate knowledge about child trafficking. Misconceptions remained prevalent, as many participants conflated trafficking with migration, child labor, and forced labor. Nevertheless, respondents exhibited a solid grasp of the issue's dynamics, including the vulnerabilities that lead to the phenomenon, the profiles of traffickers, and their methods.

Education level played a crucial role in shaping knowledge, with a direct correlation between higher education and better knowledge. However, factors such as gender and socio-economic status did not appear to significantly affect knowledge levels. Information sources proved to be vital, with trusted local institutions and interpersonal networks being the most relied-upon resources. In contrast, media formats such as television and the internet had a less significant impact.

The study underscores a significant concern and empathy among residents regarding child trafficking, highlighting their willingness to engage in preventive measures while challenging harmful beliefs such as victim-blaming and the notion of children's complicity. However, misconceptions persisted, particularly surrounding migration, which was frequently perceived as an opportunity rather than a potential trafficking risk. Divergent attitudes further complicated understanding, as some participants equated child mobility with economic escape, reflecting cultural norms that support sending children to urban areas for better financial prospects.

Moreover, demographic factors such as education level, knowledge of trafficking, perceived socio-economic status, and personal experiences with trafficked individuals were positively correlated with attitudes toward the issue. Individuals with good knowledge displayed more supportive attitudes toward victims and were less inclined to blame them, reinforcing the connection between education and awareness.

To address the knowledge gaps surrounding child trafficking, awareness campaigns must clarify misconceptions and educate the public about this phenomenon's defining characteristics. Incorporating trafficking education into formal curricula can enhance understanding, while community-based information channels and social networks can improve outreach efforts. Using various media platforms, such as television and film, can further boost awareness. Providing educational resources to support victims and their families can empower communities in the fight against trafficking.

To enhance residents' understanding of child trafficking and foster positive attitudes toward victims, targeted educational programs should be developed to dispel misconceptions, particularly regarding the distinctions between migration and trafficking. Community awareness campaigns should focus on dismantling harmful beliefs, such as victim-blaming and should promote protective behaviors. As knowledge is closely linked to attitudes, integrating trafficking education into schools and public forums will help bridge these awareness gaps. Additionally, leveraging trusted local institutions and social networks can make information more accessible.

Recognizing that personal exposure significantly influences attitudes, support programs for victims should include structured education for affected families to strengthen community advocacy. Finally, collaborations between law enforcement, policymakers, and social organizations can enhance anti-trafficking initiatives and foster broader engagement within the community.

Future research should broaden the scope of this study by including prevention components, such as legislation and policy, capacity building, victim support and rehabilitation, and collaboration and coordination. Additionally, it should include other contextual factors, such as cultural beliefs and practices, previous trauma or victimization, social support networks, risk perception, lack of legal protection, access to services, and stigmatization and discrimination. Moreover, future research should incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of trafficked children.

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