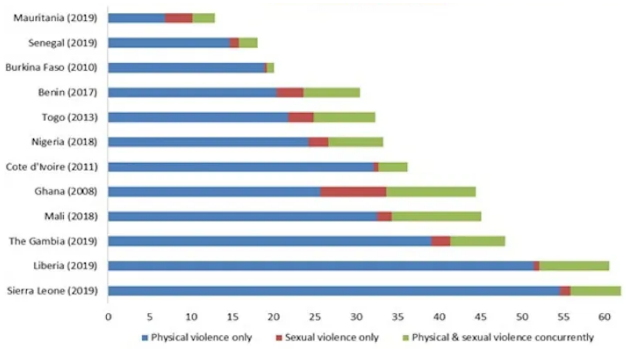
FORUM:	General Assembly
ISSUE:	Measures to Protect Children from Abuse in West Africa
STUDENT OFFICER:	Gyeonghyo (Julia) Kim
POSITION:	President of General Assembly

Introduction

Child abuse is considered a global social problem because it threatens the healthy growth and development of children, negatively affects the lives of children in later adulthood, and has serious consequences not only for themselves, but also for the well-being of their families, society, and the state.



Proportion of women aged 15 and older who have experienced various forms of violence in West Africa

Child abuse causes physical and mental pain to children, but also negatively affects psychosocial adaptation, including internalization problem behaviors such as atrophy, anxiety, and depression, and externalization problem behaviors such as aggression and hyperactivity. Evidence consistently supports that child abuse negatively affects children's overall child development, including children's psycho-emotional status, risk of suicidal ideation, academic achievement, aggression, and criminal behavior. For example, according to a study by Michael G. Maxfield, abused children were about 1.8 times more likely to be arrested than children who had not experienced abuse, more than half of abused children struggled in school, and about 25% of children needed special education services. Parents from economically disadvantaged families have limited access to basic services for educational resources and medical support, which are very important for their child's development and parents' happiness. In this environment, parents have difficulty raising their children due to their own unresolved mental health problems, which increases the probability of child abuse. The number of cases of child abuse victims due to economic difficulties or family problems is increasing, and according to a report reported by UNHCR, about 9,823 children have been protected by child protection agencies. This figure shows a steadily increasing trend of child abuse from 2,015 in 2001 to 6,403 in 2012. Therefore, for the early prevention and intervention of child abuse more effective, it is important to pay attention to the continued impact of child abuse on psychosocial adaptation.

Background

In sub-regions of West Africa, the problem of child abuse has shown a noticeable increase. Due to a lack of systematic data, there are no clear and accurate official statistics, but several studies have shown that child abuse related to child labor in West Africa has reached an alarming rate over the past 30 years.

Child Labor in West African Cocoa Industry

For example, in the cocoa industry in West Africa, the problem of child labor reflects a vicious cycle of poverty, increasing demand for technological underdevelopment, and unskilled workers. In addition, in Ghana, a port city-themed crime officer informed the Ghana News Agency (GNA) of the frequent occurrences of abuse and violen ce against children in the region, but they stopped short of informing the parents of child victims that such child abuse is a crime. Although these ongoing media reports and news stories show a growing lack of protection and protection for child sex abuse, child trafficking, and children with disabilities, due to their poverty and culture of silence, parents of abuse victims seek to address child abuse and crimes by demanding legal compensation rather than punishing offenders in court. This culture of silence and reluctance to take legal action contributes to the normalization of child abuse. Criminals are not held accountable for abuse and interfere with necessary intervention in violence. Victims of child abuse and their families are afraid of stigma or criticism from others, causing even greater problems.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has set out a response to grave injustice and crime against all children to address this situation. Article 19 of the Convention provides that children must be protected from all forms of neglect, abuse, and exploitation that are detrimental to their health and well-being. In addition, it provides for the responsibilities of parents, guardians, and the state for the prevention and management of child abuse. Currently, the African Union (OAU) has created the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children and has received the necessary ratification from its member states. Article 27 of the Convention also explicitly states that its member states are obligated to take measures to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and to prevent them from inducing, forcing, or encouraging their children to participate in any sexual activity. However, many countries in the sub-region do not have the economic capacity to build the laws and services that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child seeks to provide, and there is a gap between ratification of international agreements and the actual state of the country's finances. These limitations prevent the Convention from leading to effective professional and educational intervention for children in

those regions. Thusly, the support of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is also blowing, and people's inadequate response prevents them from leading to efforts to provide appropriate and effective professional, educational, and psychosocial intervention for children in the sub-region.

Problems Raised

Sexual abuse and child trafficking

Children younger than 5 suffer sexual abuse

The American Psychological Association defines child sexual abuse as sexual activity between a minor and an adult. In Ghana, child sexual exploitation is also under criminal law, which refers to the use of force for sexual satisfaction against women under the age of 14 without their consent. A central feature of all sexual abuse is that adults enforce or rule sexual activity on children. Such child sexual abuse remains a significant issue in West Africa. Urban areas of Ghana, for instance, reported an incident in which a man engaged in sexual activity with a young girl prior to performing an adolescent ritual. Adolescent rituals are a series of social status rituals performed by various ethnic groups for young teenage girls to celebrate their changes from childhood to adulthood. In the context of certain cultural practices and rituals, according to a report by the Women and Youth Division of Ghana's National Police Agency, an estimated 1,756 children have suffered sexual abuse in recent years, with the children being between the ages of 2 and 15. Even 70 percent of the children's parents said they encouraged young girls to engage in premarital sex. According to the Togo branch of the African Child Protection and Abuse Prevention Network, men known as the "Godfathers" sexually exploited girls ages 11 to 14 by turning them into prostitution, 16 percent of patients seeking treatment for STDs were children under the age of 5, and the remaining 6 percent were children between the ages of 6 and 15. The report shows that many young women have been sexually abused for traditional religious beliefs held by older individuals seeking fast wealth, power, and longevity. This practice also leads to the trafficking of children, with parents in West Africa often sending their children to live with other close relatives or facilitating de facto adoption of their children by childless relatives. The trafficked children are sent to major cities, where they work as domestic workers in middle-class and upper-class families or are sent to cocoa farms and fishing villages. They are also trafficked to other countries, such as Central Africa, Mali, Gabon, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Spain, for forced labor and prostitution. The abuse of these children is very difficult to control or prevent due to the lack of proper documents or identification and the covert nature of these operations.

95.5% of children with disability in Nigeria have no access to education

Neglect of disabled children

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), approximately 120 million disabled people are children and adolescents. However, most children with disabilities in sub-regions of West Africa are psychologically and emotionally neglected due to family shame and social stigma. Culturally, disability in West Africa is considered a punishment for their sins or ancestors' sins, and because of this false belief, children with disabilities are ostracized by their families and denied access to protection and education from society. Children with disabilities are often isolated from their peers and communities, and this exclusion leads to severe emotional and psychological distress, which affects their overall development. In addition, children with disabilities often do not receive adequate medical care. This includes both the basic medical care needed for a person to live and the professional care needed for their disability. Due to this limited medical approach, children's disabilities are undiagnosed or diagnosed late, exacerbating the child's condition and leading to many complications. This neglect and lack of access to resources lead to serious long-term effects. Children with disabilities who have difficulty accessing the necessary specialized schools miss important opportunities for cognitive and social development. This lack of professional education affects their employment and economic activities in the future, making it difficult for them to achieve financial independence even after they become adults.

Moreover, in most cities in Ghana, Nigeria, and Togo, physically disabled children are often left on street corners early in the morning to beg for money for their survival. The care of these disabled children is largely left to non-profit religious organizations and individuals. According to a study of adults' attitudes and perceptions toward child abuse and neglect in three cities in Nigeria, only 7 percent of about 600 respondents admitted to having children with disabilities, 66 percent believed it was no use sending such children to regular schools, and 83 percent believed it was a good idea to send such children to special institutions.

International Actions

Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR)

Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programs are designed to empower children with disabilities and families through services that are accessible to all, regardless of the socioeconomic gap

TIANMUN

between the rich and the poor. These programs enable children, including those with disabilities, to receive the necessary measures in all aspects of the community. They add ramps for disabled children in schools, modifies the structure of classrooms, and trains teachers to support and teach disabled students. It also provides vocational training for older, teenage disabled children to increase their employability and financial independence. Through this training, disabled children are trained in various occupations, such as carpentry and IT skills. In fact, the CBR program, which took place in Uganda, allowed disabled children to attend school and provided vocational training for teenagers to become economically self-reliant. It also helped parents of disabled and disabled children to raise their social and financial status through microfinance and self-help organizations. In addition, CBR fosters the acceptance of children with disabilities within the community by providing medical assistance, such as physical therapy and aids such as wheelchairs and hearing aids, and by encouraging them to participate in community activities and events.

CBR Programs in Uganda

Cross-Border Collaboration

Solutions through cooperation between countries are important for child trafficking and relief of victims. Establishing cross-border communities involving law enforcement in several countries hinders traffickers' operations and facilitates the rescue of victims. The sharing of important information about the routes of transactions between countries and the locations of perpetrators and victims allows investigations to proceed more efficiently. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has actively promoted regional cooperation to combat child trafficking and abuse. ECOWAS has worked with member states to standardize laws and policies related to child protection. Member states of ECOWAS have aligned their laws with international standards and protocols so that children's rights can be protected across borders. In addition, training programs and workshops for law enforcement and social services have been organized to effectively prevent child trafficking. It has helped ensure that children are better protected legally across the region and within ECOWAS member states as a whole.

Key Players

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is committed to advocating for and protecting children's rights around the world. They raise awareness of violence and abuse against children and advocate for stronger punishment and policies. It also helps children in marginalized child groups to receive a fair, quality education. Partner easy to increase education funding and support in developing countries to try new education laws and increase learning outcomes. For instance, UNICEF works with Global Partnership for Education (GPE) to strengthen education systems in developing countries and with Education Can't Wait (ECW) to provide education in crisis-affected regions. In addition, UNESCO's collaboration with the World Bank strengthens efforts to implement global education standards and secure funding for improving education. This provides vaccinations for children against preventable diseases such as measles and tetanus in order to reduce child mortality, improve mothers' health conditions and ensures that children do not suffer from malnutrition by providing supplements, nutritional supplements, cafeterias, and clean water.

Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)

Flag of Ivory Coast

Côte d'Ivoire is a country facing child protection issues, including child labor, human trafficking, and abuse. The Ivorian government, with the support of several international organizations, implemented various initiatives to address these issues and improve the welfare of children. Representatively, the government has launched an education campaign on the risks of child abuse and human trafficking through international partnerships with NGOs. The campaign has improved access to schools and provided safe learning environments for rural areas where the protection of children's rights is weak. In addition, the government has established regional child protection committees in various regions to identify and rescue the number of children affected by abuse. In addition, shelters and rehabilitation centers for psychological support, education, and technical training have been set up so that they can be reintegrated into society.

Possible Solutions

Cultural and Religious Engagement in Child Protection

In West Africa, religious communities have a significant influence on cultural norms, practices, and beliefs. Their leaders' words and actions are crucial in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of people in society. Leaders, such as chiefs and elders, are often in charge of managing religious cultures and

traditions, where their decisions and judgments carry significant weight and can influence the behavior of entire communities. Their endorsement of harmful practices, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and corporal punishment, leads to community child abuse. Therefore, it is important for community leaders to receive training on child rights and abuse prevention. By educating them not to let their misconceptions affect the entire community, they can continue to stop acts of abuse. When these leaders advocate for child protection, it fosters a sense of community ownership of the issue and leads to stronger, locally driven efforts. However, it should be recognized that addressing detrimental practices while maintaining respect for their religious traditions is difficult.

Psychosocial Support for Victims

Psychosocial support is an important factor in helping children who have experienced abuse heal, recover, and reintegrate into society. Children who experience abuse often suffer from trauma, which can be attributed to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health problems. Solving these mental health problems helps children become healthy, productive members of society again in the future. Trained counselors should be dispatched to help children express their feelings and overcome trauma. Community centers should also be established so that these mental treatments can take place. For children, these centers will be safe places that help them recover emotionally and physically. They need strict confidentiality and security measures to protect children and their safety. By helping children with their psychological and emotional treatment, they can prevent long-term mental health problems and help children envision a healthy and productive future. However, many parts of West Africa lack the resources needed to provide the counseling and mental health services, which requires continuous support from the government and non-governmental organizations.

First counselling center in Nigeria

Glossary

Child Abuse

Abandoned or neglected by a guardian or adult without inflicting physical, mental, or sexual violence on a child or taking care of the child

Child Trafficking

The Recruitment, transportation, transfer, detention or reception of children for exploitation purposes

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

A disease in which a person experiences a serious event such as war, torture, natural disasters, accidents, etc. and feels fear of the event, suffers through continuous re-experience after the event, and consumes energy to escape it

Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)

Ivory Coast is a West African country with its beach resorts, rainforests, and French colonial heritage. Abidjan, on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, is the country's main city center.

Sources

Abuse of Children in West Africa: Implications for Social Work Education and Practice, www.researchgate.net/publication/249285449_Abuse_of_Children_in_West_Africa_Implications_for_Social_Work_Education_and_Practice. Accessed 2 Aug. 2024.

"Child Protection." *Global Focus*, reporting.unhcr.org/global-appeal-2024/outcome-and-enabling-areas/child-protection. Accessed 2 Aug. 2024.

"Child Trafficking Trends Outlined in New Report." *News*, 3 Aug. 2023, www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/child-trafficking-trends-outlined-in-new-report/.

"Community-Based Rehabilitation: CBR Guidelines." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548052. Accessed 2 Aug. 2024.

"Human Trafficking in West Africa: Three out of Four Victims Are Children Says UNODC Report." *United Nations : UNODC Country Office Nigeria*, www.unodc.org/conig/en/human-trafficking-in-west-africa_-three-out-of-four-victims-are-children-says-unodc-report.html. Accessed 2 Aug. 2024.

Kim, Soo Jung, and Ick-Joong Chung. "A Longitudinal Study of Persistent and Recency Effects of Child Maltreatment on Depression·anxiety and Aggression." *Journal of the Korean Society of Child Welfare*, The Korean Society Of Child Welfare, 1 Jan. 1970, www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART001810208.

Michael G. Maxfield, PhD. "The Cycle of Violence." *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, JAMA Network, 1 Apr. 1996, jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/517903.

"UNICEF Report: Humanitarian Action for Children 2024." *UNICEF USA*, www.unicefusa.org/media-hub/reports/humanitarian-action-children-2024. Accessed 2 Aug. 2024.