

# Child Trafficking in Africa: Reimagining the Problem

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**Abstract:** Current perspectives on the intractability of child trafficking in Africa considers the problem as a failure of law enforcement or a lack of political will by state actors. In response, these works tend to suggest the need for strengthened institutional mechanisms as a preventative measure to curb the problem. We contend however, that this perspective does not fully appreciate the seeming detachment of civil society in Africa regarding the plight of children. In light of this, we argue that an examination of child trafficking as an intractable human rights problem ought to first, interrogate how childhood is viewed in the continent. Such interrogation creates the possibility of reimagining the problem by observing the lived realities of children in Africa and the (in)ability of society to keep track with their humanity. Further, we propose the need to memorialize the harms that children in Africa have been exposed to in the past and present through commemorative markers, as a means of appreciating the precarity of childhood in the continent. We reason that doing so will create a stronger sense of responsibility for state and civil society towards children and potentially curb child trafficking.

**Keywords:** child trafficking; Africa; human rights; memorialization; childhood

## 1. Introduction

Child trafficking is one of the vilest forms of organized crime in the world. It violates children in a range of ways, from obscuring their right to education and dignity to denying them the developmental opportunities necessary to exist as dignified humans. Whether manifesting in the abuse or exploitation of children as laborers, domestic servants, child brides, street beggars, or as victims of forced prostitution and child pornography, child trafficking adversely impacts physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Apart from being a subject of social, cultural, and political concern, child trafficking in Africa and most parts of the developing world remains a matter of sustained academic inquiry. In Africa, progress has been slow in combating the malaise of child trafficking compared to other parts of the world. Previous studies on the provenance and history of child trafficking in African countries such as Ghana, Togo, Zambia, and Nigeria (Lawrence 2016, 2010; Hepburn 2016; Chapdelaine 2016; Aderinto 2018) indicate that the drivers of the problem such as exploitative labor practices, pawning, poverty, and oppressive cultural norms from the pre-colonial and colonial period remain in place in the post-colonial state. In effect, while anti-trafficking initiatives and legislation have continued to proliferate within African states, child trafficking remains a serious concern.

Our claim in this paper is that while the existing discourse understands the difficulty in eliminating child trafficking to arise from effete law enforcement mechanisms (Jappah and Smith 2022; Motseki 2022; Ezeibe et al. 2021; Gill and McKinnon 2021) or challenging economic circumstances in the Global South (Okyere et al. 2023; Howard 2017; Okyere 2017; Thorsen 2013), there is a need to look deeper towards an equally important perspective on the intractability of child trafficking: the inability of the state and society in Africa to reckon with the harms faced by children. For the protection of children to be prioritized,



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the perception of children, by the state and society, has to be one that recognizes them as beings who are owed care. Of concern, however, is that the current imagination of childhood in Africa is one that is mediated by variegated historical tragedies and injustices, obscuring, perhaps, a wholesome picture of the responsibility owed to children by the state and society.

It is not uncommon to find in the literature on child trafficking in Africa the suggestion that if only governments could exercise ‘political will’ and put in place ‘adequate law enforcement measures’, child trafficking will be effectively curbed. However, as several scholars have highlighted, attempts to curb child trafficking cannot be restricted to a criminal justice response (Olayiwola 2023; Okyere 2017; Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi 2016), particularly where the state is incapable of cushioning the economic pressures that make child labor and exploitation somewhat inevitable. Our attempt to make sense of the failure of the state in enforcing its own anti-trafficking laws leads us to two questions: (1) do the state and society appreciate childhood in contemporary Africa as a site of vulnerability? (2) Are the state and society in Africa capable of protecting that which is not considered endangered? Neither question can be answered in the affirmative given the unmitigated misery that has defined the experience of children in Africa.

As a point of departure, we contend that life in contemporary Africa is an experience under unjust structures, which, in turn, leads to unmitigated suffering and disadvantages (Okeja 2022; Okorie 2023), and that the experience of childhood in Africa is not only mediated by these unjust structures, but they have also destabilized how the state and society understand and relate to children. Children in Africa have endured starvation as a weapon of war, endured the brunt of child marriage, been drafted to fight wars and strapped with explosives, been forced into platforms of organized begging, and been denied the right to education. With each of these harms that the state allows to happen to children, the normative equilibrium of what constitutes childhood is negatively impacted. Moreover, as the state and society fail to acknowledge these harms, the humanity of children as beings that deserve ‘special care’ is diminished. In effect, policy and academic scholarship must not only consider the intractability of child trafficking as a failure of law and order but as a problem of imagination. Our purpose here, in essence, is to point out that the way children are currently perceived in Africa is flawed, and this makes it difficult, if not impossible, for laws and institutions designed to protect them to have the needed effect. By piecing together select studies on child trafficking in Africa, reports on trafficking trends, and ethnographic studies citing the lived experiences of trafficked children, we aim to show that the state and society in Africa have so far been unable to identify with the suffering of children, which, in turn, sabotages the enforcement of passed prohibitions.

This article is sectioned in four parts. The next section presents an overview of state response to child trafficking in Africa through international and domestic criminal legislation. Here, we identify how the enactment of domestic regulations or the ratification of international regulations by African states evidences a degree of concern regarding violence against children (VAC). In the third section, we show that beyond the enactment of VAC-related regulations, protection for children against variegated forms trafficking remains a huge challenge. We point out that while the current literature attributes this challenge as resulting from a weak institutional mechanism of protection, the more concerning challenge is the lack of connection to the plight of children in African societies. Following this, we explicate on the current perception of childhood in Africa, which is mediated by a series of unbridled harms, which are allowed to happen to children without collective outrage or memorialization. In the final section, we point out that a reimagination of childhood in the continent, through memorialization, is required in order to develop a new consciousness of what childhood means (or should mean) and appreciate better the urgency necessary to prevent child trafficking.

## 2. Child Trafficking and the Limits of Legislation

Child trafficking, as defined by the [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons \(2000\)](#), is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of anyone under the age of 18 for the purpose of exploitation with or without the consent of their parents/guardian. International recognition of child trafficking, as an egregious violation of children's rights, dates back to the 1950 UN Convention on the abolition of slavery, slave trading, and related practices similar to slavery. Emanating from this commitment is the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which enjoined State Parties to take the necessary national, bilateral, and multilateral steps to prevent the abduction of, the sale of, or the trafficking of children for any purpose or in any form. Following from this was Convention No. 182 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1999 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor. Article 3(a) of the Convention called on member states to eliminate the sale and trafficking of children, including the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

Given the high prevalence of child trafficking in Africa, there have been several continental, regional, and national legal frameworks designed to respond to the problem. For example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) came into force in 1999. The preamble of the Charter mentions that due to their developmental needs, the child "requires particular care with regard to health, physical, mental, moral, and social development, and requires legal protection in conditions of freedom, dignity and security" ([ACRWC 1999](#), p. 7). The wording of this section is indicative of the broader objectives of the Charter, which are to ensure that children are protected from every form of violation and are capable of truncating their physical, social, and emotional well-being. At any rate, the ACRWC became a rallying point for individual African states to enact protective legislation that forestalls violence against children. According to the [Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children \(2015\)](#), the constitution of 49 African countries provides for child's right protection from violence, degrading treatment, and harmful practices, and 6 other African states (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, and Uganda) constitutionally capture these rights as non-derogable. Beyond national constitutions, African countries have established other forms of regulations to deepen their commitment (real or imagined) towards the protection of children. In instances such as Cameroon's Penal Code of 2016 ([PRC 2016](#)), Botswana's Children's Act of 2009 ([ILO 2009](#)), Tanzania's Law of the Child Act of 2009 ([Parliament of Tanzania 2009](#)), Nigeria's Child Rights Act of 2003 ([PLAC 2003](#)), Central African Republic's Child Protection Code of 2020 ([United Nations 2020](#)), Gambia's Children's Act of 2005 ([Citizenship Rights Africa 2006](#)), Malawi's Child Care, Protection and Justice Act, 2010 ([Malawi Legal Information Institute 2014](#)), The Republic of Sudan's Child Act of 2010 ([Citizenship Rights Africa 2010](#)), Tunisia's Child Protection Code of 1995 ([WHO 1995](#)), to mention a few, one observes the initiation of domestic laws to tackle child-related rights and protection. Since the majority of these regulations came in the wake of the ACRWC, one can infer that the Charter helped in animating African states towards creating new domestic laws to supplement the Charter. Beyond this, the ACRWC has served as a basis for resolving cases relating to child protection in domestic courts in countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Lesotho ([Mezmur 2020](#)).

Efforts have also been made to respond to human trafficking specifically as part of the broader security framework to prevent violence against children. At the regional level, countries within the ECOWAS adopted in 2011 a political declaration and an action plan against trafficking in human beings ([UNIS 2001](#)). Several bilateral agreements have also been enacted in instances where cross-border trafficking of children appears rife between countries. For example, the Malian and Ivory Coast governments embarked on bilateral agreements to end cross-border trafficking following a series of evidence-based reports by NGOs in Mali of the trafficking of Malian children who end up in the plantations of the Ivory Coast ([UNICEF 2002](#)). Similarly, Nigeria and Benin Republic signed, in 2006, the Cooperation Agreement to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking

in persons with emphasis on trafficking in women and children (UNICEF 2005). Three years prior to the agreement, Nigeria had set up the Nigerian National Trafficking in Persons Law Enforcement and Administration Act, which came into force in July 2003 and which criminalizes child trafficking with harsh punishment for offenders (Adepoju 2005). In Ghana, the anti-trafficking policy, which was adapted from the Palermo Protocol, is codified in the Human Trafficking Act 2005 (Koomson et al. 2021). Observably, anti-trafficking legal frameworks for most African states have been in place for almost two decades. However, these broad and ever-growing legislative responses to the problem contrast sharply with the concerning statistics of child trafficking in Africa given implementation deficits. For example, a 2021 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that children made up 75 percent of trafficking victims detected in West Africa (UNODC 2021). The report also suggests that there were 4799 victims detected across 26 Sub-African countries, and 2553 of them were children (UNODC 2021). Galal (2023) submits that between 2013 and 2022, 41 percent of sex trafficking victims in West Africa were below 17 years. Among the factors that account for these worrying trends are poverty, civil unrest, armed conflict, and natural disasters (Koomson et al. 2021; Dottridge 2021; Dinbabo 2013; Mark 2012;). Interestingly, the nature of suffering trafficked children are forced to endure is often contingent on the country of destination. For countries such as Nigeria, Togo, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Benin, children are trafficked predominantly for the purpose of child labor, domestic servitude, and alms begging (Okunade and Shulika 2021). In Mali, Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau, they are mostly trafficked for street begging, prostitution, and child pornography (Okunade and Shulika 2021; Mbaku 2021). The action plan of the ECOWAS region, which involves an agreement to set up direct communication between their border control agencies and tackle human trafficking, appears ineffectual. This situation is indicative of the lack of progress towards the protection of children in a region that is ostensibly a hotbed of child trafficking. The situation is no less concerning in East and Central African countries such as Congo-Brazzaville, Congo (DRC), Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Somalia, Burundi, and Sudan, where children have been used either as child soldiers or trafficked to mine diamonds in conflict-ridden localities (Fitzgibbon 2003). The implacable trend of child trafficking against the backdrop of extensive legislation signals that new conceptual interrogation of the menace is required in order to generate new ways of understanding the problem.

### 3. Perspectives on Child Trafficking in Africa

A large body of literature on child trafficking in Africa imagines the problem as mostly stemming from the failure of law enforcement and state institutions. Framed differently, these works tend to understand the problem as a failure of policy and then proceed to present policy recommendations for resolving it. To buttress the point, we appraise some of the most recent works on child trafficking in Africa to indicate the linearity of this mode of imagination of the problem. In examining the geographical and gendered dynamics of child trafficking in Africa, Okunade and Shulika (2021) recommended that governments, in collaboration with NGOs, need to develop and implement robust and supportive outreach, early warning, and awareness programs for communities that are susceptible to and at risk of human trafficking. In their mixed-method research, Ezeibe et al. (2021) found that the lack of free education, which caused many children to be out of school, elevated the risk of child trafficking. In view of their findings, the authors recommended that sustained implementation of free education programs, and other integrated multi-level approaches to social and economic inclusion, will reduce child trafficking. Gill and McKinnon (2021), whose research focused on the pervasiveness of child trafficking in West Africa compared to other regions in the continent, recommended that education, family, politics, and religious organizations must work collaboratively to end trafficking crimes. Researching on cross-border trafficking of children from Uganda to Sudan, Kenya, Rwanda, and the DRC, Nakaiza (2021) recommended that the Ugandan police, civil society organizations, and faith-based organizations ought to integrate a strong component of public information in

their programming to reach those in need of their support. Further, discussing the dynamics of internal trafficking in South Africa of children from poor rural areas to urban centers, [Motseki \(2022\)](#) suggested that specialized courts dealing with human trafficking should be established in the Gauteng Province and other provinces in South Africa to facilitate speedy access to justice. What is more, [Jappah and Smith's \(2022\)](#) study on contemporary child trafficking and servitude in post-war Liberia recommends that policies must be formulated that address child servitude and other forms of exploitation against Liberian children.

The above notwithstanding, there is an equally critical body of literature on child trafficking in Africa that challenges the law-enforcement deficiency argument as the cause of child trafficking. These works contended that the current anti-trafficking framework on which the experiences of African children are being measured is dismissive of children's agency and portrays them as passive actors with respect to practices designated as 'trafficking' ([Koomson et al. 2022](#); [Olayiwola 2021](#); [Howard 2017](#)). Ethnographic studies by [Olayiwola \(2022, 2023\)](#) and [Howard \(2014, 2017\)](#) in Nigeria, which utilized the voices of children themselves, made a case for the recognition of diversity in childhood, as child labor does not automatically entail child trafficking as imagined in Western-centric models of child development. While orthodox scholars of the phenomenon may begin their evaluation of the problem from what the law defines as years of children, critical scholars do not align with the same point of departure. Instead, they call for an imagination of childhood not as a universalizing ideal with a provenance from developed countries where children are 'immature' and incapable of exercising prudent judgement on issues concerning their lives ([Okyere 2017](#)) but to recognize the multiplicity of childhood. Experiences that constitute childhood in Africa, they argue, do not necessarily exclude the participation in labor, being primary carers of incapacitated parents, and living outside the family realm as the Western understanding of childhood implies ([Hashim and Thorsen 2011](#), p. 3; [Sabates-Wheeler and Sumberg 2023](#)). Further, [Okyere et al. \(2023\)](#) noted that the narrative of Africa's failure to live up to international standards of curbing child trafficking ignores the conceptual distortion inherent in the language of critique since it assumes 'Western standards' to be the same as 'international standards'. While these critical sentiments are not without merit, it is necessary to point out that we have focused on approaching what childhood means from a legal perspective, particularly as defined by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). Again, while the call for the appreciation of a diversity of childhood may be persuasive, there is a need for caution to avoid the risk of relativizing Africa's challenges in a way that diminishes the impetus of state actors to set ambitious goals for ending the exploitation of children. In other words, since a majority of African governments adopted the ACRWC and, as such, are obligated to conform to its dictates, we have considered it a useful metric to judge their lack of responsiveness to the plight of children.

At any rate, we do not suggest that the works we have appraised here are necessarily linear in their understanding of child trafficking or diminished by virtue of their linearity, only that both modes of conceptualizing the child trafficking problem presents certain conceptual frailties. The first perspective focuses too much on the weaknesses of state institutions, so it underplays how the problem is equally shaped by a myriad of social factors. The second relativizes Africa's peculiar economic challenges and cultural configuration to a point that it runs the risk of excusing the government's lack of ambition in appreciating the welfare of children as a paramount responsibility of the state. That said, our position is that it is equally important for scholars to plough the depths of this intractable human rights problem and scrounge for alternative perspectives of understanding and imagining. This undertaking should be guided by the need to scout for questions that have yet to be asked, not necessarily for the purpose of providing instant answers but for the goal of recognizing that something can be more than one thing. In the next section, we explain why the intractability of child trafficking in Africa is not merely down to the absence of policies or strong institutions but to the current and problematic image of childhood in the continent.

#### 4. The Idea of Childhood in Africa

As we have shown in the previous section, limiting the understanding of child trafficking in Africa as a failure of law and order produces an unwholesome ideation of the problem. It narrows down the intractability of the problem to the ineffectual nature of law enforcement and then calls for greater political will to intensify state response. We seek to go in a different direction with regards to what we perceive the problem to be, even though we do not divorce the state as part of the solution. Our argument is that there is a need to call to question the image of childhood in African societies in the present. We are curious as to whether the state is at all capable of responding to the challenge of child trafficking if the civil society in Africa does not consider children endangered. In addition, of what effect are the multiplicity of laws and duplication of law enforcement agencies to deal with the problem if children are considered expendable in the contemporary perception of some African society? Since the way society sees things often dictates the way they respond to them, we argue that the way childhood is currently viewed in Africa cannot produce the necessary conditions for safeguarding the welfare of children.

The concept of childhood that we invoke here is drawn from the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which defines a child as every human being below the age of 18 years. We draw exclusively from this legal framework for several reasons. The first is that it represents the ideation of childhood by the comity of African states, which makes it an ideal (if not scientific) basis for assessing the lived experiences of children against the professed commitment of political leadership in the continent. As [Kaime \(2009\)](#) argued, African nations were underrepresented in the drafting of the CRC and found the ACRWC as a necessary continental response to define the rights of children in their own way. The second basis for invoking the ACRWC, for the purpose of our inquiry, lies in the Charter's recognition of the precarity of childhood in Africa, taking into consideration the continent's unique political challenges. The Charter's preamble alludes to this precarity when stating the following:

*...the situation of most African children, remains critical due to the unique factors of their socio-economic, cultural, traditional and developmental circumstances, natural disasters, armed conflicts, exploitation and hunger, and on account of the child's physical and mental immaturity he/she needs special safeguards and care. (ACRWC 1999, p. 7)*

In advancement of the developmental needs of the child, the Charter mandates in Article 11 that countries provide free and compulsory basic education ([ACRWC 1999](#), p. 11). Further, it cautions against child labor or the performance of work that is likely to be hazardous to the child or impair their physical, mental, or social development ([ACRWC 1999](#), p. 15). In addition, Article 21 mandates member states to "eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child" with particular reference to child marriage ([ACRWC 1999](#), p. 18). Article 20 (subsection 2b) indicates that the responsibility for a child's welfare is a collective one, distributed in varying degrees between the child's parents, the state, and others responsible for the child. Thus, we consider the problem of child trafficking in Africa not one that exclusively resides with the state but rather as a collective failure of society.

The ideation of childhood in the ACRWC sufficiently reflects the vulnerability and limited agential development accorded to children globally and as beings that require additional layers of protection and care. While the Charter is believed to represent the normative understanding of childhood, the lived experiences of children in contemporary Africa are, regrettably, far from ideal. What appears in reality is an existence of unmitigated disadvantages for the majority of children in the continent. Given this condition, we infer that a less ideal image of childhood dominates public consciousness. Or, at the very least, there is a lack of concern about the harms that children contend with in Africa today or have had to deal with in the past.

Examples abound on how the lives of children have been treated as expendable, where they have faced egregious human rights violations, which are neither acknowledged nor made topical political concerns. For example, despite their obligations under the ACRWC,

the highest levels of child marriages are found in sub-Saharan Africa, where an estimated 35 percent of young women are first married before the age of 18 (Lowe et al. 2022; Ahinkorah et al. 2022). Children have also been highly impacted by the plethora of conflicts that have plagued Africa. It has been conservatively estimated that there were between 5000 and 7000 child combatants (between ages 8 and 14) on each side of the Sierra Leone civil war (Ciftci 2019). In Nigeria, it was observed that out of 434 individuals that Boko Haram had deployed to carry out suicide bombing attacks in Nigeria, at least 81 of them were children or teenagers (Osasona 2022; Okorie 2021). When not directly affected by conflict, they are indirectly impacted by other forms of political failure. In northern Nigeria, for example, thousands, if not millions, of Muslim children are enrolled in Madrasas without hope of ever receiving any formal education. There, they become *Almajiris*, who are required to move across the city or community begging for alms as part of a religious obligation. Safiyanu and Al-Amin (2020) described *Almajiri* as a dysfunction system of child neglect and abuse, which saturates the community with unemployable citizens. The system has contributed significantly to Nigeria's out-of-school children population, which is currently 20 million, making up more than 45 percent of the number of out-of-school children in West Africa (Akinkuotu 2022). In several parts of the Southeast and Southwest of Nigeria, children are being hired from indigent parents and turned into tools for organized begging (Ugwu and Okoye 2022). In Benin, investigative reports on the trafficking of Beninese children indicate that parents in certain rural communities hand over their children to traffickers in exchange for \$USD 250 (Mark 2012). These instances may represent desperate attempts by parents to escape privation, or it may be indicative of a lack of concern for the humanity of the children. Whatever the case, they speak to the existential dangers faced by children in Africa. It is these lived experiences that aggregate to the current image of childhood in the continent today. That said, several scholars have challenged the idea of widespread levels of child trafficking and slavery-like conditions for children Africa. (Okyere 2017; Okyere et al. 2021) noted that although anti-trafficking campaigns have a germane mission to tackle issues concerning child rights and protection, they sometimes adopt visual propaganda and hyperbolic talking points to distort and accentuate the reality of suffering faced by children to achieve a predetermined agenda for donors or related stakeholders. In other words, how the harms that occur to children are interpreted can be dependent on who is documenting or gazing. Thorsen (2013) similarly reckons that the discourse and policy on trafficking are often shaped by donor desires and financial pressures of anti-trafficking agencies. Since the policy framework of child trafficking has been largely inspired by international non-governmental organizations and western-sponsored local NGOs, these critical scholars argue that a 'crisis' narrative regarding the experiences of children in Africa is weighed against the idealized model of childhood in the West (Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Koomson et al. 2022; Okyere et al. 2021).

Other scholars have also pointed out the need to recognize child agency and trafficking in Africa as complex and deserving greater nuance. Chapdelaine (2016, 2020) noted that what constitutes childhood is dictated by the state and sometimes driven by class-related considerations. For example, while an imagination of childhood shaped by middle-class consciousness will place the freedom from labor and the saliency of schooling at the center of what should constitute childhood experience, poorer societies are unlikely to define childhood in similar terms. It is therefore necessary to determine who is gazing from where they are seated. For example, juvenile labor in both Zambia (Hepburn 2016) and Nigeria (Olayiwola 2022) has been reasoned to constitute an agentic practice by child domestic workers as opposed to being recognized as child trafficking going by the Palermo Protocol. Olayiwola's extensive ethnographic work with child domestic workers (mostly between the ages of 11 and 16) presents an important argument with respect to whether childhood in Africa should constitute a site of acute vulnerability as international anti-trafficking agencies portrays it since children do not gaze upon themselves as helpless. Olayiwola maintained that there was a wide gap between anti-trafficking legislation and prevention in Nigeria because the state simply sought to put up an appearance of compliance towards its

international obligations on anti-trafficking even while conditions are unripe for effective enforcement. The reality, he noted, was different because engagement of children in domestic work in third-party households was not conceived as exploitation or trafficking but a viable alternative for families on the margins of poverty. It seemed acceptable, he reckoned, to both indigent parents and the third-party household that engagement in domestic work was in the child's interest since it guarantees them food and shelter (Olayiwola 2021, 2022). Profoundly, Olayiwola (2023) noted that despite their teenage status, children under domestic servitude in Nigeria were able to request removal from an overbearing employer or one who did not guarantee them the possibility of completing primary school education. Similarly, Razy and Rodet's (2016) anthology on the migratory realities of children in Africa found that children often consented to going from rural to urban areas to serve as domestic workers for the purpose of gaining education and employment. Taken together, both works highlight the agentic capacity of subjects often narrativized as 'victims'. The question then becomes whether the survivalist strategies adopted by children to escape acute deprivation constitute an agentic capacity to decide one's future or if the mere willingness to resist an abusive employer as a child domestic worker constitutes a persuasive agentic practice, seeing as their employment as domestic workers ab initio constitutes a violation of their rights going by the international legal instruments their governments have ratified. Indeed, Olayiwola's portrayal of agency among child domestic workers challenges notions of victimhood for child laborers in Nigeria, but the labor itself remains exploitative, as children from economically viable homes do not contend with the harms arising from living outside the bounds of parental care. Generally, scholarship on the child labor mobility as an agentic practice tends to underplay the degrees of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse that occur in third-party households where children work as domestic servants (Onalu et al. 2023; Oludayo 2014; Mbakogu 2004). We have precisely focused on defining childhood by the dictates of the ACRWC for the purpose of analytical clarity and to avoid the explanatory paralysis that may arise from relativizing what constitutes childhood.

Having noted that the current image of childhood in Africa is mediated by the social harms that children are forced to endure, it becomes pertinent to then deal with several questions arising from this. If the harms that confront children in Africa are not considered social and political emergencies by either the state or society, would such a state be capable of protecting children against trafficking? Can a society that refuses to acknowledge, discuss, or memorialize the historical atrocities perpetrated against children be able to adequately contend with the humanity of children in the present or future? We do not consider the answers to any of the above to be affirmative. Hence, our aim is to challenge current perspectives on the intractability of child trafficking in Africa. As such, we reason that a more plausible exploratory path to understanding the government's inability to deal with the problem should instead be to ponder on what childhood actually means in the perception of the state. The reality is that most African governments have failed to appropriately perceive childhood as a site of acute vulnerability or take seriously their responsibility in ensuring "to the maximum extent possible, the survival, protection, and development of the child" (ACRWC 1999, p. 9).

## 5. Reimagining of Childhood through Memorialization

In our estimation, a creative approach through which the state and society in Africa can march towards a new consciousness and perception of childhood is memorialization. Memorialization means to create or do something that causes people to remember a person, thing, or event. Our argument is that memorialization is a persuasive way of capturing events, people, or sentiments that may be otherwise silenced. Memorialization produces among a people, country, or nation some kind of experience of the subject being commemorated. Memorialization may manifest in a tangible form, such as monuments, commemorative sites, memory museums, and (re)naming of public spaces, or as performative gestures of atonement, such as public apologies, annual ceremonies, or declaration of

public holidays (Alderman 2002). These commemorative structures preserve the memory of the past, especially of atrocities, in order to guard against their recurrence.

While what constitutes public memory for a country can sometimes be contested, memorialization provides a means of grounding, legitimating, and domiciling a specific account of the past in collective memory (Alderman 2002). According to Greeley et al. (2020), memorialization can take the form of symbolic reparation that fosters the memory of relevant historical facts, expressing criticism towards perpetrators of historical atrocities and recognizing the dignity of the victims. In effect, memorialization signposts the value of a more moral and just society by drawing attention to the importance of preventing such atrocities from happening again. Societies, from the stone age to modernity, have always amplified the social presence of the dead through variegated means. From stone works and sculptures, through writing and photography, and up to the writing and new media era, human society has always demonstrated commemorative capacity (Navon and Noy 2021). Memorialization is therefore useful in that it enables a society to interpret and appropriate its past as a deliberate attempt to mold its social memory and shape its future (Preda 2010). Where it exists as a form of symbolic reparation, memorialization responds to a demand for truth, recognition, and the re-dignification of victims and therefore plays a crucial role in creating the conditions of civic trust and social solidarity between victims and others in society (Greeley et al. 2020). Since our focus is on how memorialization can assist African societies keep track of the humanity of children, it is necessary to note that the practice of memorialization is not new in Africa, and most post-conflict societies in the continent have used monuments, memorials, and national holidays as commemorative markers. The post-apartheid national government in South Africa commissioned several commemorative projects in memory of victims of massacres and other memorials commemorating new heroes (Marschall 2012, 2010). Similarly, in Rwanda, a number of memorial projects in the form of structures, museums, and preservation of sites have all emerged as commemorative attempts to memorialize victims of the Rwandan genocide (Steele 2006). In Uganda, memorialization efforts have formed part of the country's attempt to uncover the truth about past atrocities in the aftermath of Idi Amin's regime (De Yeaza and Fox 2013). In Nigeria, there were repeated calls for 12 June to be made a national holiday in honor of the late presumed winner of the annulled 12 June 1993 election, Moshood Abiola, by military officials who eventually usurped the democratic order (Ekanade and Odoemene 2012). This clamor was eventually granted by the president Muhammadu Buhari on 2018, who declared the 12th of June every year as *Democracy Day*. Further, Eritreans in their diaspora established an online war memorial as a means of making public important national information to counteract the government's inability to do so (Bernal 2013). In effect, it is possible to de-center the state from the practice of memorialization, though the state has more resources to advance a collective memory project about the past and a vision for the future. That said, state-sanctioned memorializations can also be challenged, as the toppling of the Ras Makonnen monument in Ethiopia or the decapitation of the Cecil Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town, South Africa indicates (Sikes et al. 2021). At any rate, the above examples indicate that memorialization of harms and atrocities committed against children across different countries in Africa is a possibility and does not represent any radical political leap. Drawing from the memorialization examples above, we suggest that the time has come for African countries whose past or present are blighted by atrocities against children to leverage on memorialization in order to encourage their population to appreciate these realities, which may, in turn, transform societal consciousness or attitudes towards children. This has the capacity to lead to a reconditioning of the responsibility to treat children as beings who deserve special care. It would also make the commitment to combat child trafficking a shared one, as opposed to it being in the exclusive preserve of law enforcement officials. One imagines, for instance, that if Nigeria had erected a monument or declared a national holiday to memorialize the Biafran children starved to death as a result of its onslaught on the separatist territory, the country may have been less indifferent today to the plight of children who are victims of the Boko Haram terror

campaign. Sierra Leone also comes to mind as a space in which commemorative structures to mark the violations surrounding the child soldier phenomenon are missing yet terribly needed. Across Africa, monuments or memorials signaling the memorialization of children who perished in various state and non-state sanctioned violence massacres are rarely seen. In the absence of these structures of recollection, the ability of society to keep track of the humanity of children becomes highly impaired. In other words, commemorative markers can provide a supplementary approach to tackling child trafficking given their capacity to provoke recollection and attitudinal change. We have termed it a supplementary approach because memorialization cannot and should not supplant the role of an effective criminal justice system in resolving the problem of child trafficking and ensuring the protection of children's right. As scholars thinking through the African condition, memorialization makes sense to us as a mechanism for combating child trafficking because monuments and related commemorative markers will constantly draw attention to the plight of children who are forced into marriages, domestic servitude, and labor migration due to the absence of state protection. It is unclear how the public will react towards these memorialization attempts, but we foresee that it has the capacity to, sooner or later, kindle a discussion about making society safer for children. At the very least, we hope that memorialization will make employers of child domestic workers treat them with dignity even as social and economic factors make the phenomenon of child domestic servants inevitable in some African countries. We envisage also that with public monuments of the harms done to children in the past, political authorities may commit more strongly to providing resources and personnel to protect children against trafficking. We must add that our call for memorialization as a way of increasing societal awareness towards child trafficking should be treated as exploratory and not as a fully formed, robust perspective. We hope that other scholars find this perspective inviting enough to wrestle with as an additional, if not interesting, way of imagining a solution to the problem of child trafficking. Admittedly, the cloth on which we have woven our memorialization perspective does have its creases, which we hope future research will pick up on and possibly straighten out.

## 6. Conclusions

The article broadly highlights the limitations of perspectives on child trafficking in Africa that focus on the problem as a matter that can be dealt with by simply expanding law enforcement mechanisms. Our contention is that this approach does not allow for a wholesome appraisal of the issue given its layers of complexities. The argument we have put forth in response is that there is a need to examine how childhood is currently perceived in contemporary Africa in order to understand why children are faced with unmitigated harms and disadvantages such as trafficking. As we have argued, the image of childhood in Africa has been mediated by variegated atrocities, which are neither acknowledged nor memorialized. As a result, the lives of children have been cast as expendable, which has meant that childhood is rarely imagined as a site of vulnerability or deserving of 'special care', as embodied in the ACWRC. Memorialization, we suggest, will prove useful in recalibrating the consciousness of African societies on how to think differently about childhood. This would inform a new level of alertness regarding the abuses children face or must never be allowed to experience. Due to vulnerabilities arising from conflict, ungovernable spaces, poverty, misgovernance, and other related fallout of political failure, the African child continues to deal with existential threats that make them easy prey to human trafficking. There is no doubt that the criminal justice system has a role to play in curbing the crime of child trafficking, but how society interprets what constitutes violence against children matters even more. Memorialization can provide a constant and needed reminder of the failure of the state to protect children from trafficking in the past and the obligation to not abdicate this responsibility going forward.

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