

The Irony of Child Protection: A qualitative analysis of social workers and police officers' challenges in supporting the rights of victims of child marriage

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Abstract: Social workers and the police are key frontline workers providing intervention against the practice of child marriage. However, the challenges they experience have received little attention in the literature on child marriage. This paper seeks to contribute to emerging literature by exploring the challenges frontline workers face when intervening in a child marriage situation in Ghana. The study utilizes semi-structured interviews to collect data from six frontline workers and analyses the data thematically. The study found that frontline workers follow a common practice of prematurely reintegrating rescued victims back into the environment where child marriage is encouraged. This raises awareness of what we called *the child protection irony* which is inconsistent with the constitution and the child welfare policies in Ghana. As a result, the girls is left alone to battle their way out of child marriage while the perpetrators remain unpunished. The findings suggest a need for collaboration between child protection agencies to ensure that child welfare laws and resource allocations are implemented effectively to safeguard children's rights.

Keywords: child protection irony; social work; child marriages; revictimization; Critical intersectionality.

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Introduction

Children have traditionally held a special role in the African society as the custodians of the future (Frimpong-Manso, 2014). Customarily, extended families offer care and protection for children whose parents were dead or incapable to provide care through kinship, or other community networks (Goody, 1966). Such cultural practices enhance the child's well-being, especially in the case of foster children from dysfunctional or poor families. Despite this effective conventional method of child protection, social workers, the police, and successive governments have focused little on how these methods could turn to harm children (Sarfo et al., 2020, Cudjoe et al., 2020). Scholars argued that care favors from kinship and other community social ties force children against their will to do their biddings, especially in the context of child marriage (Sarfo et al., 2020).

However, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been labelled the most powerful legal instrument of the twentieth century for protecting the rights of children (UNICEF, 2005; Manful & Manful, 2013). Its substantial endorsement by 194 of the United Nations' 196 member states emphasizes the global importance of child protection. One of the assumptions is that, at policy and practice level, children's rights will enlighten and guide frontline social workers with a sense of responsibility regarding children's wellbeing (Manful & Manful, 2013). Nevertheless, reports about children in need of protection in Ghana are said to be hindered by structural and systemic barriers (Manful & Manful, 2013; Manful et al., 2020). These barriers deprive children of their rights to state welfare protection. According to the literature, child marriage and other forms of child exploitation are common in Ghana, particularly among girls (Frimpong-Manso, 2014; Sarfo et al., 2021). The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNHR) describes child marriage as a forced marriage because one or both partners have not expressed their full, free, and informed consent (Albu, 2019).

According to UNICEF, child marriage has affected over 650 million girls and young women alive today before they turned 18 years old (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018; Batyra and Pesando, 2021). The practice of child marriage is a breach and abuse of children's rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990 (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1981 (CEDAW, article 16-1B) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1979 (ACRWC, article 21). Studies indicate that victims of child marriage are often forced against their will to give up their childhood dreams to become brides (Schlecht, 2016; Sarfo et al., 2020). Evidence also shows that child marriage has destabilised young girls' education and exposed them to human rights violations and sexual abuse (Sarfo et al., 2020; Batyra and

Pesando, 2021; Akter et al., 2022). Accordingly, children's early and formative years, i.e., when they have the prospects to pursue and realise their aspirations are shortened, thus compromising their right to education and a decent life. Of the ten countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, six are in West and Central Africa (Malhotra et al., 2011; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015; Mourtada et al., 2017).

Girls in the West and Central African context are most likely to be trapped in child marriage practices (Sarfo et al., 2019). According to Twum-Danso (2009), contextual factors such as religion and culture prevent children from expressing their opinion on matters that concern them. In 2018, UNICEF and UNFPA reported that approximately fourteen young women in Africa are married before the age of eighteen, and one in three child brides in the region are married before the age of fifteen (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). Statistics also show that around fifteen million adolescent girls in the region are married off every year (Alhassan, 2013; Sarfo et al., 2020). The high prevalence of child marriage in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world is a source of concern for girls who are at risk and those ensnared into the practice, which has profound consequences on the girls' mental health, gender inequality and education (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). It is reported that the northern part of Ghana has the highest prevalence rate of child marriage. In addition, the Ghana Statistical Service (2020) Multidimensional poverty regional index documents that these regions are the poorest in Ghana. Statistics show that the Northern regions have a poverty rate of 80.8%, meaning that eight in every ten people are poor. The Upper East Region has a rate of 68% and the Upper West Region has a rate of 65.5% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018;; UNICEF, 2018). Scholars argue that in most of these regions there is a high premium on virginity and bride wealth for young girls (Sarfo et al., 2020).

This paper seeks to explore the challenges experienced by frontline social workers and police officers in reaching out to support and rescue victims of child marriage in northern Ghana.

Legislation and Policies against Child Marriage

Since Ghana ratified the UNCRC in 1990, four major pieces of legislation have been enacted: the Criminal Code (Amendment) Act 1998 (Act 554), a review of the statutory provisions concerning women and children in abusive households or situations; the Children's Act 1998 (Act 560); Child Rights Regulations 2002 (LI1705) and the Juvenile Justice Act 2003 (Act 653). These legal frameworks have been revised and amended to ensure the effective implementation of the

UNCRC's provisions to protect children's rights in Ghana (Manful & Manful, 2013). However, in 2010 Ghana was ranked 29th out of 52 African countries for child-friendliness (Ruiz-Casares, 2010). This is not encouraging for a country that was the first to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Manful & Manful, 2013).

The literature suggests that children's rights, particularly in rural communities are violated by negative cultural practices such as forced or child marriage (Sarfo et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2021). This results in the young girls requiring care and protection from the state (Ghana Statistical Service, 2009, p.7). This is supported by the Children's Act 1998 (14.1A, B, and C), which states that: 'No person shall force a child (a) to be betrothed; (b) to be the subject of a dowry transaction, or (c) to be married'.

Even though the legislations forbid child marriage, the practices of child marriage are so deeply ingrained in the culture that, it has proven impossible to eradicate them (Sossou & Yogyiba, 2009; Manful & Manful, 2013; Frimpong-Manso, 2014). This raises the question of how child marriage can be abolished if cultural and social constructs trump policies and legislation in Ghana.

Ghana's failure to protect children against child marriage exploitation could be linked to cultural and systemic impediments that subject social workers and police officers to a precarious situation that needs a critical attention (Laird, 2002; Manful & Manful, 2014). The failure of these legislations and frameworks to ensure children's safety raises what we call a child protection irony in Ghana. It is therefore necessary to study these ironical situations in terms of the challenges frontline social workers and the police experience in supporting victims of child marriage in northern Ghana.

The State of the Art

The complexities surrounding child protection practices, child marriage, and the challenges faced by frontline social workers and police officers in northern Ghana reflect the intricate interplay of institutional policies and street-level bureaucracy dynamics (Goody, 1966; Frimpong-Manso, 2014; Sarfo et al., 2019; Cudjoe et al., 2020). Street-level bureaucracy theory, developed by Lipsky, becomes particularly relevant when examining how these front-line actors interpret and implement policies in their day-to-day interactions with child marriage victims (Bovens, & Zouridis, 2002; Lipsky, 1980). In the context of child protection, the traditional role of extended families and community networks in providing care for children

aligns with the street-level bureaucracy's emphasis on the discretion exercised by local actors (Lipsky, 1980; Moore, 1987).

However, as highlighted by scholars (Sarfo et al., 2019; Cudjoe et al., 2020), the effectiveness of these traditional methods of child protection is nuanced, with potential harm to children arising from practices like child marriage. Street-level bureaucrats, including social workers and police officers, navigate a delicate balance between adhering to cultural norms and protecting children's rights, and their discretion can either reinforce harmful practices or contribute to positive social change (Lipsky, 1980).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a powerful legal instrument, but its impact at the street level is contingent on how frontline social workers and police officers interpret and apply its principles (UNICEF, 2005; Manful & Manful, 2013). The structural and systemic barriers identified in the literature (Manful et al., 2020) point to the challenges faced by street-level bureaucrats in translating global policies into effective local interventions. Discrepancies between policy intentions and actual implementation are common, as seen in reports of hindered child protection efforts in Ghana (Manful et al., 2020). Frontline social workers and police officers, as street-level bureaucrats, need specialized training and support to effectively navigate the intricacies of child protection, particularly in contexts where cultural practices may run counter to international rights frameworks (Lipsky, 1980; Manful & Manful, 2013). The high prevalence of child marriage in northern Ghana, shaped by cultural factors and socioeconomic disparities, requires interventions that go beyond policy mandates and consider the local context to avoid unintended consequences (MICS, 2018; Sarfo et al., 2020).

Therefore, a critical examination of child protection in northern Ghana, incorporating the street-level bureaucracy theory, underscores the need for nuanced interventions that acknowledge the discretion exercised by frontline social workers and police officers. Balancing cultural sensitivity with the imperative to protect children's rights requires a comprehensive understanding of how policies manifest at the local level, making the integration of street-level bureaucracy theory essential in shaping effective and culturally sensitive child protection strategies.

The Role of Frontline Social Workers and the Police in Dealing with Child Marriage

Social work practitioners in Ghana have a constitutional mandate and the essential skills and talent to rescue victims of child marriage and any other inhumane social activities. The Ghana Police Service is also legally empowered to ‘prevent, detect, protect, apprehend and prosecute perpetrators of child marriage and other cases of child abuse’ (Children’s Act 560; 1992 Constitution of Ghana, chapters 4 & 5; Ghana Police Service 2021). They assist social workers in rescuing, rehabilitating, and placing victims of child marriages in a safe environment (1992 Constitution of Ghana, chapter 5, section 28). [Dominelli \(2010\)](#) asserts that frontline social workers and police officers are in a position that enable them to advocate for children’s rights and facilitate their removal if the environment is oppressing the child.

According to the Children’s Act 560, section 16 (1), the district assemblies in Ghana shall protect and promote the rights of children within their area of authority. They must ensure that within the district, governmental agencies (such as social workers at welfare departments and the Police Unit, (DOVVSU)) collaborate to prevent child marriage activities. This means that the Social Welfare and Community Development Department in collaboration with the police shall investigate cases of child marriage and any other activities that infringe upon children’s rights. However, scholars have argued that the social welfare department, police unit and other government agencies that are supposed to consult with each other are not well equipped to address child marriage activities in Ghana ([Kaseke, 1991](#); [Mupedziswa, 2005](#); [Chogugudza, 2009](#)). Therefore, it is important to examine the challenges frontline personnel are facing, particularly social workers and police officers who work directly with child marriage victims.

Methods and Materials

To investigate the complex challenges faced by frontline social workers and the police in the battle of child marriages, the study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research approach. The choice of phenomenology as a research method to explore the challenges faced by frontline social workers and police officers in addressing child marriages is justified by the method’s suitability for capturing the nuanced and subjective aspects of victims’ experiences ([Stevens, 2007](#)). Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical work of Husserl, provides a unique lens to delve into the ‘essence of lived experiences,’ and how child marriage victims make sense of the world around them ([Husserl, 1927](#); [Silverman, 2009](#), p.25). In this context, the approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the

complexities involved, going beyond surface-level observations to understand the profound meanings and interpretations that frontline workers attach to their encounters.

Child marriage is a deeply sensitive and multifaceted issue, involving intricate social, cultural, and legal dimensions. Phenomenology's emphasis on the subjective experiences of individuals aligns with the need to grasp the lived realities of social workers and police officers. By adopting this approach, the study recognizes that the challenges these professionals face are not solely objective, measurable phenomena but are deeply rooted in their personal interpretations and experiences. Phenomenology incorporates the practice of bracketing, where researchers consciously set aside preconceived notions and biases. In the context of child marriages, this is particularly important as it allows the researchers to approach the study with a fresh perspective, untainted by assumptions (Silverman, 2009). Phenomenology enables open exploration, encouraging researchers to delve into the lived experiences of frontline workers without imposing external frameworks or judgments, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter. This method allows for an exploration of not only what challenges exist but also how these challenges manifest in specific contexts, shedding light on the unique intricacies faced by social workers and police officers.

While phenomenology offers unique advantages, it is essential to acknowledge that other research methods also have merits. For instance, quantitative methods could provide statistical insights into the prevalence of child marriages, contributing to a broader understanding of the issue. Ethnographic research could offer a more immersive examination of the cultural contexts influencing child marriages. The choice of phenomenology, in this case, reflects a deliberate decision to prioritize the depth and richness of subjective experiences, aiming for a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by frontline workers in the battle against child marriages (Bryman, 2016). It examines how social workers and the police construct meanings and interpretations of their practical, lived experiences, as emphasized by [Larkin et al. \(2006\)](#).

Data Collection

The data concerning the challenges faced by frontline workers were collected via semi-structured interviews, following the approach outlined by [Bryman \(2012\)](#). The study participants consisted of a total of six service providers belonging to a study group classified as "hard-to-reach." The term "hard-to-reach" is employed to describe sub-groups that may pose difficulties in recruitment for research purposes

(Hughes et al., 2008 ; Kaufmann et al., 2021). The participants in this study were purposively selected from four regions in northern Ghana, namely the Savanna Region, Upper West Region, Northeast, and Northern Region. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be professionals actively engaged in providing social support to victims, either currently involved in child marriage or rescued from such situations. Individuals who did not meet this specific criterion were excluded from the study.

Recruitment of police officers and social workers was carried out through official recommendations from friends who acted as our gatekeepers in facilitating contact with potential participants. All six professionals willingly participated in the study and provided insights and experiences related to the phenomenon in accordance with ethical research guidelines. The interview sessions ranged in duration from 45 minutes to two hours, with breaks, and were recorded using voice-recording devices for each participant.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study adhered to established ethical principles and guidelines to ensure the protection and well-being of the research participants, the integrity of the research, and the responsible communication of findings. Ethical rigor is essential to maintaining the trust and credibility of scientific research in the pursuit of knowledge and the betterment of society.

The following ethical issues were therefore addressed and satisfied during the study. These include informed consent, invasion of privacy, confidentiality, and preventing harm to participants. Following Davison's assertion that it is morally unjustifiable to leave informants damaged by a traumatic interview, the study took steps to mitigate this risk (Davison, 2004). Transparency was maintained throughout the process, and participants were given the option to withdraw from the research study at any time, prioritizing their well-being. To protect the identity of participants and adhere to the code of ethics, pseudonyms were assigned, following the guidance of Atkinson and Coffey (2003). These ethical measures demonstrate a commitment to upholding the rights and welfare of the study participants.

Data Analysis

The findings of the study were analysed thematically. The goal of the thematic analysis was to identify themes or interesting patterns in the qualitative data and use those themes to interpret and make sense of the challenges the frontline workers faced (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After a thorough review of the material, data were coded by taking a preliminary look at the words and terms and classifying them into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The code-recode approach was used to strengthen the dependability of the findings after the initial coding of the documents. The study used the analytical coding and process to examine the practical experiences of social workers and police officers in reaching out to support and rescue girls in child marriages in Ghana.

Socio-demographic information of participants

The study involved six research participants comprised of four social workers and two police officers. All the four social workers had a background in social work education and other similar social sciences programs. Three of them, SW1, SW3, and SW4 worked for the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development as caseworkers, assisting victims of child marriage. The other (SW2) founded a non-profit organization involved in outreach work to support and identify victims. There was a significant disparity in terms of the social workers' practical experience. While three of the social workers (SW1, SW2, and SW3) had 3-6 years of experience, SW4 had 18 years of experience and was the head of the department. In addition, both the two police officers had prior education in and extensive practical experience with the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) under the Ghana Police Service. The DOVVSU oversees cases involving child welfare and spousal abuse.

The findings of the experienced challenges in protecting and supporting victims of child marriages

The study resulted in the following themes as: *cultural and religious interference, lack of respite care, premature integration, and revictimization*. These themes structure the following analysis and consequently answer the research question posed by the study: what are the challenges frontline social workers and the police experience in protecting and supporting victims of child marriages?

Cultural and Religious Interference

The participants emphasized that handling child marriage cases in rural communities is particularly challenging. The frontline social workers and police officers opined that cultural and religious norms interfere with their efforts to reach out and support the victims of child marriage:

‘Culturally, it is difficult to work with child marriage cases, especially how the family is structured in some communities’ (P2).

The police officers emphasized how they often are approached by traditional rulers with the aim for them to stop investigating child marriage cases. According to one of the police officers the traditional leaders claim child marriage cases are family-related issues that must be addressed at the family level:

‘Opinion leaders who should have known better would often interfere in child marriage issues claiming it is a family case. That the police should allow it to be handled traditionally and that is what we usually experience in this society.’ (P1)

The above observations have the tendency of obstructing the police officers’ efforts to reach out and rescue child marriage victims. Aligning with this assertion, the social workers too reports that traditional and religious actors often threaten them and the key informants who help identify and support victims of child marriage:

‘Informants reporting child marriage cases to the department of social welfare get attacked every day. Even [us] social workers, we get attacked too. Even though the law is there to [obey], but if you are a coward, you cannot handle or manage child marriage cases in Ghana.’ (SW2)

Experiences of being ostracized by the community leaders who see them as ‘obstructing’ the social norm of the tribe community is an everyday challenge for the police officers and social workers in the field. According to the participants, the essence of this rejection is to put a pressure on them to discourage them from intervening in child marriage cases. The interference from the traditional leaders in obstructing social worker’s efforts to support and rescue child marriage victims indicates how opinion leaders – who are very influential people in Ghanaian rural communities – always try to prevent offenders from appearing in case conferences at the department of social welfare. One of the social workers advocated against the opinion leaders act in protecting the offenders:

‘There should be strict adherence to the law. We must enforce the law. Covering [for] offenders based on religious or family grounds, chieftaincy, and tribal relations and all those kinds [of thing] should not be condoned to deter others from engaging in such criminal practices.’ (SW1)

When elaborating on what the practitioners meant by religious leaders, politicians, and traditional actors 'covering for offenders,' it was explained as:

'No, the interference would be to cover [for] the offender. That is where you talk of the religion and cultural aspect of it. If the case is reported to the police, traditional actors like Chiefs would go in to plead, religious leaders would go in to plead, opinion leaders would go in, and politicians would call in to interfere for the police not to process the case anymore' (SW3).

Due to such interference, according to the social workers, most cases of child marriage are left uninvestigated or processed for court. The victims are therefore left to fend for themselves as society robs them of their future.

Lack of Respite Care

Responses from the study participants demonstrate instances of a lack of respite care for victims trapped in child marriage. Participants revealed that providing rescue services to victims of child marriage is a frustrating experience in northern Ghana, as the majority of cases are being closed without further investigation:

'It can be frustrating at times, and child marriage cases are occasionally closed without further investigation. Where would you shelter the girl child if you are interested in prosecuting the offenders?' (SW4)

The police officers felt that their primary role was to protect the victims of child marriage and prosecute the offenders. According to them, they perform their statutory duties with the assistance of the frontline social workers.

'We provide prosecution services, on behalf of the victims, against the family members who perpetrate such child marriage practice. We take them to court and make sure that justice is served' (P1).

However, the police officers are unable to provide adequate and temporary social respite care to the victims trapped in child marriage. The participants expressed these concerns about the lack of temporary accommodation to safeguard victims traumatized by the activities of child marriage:

'The State does not have a temporary shelter for the security and effective rehabilitation of the victims to be stable and function well' (P2). Similar responses from the frontline social workers illustrate that there are no temporary or permanent shelters for girls and victims who are at risk and in need of institutional care:

'If the victim requires temporary shelter, we are unable to provide it, and these are the things that are required when providing psychosocial support to victims at the department of social welfare.' (SW2)

As evidenced by the quotes above, social workers and police officers are struggling to find shelters for victims traumatized by the practice of child marriage. As a result, the involved practitioners' possibilities to provide competent services to victims of child marriage and reinforced children rights as mandated by Ghana's Children's Act 560 are lacking. The police officers and social workers are therefore under a pressure left with the only option to integrate the victims back into their families. This routine of practice can further expose the victims into a more vulnerable position which might endanger children's social life and well-being.

Premature integration

Integration of girls rescued from forced marriages back to their respective families was one of the primary themes that emerged from the data. The study shows that after the social workers provide victims with social support (e.g., psychosocial counselling), they negotiate with the victims' families for their return: *'After giving psychosocial counselling, we try to reintegrate the victim back to their family'* (SW2).

Similarly, the police officers shared their experience that, due to the lack of care homes at the various social welfare departments in the districts, they have no other option than to send the victims back into their respective families with the help of social workers.

'The department of social welfare and DOVVSU (police unit) does not have temporary or permanent shelters for victims who are at risk of harm and have to negotiate to reintegrate the girls back to their families' (P2). Participants of the study stated that although they are not interested in destabilizing the family unit, the lack of care homes has undermined the child's rights to protection against harm.

'We are not interested in destroying families, but as social workers, we are interested in seeing the family functioning effectively. You are interested in girl child welfare and the welfare is not just on paper, it is not just mouth talk, you must work it out. The girl must be sheltered somewhere if you arrest the offenders who are usually family members. But in this case, the girl must go back to the family house, due to a lack of shelter [...] Just imagine!' (SW2)

Social workers and the police integrating victims back into their families poses an ironical situation in terms of upholding the principles of social work and the UNCRC: 'the best interest of the child and her safety.' The social workers and

the police expressed concerns that in most cases, the victims would not be safe after being reintegrated with her family:

'Yes, you just have it documented that you have rescued the girl and stopped the child marriage. You have talked with the family and reintegrated the girl child back into the family – and how effective is this? And how comfortable would that girl be in that family?' (SW4).

Although Ghana's Children's Act 560 provides legal protection and guidelines for frontline social workers and police officers, the study found that child marriage victims do not receive adequate welfare support. Participants expressed concerns about not being able to provide housing for victims traumatized by child marriage practices. Consequently, victims may become reluctant to disclose any potential threats or abuse to the police or the department of social welfare if they experience or notice it:

'Whatever the girl child might be going through in the family this time, she has to keep quiet because there was no help. Yeah, the girl child is not safe after the reintegration.' (P2)

Social workers and police officers dealing directly with child marriage cases and therefore have little support other than to integrate victims back into the very family or society who initially committed the crime against them. Therefore, reintegrating these victims could expose victims to new potential risks and harm, including revictimization.

Revictimization

Due to the failure of state institutions to provide care to victims of child marriage in most rural communities the study participants experienced that the victims faced a greater threat or were at risk of being remarried and thus not rehabilitated. Revictimization refers to a situation in which the previously abused girl suffers more than one incident of abuse over a period of time. One of the police officers reflected that victims would be subject to social exclusion and name-calling. Being reintegrated into the family, the child might experience some additional form of trauma or other abuse:

'She would be going through a lot. And you know, in Africa here – especially in Ghana, we have a certain perception. The moment that elderly people comes in; they start pointing fingers at that child [...] referring to her as delinquent just to validate their actions. The moment that happens, even a third party is afraid to accept her into the society' (P1).

Social exclusion and labelling are deeply discrediting and place the victim in an even more vulnerable position (Becker, 1963). In the social workers' experience,

girls who run away from child marriages are being labelled social delinquents and consequently not welcomed back into her family and /or community. Considering this, victims are likely to be revictimized by the very people who engage in and uphold child marriage practices as the norm. One social worker shared this experience:

‘Society frowns upon such girls, thinking that they are bad or delinquent girls, but it is not like that – they don’t have the time to listen to the children.’ (SW1)

According to police officers, most people in society are afraid or have a negative perception of someone who has been to the police station. This is because people do not want to be perceived as an ex-convict:

‘Because the girl has been to social welfare or filed a complaint at the police station, then it becomes a serious societal problem. [Her parents] would be maltreating her when she returns’ (P1).

The girl is likely to be revictimized and socially excluded when she fails to adhere to customs, norms, and family practices. This presents a dilemma as to whether the best interests of the child and her safety are paramount.

Discussion

The results of frontline social workers and police officers lived experience reveals critical issues within the Ghanaian child protection system. The recent study discovered that social workers and law enforcement officers encounter challenges and difficulties in reaching out to support and prevent child marriages. It highlights a critical intersection of factors contributing to child marriage, including cultural norms, religious beliefs, and gender disparities. These deeply entrenched cultural customs place a higher emphasis on family honor and patriarchal values than on the well-being and rights of young girls (Moody, 2020).

The current study highlights the imprint gender disparities within child marriages, with girls facing domestic violence and emotional abuse (Mahato, 2016; Tristam, 2019). The far-reaching consequences of child marriage on girls’ prospects, including restrictions on their social skills and decision-making capabilities, corroborated with the findings of Akter et al. (2021) and Mahato (2016). According to Akter et al 2021 and Mahato 2016, child marriage deprived girls of their future and placed them in a vulnerable position. Considering the above literature, the current study cited inadequate

respite care services as a pressing concern obstructing care and support for victims in child marriages.

According to [Sarfo et al. \(2020\)](#), [Knox \(2017\)](#), and [Manful and Cudjoe \(2018\)](#), the lack of adequate social support intensifies the numerous issues associated with child marriage. Within this framework, social care encompasses a broad spectrum of services such as counseling, legal aid, and educational access, among others. Child marriage victims often require comprehensive assistance to recover from the effects of the practice and rebuild their lives. The unavailability or inadequate access to social services and resources further hinder frontline workers in providing these essential respite services to victims ([Mupedziswa, 2005](#)). The absence of respite care services, which is often a temporary care provided to child marriage victims, poses a significant challenge for social workers and the police ([Abdullah et al., 2021](#); [Wallerstein, 1992](#)). Accordingly, Child marriage victims often find themselves in urgent need of a safe place to stay, away from the harmful environment they were forced into ([Knox, 2017](#)). Without access to respite care facilities, the current study revealed that, frontline workers often struggle to offer immediate protection and victims traumatized by child marriage practices, putting their safety at risk ([Twum-Danso, 2009](#); [Manful and Manful, 2013](#)). The consequences of these limitations are particularly explicit in Ghana's northern regions. The current study emphasizes that the absence of temporary accommodation options not only impedes the rehabilitation of child marriage victims but also undermines the overall child protection policies.

[Lipsky \(2010\)](#) states that persistent inadequate respite services, place frontline social workers and the police in a paradoxical position, potentially leading them to adopt common practices that may not align with the best interests of the victims. Our study consistently revealed that due to insufficient respite services, frontline social workers and the police often resorted to the common practice of prematurely reintegrating victims into environments where child marriage is encouraged. This raises awareness of what we called the 'child protection irony,' which is inconsistent with the UNCRC, Ghana's 1992 constitution and the child welfare policies. The child protection irony highlights a sharp disparity between Ghana's dedication to safeguarding children, as articulated in the UNCRC and the Country's 1992 constitution, and the challenging circumstances encountered by frontline workers.

This ironical situation becomes apparent when social workers and the police, despite the safeguard responsibility, reintegrate child marriage victims into the very communities where the phenomenon is prevalent without adequate monitoring ([Gilson et al., 2015](#); [Watkins-Smith, 2022](#)). According to the 1992 Constitution of Ghana (chapter 5, section 28), the police shall

assist social workers in rescuing, rehabilitating, and placing victims of child marriage in a 'safe environment'. However, their interventions according to the current study, inadvertently place victims in situations that contradict the very principles of child protection that Ghana upholds. Congruence to this, the absence of robust monitoring mechanisms means that once reintegrated, these children may face the risk of re-victimization, as they return to environments where child marriage remains a deeply ingrained practice (Jones, 2021). This stresses the urgent need for not only preventing child marriages but also ensuring the sustained protection and support of victims after their rescue. Without continuous monitoring and follow-up, the children's safety and well-being may remain in jeopardy, perpetuating the cycle of harm (Davis, 2018). This aspect of the child protection irony highlights the importance of comprehensive strategies that encompass prevention, intervention, and post-rescue care to break the cycle of child marriage effectively (Cochran, 1986; Keiffer, 1984; Robinson, 2021). The child protection irony in Ghana is a complex issue rooted in deep-seated societal norms and resource limitations. Addressing this challenge requires not only a commitment to legal and policy frameworks but also a concerted effort to provide the necessary resources and support to frontline workers. Ghana's aspirations for child protection and welfare must align with the realities faced by those on the frontlines, working tirelessly to protect vulnerable children from the harms of child marriage. The consequences of integrating victims back into an environment that promotes child marriage without regard for whether the child is safe deserves further attention. This common practice can lead to a new crop of societal problems such as remarriage, homelessness, child abuse and exploitation.

Reshaping Child Welfare in Ghana: Ubuntu's Influence on Policy and Practice

The amalgamation of our findings bears significant implications for the transformation of child welfare in Ghana, within the context of Ubuntu theoretical lens. This theory highlights the importance of interconnectedness, dignity, and community, offering valuable insights into intervening against the critical problem of child marriage. Of particular significance is the imperative for practitioners and policymakers to address cultural and religious structures that promote child marriage, as elucidated in our study (Mayaka et al., 2023; Mayaka & Truell, 2021). By applying Ubuntu principles, social workers in Ghana can approach child marriage through advocacy and community education while respecting the

cultural context. Our findings emphasize that child marriage issues are deeply rooted in cultural norms and practices, underscoring the necessity of cultural sensitivity in interventions. This approach fosters understanding and dialogue within communities, aligning with Ubuntu's emphasis on interconnectedness and shared responsibility for the well-being of all, encapsulated in the mantra '*A person is a person through the other person*'. That is social workers, and the police should wear their cultural lens while advocating for change, - '*I am a human because I belong*'.

Moreover, the findings draw attention to the dissonance between Ghana's child protection policies and their practical implementation. Ubuntu's core principle of respecting the dignity of every individual underscore the need to harmonize policy with practice. To address this incongruity, it is imperative to incorporate social work and legal education into the curriculum of social work training at all levels, aligning with Ubuntu's principle of enhancing knowledge and understanding (Zvomuya, 2020; Truell, 2023). The concept of Ubuntu also encourages collaborative learning and support. In this context, it suggests that social workers and police should engage in in-service training, seminars, and workshops to enhance their capacity to handle culturally sensitive cases such as child marriage. This collaborative approach aligns with Ubuntu's emphasis on communal ethics and shared responsibility for well-being (Zvomuya, 2020). Furthermore, the findings underscore the necessity of establishing respite care services and care homes for rescued victims, aligning with Ubuntu's emphasis on caring for the welfare of the community and individuals. These services prioritize the safety and well-being of victims over returning them to environments that encourage child marriage.

Additionally, our findings mirror the challenges faced by social workers and police officers in their efforts to assist girls in escaping child marriage. Ubuntu encourages challenging disempowering decisions and relying less on the personal discretion of social workers and police officers. This approach can aid in challenging societal injustices and upholding the dignity and well-being of individuals, in line with the Ubuntu philosophy. In summary, the theory of Ubuntu provides a framework for the advancement of child protection policies in Ghana that resonate with the culture and values of the community. It underscores the importance of respecting human dignity, promoting collaboration, and embracing collective responsibility, offering valuable guidance for addressing the intricate issue of child marriage and enhancing the well-being of vulnerable girls in the country.

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