When child trafficking and informal fostering intersect: A mixed methods study

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Abstract: Informal fostering is an important tradition for many communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the intersections of poverty and social circumstances may increase the risk of exploitation for informally fostered children. We used mixed methods to estimate the prevalence of child trafficking within informal child fostering placements in Sierra Leone, to document vulnerability factors and explore perceptions of key stakeholders. Data were collected through 1) a household survey (N= 3,070), 2) interviews (N= 41) with young adults who experienced child trafficking in informal fostering, parents of children who experienced trafficking in foster placements, and key informants, and 3) focus groups with community members (N= 23). We found that informal fostering increases the likelihood for children to experience trafficking. Although there are significant associations between child trafficking and informal fostering, social (gender and cultural traditions) and economic factors (poverty and school access) appear to be drivers for both. Our results suggest that strengthening poverty reduction measures, expanding opportunities for schooling and vocational training for children and young adults, and improving safety for children in informal fostering arrangements through reporting and monitoring are essential to mitigate the high rates of child trafficking in Sierra Leone, and to ensure children's well-being in informal fostering placements.

Keywords: informal child fostering, Sierra Leone, child trafficking, risk factors, poverty

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Study background

A collective responsibility for the care and support of children is an important hallmark of child-rearing traditions in West Africa (Leinaweaver, 2014; Hampshire et al., 2015; Sharley et al., 2020; Cotton et al., 2022). Informal fostering plays an integral role in this tradition and is very prevalent across West African communities (Hampshire et al., 2015; Cotton, 2021). The practice of informal fostering has been found to have many potential benefits for children, family, and community by strengthening family ties, supporting kin through caregiving and domestic work, and improving future prospects for a child and their family through access to educational or vocational opportunities (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Bledsoe, 1990; Ariyo et al., 2019; Cotton, 2021). However, concerns have been raised that children placed in informal fostering situations may be at an increased risk of experiencing exploitation or that these placements could result in child trafficking (Nnama-Okechukwu, Agwu, and Okoye, 2020; Sharley et al., 2020). Child trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a person under the age of 18 for exploitative labor; force, fraud or coercion in the context of labor; or being engaged in any form of commercial sex as a minor (United Nations, 2000; Okech et al., 2022). Some scholars and advocates have suggested that children living in informal fostering situations may have an increased vulnerability to child trafficking due to the practice of informal fostering itself, which necessitates children moving away from their biological family (Ariyo et al., 2019). Assumptions underlying this argument are that children being "on the move" may be inherently more vulnerable than children who remain with their family (Boyden and Howard, 2013) and that foster families may be at greater risk of engaging in exploitation of children in their care compared with biological families because foster families are not as closely related to the child (Ariyo et al., 2019). However, evidence for the effects of informal fostering on children's well-being is mixed (Ariyo et al., 2019), with some studies finding positive impacts of informal fostering placements (Hedges et al., 2019; Badaoui and Mangiavacchi, 2022) while others finding the opposite (Hampshire et al., 2015; Darko and Carmichael, 2020; Cudjoe et al., 2021).

Presently, there are no comprehensive studies across social work or other cognate disciplines that examine the risk of child trafficking for children in informal fostering placements in West Africa (Goździak, 2008; Cockbain and

Olver, 2019). Critics have therefore raised concerns that assumptions regarding links between informal fostering and child trafficking are anecdotal and not adequately supported by empirical research (Howard, 2011; Boyden and Howard, 2013; Mbakogu and Hanley, 2020). Further, there have been concerns that research in this area has largely excluded voices of children and youth survivors themselves and their own conceptualizations of their experiences, resulting in an adultized and Western-centric view of this complex practice (Mbakogu and Hanley, 2021).

Social workers worldwide are actively engaged in working directly with survivors and their families, as well as supporting families in accessing resources and navigating complex social services (Steiner et al., 2018). Social work practitioners and other personnel in human service agencies can benefit from a better understanding of child trafficking risks in order to provide the most appropriate services to victims and survivors (Okech et al., 2018) and to prevent the problem by targeting the specific risk and vulnerability factors. As Barner, Okech, and Camp (2018) have noted, a one-size-fits-all approach is not in the best interest of child trafficking victims. In order to provide trauma-informed, victim-centered, child-focused, culturally relevant, and evidence-informed services, practitioners need to be aware of and consider the various sociocultural risk factors of child trafficking and meet the children and their communities "where they are" (Barner et al., 2018; Steiner et al., 2018). This understanding necessitates practice across the micro-mezzo-macro continuum and the acknowledgment that the entrenchment of some risk factors, such as cultural acceptance of child marriage, might require patience and tact before achieving the desired outcomes for the children (Katiuzhinsky and Okech, 2014; Steiner et al., 2018).

Investigating linkages between informal fostering and child trafficking is important for social workers across the world who are in a unique position to support families in ensuring their children's safety and well-being. Recent research has indicated that social workers play an important role in directly engaging with survivors, guided by social work values of relationship and empowerment at the individual level, and in actively working at the community levels to develop responsive and contextually appropriate interventions to support families at risk of child trafficking (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012; Steiner et al., 2018; Albright et al., 2020). However, scholars have noted a critical lack of scholarly conversation and empirical research about human trafficking (especially labor trafficking and child trafficking) within social work literature (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012; Okech et al., 2018).

The present study seeks to bring social work into the global conversation about human trafficking and enhance social workers understanding of the complex experiences of children living in informal fostering placements. We report on findings from a mixed-methods, interdisciplinary study, which engages deeply with understanding the potential links between child trafficking and informal fostering, drawing from data collected in Sierra Leone (2019-2021).

Study context

The tradition of informal fostering placements (IFP), i.e., sending a child to live with and be raised by a relative, is common across West Africa and also globally. Children from poorer and parentless households are placed in informal fostering situations with relatives who are economically more stable (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Leinaweaver, 2014; Selwyn and Nandy, 2014; Hampshire et al., 2015; Cotton, 2021). These placements are considered informal because they are made outside of any formal governmental child welfare systems and because they are often flexible, meaning that children may return to their family or move to a different placement (Leinaweaver, 2014). Within low resource contexts, IFP has been identified as a strategy for families to potentially increase their child's opportunity for social and economic mobility, as well as to draw from extended family resources to support children as a kin community (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Leinaweaver, 2014; Sharley et al., 2020). For example, families may decide to place their child with a relative in order to improve the child's access to educational or vocational opportunities, to strengthen family ties through sending a child to support a family elder, or due to a belief that having a young child in a home may increase fertility for a young couple (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Bledsoe, 1990; Hampshire et al., 2015; Ariyo et al., 2019; Cotton, 2021).

Although data suggests that IFP is much more prevalent in low-resource countries, some research has demonstrated that the practice also occurs in wealthy countries such as the UK and the US (Leinaweaver, 2014; Sewlyn and Nandy, 2014). For example, Sewlyn and Nandy (2014) estimated that among children living in the UK in 2001, 1-2% (175,000 children) were living in unregulated, informal foster arrangements. There is a recent increase in developed countries, including the US, to encourage the use of kinship care as part of a movement toward family preservation and away from child protection (Dorval et al., 2020). This movement toward family preservation in the US has been spurred by poor outcomes for children within the formal foster care system, particularly with older children and youth who are aging out of care (Berrick et al., 1994; Dorval et al., 2020; Testa and Kelly, 2020). In addition, some studies around the world have demonstrated positive outcomes for children who are living in kinship care and maintain family ties, even if they are no longer able to connect with their biological parents due to death or separation as a result of maltreatment or neglect (Berrick et al., 1994; Leinaweaver, 2014).

Research in this area has suggested that the socioeconomic status of the foster family is associated with a foster child's well-being (Hampshire et al., 2015; Ariyo et al., 2019; Cudjoe et al., 2019; Abdullah, Cudjoe, and Manful, 2020). In addition, studies have found that children fostered by close relatives (such as a grandparent) are more likely to have positive outcomes compared with peers fostered by distant (such as an aunt) or non-relatives (Ariyo et al., 2019; Hedges et al., 2019). Collectively, these findings suggest that rather than informal fostering itself being inherently

problematic, it may be the contextual factors about the placement itself, the family dynamics, the reason for placement, and the financial position of the foster family which together may influence the child's experience.

While IFP is found around the world, our review of the extant literature shows that it is particularly prevalent in West Africa, including Sierra Leone, where the practice is referred to as "menpikin." Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of IFP, with 38.9% of households reporting at least one foster child under the age of 18 in the household (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF, 2020). According to the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey from 2017, among 0-17-year-old children in Sierra Leone, 93% were living in a household headed by a family member, but 25% were not living with a biological parent. Within this group, 21% had both living parents, 60% had a living father only, and 38% have a living mother only. Regardless of the child's orphanhood status, the two most prominent placement settings, for children who were not living with their parents, were with a grandparent (~40%) or with another relative (~39%) (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018).

There are very few empirical studies exploring children's experiences of child trafficking globally and also within the West African context (Go dziak and Bump, 2008; Cockbain and Olver, 2019). Recent research estimated that 1 in 3 children (5-17 years old) who lived in the eastern region of Sierra Leone in 2019-2020 experienced child trafficking. Portering (i.e., carrying heavy objects) was found to be a particularly prevalent form of hazardous labor, and almost 20% of children who experienced trafficking reported force, fraud, or coercion (Okech et al., 2022). Both male and female Sierra Leonean children had a relatively equal risk of experiencing trafficking (Okech et al., 2022). Children who were between the ages of 12 and 17, those who had lost one or both parents, and those who were not enrolled in school experienced trafficking at higher rates (Okech et al., 2022). Overall, the available evidence suggests that child trafficking is very prevalent and an issue of major concern within Sierra Leone. This rest of this paper is structured sequentially, where we present methodology and findings moving from quantitative to qualitative in each section. We end the paper with a discussion of the results and implications.

Methods

We report on findings from a large mixed methods longitudinal study drawing from data collected in Sierra Leone through 1) a household survey, 2) in-depth qualitative interviews with young adult child trafficking survivors living in informal placements, parents/guardians of children who experienced trafficking in informal placements, and key informants, as well as 3) focus group discussions with community members. We sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What is the prevalence rate of trafficking for children placed in an informal fostering arrangement in

comparison to children who were not? 2) What social and economic factors increase vulnerability of trafficking for children living in an informal fostering arrangement? 3) How do child trafficking survivors, parents and community members view and experience informal fostering?

Data were collected as part of a baseline study assessing child trafficking prevalence within the eastern province in Sierra Leone. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were used to gain a comprehensive view of child trafficking, including community perceptions of child trafficking. In addition, interviews with adult survivors of child trafficking provided an in-depth retrospective view about child trafficking experiences. Prior to data collection, there was a comprehensive ethical review process involving a US University, a UK university, and the national ethics review board of Sierra Leone. In addition, permission to conduct data collection was obtained from local leaders. The present study utilizes a sub-sample of the original data set to explore whether and how informal fostering may intersect with child trafficking.

Quantitative methods

Sampling strategy and estimation

The sample consisted of 3,070 households from 138 enumeration areas (EAs), which were allocated to three hotspot districts (Kailahun, Kenema, and Kono) proportionate to the population of each district so that the region with a larger population received a proportionately larger allocation. Specifically, it resulted in 905, 1,220, and 945 sampled households in Kailahun, Kenema, and Kono, respectively. Targeted households were selected via systematic random sampling from a randomly selected starting point in each selected EA. The survey respondent was the oldest female member of the household. The oldest female respondent was surveyed because they are assumed to have the most knowledge about the children living in their household and they are also well situated to respond to questions about household income and other household-level variables. The sampling design can be considered an approximately equal probability selection method (EPSEM) (Peters and Eachus, 1995; Frerichs, 2004). An EPSEM design enables equal probability selection and therefore sampling weights are not necessary. Non-response at the household level was negligible, as was non-response at the item level for the child trafficking questions.

Quantitative measures

Child trafficking, as defined in the Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000) and Article 3 of ILO Convention Number 182 (International Labor Organization, 1999), is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a person under the age of 18 for any form of exploitive labor or commercial sex act. Children were

classified as victims of child trafficking if, in the last year, their labor conditions were characterized by any of the following: (1) hazardous labor sectors, (2) hazardous labor activities, and (3) force, fraud, and coercion.A report by Okech et al. (2020) provided more details of statistical and operational definitions of child trafficking, which were adopted in this study. Children in this study were in the age range of 5-17. Children who were either residing in a respondent's household and reported to be menpikin by the respondent, or who were members of the respondent's household within the last five years but were currently living as menpikin in another household were considered to be in an informal fostering placement.

We also included demographic, social, and financial variables for associations with our dependent variable. These included the child's (1) age (continuous), (2) gender (1=male, 0=female), (3) religion: 1=Christian, 2=Muslim, 3=Tribal religion, 4=others, 5=do not know, (4) marital status: 1=single, 2=married, 3=separated/divorced, 4=widowed, 5=others; (5) disability (1= yes, 0 = no), (6) orphan status (1= yes, 0 = no), (7) level of education: 1=pre-primary, 2=primary, 3=junior secondary school, and 4=senior secondary school, 5=university, 6=none, 7=other, (8) enrollment in a formal school (1 = yes, 0 = no), (9) enrollment in a Koranic school/madrassa (1 = yes, 0 = no), (10) living away from home or working outside home (1=yes, 0=no), (11) contributing to the expenses of the household (1 = yes, 0 = no), and (12) financial well-being of the household (continuous). Financial wellbeing was measured using the following six self-evaluation statements about family welfare reported by the respondent: 1) by Sierra Leonean standards, your household is really well off; 2) your household finds it easy to live on its current income; 3) generally, there is enough food for all the people in this household; 4) generally, there is enough money for school fees to send every child in the household to school; 5) generally, there is enough money to supply clothing for everyone in the household; and 6) generally, there is enough money to buy medicine for everyone in the household. These questions were answered on an agreement scale of 1-5, with 1 denoting extremely disagree and 5 denoting extremely agree. Financial wellbeing was calculated by averaging the responses to the six statements.

Quantitative analytical procedures

To assess the association between the potential factors with the variables of interest, i.e., child trafficking and menpikin, we performed bivariate association analysis by testing child trafficking or menpikin against each of the selected explanatory variables based on either Pearson's chi-square test (1901; for categorical explanatory variables) or Student's t test (1908; for continuous explanatory variables). These were also applied for the explanatory variables to assess their collinearity levels. Variables were entered into the logistic regression in a sequential order (by the magnitude of p-value) such that those with the strongest association with the response variable entered the model first. Each time, the variable with the smallest p-value that did not significantly correlate with any of the existing variables was added.

Considering both child trafficking and menpikin placement were binary measures, logistic regression models were fitted against the social and financial variables selected by the procedure described above as well as their interaction terms. Model selection was optimized using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) (Hastie et al., 2009). The odds ratio, standard error, t-value, p-value, and R2 and adjusted R2, goodness-of-fit test result were checked to ensure model validity.

Qualitative methods

In-depth interviews with young adult (18-25-year-old) survivors of child trafficking, parents/guardians of child trafficking survivors, and key informants were conducted as part of the larger baseline study. We purposively sampled from the larger study for data directly related to respondents' experiences with and perspectives about informal foster care and child trafficking. Interviews with survivors and parents who did not experience trafficking within a menpikin situation were excluded from this analysis. Our sample included 16 qualitative interviews with survivors who had experienced child trafficking within a menpikin placement and 10 with parents whose children had experienced trafficking within a menpikin placement. We also included key informant interviews (N=15) and community-based FGDs (N=23), because each of these respondent groups had meaningful discussions about informal fostering and child trafficking.

Recruitment and data collection procedures
Data were collected using snowballing and purposive sampling methods as part of the larger baseline study. Survivors and parents were recruited to participate in the study through key informants, who were working in organizations at the national or local levels and were directly involved with either child trafficking policy interventions or working directly with child trafficking survivors. Focus group participants were recruited through community leaders. Study areas were selected by the research team, based on consultation with research partners and key informants, and also through a scoping visit conducted prior to the start of the research.

Following an informed consent process, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with survivors, parents, and key informants. Interviews took place in a space selected by the respondent where they could have privacy. FGDs took place in a community space where members regularly gathered. Much of the data collection took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so group discussions were held outdoors to minimize risk to respondents. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in the local language, such as Krio or Mende, and then audio recorded. Audio files were then uploaded by the study team and transcribed into English for analysis.

Qualitative analytical procedures

Data were coded in NVivo using a team-based coding process. A descriptive codebook was developed prior to coding transcripts which was applied by a team of senior researchers and students. For this study, coded data related to the topic of experiences with child trafficking within informal fostering placements were selected for analysis. A matrix approach (Gale et al., 2013) was used to organize data where the columns were respondent groups and the rows were codes specifically related to the study topic, such as "menpikin experiences." Summaries were written into the matrix and then further analyzed by comparing responses between groups for each category. Following the completion of the matrix, a thematic approach was used to analyze summaries and identify themes within and between respondent groups (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 2012).

Results

In this section we report results from the quantitative analysis of the household survey followed by findings from the qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups.

Household survey results

Prevalence of child trafficking among menpikin children

The prevalence rates of children aged 5-17 who were involved in work that qualified as trafficking were 32.87% in Kailahun, 26.64% in Kenema, and 45.67% in Kono (Table 1). The prevalence rates of children who were in menpikin arrangements were 12.11% in Kailahun, 9.51% in Kenema, 10.74% in Kono.

In Kailahun, 211 (out of 1,743; 12.11%) children were reported to be placed in menpikin arrangements, 46.92% of whom were reported to have experienced child trafficking. Comparatively, the prevalence rate of child trafficking was 30.94% among the 1,532 children who were not informally fostered, which was significantly lower than that of menpikin children. Similar findings were also found in Kenema and Kono. Specifically, in Kenema, 63.19% menpikin children experienced trafficking while this rate was 22.80% for children who were not menpikin. The prevalence of trafficking for menpikin children in Kono was 52.73%, which was statistically higher than for children who were not in menpikin placement (44.83%).

In summary, data revealed that menpikin placement increased the risk of trafficking for children living in the three districts. In particular, about half of menpikin children experienced trafficking in Kailahun and Kono, and roughly two thirds of menpikin children in Kenema were trafficked. However, although risk of trafficking was generally lower for non-menpikin children, the prevalence

Table 1

Number and prevalence rates of child trafficking (CT) among menpikin children and non-menpikin children who living or working inside and outside of the households, in Kailahun, Kenema, and Kono

District	Menpikin Classification	Outside or Inside of Household	CT	Not CT	Prevalence of CT (%)
Kailahun (n=1,743)	Menpikin	Outside	75	23	76.53
		Inside	24	89	21.24
		Total	99	112	46.92
	Not Menpikin	Outside	243	101	70.64
		Inside	231	957	24.14
		Total	474	1,058	30.94
Kenema (n=3,029)	Menpikin	Outside	144	76	65.45
		Inside	38	30	55.88
		Total	182	106	63.19
	Not Menpikin	Outside	253	300	45.75
		Inside	372	1,816	17.00
		Total	625	2,116	22.80
Kono (n=1,537)	Menpikin	Outside	60	43	58.25
		Inside	27	35	43.55
		Total	87	78	52.73
	Not Menpikin	Outside	322	161	66.67
		Inside	293	596	32.96
		Total	615	757	44.83

rates among non-fostered children were still substantial (e.g., they were as high as 44.83% in Kono).

Comparing prevalence of child trafficking between fostering-in and fostering-out

In Kailahun, about half of the menpikin children were fostered-out to another household (46.44%) and another half were fostered-in to the surveyed households (53.56%). However, more families reported fostering-out in Kenema (76.38%) and Kono (62.42%), than families who reported fostering-in in Kenema (23.62%) and Kono (37.58%). This might be explained by the economic status of the families and the districts.

Regarding the intersection of child trafficking and menpikin fostered-in versus fostered-out, in Kailahun, 24 of 113 (21.24%) of children fostered-in were reported to have experienced trafficking, which was significantly lower than children who were fostered-out, where 75 of 98 (76.53%) were trafficked. However, the difference

was not observed in Kenema (55.88% for children fostered-in versus 65.45% for children fostered-out) or in Kono (43.55% versus 58.25%).

Social and economic factors for child trafficking and menpikin

Figure 1 presents the pairwise association matrix among child trafficking, menpikin and the selected explanatory variables for the three districts, respectively. In the pairwise association test, we assessed null hypothesis that the pair of variables were independent from each other at their original scales or categories. Variables that were tested to be not independent of the response variable, child trafficking, were included into the multiple logistic regression analysis as explanatory variables. At this step, variables with multiple categories were coded as dummy variables for each of the categories. Also, variable selection was performed before the logistic regression was fitted due to the multicollinearity considerations.

We took Kailahun as an example to show our variable selection process as follows: (1) menpikin, as a variable of interest and of significant association to child trafficking, was added into the model first; (2) the second variable added was religion, because it was not correlated with the first variable, menpikin, and was highly correlated with the dependent variable, child trafficking. As noted earlier, religion was entered into the model and recoded into three dummy variables, i.e., Christian (1=yes, 0=no), Muslim (1=yes, 0=no), and Tribal religion (1=yes, 0=no), for the purpose of identifying which specific religion was playing a role on child trafficking; (3) one or both of the above two variables were significantly correlated with the remaining eight variables, thus no more variables were entered into the model for child trafficking. Therefore, menpikin and religion were the two explanatory variables selected into the model for child trafficking in Kailahun, along with the interaction term. Despite very few explanatory variables included into the models, they were representative for the other variables given their widespread high correlations with one another (as revealed in Figure 1). Note that in all three districts, level of education, attendance of formal school, being an orphan, living or working away from home, and age were all significantly correlated with both child trafficking and menpikin. As indicated earlier, given the high degree of association between these variables with each other, they were not included in the logistic regression models. Some additional factors appeared to be significant only in particular districts, such as marital status in Kailahun, and gender and disability in Kenema. However, these variables were either significantly correlated with both child trafficking and menpikin or were no longer significant when added to the logistic regression model. Model selection was performed which allows for adding or removing variables from the model dynamically and the optimal model with the lowest AIC was identified. The results are demonstrated in Tables 2–4.

In Kailahun, child trafficking was found to be significantly correlated with menpikin and religion (see Table 2). Being menpikin increased the odds of falling into trafficking for the household children (with odds ratio=1.95 and p-value=<.001). This indicated that children who were informally fostered were 1.95 times more likely to
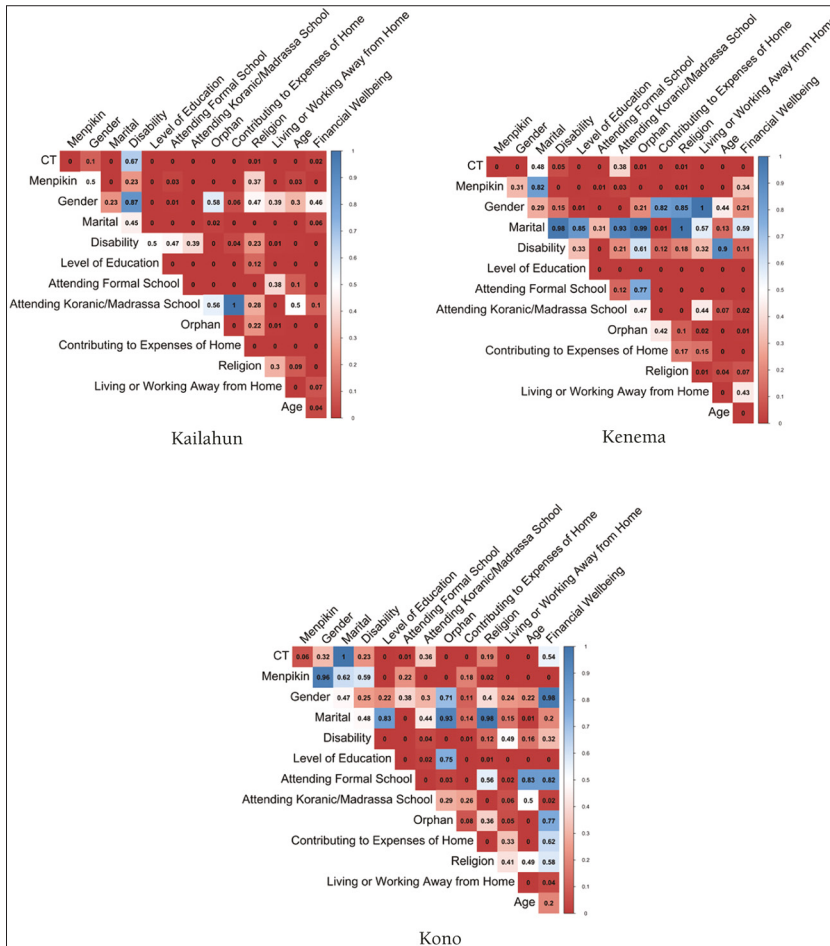
Figure 1: Pairwise association matrix (i.e., p-value matrix) for CT, menpikin and the demographic, social, and financial variables in Kailahun (top left), Kenema (top right), and Kono (bottom). In the plot were p-values of the association tests based on Pearson's chi-square test for a pair of categorical variables or Student's t test for a binary variable and continuous variable (e.g., CT or menpikin vs. age or financial wellbeing). P-values highlighted in dark red were <0.05, indicating a significant association. P-values highlighted in any other color (including lighter red, white and blue) were >0.05, indicating a non-significant association.

be trafficked than children who were not fostered. While we would not interpret the impact of religion on child trafficking (with odds ratio=1.38), we cast our attention to other factors it represents, which include attending formal school, living away from home, contributing to expenses of home, and financial wellbeing. The significant role of religion provided evidence for these as correlating factors to child trafficking.

Child trafficking in Kenema was shown to be correlated with menpikin arrangement and financial wellbeing of the household the children resided in. Either sending the respondent's own children away from home as menpikin or receiving children as menpikin residing in their home from other households both increased children's risk of trafficking (with an odds ratio=5.79, and p-value=<.001). Households with disadvantageous economic wellbeing were shown to be significantly correlated with child trafficking for their children. Koranic/Madrassa Schools, which are common types of religious schools in Sierra Leone, were shown to be negatively associated with informal foster care placement (odds ratio=0.44 and p-value=0.003). Indeed, not attending either formal schools or Koranic/Madrassa schools, was a strong indicator of vulnerability and an increased risk to be placed in foster settings.

In Kono, trafficked children were often found to be undertaking financial burdens of the household due to the vast poverty of the locality. Children who were placed in menpikin (odd ratio=6.37 and p-value=<.001) and children who provided for the family's expenses (odds ratio=6.91 and p-value=<.001) were shown to have a higher probability of child trafficking. The unmet financial need of the family and the menpikin placement made these children more than six times more likely to be trafficked than children from wealthier families and children living in their own homes. In addition, contributing to household costs was associated with low levels of education, lack of formal school opportunities, older age, disability, and religion (see Table 4 and Figure 1). These were all vulnerability factors associated with child trafficking.

In summary, significant associations between child trafficking and IFP were found across the three districts. Both child trafficking and informal foster care can be explained by some common factors such as poverty, lacking schooling and education resources and opportunities, and living or working away from home. The next section reports on findings from the qualitative analysis. We begin with qualitative descriptions of child trafficking within IFPs to provide some context for the quantitative results previously shared.

Findings from Interviews and Focus Groups

Qualitative descriptions of child trafficking within menpikin placements

We report some key characteristics of survivor respondents to provide context for the qualitative findings. The qualitative analysis for survivor experiences was based on interviews with 16 adult survivors who described a trafficking situation within a menpikin placement when they were children. The most commonly reported labor

Table 2

Logistic regression results with child trafficking (CT) and informal foster care as target variables for Kailahun. The odds ratios were presented for the binary explanatory variables, and the significance in the last column are coded as: 0 '***'; 0.001 '**'; 0.01 '*'; 0.05 '.'; 0.1 ' '; 1 ' '

Response Variable	Explanatory Variable	Odds Ratio	Coefficient Estimate	Std. Err	Z Value	P-value	Sig.
CT	Intercept	/	-1.0296	0.10	-10.32	<.001	***
	Menpikin	1.95	0.6674	0.15	4.48	<.001	***
	Religion	1.38	0.3219	0.12	2.80	0.005	**

Model diagnostics:AIC=2186.4,R2=0.013, Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test: p-value=0

Table 3

Logistic regression results with child trafficking (CT) and informal foster care as target variables for Kenema. Note that odds ratio was not reported for continuous variables such as financial well-being. Other notations and notes can be referenced in the caption of Table 2

Response Variable	Explanatory Variable	Odds Ratio	Coefficient Estimate	Std. Err	Z Value	P-value	Sig.
CT	Intercept	/	-0.8904	0.16	-5.72	<.001	***
	Menpikin	5.79	1.7558	0.13	13.46	<.001	***
	Financial Wellbeing (continuous)	/	-0.1601	0.07	-2.19	0.03	*

Model diagnostics:AIC=3323.2,R2=0.06, Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test: p-value=0

Table 4

Logistic regression results with child trafficking (CT) and informal foster care as target variables for Kono. Notations and notes can be referenced in the caption of Table 2

	Variables	Odds Ratio	Coefficient Estimate	Std. Err	Z Value	P-value	Sig.
CT	Intercept	/	-1.4121	0.05	-28.23	<.001	***
	Menpikin	6.37	1.8517	0.14	13.22	<.001	***
	Contributing to expenses of Household	6.91	1.9334	0.15	12.62	<.001	***
	Menpikin* Contributing to expenses of Household	0.31	-1.1791	0.41	-2.85	0.004	**

sectors among these youth were domestic work and selling; one survivor reported sex trafficking and one survivor reported being forced to engage in theft and selling drugs. Among the survivors interviewed, 13 were young women and three were young men. The majority reported being sent to live as a menpikin when they were very young (around five or six), while a few reported experiencing placements as an older adolescent (16 or 17). Twelve reported experiencing physical, sexual or emotional violence or having food withheld during the trafficking experience. Twelve survivors reported that their aunt or uncle (or someone who their family viewed as an aunt or uncle) was the person responsible for their exploitation, two reported that their sister was responsible, one reported that their grandmother was responsible (however, the grandmother was not a blood relation but rather a woman who had raised the survivor's own mother). Seven survivors were orphans (either single or double) and nine were non-orphans. At the time of the interview, six survivors had no occupation, five were students, two were carpenters, one was working as a nurse, one was working as a hairdresser and one was working as a trader.

Survivors, parents and community members in FGDs described exploitive menpikin placements where children living with kin or family friends were made to perform domestic work or street selling, without pay and typically without being allowed to attend school or have time to play.

> "I was to go and do the SSS [senior secondary school] one, since I passed the BECE [Basic Education Certificate Exam]. But when I went there [to my aunt's house], about a week to the reopening of school, she [my aunt] told me to be selling cold water until school reopen[ed]. So I started selling until school reopened, then I asked her about the school business. She then told me to continue selling the cold water. The money she will use to buy my school materials. But for her own children, they started to go to school straight off while I stayed home selling." – Male Survivor #8, Kailahun, age unknown, student

Survivors described exploitive menpikin placements where they were kept from having enough food, and often their movement was controlled by the foster parent who also kept the survivor isolated from neighbors and friends, telling neighbors not to feed or offer comfort to the young person. In the excerpt below a survivor recalled her first day living as a menpikin with her older sister, an arrangement that was made before she was born.

> "When I was seven years old, my elder sister came from Kono to our village…and told my parents that she wants me to go with her to Kono so that she can take care of me in other to help my parents with my schooling and other affairs…So with joy my dad and my mum told me I will be going with my sister to Kono… My first day in the house, I was excited as a little girl…I woke up early. I can still remember hearing the Muslims calling morning prayers…After fetching a lot of water that morning, I was so hungry. Then I went to [my sister] for food but she told

me mine is not yet ready…She told me that I will eat later when I'm done with my housework…After fetching the water, she gave me lots of dirty clothes to wash, but I was still very hungry. After washing the clothes, she told me to clean the toilet… So after that I washed the dirty plates, cups, spoons, and other dirty containers. At that time my whole body was trembling because of hunger. I then went to her for food, but she told me I will eat when the afternoon food is ready…I sat down crying. On that day I did not eat until late in the evening." – Female Survivor #2, Kailahun, age unknown, unemployed

As described above, some survivors described feeling excited about living as a menpikin in a city and expected that they would be able to attend school and be treated like a member of the family. This was especially noted by survivors who were orphans: "When I was with my uncle, all I needed from them was to take care of my education and encourage me or show me the love my mother would have shown me." (Female Survivor, #16, Kono, age unknown, unemployed). However, young people interviewed in this study described feeling like they were not treated like they were a member of the family, and some described with pain being made to feel that they were less valuable than household children who were not menpikin. Relatedly, many survivors reported experiencing violence or emotional abuse with regularity:

"…[my aunt] had wanted me to do the work on time. My strength was not up to the job given to me. I was doing the job but not at her own time. Sometimes she beat me a lot for not having completed the task in time." – Female Survivor #9, Kenema, age unknown, unemployed

Returning home after exploitive menpikin placements

Some respondents reported that they were five or six when they were first placed as a menpikin and they returned to their home community to be with their parents or left the situation to live on their own when they were 15 or 16 years old. Many survivors reported not attending school at all during their time as menpikin or attending only for brief periods of time. Upon their return home, survivors described feeling depressed, having difficulty connecting with friends and family, and having challenges finding vocational training, a job, or enrolling in school. For example, a survivor described her unmet desire to attend school after leaving an exploitive menpikin placement at her sister's house:

"M: How was help available?

R: [NGO] picked me up and help[ed] me out to locate my family.

M: What were your immediate needs after having come out of this experience?

R: I just wanted to go to school, that was the first thing I needed.

M: Tell us about the help you needed and from whom.

R: I wanted to go to school but nobody helped [in a low tone].

M: What challenges do you encounter being back?

R: I don't have better dressing to wear and even after giv[ing] birth I want to go to school again, I know I am not big to attend school [in a low tone]." – Female survivor, Respondent #21, Kono, age unknown, student

Parents reported struggling to support their children when they returned post-trafficking, having difficulty providing basic resources and supplies for school or vocational training. There were reports from FGD groups and some descriptions from survivors indicating that children sometimes ran away from exploitive menpikin placements and ended up living on the streets, where they may face increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

Qualitative Reports on Factors Leading to Menpikin Placements

In analyzing experiences of menpikin described in focus groups and in interviews with survivors and parents, three factors leading to menpikin placements were most often described by study respondents: 1) household poverty 2) cultural traditions, and 3) gender roles and expectations for children. Importantly, these factors were not described in isolation by respondents, but were often interrelated. Respondents reported that they believed parents usually had good intentions when sending their children to be menpikin, fulfilling their desire to send their children to school and also honor relationships with relatives.

> "P1: Yes, children are being moved from their homes to other places in the community, not with the intention of exploiting them but for them to go to school, and because of the relationships we have for the people that comes in and because of namesakes [a relation, god parent, or friend who a child is named after]." – FGD #10, adult and elder women, Kenema

However, there were some reports by survivors and FGD respondents that sometimes, financial, cultural, and social factors (such as gender-based violence and expectations for children) also played a role in the decision.

Household poverty.

Financial strain due to having many children or separation from a spouse (due to death or abandonment) were commonly described as factors influencing the decision to place a child and "lessen the burden" on parents.

"P5: These are families who cannot cater for their children, and they have plenty of children. This is a rural community where things are limited so they prefer sending them to the city to reduce burden and for us to also get better and be better people in the society and come to help them." – FGD #8, young adult women, Kailahun

Respondents suggested that parents wanted a better life for their children and that they sometimes saw positive outcomes from placement. Some children were reported to request menpkin placements as they were seeking stable housing and food security, which they were not getting in their family home.

"P6: …There's a father in our neighborhood whose biological child, because of inadequate food in the home, decided by himself and went over to put up with his uncle. The boy used to complain to his uncle whenever his father couldn't give him food and his uncle always provided him food." – FGD #4, adult and elder men, Kailahun

In addition, many respondents reported that challenges with school access often led to the placement decision as the parents struggled to provide the necessary supplies, clothes, and food needed to attend school, even with the free school program available. Also, some respondents pointed to the necessity of children having to move away in order to attend high level schools, which are often not available in rural communities. If children pass exams to be eligible to attend a higher-level school but there is no school facility in their community, then they must seek placement in a city where they can attend school.

"There was no money to send her to school, nobody to help me out with the fees and all, so I sent her to her aunty to raise her after I got pregnant. The father of the child, he was the one who asked the woman, which is of his relative to please take the child and raise her to a better person." – Mother of survivor, respondent #16, Kono, trader

Cultural tradition

Respondents shared that cultural values regarding respect for and connection to extended family are an important part of the decision-making process for sending a child to live in a menpikin placement.

"Some people give away their child not because they are poor because they want to respect tradition. This person is my cousin, and she is not fortunate to get a child. And our tradition demand[s] if I have given birth and my cousin does not have, I must give." – KII # 12, investigator, family support unit

FGD respondents and key informants described that parents may feel they have an obligation to accept requests made by family members to help raise their children, especially when the requests were made by elders or relatives living in wealthier communities.

"Respondent 9- Like the family business, the sister/brother will come and say I am alone at home, I want someone by me, so please give me your child. In fact, that is why l gave my child to my sister. There are reasons behind this, you cannot deny your sister or brother." – FGD #5, adult and elder men, Kailahun

Respondents also described sending their child away to "help [a relative] with housework" or to care for infants or elderly family members.

"I have nine children. The seventh child was taken by my husband's younger sister, who was handicap and at that time did not have children. So…I and my husband agreed to send our seventh daughter who was nine years old to her in [order] to help her with some housework and at the same [time] for them to have a young child in the home. We thought…when a child is in their home their own child will be hastens to come, as it is a traditional belief." – Mother of survivor, parent #2, Kailahun, occupation unknown

As described in the excerpt above, there was also descriptions about a traditional belief about fertility linked to menpikin, specifically that having a young child in the house of a newly married couple would impact fertility.

Some FGD respondents described how relatives who are viewed as wealthy (because they live in a city or because they wear nice clothing) have the "upper hand", so when they ask for children, their request is accepted. Respondents suggested that parents believe that, even if the child may experience challenges in the placement, they will ultimately be better off living with the wealthy relatives than they would staying in the village with limited opportunities. Relatedly, many respondents described parents seeking menpikin placements for their children in order to improve their children's or their own situation. Overall, respondents reported that giving children away to relatives was common because parents assume that their relatives will treat their child as one of their own; therefore, if a relative asks for your child you give them your child because that is what is expected.

Gender roles and expectations for children.

Factors related to gender roles and expectations for children were also identified by qualitative respondents as being potentially important factors involved in placement decisions. These factors included: 1) lack of children's participation in decision making, 2) views about the role of girls and women in the household and, 3) views of menpikin children. Children not being included in placement decision-making was noted by some respondents as being a factor in menpikin placements, suggesting that children were often not consulted about placements and also that children generally do not have the "right to say no to tradition" (FGD #21, young adult women, Kono).

"P3: Let talk about the culture side, in our own tradition our parent[s] think that the child has no right and uses the child anyhow, so that is it about the cultural in as

much he is the breadbasket. He [the father] does whatever he want[s] without anyone's consent he decide[s]…" – FGD #19, adult and elder men, Kono

Some survivors in our study reported feeling left out of the decision-making process about their placement and were shocked to learn that they were going to have to leave their families home and move to a foster placement. Some FGD respondents expressed that the child's right to participate in the placement decision was an important consideration:

"Though they are the child's biological parents, they must still seek her consent before giving her away to the strangers. It should not mean that, just because she's their child, they could give her away beyond her consent. It is for this reason that I think it is inappropriate. – FGD #15, adult and elder men, Kenema

Views about the role of girls and women in the household.
In addition, many respondents described a belief that girls in particular may be at risk for exploitive menpikin placements which they linked to patriarchal beliefs about girls roles in family life, as having responsibility for domestic work:

"P7: Most parents have the idea that their girls should do more work at home to learn how to take care of their family for tomorrow. That is why girls are most time given away to help other family members on their household chore[s]." – FGD #8, young adult women, Kailahun

Also, some respondents including mothers of survivors and young adult women in FGDs described how a lack of support for women's voices in male-headed households sometimes impacted placement decisions.

"…as for me because a woman does not have strength/power compared to your husband…I would not have wanted my child to leaved me, but just because my husband has right[s] towards the child that is why…I was hearing [news] concerning the child to go and take her but he keeps on telling me to wait, for [he is] not too worried…all I need[ed] was my child to get away from there." – Mother of survivor, parent # 10, unknown occupation, Kono

Views of menpikin children.
Respondents (in all respondent groups) reported a perception that often menpikin children were treated differently from and viewed as being entitled to less than biological children, given work which is "above their age" and treated as "mature people" (FGD #16, young adult women, Kenema). There was discussion that sometimes menpikin placements, even when exploitive, may be viewed as a step

up for menpikin children who are coming from families facing financial hardship. Respondents shared that girls may be viewed as needing to have a tough menpikin experience in order for them to learn domestic work, which is assumed to help them with their future domestic roles in adulthood. Our data suggest that parents may overlook potential challenges of exploitation that their child may face in a menpikin placement because they may feel that the potential long-term benefits for the child and their family outweigh the risks of having a challenging or even exploitive experience.

> P5: "…if a person is living in the village and all he/she knows is taking the children to the farm in the morning, so if such an opportunity comes to take your child to the city, we all know how the rural life, so going to Freetown is a goal for some parent, even if you don't tell them what or how you are going to treat their children, they don't care. For some people they know that this child will suffer some challenges with this person but because he/she has a lot of children and the responsibility is just too much they will just agree." – FGD #23, young adult men, Kailahun

As described above, some respondents reported that parents may feel pulled to send their child away to a city to improve access to opportunities for their child that they feel are not available in their rural community. However, as indicated above, parents may also be motivated to send their child into an IFP to decrease financial strain within their household, which could mean that parents may sometimes be more focused on lessening the burden on their own household over considering the potential impacts of an IFP on the child. This being said, many respondents reported a view that menpikin placements were part of meeting family goals to give their child a better life as they "strive hard to give our children the best." They suggested that if helping their child have a better life meant giving their children to relatives with the "upper hand" financially, then this is what they must do.

> "P3: Every parent wants something better to come their children's way. If someone comes for your child…there is someone that will stand as a guarantor … if it pleases us, we will give our child, but other people have sent their child or children away without any problem. We have seen them. So if the same opportunity comes for my own children we will give them." – FGD #2, adult and elder women, Kailahun

Qualitative reports about factors potentially increasing vulnerability to exploitation for menpikin children

Respondents reported two primary factors which they viewed as potentially increasing risk for menpikin children: 1) financial strain within the foster household and 2) challenges with reporting exploitation and a lack of monitoring children in IFP. Consistent with the quantitative findings, financial strain within the foster household was identified as a potential factor contributing to vulnerability of menpikin to

experience trafficking. There were indications that sometimes menpikin placements became exploitive following increased financial strain in the foster household or when a foster parent accepted care for a child but did not have the resources to provide for them. For example, some parents and survivors interviewed reported that the placement began positively, with the child attending school and contributing to household chores. However, spousal separation or death increased financial strain on the foster household resulting in the menpikin child being taken out of school and made to work, even while the foster parent's biological children remained in school. In the example below, a survivor describes her experience with a complex menpikin placement, where her aunt initially placed her in school but then pulled her from school due to the burden:

> "Well, when my aunt brought me to her place, because she also has a lot of her children to take care of, so she sent me to a school where I attended from JSS [Junior Secondary School] one to three, and [then] I stopped going to school because according to her the burden was too much. So, I stopped going to school and started helping her at the market selling cola, while her children are going to school. Sometimes I will sit quietly and cry whenever I see them going to school and am not happy. So, one day, [teacher] went to the market and met me there, but the way he saw me sitting he decided to ask me what was wrong, he encouraged me to talk to him…I was then able to explain my story to him and he told me that he will talk to my aunt for her to send me to school again…he came back the next day and talk to my aunt and she listened to him. He wrote my name into this program called NGO, my aunt decided to send me back to school so I continued my education." – Female survivor, survivor # 19, student, Kono

At the time of the interview, the survivor was still attending school however, her aunt was struggling to afford basic resources to support her children. The survivor reported that they would often go without breakfast and not have any food for lunch and would only eat after returning home from school. This example illustrates how sometimes deep financial strain can impact foster households, especially when there are many children being cared for, and that interventions are critical for supporting children in these placements to attend school, but also more is needed to ensure that children's well-being within the family environment is secured. Although the survivor was attending school, she and her foster siblings were regularly experiencing hunger.

Challenges with reporting exploitation or monitoring children in placements

In addition to financial strain within the foster household, parents, community members in FGDs and KIIs suggested that difficulties reporting exploitation and a lack of regularly monitoring children in menpikin placements were potential contributing factors to exploitation. For example, some parents interviewed reported having difficulty finding funds to cover transportation costs in order to check on their children living away from home. FGD respondents noted that checking in on

menpikin children could result in an uncomfortable relationship with the foster family, because checking-in may be viewed as a lack of trust on the part of the parent. Given that many of these placements were long term, more than one year and sometimes up to 10 or more years, respondents suggested that having a process in place to support parents or government officials in monitoring children is critical, however, some respondents expressed that monitoring will be difficult and require significant resources.

> "If a trader goes to a village and use the relationship, they can say ah give me this girl so I can take this girl to Freetown and take care of this girl. They are moved by public transport. No one is checking, you don't need papers to travel. And the kinship care or the menpikin, it is so huge almost 30% of children who have parents alive live with extended family members. So it is so huge it is difficult for government to track and monitor." – KII #14, INGO, protection specialist

In addition, community members in FGDs and even parents of survivors interviewed in the study reported being unwilling (or even afraid) to intervene even when they know there is a child who is being maltreated or trafficked in a neighboring household suggesting that you don't "put your nose into someone family issue if you are not invited to…it will be bad according to our culture for you to take your blood to the police." (FGD #20, adult and elder men, Kailahun). Respondents described a fear of being labeled a gossip or causing bad relationships within their family or with neighbors if they reported an incident to the authorities.

> "…sometimes when a problem happens and [if you] made a call, people will start seeing you as a bad person in the community and this will make me not call as a concern." mother of survivor, parent #10, unknown occupation, Kono

Overall, our qualitative findings suggested that although IFP was viewed by many respondents as potentially helpful for children to increase access to opportunities and for families to lessen household burdens, there were also serious concerns about the potential for mistreatment of menkipin children. Survivors in this study reported experiencing exploitation within IFP where they were made to perform domestic work or street selling, as well as experience violence and neglect within the foster household. We found that families often make decisions about IFP based on economic reasons (e.g., due to household poverty) and/or social reasons (such as to uphold the tradition of sharing responsibility of caring for a child) or due to gendered expectations, particularly for girls, regarding the necessity to learn about domestic work and to prepare for future adult roles. For children in menpikin placements, our analysis revealed two potential factors contributing to increased risk for child trafficking, 1) financial strain within the foster household and 2) challenges with reporting exploitation and a lack of monitoring children in IFP. In

our final section, we discuss the implications of this study, and highlight areas of overlap and difference between the quantitative and qualitative findings.

Discussion

The aims of this study were to document the prevalence rate of trafficking for children placed in an IFP compared with those who were not placed in an IFP, assess the social and economic factors that increase vulnerability of trafficking for children in IFPs, and to explore how child trafficking survivors, parents, and community members view and experience informal fostering. Given the socio-economic conditions of our study areas, we were not surprised that the rates of child trafficking were very high. We found that nearly half of children in Kono (45.67%), one third of children in Kailahun (32.87%), and a little over a quarter of children in Kenema (26.64%) had experienced trafficking in 2020. In all three districts, rates of experiencing trafficking were significantly higher among children placed in IFP compared to children who were not in IFP. Differences in the rates of trafficking for children in IFP compared with children who were not in IFP were as high as 40% in Kenema (63.19% IFP versus 22.80% not-IFP), 16% in Kailahun (46.92% IFP versus 30.94% not-IFP), and 8% in Kono (52.73% IFP versus 44.83% not-IFP). Results from the logistic regression confirmed that children in IFP had an increased likelihood of experiencing trafficking, with an increased risk of 1.95 times in Kailahun, 5.79 times in Kenema, and 6.37 times in Kono.

Collectively, these results indicate that children in IFP have an increased risk of experiencing trafficking. However, as we noted earlier, the risk of trafficking for children not living in IFP was also very high suggesting that, while IFP appears to be an important potential vulnerability factor, it does not account for all experiences of child trafficking in the region. Our qualitative finding that informal fostering is perceived as important for respondents' communities, viewing the arrangements as increasing opportunities for children and improving financial stability for families, echoes previous studies (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Bledsoe, 1990; Hampshire et al., 2015; Ariyo et al., 2019; Sharley et al., 2020; Cotton, 2021). However, many community members, survivors and parents who participated in this study described exploitive menpikin situations consistent with experiences of trafficking. Survivors and parents reported lasting emotional and social challenges (including isolation from family and friends and depression) faced after returning to families following an exploitive menpikin placement. These results are consistent with other studies which found that context does indeed matter with regard to children's experiences of informal fostering (Hampshire et al., 2015; Ariyo et al., 2019; Mbakogu and Hanley, 2020; Cudjoe, Abdullah, and Chiu, 2021).

While the government continues to make efforts to reduce child trafficking in Sierra Leone, significant barriers remain, including a lack of sufficient schools and/or teachers in the districts, the cost of uniforms and supplies for children, limited transportation to schools, and sexual and gender-based violence by teachers and other students (Riley, 2014; Samonova et al., 2021). Working with parents to decrease the risks of the menpikin practice may reduce the prevalence of child trafficking; however, to significantly reduce the problem, it is crucial to strengthen government policies and ensure school access, particularly for children in need. Specifically, ensuring that primary school education is completely free and eliminating the cost of school supplies can increase school attendance, which in turn, can reduce the number of children placed in informal arrangements. In addition, given that survivors in this study often reported not attending school at all or only irregularly attending school while experiencing trafficking, steps need to be taken to ensure that children and older youth are able to access education post-trafficking either when they return to their home communities or if they decide to settle in the city where they experienced trafficking.

Children, foster or biological, have a right to family support (Dolan et al., 2020: Hendricks, 2021) which implies that governments and international stakeholders are obligated to do more to improve the economic and social conditions of children and their families. In essence, children have a right to family support and by extension families have a right to be supported in creating a safe and stable environment for their children. Given that our findings have demonstrated how much a family's financial well-being is a critical factor for both IFP decisions and also child trafficking experiences within IFP, we echo Dolan et al.'s (2020) recommendation that more action steps be taken to support children's rights to family support within the biological family and also within foster placements. Also, considering that many respondents noted that a lack of monitoring of children in IFP may be a contributing factor towards exploitation, we suggest that more resources be devoted to developing a community-based, contextually relevant plan for supporting parents and local communities in monitoring IFP. Social workers, especially those involved with the family support units in Sierra Leone may be well-placed to lead these efforts. Given the links between poverty and child trafficking and IFP, targeting resources to the poorest districts, where there are more at-risk children should be a priority for government and NGOs in addressing the problem.

In conclusion, ours is the first large-scale systematic and empirical study in Sierra Leone on the topic of menpikin and child trafficking. Similar studies should be conducted across the various districts in Sierra Leone. The dissemination of similar studies can spur resource mobilization to reduce the problem of child trafficking and improve well-being for children and their families. While we found a strong relationship between child trafficking and menpikin, it must be pointed out that the practice of menpikin is meant to represent positive kinship care as found in many societies. However, given the lack of strong child welfare systems in Sub-Saharan

Africa and the presence of only a handful of NGOs that provide residential care facilities for children in need, menpikin has had to fill this gap.

As with all well-intentioned practices, people can abuse a system, especially in an urbanizing environment where extended family ties are weakening. Social work values include service to those we study. We therefore go beyond describing this serious problem to implementing and designing potential solutions. Findings from our baseline child trafficking study have already led to efforts by NGOs and the government of Sierra Leone in providing services to at-risk children. Specifically, we have co-designed a collaborative project with an NGO to: a) train local stakeholders and community groups on how to identify, refer, and protect children from trafficking; b) train new and existing Village Parent Groups and Child Welfare Committees to disseminate information on child trafficking to schools and other community groups; and c) partner with the Children's Forum Network to facilitate activities through school clubs to raise awareness on child trafficking. We have also conducted training with the "I Am Special" curriculum for school clubs and local shelters, created materials to make The Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act, 2022 (Government of Sierra Leone) accessible to community members; and increased community sensitization and engagement of out-of-school children, youth, caregivers, and community groups. We will evaluate the program over time to assess reductions in child trafficking in the three districts of Kailahin, Kenema, and Kono.

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