

# “Slaves of the Gods” - Vulnerability to Trafficking: Labor and Sexual Exploitation of Women and Girls Among the Ewe Communities in Ghana

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*Abstract:* This contribution explores how cultural religious beliefs and practices of the *Trokosi* institution engender vulnerability to the recruitment of girls into bonded life, sexual and labor exploitation, and trafficking in Ghana. Here, trafficking and exploitation are conceptualized at three levels: (a) the family level where young girls are taken away from home through deception, false promises, abduction, threats, or coercion and moved elsewhere (e.g., from rural areas to towns); (b) intra and inter-community transfers; and (c) moving women and girls through marriage arrangements organized within the *Trokosi* (“slaves of the gods”) practice. The girls are often deceived about the destination, or their transfers are carried out through forced marriage arrangements. The above practice of transferring girls from one place to another and their sexual and labor exploitation fall within the UN Palermo Protocol definition of human trafficking and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 29, respectively. This study therefore aims to enhance our understanding of how the underlying patriarchal power relations and violence against women, underpinned by traditional religious beliefs and practices in the *Trokosi* institution, perpetuate bondage, labor, and sexual exploitation and aid trafficking of children and young women among the Ewe communities of Ghana.

*Keywords:* *Trokosi*, Bondage, Women, Girls, Sexual, Labor, Exploitation, Trafficking

## Introduction

Trafficking women is the norm “in parts of the Middle East and Africa where old systems continue into modern times; children held in the worst forms of forced labor; and in the trafficking and exploitation of women for domestic and commercial sexual

purposes.”<sup>1</sup> Globally, an estimated 71% of enslaved people are women and girls, while men and boys account for 29%. It is therefore not surprising that “for the first time since UNODC started collecting data on trafficking in persons, detection of trafficking for forced labour in 2020 was equal to that of trafficking for sexual exploitation, at just under 40 percent each.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, trafficking and exploitation in Ghana are conceptualized at three levels: (a) the family level where young girls are taken away from home and moved elsewhere (e.g., from rural areas to town), (b) from one village to another within the same area or different areas, and (c) moving women and girls through marriage arrangements organized within the *Trokosi* institution.<sup>3</sup> According to the report by Dovlo, “women and girls are trafficked from other West African countries, most notably from Ghana, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso to Cote d’Ivoire, for commercial sexual exploitation”.<sup>4</sup> Often, girls are deceived about the destination or their transfers are carried out through false or forced marriage arrangements. The report further notes that Ghana is a source, transit, and destination country for children and women trafficked for forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. Trafficking within the country is more prevalent than transnational trafficking and most victims are children.<sup>5</sup> These girls and women are often moved to seek work in the domestic service industry. Many of them end up in prostitution and hawking on the streets of the big towns, both seen as the easiest ways out of poverty when domestic service opportunities fail.

In his study of child labor and trafficking in Ghana, Lawrence identified six typologies: “the abduction of children; payment of money to impoverished parents who bond children with assumptions about treatment; bonding of children for debt; the token placement for specified duration or gift; fee-based, agent-directed domestic work at parents' request; and deception of parents into enlisting children for education.”<sup>6</sup> Considering these typologies, this study examines bonded life in the *Trokosi* institution.

A definition of *Trokosi* is helpful here. The term *Trokosi* is made up of *Tro* [god/deity] and *Kosi* [slave]. Traditionally *Klu* or *Kluvi* is used for slaves, sometimes both

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<sup>1</sup> Patterson 2012: 343.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2022: 17.

<sup>3</sup> Dovlo was a local expert who carried out research on the *Trokosi* in 1995 and referred to it as “*Trokosi* institution” in Dove and Adzoyi 1995. The late Dr. Dovlo was a lecturer at the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon.

<sup>4</sup> Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons 2009: 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 142.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence 2010: 65.

male and female, while *Kosi* “denotes a female slave. Moreover, the etymological meaning of *Kosi* is much more indicative of slavery than a spousal relationship.”<sup>7</sup> The term also refers to a “sacrificial maiden” among the Tongu. The term *Fiasidi* is used among the Anlo and Avenor. *Fiasidi* and *Trokosi* describe the same institution. They refer to the maidens serving as slaves of the gods in the shrines among different congeries of the *Ewe*.<sup>8</sup> Given these translations, the term *Trokosi* in this paper is used interchangeably to refer to both the institution and the girls who are offered to the various shrines as slaves of the gods.

It is also helpful to clarify from the outset how the *Trokosi* system differs from other cases of bonded labor in important aspects. Unlike cases of bonded labor where laborers are indentured through contracts or sent to work for debt repayment,<sup>9</sup> the *Trokosi* system involves girls and women who are not bound by contractual obligations but are instead considered “slaves of the gods” and overseen by priests who are seen as proxies of the deities. In his discussion of the notion of “slave” and “slavery” in the past and present, Patterson argues that there is “absolute degradation attached to slave status, the fact that the slave is a person without honor, having no dignity that any free person is required to respect, and that this dishonor parasitically aggrandized the power and honor of the slave-holder” and that “all slaves, but especially women, were held in this distinctive ‘bodily subjection,’ ...always answerable with their bodies, in antiquity as they are today.”<sup>10</sup> If we concur with Patterson, the same can be said of the *Trokosi* women and girls. This distinctive attribute underscores the asymmetrical power dynamics between the individuals subjected to the *Trokosi* system and the priests within the *Trokosi* religious institution. Girls are consigned to the shrines to atone for crimes committed by their male relatives; this consignment entails living at the shrine for many years and “rendering various forms of religious and mundane service.”<sup>11</sup> The practice is predicated on the belief in enduring retribution for transgressions committed against society by preceding generations.

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<sup>7</sup> Dovlo and Adzoyi 1995: 2.

<sup>8</sup> An extensive desk review of the corpus of knowledge in published and archival material produced by local researchers provided a deep understanding of both the historical foundations and contemporary perspectives on the practices of *Trokosi*. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with two scholars who have conducted studies on different aspects of the *Trokosi* institution. Also, several individuals who are well versed with the *Trokosi* practices and its role as a social institution gave insights particularly into the fundamental beliefs that continue to sustain reverence for the priests and the shrines in the region.

<sup>9</sup> Tappe and Lindner 2016: 2–4.

<sup>10</sup> Patterson 2012: 324–26.

<sup>11</sup> Dovlo and Adzoyi 1995: 1.

There is no doubt these are culturally embedded harmful practices that create and sustain various forms of child trafficking, sexual bondage, and labor exploitation. This study thus aims to establish that these methods of transfer of girls and women—particularly those sanctioned by the social, cultural religious beliefs and norms—fall within the UN Palermo Protocol definition of human trafficking and exploitation. However, the protocol does not refer to cultural practices, such as the *Trokosi* institution, in its definition of trafficking and exploitation. For a more nuanced application of the UN Palermo Protocol in the analysis, I refer to the ILO Convention 1930 No. 29 which treats coercive sexual exploitation as forced labor and defines slave-like conditions for those who are trafficked and bonded.<sup>12</sup> The ILO’s definition of “slave-like conditions” for those who are trafficked and living in bondage helps to steer clear of the current academic debates on what can be termed as modern-day slavery, especially regarding the issues of human trafficking, prostitution, and sexual bondage. In 2014, the ILO International Labour Conference (ILC) voted overwhelmingly to adopt a Protocol to “supplement the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and complement existing international instruments by providing specific guidance on effective measures to eliminate all forms of forced labour.”<sup>13</sup>

In the report *Human Trafficking: New Direction for Research*, the IOM unequivocally stated “the importance of taking into account the role of social values, norms, and traditions in addition to the economic and criminal side of trafficking to produce studies representing the reality of trafficking in the regions studied is key.”<sup>14</sup> Further, the IOM pointed out that “there is still no reliable data on the characteristics of the victims and perpetrators.”<sup>15</sup> In addition, most of the studies on trafficking and exploitation tend to rely largely on economic perspectives to explain the phenomena, arguing that poverty and gender inequality are *the* main drivers of trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation. By focusing on the role of religion, social values, and traditions underpinning trafficking and exploitation of women and girls, this study employs an innovative approach to a specific form of trafficking that is least studied. This approach goes beyond the established economic and gender disparity explanations for human trafficking and exploitation and looks elsewhere for other possible explanations.

The research on which this paper is based was recently carried out in various shrines in the Volta region of Ghana, where cultural and religious practices of the

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<sup>12</sup> ILO 2005: 7; on the Palermo Protocol, see Ngeh and Pelican in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> ILO Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch 2017.

<sup>14</sup> International Organization for Migration 2008: 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 152.

*Trokosi* institution are still prevalent. It is necessary to point out that although the *Trokosi* institution is documented in a few studies by local researchers familiar with Ewe cultural beliefs and practices, most of them focus largely on its history, practices, and cultural significance.<sup>16</sup> Other studies pay attention to legal and human rights issues and provide analyses of the *Trokosi* institution's adverse effects on women and girls.<sup>17</sup> However, a closer look at the fundamental beliefs and practices from a different perspective reveals that this ancient social institution not only perpetuates ritual bondage and practices overtly akin to slavery but also a specific form of trafficking of women and girls in the name of religious practice. The term *Trokosi*, translated as “slaves of the gods,” speaks for itself! In this paper, I seek to understand how the beliefs and practices enshrined in the *Trokosi* system engender women and girls’ vulnerability to gendered violence, trafficking, and sexual and labor exploitation amidst old and emerging global forms of human trafficking. In the second and third parts of the paper, I discuss the notions of punishment and banishment.

## Researching the Trokosi Institution – Methodological and Conceptual Considerations

As stated above, fieldwork was carried out in the Volta region in Ghana. Various Trokosi shrines and their environs were visited. Interviews were conducted with the priests, elders, and individuals whose role is referred to as that of “linguists.”<sup>18</sup> A large shrine with a sizable number of residents and headed by a priestess was also visited. The priestess is a native of a neighboring country and a member of the Ewe community there.

Each shrine is under the control of a priest, locally referred to as a “fetish” priest who is assisted by several powerful elders and a “linguist” (spokesperson). The shrines are not open to public scrutiny and visitors without a valid reason to visit the priest or residents may be restricted on various grounds. However, after fulfilling requirements, such as being clad in a specific shrine mode of attire, visitors, including researchers, may be allowed onto the premises at the priest’s discretion. This posed issues during research. For instance, at a shrine with many women and girls doing different chores or just sitting on the floor and chatting, the head priest, who seemed to wield immense power over the establishment and its residents, did not attempt to disguise his displeasure with our visit.

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<sup>16</sup> See Nukunya and Kwafo 1998; Abiabo 2000; and Kufogbe 2008.

<sup>17</sup> See Ameh 2001; Asamoah 2015; Lawrence 2010; and Tubor 2019.

<sup>18</sup> The translator from Ewe to English clarified that the title of the person who plays this role is a linguist. He may explain what the priest at the shrine says to a group of people, but he has other duties at the shrine.

He declined to grant an interview or to allow any other person to speak with us. In this instance, I could only rely on my observations to understand what seemed to be the chief priest’s firm control over the shrine’s largely female population. The research team respectfully declined to bow at his feet and requested permission to sit before him, which was granted. We expressed our gratitude for the reception in the shrine and he escorted us out of the premises.

The research employed ethnographic methods, relying largely on interviews based on a purposive sampling strategy to identify research sites and research participants who may be associated with the shrines in one way or another. The research team conducted comprehensive individual interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse group of men and women of varying ages and social statuses. The data used for this paper were generated through interviews with participants, including four women now in their mid-sixties who were taken to different shrines when they were young girls; a younger woman currently residing at a shrine; four men whose mothers had been subjected to the *Trokosi* system; and staff members at two local educational institutions. The research team also visited five shrines and conducted focus groups with the priests and the shrine elders.

Although the research participants were purposively selected, there were a few occasions when we conducted impromptu discussions. For instance, as we conducted a focus group discussion at one of the shrines, two women accompanied by a small girl (about six or seven years old) and a man came to meet with the priest. Understandably, we were not admitted inside the priest’s inner chamber where rituals were performed. Admittance could only be granted if we accepted to have some rituals performed on us to merit access to the knowledge possessed only by those who have undergone the necessary initiation. Therefore, the research team remained outside and waited for the priest to come out and continue with the conversation. While waiting, we spoke with elders who were present.

The interview method of data collection was useful for this research which sought to explore people’s experiences, “understandings, perceptions and constructions of things that participants have some kind of personal stake in.”<sup>19</sup> Through the analysis of “thick” data in interview transcripts as well as observations captured in the field notes, it is possible to explore the experiences of women in bonded life and the attendant vulnerability to trafficking, sexual and labor exploitation in Ghana’s *Trokosi* institution.

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<sup>19</sup> Braun and Clarke 2013: 81.

The process of gathering data also relied heavily on an adapted autoethnographic approach, which involves using personal experiences of researchers to gain insights into cultural phenomena while interacting with participants to understand their worldviews.<sup>20</sup> This method allowed women to share personal stories of trafficking, sexual bondage, and labor exploitation in their own words, thus contributing to a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of their experiences and the broader societal structures that shape these experiences. This technique enriches the research by presenting data in a form that respects and values the voices of women in the *Trokosi* system. Thus, this research not only gathers data, but actively contributes to co-creating knowledge with women who have experiences of being bonded, exploited, and trafficked. This challenges the traditional, often Western-centric methods of research that may overlook or misrepresent the lived realities of non-Western cultures. By involving these women as active agents who contribute to knowledge creation, the research aligns with efforts to decolonize methodologies, prioritizing local narratives and indigenous methodologies that counteract the dominance of Western academic paradigms. This not only broadens our understanding, but also reinforces the imperative to engage with the affected communities in meaningful ways.

Our analysis is driven by two primary theoretical frameworks. While visiting a community surrounding a shrine, we met some women who were reluctant to speak about their multi-year experiences as *Trokosi* for fear of offending the deities and thereby incurring their wrath (which might cause deaths in their families, the very reason for which they were sent to the shrines in the first place). This gave us an insight into the inseverable bond with the gods even after the “release” from bonded life. With this in mind, Appadurai’s<sup>21</sup> and Therborn’s<sup>22</sup> work help to clarify the vulnerabilities and inequalities in the *Trokosi* system.

Appadurai treats aspiration as a crucial asset that is often unevenly distributed among social classes, contributing to sustained inequalities. The capacity to aspire is substantially diminished among the poor due to limited access to the social and cultural tools necessary to formulate and pursue aspirations effectively. This lack of access restricts their ability to connect desires with achievable goals, leading to what Appadurai describes as a meta-capacity that, if strengthened, could significantly mitigate the cruelties of economic exclusion. Appadurai further explains that aspirations themselves

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<sup>20</sup> Muncey 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Appadurai 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Therborn 2013.

are culturally embedded and are formed through the thick of social life rather than being solely individualistic pursuits. Aspirations link to broader cultural norms and are shaped by interactions within the social fabric, reflecting a collective rather than purely personal nature.<sup>23</sup> For those in impoverished or marginalized conditions, such as the *Trokosi*, this capacity to aspire is significantly restricted or conditioned by their immediate social and cultural environment.

Therborn's notion of inequality provides an analysis of how various forms of inequality (vital, existential, and resource) operate.<sup>24</sup> The three forms of inequality can be understood as an integral component of both institutionally and culturally endorsed inequalities embedded in the *Trokosi* system that significantly impact the existential and resource-based dimensions of the inequality experienced by affected individuals. The practice of ritual servitude in the *Trokosi* system epitomizes these stark inequalities.<sup>25</sup>

When melded together, Appadurai's and Therborn's frameworks allow for a deeper understanding of how structural conditions limit personal aspirations and, concurrently, how socioeconomic and cultural constraints perpetuate a cycle of inequality that is difficult to break. This is seen clearly in the *Trokosi* system, where the women lack significant opportunities to aspire beyond their immediate circumstances due to entrenched social norms and lack of resources, thus perpetuating their disadvantaged status.<sup>26</sup> This paper thus recognizes the *Trokosi* system as a form of gender-based violence that is perpetuated by patriarchal systems and that *Trokosi* girls are often subjected to a form of triple exploitation based on their gender and their status as children vulnerable to abuse and poverty.

## Framing Vulnerability, Bondage, and Trafficking in the *Trokosi* Institution

Many studies have highlighted the exploitation of children through forced labor on cocoa plantations and fishing on Lake Volta as well as the attendant abuse of human rights.<sup>27</sup> However, far less research has been devoted to trafficking, sexual bondage and labor exploitation related to the cultural and religious practices of the *Trokosi* institutions. While sufficient empirical research is necessary, “labor and trafficking may be conflated, compared, or separate.”<sup>28</sup> Given this, it is important to explore how the

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<sup>23</sup> Appadurai 2004: 69–70.

<sup>24</sup> Therborn 2013: 49-54.

<sup>25</sup> Asamoah 2015; Bilyeu 1999; Dzansi 2014.

<sup>26</sup> For more details, see Ameh 2004.

<sup>27</sup> See Dovlo and Adzoyi 1995; Hamenoo and Agyire-Tetey 2018; Bilyue 1992; and Akpubli-Honu 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence 2010: 65.



*Trokosi* institution perpetuates a specific form of trafficking and bondage that is sanctioned by religious beliefs and rituals. Here, I also pay attention to the clash between traditional values and norms on the one hand and respect for the human rights of women and girls on the other in Ghana's specific social, economic, and cultural contexts. As I show below, it is not easy to apply the local legal frameworks and international instruments to effectively address the exploitation of the *Trokosi*. The government seems to have no power to move the society away from its cultural and religious practices.

To understand the foundations of the *Trokosi* institution and its enduring influence today, some background information about the Ewe is necessary at this point. The Ewe is a large ethnic group found in Ghana, Togo, and Benin in West Africa. The geographical area inhabited by the Ewe people stretches from the Volta River in Ghana to the Togo-Benin border, encompassing the Atlantic coast.



Figure 1: A map showing the location of the Ewe-speaking people.<sup>29</sup>

The Ewe occupy the southeastern part of Ghana, the southern part of Togo, and the southwestern part of Benin. In Ghana, the Ewe region is bordered by the Volta River to the west and the Akwapim-Togo Ranges to the east.<sup>30</sup> The Ewe in Ghana consists of several communities such as the Anlo, Tongu, Wedome, Ave, and Avenor. These groups

<sup>29</sup> Relying on different sources, this author's map shows the current location of the Ewe population in three countries. It is important to bear in mind the regional dynamics, hence the map situates the Ewe among the neighboring countries. See Gbolonyo 2009: 60-62.

<sup>30</sup> Marfo 2023: 4.

are characterized by various traditional religious beliefs, practices, rituals, and social norms, including the *Trokosi* institution. The Southern Ewe consist mainly of the Anlo and Tongu communities. The Anlo are found in the following districts: Keta, Ketu, Anloga, Akatsi and Tongu.<sup>31</sup> The data on which this paper is based were gathered at selected sites in these districts.

Although the *Trokosi* practice is essentially religious among the Ewe, it can be understood in a wider cultural context of pawning children. The cultural practices of sending children away from home as compensation in the typologies listed above create a social environment conducive to the wide-spread trafficking of young women and children for labor and sexual exploitation. To people in the Volta region, mainly the Ewe who participated in this research, bonded life is generally accepted as an element of religion and culture. For the many who espouse this view, it is unthinkable to challenge the role of the *Trokosi* institution in today’s (albeit) “modern” Ewe society. Even if some people might not approve of the practice, they do not publicly oppose it, maintaining an ambivalent attitude towards what is widely viewed and revered as an ancient tradition. Nevertheless, the fear and reverence of the *Trokosi* institution can be juxtaposed with the stigma, exclusion, and marginalization that characterize the experiences of the *Trokosi* women. Although there are no reliable data on the geographical spread of the shrines and the number of women and girls residing in them,<sup>32</sup> it was not surprising to realize how many individuals that I came across in different places had either a relative with or knew someone with current or past links to the *Trokosi* institution.

The *Trokosi* institution is tied to Ewe society. Nearly all the members of the communities who participated in this study explained the significance of the *Trokosi* institution to the practicing communities and they concurred that “it is not going to disappear any time soon.” There is a belief that “the *Trokosi* institution will remain revered for many years to come since offending the supernatural forces leads to curses and afflictions for the families and for the entire community.”<sup>33</sup> However, it seems that the attitude toward *Trokosi* practices among non-Ewe Ghanaians can be generally characterized as ambivalent: many of them describe it as an ancient Ewe practice that has little or no relevance in modern times. A local citizen of an Ewe traditional area (a community around the shrine or shrines) gave a more nuanced response that “generally, the practice is not accepted as something to be continued, especially those practices that

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<sup>31</sup> Ameh 2001: 161.

<sup>32</sup> See Marfo 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Akatsi, 17 May 2023.

are inhumane and outdated. Many Christians see them as outdated, while those who adhere to the traditional beliefs take a different stance.”<sup>34</sup> It should also be noted that others openly oppose the *Trokosi* practices based on allegations of human rights abuse of girls and women. In addition, numerous local and international NGOs are part of the anti-*Trokosi* movement; for instance, the International Needs Network Ghana (INNG), a Christian Non-Governmental Organization, has campaigned for the abolition of the *Trokosi* institution for many years.

The bulk of the research on human trafficking from and within Africa suggests that poverty—lack of sustainable livelihood, lack of economic and social opportunities, and the pressure to provide for the family—is the major driving force that increases the vulnerability of specific groups.<sup>35</sup> However, as intimated above, it is important to take cognizance of the fact that other forces can be added to the list of factors that contribute to or influence the various forms of trafficking. Because of this, it can be argued that the trafficking of *Trokosi* women and girls within the Volta region is perpetuated by local cultural and religious traditions which are embedded in the social structures of the communities concerned. The point being made here is that the question of punishment for which the virgins become slaves of the gods is a theological issue that also includes the values, norms, and ideas about the nature of and origins of women and their relationship to men and the supernatural that communities hold dear.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, based on the moral and religious authority vested in the priests as proxies of the deities, they play an important role in mediating and restoring the well-being of the families concerned through the performance of prescribed rituals.

For this discussion, the term “theological” is not to be understood in a narrow sense as denoted by a particular religious tradition. In a radical departure from prevailing perspectives, I engage the Ewe communities’ view of human nature as male and female by examining a form of trafficking aided by the *Trokosi* institution which relies on the fear of punishment. Transgression against an individual is seen as a transgression against society and failure to atone is tantamount to an offense to the gods who are bound to punish the family of the wrongdoer. As illustrated below, atonement by offering virgin girls is realized through coercion; they have no choice but to oblige. The *Trokosi* are stripped of human rights and subjected to sexual exploitation or forced labor to pay for the crimes of male family members. Yet, the role of African traditional

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with John, Mafe area, 4 Dec. 2023.

<sup>35</sup> See Beydoun 2006; Manion 2002; and Cameron and Newman 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Uchemi and Ngwa 2014.

religion in human trafficking for sexual exploitation is generally under-investigated, misunderstood, or ignored altogether.

The UN Palermo Protocol, created in 2000, supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and criminalizes human trafficking.<sup>37</sup> It references the concepts of bondage, vulnerability, sexual and labor exploitation. Trafficking, as understood in this paper, is informed by the Palermo Protocol, which states that:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, using the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation and the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs.<sup>38</sup>

Although it is widely recognized that the Palermo Protocol provides the most authoritative international definition of human trafficking, the meaning of what exploitation entails is one of the controversial aspects in the face of the multiplicity of legislation and interpretations of abuse of power and vulnerability of trafficked individuals in different countries.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Art. 3 of the Protocol defines “exploitation of the position of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or removal of organs.”<sup>40</sup> However, there is no international consensus on “social practices that may contribute to trafficking.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it is a challenge for authorities in Ghana, who ratified the UN Palermo Protocol on August 21, 2012,<sup>42</sup> to interpret their mandate to combat the trafficking of women and girls in line with the provisions of the Protocol and other international instruments in a culture where children are used as collateral, bonded for debt repayment and restitution for crimes in the *Trokosi* institution.

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<sup>37</sup> See Ngeh and Pelican in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> See the Palermo Protocol.

<sup>39</sup> Ollus 2004: 22.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter XVII Section 12.a of the Palermo Protocol.

<sup>41</sup> Clark 2008: 61.

<sup>42</sup> See

In the same vein, it is difficult to challenge “the extended family system, which encourages the culture of kin fostering by blood relatives and serves as an avenue for child trafficking.”<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that parents/families are not considered to be traffickers of their daughters. The general understanding is that they are following the tradition and are operating within the domain of acceptable cultural norms and values. From this perspective, it is clear that these deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and practices are a major source of vulnerability. It cannot be overemphasized that the practice of recruiting and sending virgin girls to the shrines is an “abuse of power” and the children’s “position of vulnerability.”<sup>44</sup> It fits well within the Palermo Protocol definition of trafficking and sexual and labor exploitation.

Prior to the UN Palermo Protocol, Ghana introduced the Children’s Act 560 in 1998, which contains provisions for the “Rights of the child and parental duty” including:

Part 1, (Section 8) *Right to education and well-being...*

(Section 12) *Protection from exploitative labour*

(Section 13) *Protection from torture and degrading treatment*

(Section 14) *Right to refuse betrothal and marriage.*

(1) No person shall force a child: (a) to be betrothed; (b) to be the subject of a dowry transaction: or (c) to be married.

(2) The minimum age of marriage of whatever kind shall be eighteen years.

(Section 15) *Penalty for contravention.*<sup>45</sup>

In 2005, the government introduced the Human Trafficking Act 964.<sup>46</sup> Section (3) of the Act states that: “Placement for sale, bonded placement, temporary placement, placement as service where exploitation by someone else is the motivating factor shall also constitute trafficking.” Certainly, these clauses prohibit “exploitative labour” and “degrading treatment” and guarantee the right to refuse “betrothal and marriage”, specifying that no “person shall force a child to be betrothed” or “to be married.” Therefore, the recruiting and transfer of virgin girls (often aged seven to fifteen) to shrines where they are subjected to sexual bondage and labor exploitation is a contravention of the above sections of Ghana Children’s Act 560 ratified in 1998.

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<sup>43</sup> Hamenoo and Agyire-Tetey 2018: 149.

<sup>44</sup> See the Palermo Protocol.

<sup>45</sup> Children’s Act 1998 (Act 560), Government of Ghana, Accra. Gazette notification: 5th February 1999.

<sup>46</sup> See Gazette notification. 9th December 2005. Government printer, Assembly Press, Accra. GPC/A444/300/8/2005.

However, despite the introduction of these national instruments and strategies, views vary, resulting in a lack of consensus on what counts as child trafficking within Ghana, with the majority of individuals and organizations failing to recognize the meaning of trafficking in the local context. As stated above, in the public view, practices such as *Trokosi* and pawning or sending children to work for a fee paid to the parents are not considered exploitative; they are understood to be part of the cultural milieu. The following statement is illustrative of some of the prevailing perspectives on child trafficking in Ghana:

As far as the Human Trafficking Act (2005) is concerned, we do not have “child trafficking.” What we have is human trafficking. Whether the person is a child or an adult, the person is a human being. Although children are the most vulnerable, they are humans, so we combine them all as human trafficking.<sup>47</sup>

Although in this statement the organization concerned admits that children are the most vulnerable to trafficking, in the same breath the argument can be made that they are unwittingly obscuring the severity and uniqueness of child trafficking. Admittedly, this statement is illustrative of how prevailing attitudes of specific institutions (actors) enable the exploitation and abuse of young girls by failing to recognize *Trokosi* as an inherently abusive and exploitative form of child trafficking. In view of the above statement, it is not far-fetched to suggest that although the evidence is overwhelming, there is still a great deal of denial and inaction regarding the cultural practices that perpetuate child trafficking.<sup>48</sup> This is not because many people are unaware of the issue, but perhaps due to reluctance to genuinely, without fear or favor, challenge cultural norms or existing power structures that may be complicit in the *Trokosi* practices. Additionally, some people may be resistant to the idea of changing the inequality status quo, even if it is detrimental to children and women. Thus, challenging the *Trokosi* practices requires not only awareness but also the courage to advocate for change, to take a firm stand against this practice, and to challenge existing power structures.

Yet, discussions with current and former residents of various shrines, some of whom were bonded for many years but are now “free,” revealed that the impact of their experiences of trafficking and bondage is deep and intimate, and more importantly, enduring.

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<sup>47</sup> Hamenoo and Agyire-Tettey 2018: 142.

<sup>48</sup> Golo 2005: 2.

Efua, a woman in her early sixties describing her experiences as a *Trokosi*, said that she was taken to the shrine at the age of fifteen. Her grandfather was rich and a friend of the priest, therefore, he selected her to serve as his friend. No crime had been committed; she was not sent to the shrine for atonement. She was offered as a gift to a friend, a representative of the deity. I asked her how she felt when she was offered to the priest by her grandfather. She explained that she “did not want to go there,” that she “wanted to go to school” but she “was not allowed.” At the shrine, she “joined others to work and do farming for the priest.” The family was supposed to provide for her needs while she was at the shrine, but they did not support her in any way. It was a difficult life of deprivation and hard labor. When they worked, the priest was there to supervise and ensure that they worked all the time. She said that was “perpetual suffering.” She knew that she was too young to accomplish the tasks assigned to her, but she “was compelled to perform them.” She went into “slavery [*Klavinnyenye*]” as she put it.<sup>49</sup> “They ask you to do what they know you cannot do. You are suffering there, and you cannot leave.”<sup>50</sup> In addition, unequivocally stating that being compelled to do hard work as a child was perpetual suffering from which she was unable to extricate herself can be understood as a way in which a *Trokosi* can exercise and manifest agency.

Even those who are supposed to be free live in fear of upsetting the deities in word or deed. However, they manage what seems to be a balancing act of living outside the control of the shrine and at the same time observing the necessary rules and regulations as former *Trokosi*. For instance, when we asked Adzo, who had been bonded at a shrine for twenty-nine years, to tell us about her experiences, it was evident that her responses were measured. Initially, I thought that she was uncomfortable describing her experiences in the presence of two male research assistants who accompanied me to the place where she lived. Therefore, I asked the men to leave, hoping she would feel free to speak about her experiences. Nevertheless, she remained careful not to create a negative impression about the time she spent as a *Trokosi*.

When asked whether this ancient cultural practice can be abolished through government legal and policy interventions, or how gradual eradication through social change can be realized, ordinary people of different social status were unequivocal that the :

Trokosi institution is there to stay . . . t is unthinkable that reverence for the deities would decline among the Ewe communities, or the practice

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<sup>49</sup> In Ewe language, the term *Klavinnyenye* means slavery. A slave is *Klivi*.

<sup>50</sup> Efua, interview by author in Mafi, May 11, 2023.

would cease to exist . . . Then how would society deal with the repercussions if the deities are aggrieved by the iniquities of errant individuals?<sup>51</sup>

Also, when a priest at one of the shrines was asked to explain the relevance or role of *Trokosi* system in today’s Ghanaian society, he said that the practice “helps to keep order in society, and to minimize crime.” He could not hide his surprise that I asked a question which could be construed as casting aspersion on the relevance of this revered institution or implying that it has outlived its usefulness. But at the beginning of our visit, I had explained that as someone who is not a member of the Ewe community, I would ask questions that would help me understand the practice enshrined in the *Trokosi* institution. Therefore, my aim was not to question the authority of the priests and priestesses; it was a genuine ethnographic inquiry into the institution. He went on to reiterate that it is an ancient practice in the local culture, and therefore it is not going to disappear despite the ineluctable currents of social changes.<sup>52</sup> Three elders who were present at the shrine also corroborated what the priest had said and went on to give further examples of how the *Trokosi* system serves the society and ensures social cohesion.

Often, the situation differed from one shrine to another. For instance, a caretaker at another shrine explained that the shrine had been without a priest for many years, but there is no risk that the community will lose it; the deity will select a priest at its own time. His responsibility as a caretaker is to maintain the shrine and ensure that he performs the duties for which he has the mandate.

## Punishment and Banishment in the Trokosi Institution

To explain the notion of punishment that is the focus of this section, I draw from Ameh’s useful insights on the worldview of the Ewe: Collective responsibility is a major concept for the Ewe (like many other communities in Africa). The rights of an individual and those of the community are intertwined. This explains why the community “*must* seek vengeance on behalf of an offended member” and “this is reciprocal—a member could be asked to pay for acts of omission or commission by other members of the clan . . . In this way, it becomes understandable how female virgins (*trokosi*) could be asked to

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<sup>51</sup> Focus group discussions and individual interviews by author at two shrines in Afife traditional area. Also, see the views expressed by a local chief and priests on the importance of the *Trokosi* system for the believers and society in general in Akpabli-Honu 2014: 105–107.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



pay for crimes committed by other members of the family.”<sup>53</sup> The principle of collective punishment is used to justify the practice of making girls slaves of the gods. A crime, however, cannot be compensated by another crime, namely crime against an innocent child/girl who does not understand what her grandfather may have done to warrant the punishment meted to her.

Underpinning the notion of collective responsibility is the fundamental belief that transgressions against an individual have an impact on the community. Therefore, when a family is afflicted by unexplained deaths, they are obligated to find the cause. Failure to take the necessary measures is considered to put community wellbeing, peace, and harmony at risk of being disrupted and would not go unnoticed by the community. But the concept of collective responsibility excludes women and girls who become sacrificed for the benefit of the community. Surprisingly, women are sent to the shrines because it is considered cheaper to send a virgin girl than to pay the fine in commodities, such as livestock, money, and drinks. Admittedly, they are not considered as part of the community whose well-being they are sacrificed to secure. The exclusion of women is further expanded through rules and practices that are akin to banishing women who are also stigmatized on grounds of their *ex-Trokosi* status.

In the same vein, the communities become complicit in the movement of *Trokosi* from one location to another through marriage arrangements, which enable the community to benefit from this practice. In this way, the entire community is complicit in the exploitation of the *Trokosi* women. This complicity in exploitation and violence against women is also rooted in historical practices of marginalization and oppression and the result of a patriarchal system that encourages and rewards the commoditization and exploitation of women.

It is indisputable that this ancient cultural practice is alive and well among the congeries of Ghana’s large Ewe ethnic group of about six million.<sup>54</sup> Generally, the dimensions of child trafficking have hitherto remained “difficult to articulate,”<sup>55</sup> especially those linked to the *Trokosi* institution. However, a more nuanced inquiry reveals that the removal of women and girls from their homes to the shrines, from one place to another through the threat of curses and invoking punishment for incurring the wrath of the deities, fits well within the definition of trafficking, sexual bondage, and

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<sup>53</sup> Ameh 2001: 162–63.

<sup>54</sup>The Ewe are also found in the neighboring countries: three million in Benin, half a million in Togo and about six hundred thousand in Nigeria.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence 2010: 69.

labor exploitation stipulated in the international and national instruments referred to in this paper. I argue that to be taken away from the care of parents at home or a familiar place where a girl has social ties and finds the necessary material and psychosocial support, to be taken to another place against her will, and to be exploited at the shrine is, without doubt, trafficking of a minor.

With this in mind, I turn to the case of Esi. She was taken against her will by her father to a place where she had never been and left with her grandfather, who then delivered her to a *Trokosi* shrine. From the standpoint of this analysis, this is understood to be trafficking of a vulnerable girl. Many years later, Esi still does not know whether her father knew that her grandfather would send her to the shrine. However, it is not far-fetched for me to suggest that either her father knew or even colluded with the grandfather to send Esi to the shrine. In the circumstances that she described, it seemed to be the “normal” way for the grandfather to send his granddaughter to atone for crimes committed by his family several generations prior. After all, the grandfather was the link with the old generations who incurred the eternal punishment transferred to Esi. She had no choice but to go and appease the gods through forced labor and sexual bondage. This case demonstrates how parents become traffickers of their children and expose them to sexual bondage and labor exploitation.

The girls offered by their families normally remain there. The underlying principle is that once a girl becomes a *Trokosi*, she is married to the deity and essentially ceases to belong to her family.<sup>56</sup> “Whatever the designation is applied to the maidens, either as slaves or wives [they] suffer various forms of abuse and the entire process poses various problems regarding the human and legal rights of the maiden; the priest's role as husbands by proxy; i.e. the enforced concubinage of the girls; the nature of corporate justice that enables the practice.”<sup>57</sup> Through this fundamental concept of punishment, the *Trokosi* system also violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

because it separates girls and young women from their families . . . against their will; subjects them to physical and mental abuse, neglect . . . maltreatment and exploitation, including sexual abuse; deprives the girls of a “standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development . . . and economically exploits their labour to

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<sup>56</sup> Priest and elders at a shrine in Mafi, focus group discussions by author, May 11, 2023; Kwame, interview by the author in Akatsi, May 2, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Dovlo and Adzoyi 1995: 2.

perform work . . . that is harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.” However, because the UNCRC has no enforcement mechanism, it cannot be used to hold Ghana, a member state, accountable for the *Trokosi* practice within its borders.<sup>58</sup>

This is a lifetime of bondage and, therefore, in case a woman is released for any reason, another virgin girl from the family is often required as a replacement, as mentioned in the excerpt presented below. I argue that this “sacrifice” constitutes punishment. The underlying notion of punishment is evident in the following interview excerpt with a woman who has been a *Trokosi*:

My name is Esi. We lived in a village far away from here. I became sick in the village when I was quite young. Then my father wanted to bring me here, but I refused. I was not ready to come to the village and I had not lived here before . . . But when I came here, I recovered from the illness that I had. My father left me in the care of my grandfather. I went to visit the *Amegashi* [priestess] and after that, I was sent to be an apprentice as a seamstress. Afterwards, I was sent to the shrine together with my aunt’s daughter and there we were put through the initiation ritual and remained in seclusion for five days . . . When we finished with the ritual, we were allowed to go out to the market, to fetch water, or to work on the farm . . .

I was not happy to go to the shrine, it was not my choice to go there, and I did not want to be there. But I realized I had no choice but to accept . . . A long time ago, a family member married a woman who gave birth and asked her younger sister to come over and be a babysitter. The brother-in-law had sex with the babysitter, and therefore, the wife who had given birth could not live in the same house as her sister, the husband, and brother-in-law after such sexual taboo had been broken.

Consequently, the lactating mother went to the shrine with her baby and sought refuge there. The husband went to the shrine to bring his wife and child back home. But he too wanted to be released, therefore, he had no choice but to offer a virgin girl to the shrine. A taboo was broken at his home – you cannot marry two sisters. This is why he must bring a virgin to the shrine. His brother broke the taboo and thus committed a crime against society by having sex with the babysitter. Therefore, he too must

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<sup>58</sup> Bilyeu 1999: 485.

take a virgin girl to the shrine. This is why both of us were taken to the shrine . . . However, that was not the first time the family sent virgin girls to the shrine; we were being sent as replacements for those sent before us.<sup>59</sup>

In this excerpt, several issues emerge: First, Esi was *transferred* from one place to another by her family against her will; she explains that she had not been to her grandfather's village before and that she was not ready to go there. She was sick and *vulnerable* and although her father may not have taken advantage of her vulnerability, he relied on his authority as her father to decide to place her in the care of her grandfather against her will.

Second, the grandfather eventually decided to send her to the shrine to atone for the family's old iniquities. She did not want to go there either, but she was forced to, thus she was moved to the shrine through *coercion* and realized she “had no choice but to accept.” While there, she was subjected to *labor exploitation*: fetching water and working on the farm for the priest, among other tasks.

Third, the two girls were sent to atone for an earlier transgression in the family. I see this as evidence of a deeply embedded notion of an enduring punishment; its cause and effect seem interminable and therefore continuity of atonement must not be breached but rather guaranteed. She explained that at that time, there were eighteen girls from different families at the shrine to which she was sent. However, a group of new girls were expected to come into the shrine. To accommodate the new girls, she was lucky to be released early at the age of twenty-three. Although she is *free* (having been released many years ago, now a staunch Catholic, and “*not one of them*,” as she put it), if she and the cousin die at the same time, for instance in an accident, the family must send two virgin girls to the shrine as a replacement. She clarified that “this is a generational thing; some other girls will be sent. They will always send a pair at the same time.”

Fourth, how free is a *Trokosi* after she has been released from the shrine? What does “release” mean for her? I raise these questions based on the observation that the women remain connected to the shrine in some way after release. For instance, despite being “released” many years ago and the unusual steps that Esi took to detach herself from the shrine, she made it clear that if she and her cousin died at the same time, they must be replaced. Given this and other cases, I concur with many research participants who described the relationship of *Trokosi* with the shrine as a lifetime commitment. I

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<sup>59</sup> Esi, interview by author in Akatsi, May 16, 2023.

have underscored that since it is a generational matter, both the punishment and atonement must endure from generation to generation.

Germane to the discussion here is the practice of offering women in marriage to men in the community outside of the environs of the shrine. Despite the restrictions imposed on the women living at the shrines, a priest explained that a woman is free to marry such a man. In the broader scheme of things, a priest combines several competing roles. He is the proxy of the deity and hence the husband of the *Trokosi*,<sup>60</sup> but he also has his wives and is a father figure to the *Trokosi*. His wives are also referred to as *mama* (meaning grandmother) because the priest is often referred to as grandfather. He enjoys the prerogative of the power afforded him by any of these roles depending on the issue at hand. The men who come for wives from the shrine offer gifts and drinks to the priest and express their wishes. However, in such a marriage, the “woman is given to a friend, to a man as a friend” and not as a husband because the deity is and remains the husband of the woman in question. It also emerged that such women remain connected to the shrine through the annual festivals in which they are obliged to participate. During these festivals, the women may spend some time at the shrine where certain rituals are performed and the priest may have sex with them if he so wishes; they have this obligation because the deity is their *real* husband. Thus, the *Trokosi*'s relationship with the shrine is never actually severed; it lingers on, as does the obligation to expiate and placate the gods to ensure the well-being and peace of the families and communities concerned.

## Concluding Remarks

In this study, I have explored how practices embedded in the Ewe culture sanctioned by religious beliefs enshrined in the *Trokosi* institution generate vulnerability to trafficking, sexual bondage, and labor exploitation of women and girls. The *Trokosi* practice is a deeply rooted institution that steadfastly produces enduring inequalities, particularly gender-based and societal disparities. Central to the *Trokosi* practice are notions of ownership and control which align with the broader patriarchal structures within which they operate. Women subjected to this practice often endure significant abuses and are stripped of autonomy and rights, echoing broader issues of gender inequality in the region.

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<sup>60</sup> The priest has sexual relations with *Trokosi*, however, he is not obliged to provide sustenance or perform customary rights of marriage engagement. The families of the *Trokosi* are responsible for their upkeep, but most of them break ties with the *Trokosi* after they send them to the shrine. See Dovlo and Adzoyi 1995: 14.

The perpetuation of such inequalities is not merely a result of individual actions but is embedded within cultural values and social frameworks that provide legitimacy to such practices. It cannot be over emphasized that women in this institutional setup find themselves in a marginalized position where escape or resistance is fraught with significant personal and societal risks.

The *Trokosi* are sent to the shrines to make amends for crimes (e.g., murder, theft, and rape) committed by family members. The life of atonement is one of punishment from which the *Trokosi* cannot escape. They are forced to fend for themselves and they may not take the farm produce of their labor for their sustenance. Some of them also work in the market and sell fish, bringing the money to the priest. This is another way of paying for the crimes committed by their relatives. For fear of consequences in the form of sudden sickness and deaths (the types of catastrophes believed to be caused by the crimes committed by their family members), they cannot act dishonestly and withhold the money or keep some of it for their own use. Thus, the fear of punishment serves as a means of securing compliance with the demands of bonded life. Although some *Trokosi* may be released on various grounds, the link with the shrine is never actually severed. It is also important to note that the *Trokosi* remain stigmatized in their communities. A visit to a school that was established for girls released some years ago revealed that it no longer serves the purpose for which it was built by an international NGO. It still bears the stigma of “*Mama* school.”<sup>61</sup>

During the annual festival, released women must return to the shrine where they are required to spend several months providing various services. At the height of the festivities, the ban on having sex with *Trokosi* is temporarily lifted. This means that the *Trokosi* may have sex with men outside the shrine and, apparently, they are encouraged to offer themselves to men during the parade in the local town. Some of the sex rituals encourage prostitution. As Akpabli-Honu observes, the *dodese ritual* in Agave and Avenorpeme “amounts to the promotion of compulsory prostitution.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, they may be exposed to sexual exploitation.

I have illustrated above how child trafficking is perpetrated at the family level and the complicity of the community in several ways. However, trafficking and exploitation of women and girls through religious beliefs and practices remain oblivious to the public. As noted above, the *Trokosi* system is not considered “as a crime but rather a justice

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<sup>61</sup> *Mama* is the title given to the wives of the priests and generally the *Trokosi* women are referred to as *Mama*.

<sup>62</sup> Akpabli-Honu 2014: 142.

system.”<sup>63</sup> Slavery is explicitly prohibited by the 1992 Ghana Constitution, which also prohibits the forced recruitment and use of children as soldiers as well as all forms of forced labor. However, as noted above, the government has not succeeded in its efforts to outlaw the practices sanctioned by the *Trokosi* institution. Most of the research participants in this study were emphatic that the institution is there to stay “because it is deeply embedded in the culture” and, to many of them, “it plays an important role for the communities concerned.” The law enforcement agencies are afraid of the spirits and curses, posing an obstacle to effective enforcement of the law against the *Trokosi* practices. Ultimately, “the Ghanaian law is of limited effectiveness: Rather than engaging with autochthonous causes, including complex social practices with historically rich traditions (like child fosterage rearing and labor), it enjoined a narrow economic model for the proliferation of trafficking.”<sup>64</sup> Hence, I concur with the observation that the practices and influence of the *Trokosi* institution persist “because of the conflict between culture and religious norms on the one hand and positive laws on the other.”<sup>65</sup>

Addressing the deeply entrenched inequalities perpetuated by the *Trokosi* practice demands a holistic strategy. It is critical that legislative and policy reforms are pursued, but these reforms must be reinforced by transformational shifts in societal attitudes and norms. Regrettably, despite the implementation of a legal framework and educational programs aimed at challenging existing stereotypes and empowering women, these initiatives have not made substantial impact in dismantling the underlying social structures that support the *Trokosi* practice. This indicates a need for a more integrated approach that combines policy innovation with cultural and social reform to effectively combat these persistent inequalities.

This study argues that although the UN Palermo Protocol does not make any reference to cultural practices, such as the *Trokosi* institution, within its framework for defining trafficking and exploitation, the mechanisms of transferring girls and women under the *Trokosi* system—alongside the overarching social, cultural, and religious norms—conform to the definitions articulated therein. Furthermore, Article 3 of the Protocol delineates various forms of exploitation, including using a position of power or exploiting the vulnerability of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery or similar practices, and servitude—characteristics also present within the *Trokosi* institution. This investigation has revealed that in Ghana, a signatory to the UN Palermo Protocol,

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<sup>63</sup> Asamoah 2015: 139.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence 2010: 64.

<sup>65</sup> Bastine 2010: 81.

authorities face substantial challenges in enacting their mandate to combat the trafficking of women and girls. These challenges stem from the cultural context where children may be used as collateral, bonded labor in the repayment of debts, or recompense for criminal actions within the *Trokosi* framework.

In addition to the UN Palermo Protocol, this study has referenced the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 29 of 1930, which classifies coercive sexual exploitation as forced labor and delineates conditions akin to slavery for trafficked and bonded individuals. By identifying the dissonance between international legal instruments and entrenched cultural practices, this study has underscored the necessity for a nuanced understanding of local cultural dynamics when addressing global protocols against human trafficking and various forms of exploitation.

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