Obstacles to the protection of children's rights in coastal communities of Ghana: Voices of stakeholders

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Abstract

The safeguarding of children's rights has emerged as a global concern. The concept of child rights protection significantly differs based on the prevailing environmental, socio-economic, socio-cultural, and political situations. This paper uses a qualitative case study research design to examine the challenges to safeguarding child rights in Ghana's fishing communities, specifically in the Ketu South District. The target population included various stakeholders responsible for safeguarding children's rights in the Ketu South District of the Volta Region in Ghana. Eighteen (18) participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to engage in the study. The acquired data was analysed thematically. The research illustrates that the safeguarding of children's rights in the designated area has been obstructed by climate change and its associated phenomena, poverty, physical punishment, and sociocultural practices. The paper recommends a multisectoral approach to tackle societal perceptions of children's safety, poverty, and cultural norms and practices that hinder the protection of children's rights in the study location and other associated fishing communities in Ghana.

Keywords: Child rights; child rights protection; coastal communities; Ghana, Ketu South District.

Introduction

The persistent and escalating array of adversities, manifested as abuse from individuals and societal structures, underscores the imperative for states and the international community to safeguard children from diverse forms of maltreatment. Consequently, throughout the past decades, concerns about child protection have garnered significant global attention and endorsement following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989.

Child Protection, as delineated in Article 19 of the UNCRC, pertains to safeguarding children from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. For more than thirty years, the UNCRC has evolved into an international human rights treaty and a compendium of rights that delineates legal standards employed by lawmakers to validate child protection frameworks (Falch-Eriksen & Backe-Hansen, 2018). Article 19 of the universally recognised UNCRC mandates legal, administrative, social, and educational measures to safeguard children from all types of violence and abuse. The ratifications and subsequent implementation of the UNCRC have led to several international and national policies and regulations aimed at safeguarding children's rights worldwide. In this context, the UNCRC serves as a legal framework to substantiate decision-making, policy formulation, organisational structures, and routine legislation by all State parties in the interest of child protection.

Additionally, there are other significant legislations, including the Optional Protocols to the UNCRC concerning the sale of children, designed to enhance international standards (EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child, 2016). The UNCRC and its Optional Protocols create the foundational principles of children's human rights, which are seen in the child rights strategy that enhances commitments and support for child-centred policies. Moreover, recognising the importance of child rights protection for sustainable development, several significant international accords have been adopted since 2015. Included are the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SGD), which mandates the provision of a nurturing environment for children and youth to fully realise their rights and capabilities (SGD, Paragraph 25), and the Financing for Development agreement, which is primarily pertinent to children on a global scale (EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child, 2016).

Nonetheless, the obstacles encountered by the youngsters persisted. In many African and Asian nations, children face precarious conditions resulting from diverse economic, social, cultural,

political, and environmental issues. Literature indicates that children persistently endure abuse, violence, and discrimination, with their specific needs frequently overlooked in familial, educational, community, and service contexts (Daly, Ruxton & Schuurman, 2015). Statistically, an earlier report estimated that annually between 500 million and 1.5 billion children worldwide encounter violence (UNICEF, 2015**a**). The same report further indicates that approximately 150 million children aged 5 to 14 are involved in child labour, and about 100 million children of primary school age are not enrolled in basic education (UNICEF, 2015**a**). Additionally, UNICEF (2022) revealed that in Africa, 125 million girls and women were married prior to the age of 18, with 30% of women entering marriage before the legal age. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2022) likewise estimates that over 120 million girls experience some type of coerced sexual contact before the age of 20.

These circumstances continue to be an escalating global concern among academics, policymakers, governmental entities, non-governmental organisations, diplomats, and advocates for children's rights. As a result, there has been a proliferation of studies concerning child rights in recent decades, influenced by the standards outlined in the UNCRC (Antwi, 2021; Benson & Achanso, 2022; Golo et al., 2017; Golo et al., 2025; Jayati, 2020; Mia et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2022. Nonetheless, to this day, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding the numerous impediments to the safeguarding of children's rights, particularly in Ghana. This article seeks to transcend the examination of the nature and fundamental causes of child rights breaches and abuses by evaluating the obstacles to the protection of their rights, utilising a qualitative research methodology. The paper proceeds to examine the international and state legal frameworks for the protection of children's rights over the years. This is followed by a presentation of the methodology employed in the study, findings and discussion, and finally the conclusion and recommendations.

Protection of Child Rights: The International and National Legal Frameworks

A variety of international and national human rights frameworks exist worldwide to safeguard childhood and the rights of children. The initial measure for international childhood protection originated with the 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, succeeded by a further Declaration in 1959 (Daniel, 2012). This Declaration, concerning children's rights, is regarded as the inaugural international instrument developed in reaction to the severe conditions

experienced by children following World War I (Ame, 2012; Hutchison, 2013). The Declaration of the Rights of the Child represented a significant milestone in the history of children's rights, underscoring the necessity of a supportive environment for children by accentuating the role of parents and families in advancing their fundamental rights and welfare.

Subsequent to the significant advocacy of the Polish Government and the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the UNCRC was ratified on November 20, 1989, and became open for ratification on January 16, 1990 (Vandenhole, Türkelli & Lembrechts, 2019). The UNCRC defines a child in Article 1 as every individual under the age of 18, entitled to all rights outlined in the Convention, regardless of religion, race, talents, or family history (Vandenhole, Türkelli & Lembrechts, 2019). The objective is to enhance and safeguard the rights of children from their adversities.

Following years of deliberation, the transition from an ethical declaration to a legal convention enabled the UNCRC to attain legally binding status in 1990. Situated within the framework of human rights legislation, the rights promoted are characterised as indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent, offering a definitive and obligatory standard for the treatment of children (Evers, Vadeboncoeur, & Weber, 2015), thereby establishing a universally acknowledged legal instrument for the safeguarding of children's rights (Hutchison, 2013; UNICEF, 2015). The UNCRC encompasses numerous provisions pertaining to various principles derived from diverse international human rights instruments and rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which all States that have ratified the Convention commit to uphold (James & James, 2008). Notably, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR art. 23(1)) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR article 10(3)) affirm that the family warrants 'protection by society and the State and that special measures of protection and assistance should be taken on behalf of all children and young persons (Plastow, 2015).

The UNCRC, regarded as a legally binding agreement, is overseen by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which evaluates its implementation by advising all state parties on effective execution (Ame, 2012; Howe & Covell, 2010). The preamble of the UNCRC is founded on sections 25 (2) and 16 (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that childhood warrants special care and aid and that the family is a fundamental group of society (Ame, 2012). It underscores four fundamental principles that govern its administration: ‘non-discrimination (article 2), the best interests of the child (article 3), the child’s right to life, survival, and development (article 6), and respect for the views of

the child (article 12) (Ame, 2012). The UNCRC ensures three essential rights for children, namely provision, protection, and participation. States that ratify the UNCRC pledge to uphold and safeguard these rights (Ame, 2012; Apt et al., 2011). Furthermore, the UNCRC acknowledges children as holders of rights and delineates the obligations of parents, carers, and states as duty-bearers (Ame, 2012). It underscores the rights essential for children to develop and realise their full potential. The safeguarding of children's rights has not only been prioritised globally but has also garnered significant attention at regional and national levels.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights underscores the safeguarding and promotion of children's rights, recognising their entitlement to education, healthcare, and protection from exploitation (Apt et al., 2011). It acknowledges the family as the essential societal unit and emphasises the need for parents and carers to safeguard children's welfare. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) was adopted by the OAU in July 1990 and came into force in November 1999, serving as an international instrument that establishes a comprehensive framework for the protection and promotion of children's rights in Africa. The ACRWC was deemed essential as some African governments contended that the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) inadequately addressed the particular requirements of African children (Adu-Gyamfi & Keating, 2013). The ACRWC recognises the distinct position of children as individuals and delineates certain fundamental rights vital for their well-being and development, encompassing the right to education, healthcare, protection from abuse and exploitation, and involvement in choices affecting their lives. The ACRWC is partitioned into two primary components. The introductory portion has 31 articles outlining the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of a child. The subsequent section specifies the obligations of states to enact laws in order to enforce the provisions of the ACRWC.

In contrast to the UNCRC, which omits the obligations and responsibilities of a child, the ACRWC specifically delineates these tasks for African children. The Charter includes explicit provisions to safeguard children in armed conflict, forbidding their recruitment into armed forces or groups and promoting measures to protect them from the consequences of such conflicts. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child oversees

the legally binding African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). This committee obtains reports from states regarding their execution of the ACRWC and offers recommendations and advice on enhancing the safeguarding and advancement of children's rights. The ACRWC is a crucial international legal framework for safeguarding and advancing children's rights in Africa. Its provisions underscore the significance of safeguarding children's rights in Africa.

Ghana's Legal Framework for Child Protection

In Ghana, various acts have been enacted to protect human rights broadly and children's rights specifically, including the Children's Act of 1998. Prior to the ratification of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Ghana instituted the Ghana National Commission on Children in 1979 to oversee the overall welfare and development of children and to coordinate all vital services for children within the nation. Recognising that individuals unaware of rights and freedoms cannot safeguard children, Article 28 of Ghana's 1992 Constitution and the Children's Act of 1998 underscore the necessity for extensive dissemination regarding the welfare principle, parental obligations, and the rights to education, social engagement, freedom from exploitative labour, and non-discrimination in matters concerning children. The Constitution recognises the importance of protecting children's rights and welfare, incorporating several sections specifically aimed at maintaining these rights in Ghana. Chapter 5 of the Constitution is dedicated to Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms and delineates several rights, including the right to life, personal liberty, protection from slavery and forced labour, economic rights, and cultural rights. Article 28 of the Constitution provides children several rights, including the right to parental care and protection against cruel, inhuman, or humiliating treatment or punishment. It mandates the entitlement to education and healthcare for all children, irrespective of their parents' or guardians' socioeconomic background and religious convictions. Article 39 affirms every child's entitlement to a name and nationality, emphasising the imperative to guarantee that all Ghanaian children possess a legal identity. The Constitution further emphasises the necessity of protecting children from abuse and exploitation. Article 13 ensures the right to personal liberty and security, prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, and safeguards children from physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and other forms of mistreatment. Article 15 established the Commission on Human Rights and

Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), responsible for investigating allegations of human rights breaches, especially those related to children.

The Children's Act of 1998 (Act 560) in Ghana is a detailed legal instrument that delineates a framework for the protection and promotion of children's rights within the nation. This Act was established to enforce the stipulations of the UNCRC and other international and regional documents pertaining to children's rights. Ghana Government's ratification of the UNCRC compelled the country to evaluate its domestic laws and policies, culminating in the enactment of the Children's Act in 1998, which became effective in 1999 (Twum-Danso, 2012). The Children's Act of Ghana unified all child-related laws into a single, child-focused statute to enhance accessibility, advocacy, and enforcement (Twum-Danso, 2012). The Children's Act of the country specifies the rights and safeguards afforded to children, including the right to education, healthcare, protection from abuse and exploitation, and the opportunity to engage in decisions that impact their lives. It recognises the distinct position of children as individuals and underscores the necessity of offering a secure and supportive environment that cultivates their fullest potential. The Children's Act of Ghana comprises one hundred and twenty-six (126) sections organised into six parts. The Act is based on four fundamental principles: Prioritising the child's best interest (Article 2); prohibiting discrimination (Article 3); guaranteeing the right to life, development, and survival (Article 5); and permitting children's participation in issues affecting them (Article 11). According to the Act, a child is defined as an individual under the age of eighteen (Article 1). The Act differentiates between child labour and modest household tasks, acknowledging the customary expectation in Ghana for children to aid their families from an early age. It provides definitions for diverse entities and individuals, along with the methods for implementing its provisions aimed at enhancing children's life in Ghana. The Children's Act includes measures for the protection of children in legal dispute, highlighting the significance of rehabilitating and reintegrating those who have encountered legal issues. Additionally, it prohibits detrimental cultural practices, including female genital mutilation and underage marriage. The Act creates the Department of Children, responsible for advocating and safeguarding the rights of children in Ghana. This department oversees the implementation of the Children's Act and offers assistance to children who have experienced abuse or exploitation.

To enhance the safeguarding of children's rights, Ghana's Juvenile Justice Act of 2003 (Act 653) was enacted by the President of the Republic of Ghana on October 28, 2003, serving as a national legislative framework for managing cases involving minors in legal conflict. The Act

consists of three sections. The initial section presents terminology, including the term 'juvenile', and delineates the precise protocols for managing cases involving minors in legal conflict and the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders (Golo, 2018). Section one of the first part of the Act defines a 'juvenile' as an individual under the age of eighteen who engages in unlawful behaviour. The Act mandates that the juvenile's best interest shall be the foremost consideration in all related matters. The second section of the Act underscores the prompt and effective management of juvenile cases within the judicial system. Although minors charged with offences possess the same rights and safeguards as adults, including the right to legal counsel and a fair trial, the Act underscores the importance of addressing the distinct needs and circumstances of children throughout the justice process. It requires the creation of a Juvenile Correctional Centre tasked with the rehabilitation and education of minors who have violated the law. In addition to the Juvenile Justice Act, Ghana's Human Trafficking Act, 2005 (Act 694), serves as a national statute that criminalises human trafficking and delineates a framework for the protection of victims, especially minors. The Act comprises three principal sections: the prevention of human trafficking, the protection of trafficked individuals, and the prosecution of those engaged in human trafficking activities. This Act, influenced by the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol), aims to combat and prevent human trafficking, particularly of women and children, while safeguarding and upholding the rights of trafficking victims (Sertich & Heemskerk, 2011). Nevertheless, research indicates that fishing communities in Ghana are burdened by activities that compromise the realisation of children's essential human rights (Golo et al., 2025; Marschke, 2022; Feed the Future Ghana Fisheries Recovery Activity, 2022; United States Department of State, 2019; Golo, 2015). Yet, despite the availability of several publications addressing the violation and abuse of children's rights globally, there remains a paucity of data regarding the obstacles to the protection of children's rights in Ghanaian coastal communities. This publication aims to enhance the knowledge of child rights protection, which is essential for informed decision-making on the welfare and rights of children in the small-scale fisheries industry. This study concentrated on Ketu South in Ghana's Volta region.

Methods

The research location

The Ketu South District is located in the southeastern region (Volta Region) of Ghana, positioned between latitudes 6°00'N and 6°10'N, and longitudes 1°00'E and 1°00'E (see figure 1). To the east of the district is the Republic of Togo, to the west is Keta District, and to the north is Ketu North District. The southern region is located midway across an arid coastal plain, stretching from Ghana to the Republic of Benin.

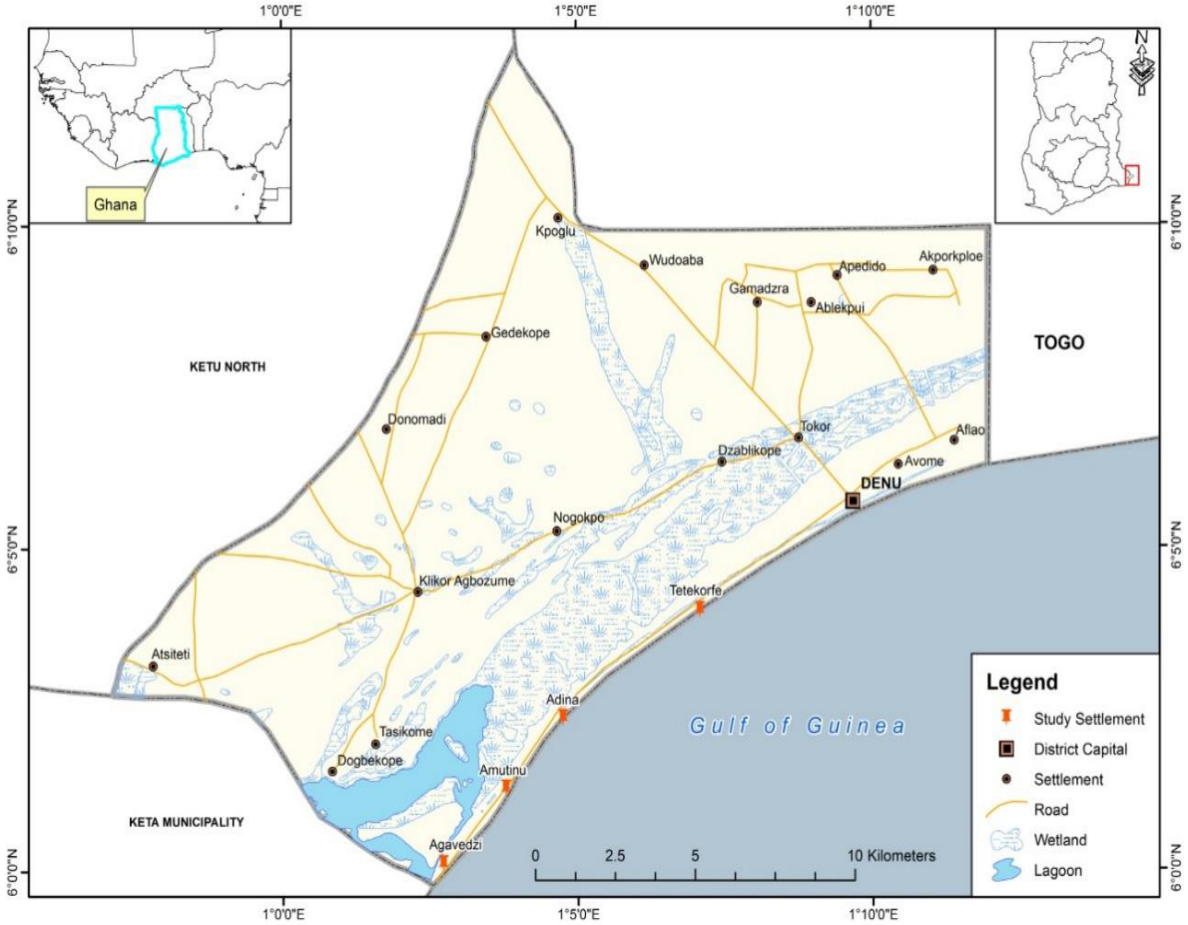

Figure 1: Cartographic representation of Ketu South District

Source: Author, digitised by the Department of Geography, University of Education, Winneba.

The district covers an area of approximately 400 square kilometres with a low altitude of less than 15 metres at the coast and 66 metres inland. A significant feature of the district is a 30-kilometre expanse of lagoons (see Figure 1). The lagoons are joined by streams and minor rivers, connecting them to the River Volta. The district is situated between the sea to the south

and the lagoon to the north. Nevertheless, the region contains numerous communities of varying sizes, "arranged in a continuous stream like beads along a string" (Nukunya, 1997: 9). Consequently, the daily activities of coastal inhabitants transpire between the lagoons and the ocean. The district in recent years has encountered frequent tidal waves that cause significant flooding, devastating the properties of residents and leaving many homeless (Ketu South District Report, 2010).

A case study design with a qualitative approach was employed to identify the obstacle impeding the safeguarding of children's rights in the Ketu South District of Ghana. The design was considered suitable due to the study's focus on a specific location. The study design provided a chance for a comprehensive investigation of the study's objective, aiming not to generalise the findings but to explicitly illustrate the issues related to child rights protection in Ketu South District. A qualitative research approach, characterised as a method for obtaining non-numerical data (Hadjer, Bellalem & Mirza, 2023), was employed to guide, design, and implement the research objectives. The methodology facilitated a more profound comprehension of the barriers obstructing the protection of children's rights in the studied area.

The study's population included all pertinent stakeholders responsible for safeguarding children's rights and welfare in the Ketu South District. Twenty (18) participants were selected for this study based on their availability and willingness to engage in in-depth interviews for the study. The participants included staff of the Social Welfare Department and Community Development (n=2); the Domestic Violence Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service (n=1); the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection – Ketu South (n=2); the Office of the Local Government Service – Ketu South (n=2); the Ketu District Assembly Unit Committee (n=2); the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) (n=1); and Assemblymen (n=2). Additional principal participants in the study included Headteachers (n=2), Queen Mothers (n=2), and Divisional Chiefs (n=2).

Fieldwork was conducted over three months in the Ketu South District from October 2014 to January 2025. Data was mostly gathered through in-depth interviews utilising semi-structured interview guidelines. Based on the participants' choice of language, the interviews were conducted in English and Ewe, lasting between 40 and 45 minutes. The participants were guaranteed the secrecy and anonymity of all information submitted. The in-depth interviews were audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed with participants' approval. The Ewe interviews were translated word-for-word into English. Thematic content analysis was

employed by reading, scrutinizing, selecting themes from the transcripts, verifying the accuracy, and importing the data into NVivo 11 for coding and theme comparison for validity.

Findings and discussion

A significant portion of research on child protection is influenced by children's rights criteria as articulated in the UNCRC (Overseas Development Institute, 2014). The UNCRC fundamentally comprises a framework of international standards that delineate the minimal rights that States are obligated to provide to children, ensuring their survival, development, and growth in alignment with human dignity. This section of the paper presents and discusses the common themes derived from the views and experiences of individuals interviewed about the barriers impeding the protection of children's rights in the Ketu South District.

Events associated with climate change

The 2023 UN General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, particularly regarding climate change, asserts that States must promptly act to safeguard the environment to uphold children's human rights (Mia et al. 2023). The Committee emphasises the necessity for States to safeguard children's rights to life, development, and survival. However, data from this study confirm other studies that coastal towns in the Ketu South District are confronted with recurrent strong tidal waves and severe flooding (Duhoe, 2022; Golo et al, 2025; Salifu, 2021). The predominant concern expressed by numerous participants, therefore, was the recurrent climate change-related events, particularly severe rising tidal waves, which, according to them, continued to hinder the effective safeguarding of children's rights by government agencies and stakeholders in the district. They explained that climate change-related occurrences persist in jeopardising children's rights to a secure environment, a sufficient standard of living, and education in many coastal communities inside the district. Consequently, the prevalent subject among the participants was that climate change-related events have obstructed the safeguarding of children's rights in the Ketu South District and its vicinity. A participant who is a headteacher asserted:

> Children in this area are highly vulnerable to repeated climate change-related disasters. We receive considerable assistance from various government agencies, NGOs, and philanthropies to ensure our impoverished children have a secure environment and a satisfactory standard of living during such events, […].

> However, the recurrent tidal waves and severe flooding, due to climate change, continue to hinder efforts to safeguard children's rights to health, education, nutritious food, and a secure environment in coastal areas in the district (Headteacher, January 13, 2025).

An employee of the Department of Social Welfare confirmed the situation as follows:

> We encounter numerous obstacles in safeguarding children, particularly in different coastal communities within the district. The primary challenge pertains to recurrent climate change-related phenomena such as rising sea levels and catastrophic flooding […]. These occurrences consistently undermine our endeavours to attain comprehensive protection of children's rights to a standard living in the district (Staff, Department of Social Welfare, November 4, 2024).

The aforementioned comments align with earlier research conducted by Golo and his colleagues, indicating that climate change-related occurrences in the coastal settlements of Keta and Ketu South district adversely affected both children's rights to health and their right to food (Golo, Sulley & Erinosho, 2025).

Traditional and cultural practices

The preservation of child rights addresses significant and pressing issues related to traditional customs. Thus, the ACRWC in Article 1 (3) asserts that "any custom, tradition, cultural, or religious practice that contradicts the rights, duties, and obligations outlined in this Charter shall be discouraged to the extent of such contradiction." Article 21 (1) explicitly addresses traditional customs and practices, urging state parties to take appropriate steps to eradicate all detrimental traditional customs and practices. Participants in this study said that certain cultural attitudes and traditional practices have hindered the protection of the rights of the female child in the studied area. One practice cited by nearly all participants is female ritual bondage, referred to in the local language as t*roxovi*. Participants indicate that the practice of offering female virgins to a deity as recompense for familial transgressions, aimed at averting divine wrath that could lead to familial demise, persists in numerous communities within the Ketu South district, despite efforts over the years to abolish it. According to a participant of the Social Welfare Department:

> Despite the implementation of legislation in 1998 aimed at abolishing ritual or customary servitude, the practice endures due to the backing of numerous

> traditional authorities in the region. Consequently, it remains clandestine, complicating efforts to address the traditional authorities who perpetuate it without detection (Staff, Department of Social Welfare, November 4, 2024).

Yet another traditional practice that obstructs child rights protection in the study location is child marriage. Child marriage is a worldwide issue, identified as a significant barrier to national development and the complete fulfilment of children's rights (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2016). It is estimated that, in the current decade, 14.2 million girls will be married before age 18 every year, and that, without preventative action, 15.1 million girls a year are at risk of marriage by age 18 between 2021 and 2030 (UNICEF, 2022). Section 2 of Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990) articulates:

> Child marriage and the engagement of girls and boys will be forbidden, and decisive measures, including legislation, shall be implemented to establish the minimum marriage age at 18 years and mandate the recording of all weddings in an official registry.

Child marriage is illegal in Ghana. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana states that an individual under 18 years of age is classified as a child and is hence prohibited from marrying or being given in marriage (see Ghana's Children's Act 560 (1998), Article 14(2). Nevertheless, the custom of child marriage is a traditional practice that compromises the safeguarding of the rights of, particularly, the female child in the Ketu South District. An Assemblyman participant expressed discontent with the situation:

> As a community leader, I have observed the effects of child marriage on girls' rights to education and health within this community. Despite our collaboration with the Department of Social Welfare and DOVVSU to educate families and communities in the district against this practice, some parents continue to marry off their girls at a very young age instead of enrolling them in school […]. Occasionally, these innocent females experience health issues during childbirth (Assemblyman, October 15, 2024).

Child marriage has been recognised as a faceless violation of the rights of the child, with far-reaching social, economic, and health implications for the girl child (Muyila, 2006). Overseas Development Institute (2014) contends that child marriage constitutes physical and sexual

assault, resulting in severe immediate and long-term repercussions, such as mortality, transient injuries, permanent disabilities, and mental and physical health issues for the affected minors. Hence, the 21(2) of the ACRWC singles out child marriage and betrothal of boys and girls for abolition.

Additionally, poverty has been noted as a key driver of child marriage (Muyila, 2006). The majority of participants in this study characterised poverty as financial hardships compounded by traditional practices that obstruct the safeguarding of girls' right to education in the Ketu South district. A headteacher elucidated:

> Financial hardships experienced by several households lead some parents to perceive no necessity to enroll their daughters in school […]. Some individuals still maintain that girls should not receive an education, as it contravenes tradition. As a result, they compel these innocent young girls into premature marriages with affluent men as recompense and resolution for familial troubles such as indebtedness […]. Some rationalised the practice by asserting that it safeguards females from pregnancy without paternal involvement (Headteacher, January 13, 2025).

This finding aligns with the existing literature. UNICEF (2022) demonstrated that the practice of debt-bondage, wherein an impoverished household exchanges a girl child with another household for assistance, contributes to child marriages. UNICEF (2022) estimates that 650 million girls and women were married before the age of 18, with over 500 million of them living in Eastern and Southern Africa. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2022) reported that over 120 million girls experience some sort of coerced sexual contact before the age of 20. In Ghana, there was an increase of 7.9 per cent from 2014 (19.3%) to 2018 (27%), while in 2021, more than 80,000 girls aged 12 to 17 were in a marital union (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022).

Violent/corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment refers to the use of physical force, such as a beating or flogging, to inflict suffering on a perpetrator to correct or prevent the perpetrator from repeating an unpleasant behaviour (Gershoff, Purtell & Holas, 2015). The interpretation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding corporal punishment is derived from General Comment No. 8 (2006) on “The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (arts. 19; 28, para. 2; and 37, inter alia).” Article 37(a) of the

UNCRC stipulates: Art. 37: states "Parties shall ensure that: (a) No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Consequently, nations such as Germany, Spain, Greece, and Venezuela have prohibited physical punishment in all contexts, including domestic environments. Research in Africa has shown that more than one hundred countries, including the vast majority of African nations, have banned physical or corporal punishment in education and all other environments (Department of Children, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection & UNICEF Ghana, 2018). Despite the prohibition of corporal punishment in schools, nearly all participants in this study indicated that its endorsement in numerous District schools not only indirectly infringed upon children's right to education but also perpetuated their exposure to torture and dehumanising treatment. A participant from CHRAJ explained:

> A significant number of youngsters, particularly boys, discontinue their education as a result of corporal punishment. We attempted to inform the educators about the ineffectiveness of corporal punishment with canes, but our efforts were futile. Currently, if you visit the beach, you will observe numerous boys participating in fishing rather than attending school. Our contacts with various individuals indicate that many boys and girls in our communities ceased attending school just to evade caning or flogging as punishment for offences committed (Staff, CHRAJ, December 17, 2024).

A female employee of the Social Welfare Department and Community Development also reported:

> We have endeavoured to dissuade certain educators from employing canes on students, but the application of corporal punishment is frequently rationalised by both educators and community members via deeply entrenched cultural, religious, and social convictions and customs (Staff, Department of Social Welfare, November 4, 2024).

Existing literature has indicated that in sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, over seventy per cent of children aged 2 to 14 are subjected to corporal punishment, such as caning or flogging, as a form of discipline. Ghana has been ranked number one in sub-Saharan Africa, with 93% of children reportedly experiencing corporal punishment at home (Department of Children, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection & UNICEF Ghana, 2018). The findings in the current study resonate with the Overseas Development Institute's (2014) argument that

sociocultural norms permitting violence against children exacerbate the danger of violations of their protective rights. In this context, it could be deduced that the dominant perceptions regarding child-rearing and disciplinary methods, as well as the definitions of acceptable, desirable, or abusive practices in many Ghanaian communities, including the Ketu South District, persistently obstruct the safeguarding of children's rights.

Poverty

Literature has demonstrated an increasing acknowledgement in recent years of the extent to which poverty undermines the effective protection of child rights (Overseas Development Institute, 2014). Further evidence indicates that safeguarding children's rights positively influences food security, health, and educational access, thereby enabling children to realise their full potential and fulfil their rights to social security (UNICEF & ILO, 2019). Consequently, the UNCRC mandates the establishment of conditions that safeguard children from economic exploitation and from engaging in any labour that may be hazardous or detrimental to their education (Article 32). In this current study, the majority of participants ascribed the obstacles to the implementation of child rights protection policies in coastal settlements of the Ketu South District to poverty. They elucidated that child bonded labour and domestic servitude, integral to the local support system for the impoverished, are currently being exploited by certain persons due to their exacerbation in the research area. A participant headteacher elucidated that financially disadvantaged families frequently permitted their children to work for their creditors for a designated duration, subjecting these youngsters to perilous labour that adversely impacted their health and education. A Queen Mother, originally from one of the settlements in the district, conveyed to us candidly and straightforwardly:

> Similar to 'child bonded slavery', the placement of girls as domestic workers and boys as bonded agricultural or fishing labourers is prevalent in numerous areas within the Ketu South district. These youngsters are typically prohibited from attending school, and the majority of the work they are engaged in is detrimental to their health (Queen Mother, October 22, 2024).

The participants of the Department of Social Welfare and DOVVSU indicated that they addressed over 60 cases of servitude and bonded child labour in the district over the previous five years; yet, some impoverished parents continue to partake in this practice. The Assemblymen, Chief Fishermen, and Queen Mothers in the interview affirmed that numerous

youngsters in coastal areas within the district discontinued their education due to parental involvement in such activities. In this context, nearly all interviewed stakeholders attributed poverty as a primary impediment to the safeguarding of child rights in Ketu South District.

Conclusion and the way forward

A significant portion of research on child protection is inspired by children's rights standards articulated in the UNCRC, which underscores the principle of the indivisibility of rights, asserting that protection rights are as fundamental to child welfare as the rights to health, education, or sustenance, and calls for increased focus on these overlooked rights. Although many nations, including Ghana, have signed and incorporated the UNCRC by enacting legislative measures to protect children's rights, many children continue to face many challenges that undermine the protection of their rights. This article specifically examined the barriers hindering the protection of children's rights, focusing on Ketu South District. The study identified multiple factors hindering child rights protection in the district. They include climate change-related events, such as tidal waves and severe flooding, alongside traditional and sociocultural practices such as early marriage, forced labour, and servitude intensified by poverty, as well as violent or corporal punishment. The findings indicate the necessity for pertinent duty-bearers, including child rights protection institutions and stakeholders both within and beyond the study area, to address these impediments that undermine the protection of children in the study location and beyond.

To effectively safeguard children's rights in the Ketu South District and comparable contexts, a multisectoral approach is required that tackles societal perceptions of children's safety, poverty, and cultural norms and practices that hinder the protection of children's rights. Consequently, the following recommendations are provided: First, the finding that climate change-related phenomena, including tidal waves and floods, hinder safeguarding children's rights in the study area necessitates the construction of a sea defence wall along the district's coastlines to mitigate their vulnerability to these events. Second, this study demonstrates that cultural practices, such as child marriage and child-bonded labour, which undermine the protection of human rights in the area, were exacerbated by poverty. As a signatory to the UNCRC and several international and national welfare legislation, it is recommended that the Government of Ghana takes practical measures to restrict cultural practices that impede the fulfilment of children's rights. In this respect, domestic legislation in the country must be reinforced to confront traditional and cultural practices that are detrimental to the welfare of

children, particularly in the Ketu South District and throughout the country as a whole. Third, poverty remains the main driver of child marriage, child bonded labour, and girls' servitude in the study location. Therefore, interventions that improve the socio-economic status of families may help curtail the practice and need to be considered in efforts to end it. In this context, providing economic support and incentives, such as providing alternative or supplementary livelihoods for households, remains crucial for effectively protecting children's rights within the Ketu South district's coastal communities and similar ones. Finally, principal stakeholders such as the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection (MoGCSP), the Department of Social Welfare, the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), and the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) should be tasked with the obligation of promoting awareness of international human rights instruments and national legislation pertaining to child rights protection in the country. This must encompass the enforcement of corporal punishment legislation within the country. It is essential to acknowledge that while this study offers comprehensive insights into the challenges impeding the safeguarding of children's rights in coastal fishing communities, the findings are constrained in their generalisability due to the limited sample size and the scope of the study, which may not accurately represent all fishing communities in Ghana. Future studies could be conducted throughout the entire coastal communities across the country to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon for appropriate and adequate intervention measures.

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