



In Brief



West Africa: Child Trafficking in West Africa. Report on investigations

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Social, economical and structural conditions encouraging child trafficking

- Work migration of young, mostly male adults caused by drought, warfare or poverty
- Work migration of young Mali women aiming at making money for a trousseau
- Lacking awareness of existence and consequences of child trafficking
- In West Africa, especially in rural regions of Benin, it is a tradition to send children of poor families to wealthy relatives in towns to help in the household. In former times having been part of a project of collective upbringing intended to ensure better living conditions for children and supposed to contribute to unite the family respectively the community, this has long since become a system of child trafficking and exploitation.
- The marginalization of children within the family hierarchy
- Pedagogic customs tolerating or even requiring physical punishment carried out by the own family as well as by the relatives in town in charge of the child's upbringing
- Insufficient education and early start of gainful activity
- Social acceptance of child labour as a part of the upbringing
- Great number of children from mostly polygamous families and resulting problems or increasing economic troubles
- General worsening of living conditions in the countries of origin and resulting tendency of parents towards giving away their children, respectively increasing trend of minors to leave their families earlier and earlier
- Increasing desire of children and young people for consumer goods
- Poor knowledge of real life and working conditions of children and young people in the supposed rich countries of the Ivory Coast, Nigeria or Gabon
- Increasing demand for children and young people as manpower by plantation- and land-owners being forced to produce cheaper and cheaper
- Increasing want for cheap domestic servants in the growing cities
- The profit margin realised by the mediation of manpower
- The unscrupulousness by which human rights not belonging to the own family or to the own clan are violated
- Permeability of borders, and border officers acting as accomplices
- Lacking prosecution of female and male child traffickers by the police and justice authorities
- Lacking execution of international children's rights conventions ratified by the several states

Child trafficking in Benin

- Child trafficking and child labour in Benin (as well as in other African countries) is functioning against a special cultural and economical background. Children, mostly girls aged about 10, are given away (placed) to wealthier relatives who use to benefit from the



work done by those trusted to them, and who, at the same time, are supposed to take care of the children's education and upbringing. According to the theoretical construction, the family would thus be economically unburdened, the children would be offered a better future and the relations among the relatives would be intensified.

- In the course of the economic and social degradation, however, this system has changed. By professional agents (mostly women), these children nowadays become cheap manpower in urban households. As a compensation, the parents receive a sum of money or other "gifts".
- There exists no knowledge whatsoever of the commission the agents receive from the potential employers in the city.
- The percentage of girls among the children mediated this way (called Vidomègon), is 85%. They have to do the daily housework and are used as street- and market-vendors
- Estimates confirm that in both towns of Cotonou and Porto Novo about 100.000 Vidomègon are living in 65 per cent of all households.
- On an average, the children use to stay for three years with the families; 20 per cent of the interviewed children, however, use to work for six years or even longer. Working time is up to 15 hours a day.
- Maltreatment is a feature of the working conditions
- 75 per cent of the children do not receive any wages but only lodging and boarding.
- A similar system of "placing" has developed in Togo, Ghana and the Ivory Coast.
- Four different methods have been made out:
 - **Giving away:** The child is given away to relations to live with them and to be brought up. The favourite country of destination is the neighbouring country Nigeria.
 - **Pledging:** The child is left to the lender as a pawn for a borrowed amount of money and has to work out the sum.
 - **Sale:** The child is left in exchange for money to a female or male agent without the parents having a chance to influence its fate after the deal.
 - **Travelling labourers:** Young people, mainly girls or young women, are recruited on a voluntary basis and will thereafter be sent to other countries of the region.

Border crossing mediation of children and young people as manpower

The practice of "placing" is very closely connected with the border crossing trafficking in children and young people. Depending on the country of origin or destination and the occupation assigned, the mediation of the children and young people to their future employer or owner uses to take different courses. Altogether, as a fact, however, a network of agents, drivers, middlemen and touts use to profit by trafficking in children and young people in West Africa.

- Mediation of plantation labourers from Mali to the Ivory Coast
- Children and young people seeking labour use to come from the villages to Sikasso (Mali), one of the largest place of mediation and contacts in the region. By false promises they will be taken, among other by taxi drivers, across the border into the Ivory Coast (Korhogo, Bouaké) and sold as labourers to plantation owners.
- The price per person is about 40,000 CFA (about 110 – 120 DM in 2000). The children and young people will thereafter often be forced to work for years without payment under insufficient living conditions in cotton-, maize-, coffee- or cocoa-plantations. Altogether, 53 so-called Campements have been discovered since the middle of the nineties where on an average 200 children and young people aged between 10 and 15 were living.
- Mediation from Burkina Faso to the Ivory Coast
- Burkinabé (name for people from Burkina Faso) have been living since several generations in the Ivory Coast. The still existing relations to Burkina Faso enable them to recruit the farm hands required for the plantation work from the former places of provenance. The children and young people use to become dependent on the plantation- and land-owners without being sure to get the promised payment for their work.



- Mediation from Benin and Togo to Gabon
- Children and young people are recruited or bought by female agents in Benin or Togo and taken to Gabon. Since the port of Cotonou in Benin is meanwhile known as starting place for child transports to Gabon, they use to switch over to the neighbouring ports of Togo or Nigeria. The passage of about 500 km to Gabon may last up to two weeks, and up to one third may lose their lives.
- In Gabon, the children and young people will be received either by the female agents themselves or by female accomplices and handed over to the “employers” they are assigned for. The boys (about 20 per cent of the children) will be forced to handicraft work, the girls to housework or trade.
- Often the young people will be sent back shortly before their majority, as in Gabon a work permit is required from 18 years onwards, the cost being up to 500.000 CFA.
- Moreover, it is suspected that children respectively children’s organs are used for the production of fetishes. On this subject, however, no secure information is available.
- Apart from Gabon, also Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea and Ivory Coast are countries of destination for children and young people from Benin or Togo.

Border crossing routes

Border crossing is possible and facilitated by lacking controls at the borders, children and young people being provided with false documents or the simple statement of the accompanying persons that they were relatives. In some cases, these are actually relatives taking children and young people over the border to hand them but then over to the female agents.

- Children and young people of both sexes from Mali to the Ivory Coast
- Children and young people of both sexes from Benin to Nigeria (country of destination and transit to Gabon)
- Children and young people of both sexes from Benin, Ghana or Togo to Gabon
- Children and young people of both sexes from Mali, Togo and Benin to Burkina Faso
- Girls from Burkina Faso to Kuwait
- Girls and boys from Benin into the Gulf States
- Mainly girls from Benin over Togo into the Ivory Coast

Consciousness of the public on the problem

Awareness of the public on trafficking in children and young people is varying between ignorance, repression and acceptance of an existing situation with long tradition.

- In Mali the public are not aware of the dangers connected with trafficking in children and young people
- Also in Burkina Faso dangers and conditions of child labour are not present in the public awareness.
- In Benin “migration” of children and young people and working abroad is considered as a common and normal process in which a great number of families is involved. This is based on the custom to hand over the children as helps to relatives. The treatment the children there are subject to is considered as a necessary part of the education.
- The interpretation held by the parents that the children were but living and working with relations securing themselves a better future is in contradiction to the fact that the parents use to receive money or other gifts as a compensation from the agents or relatives.
- In Mali reproaches against the parents giving away or selling children for money or gifts are rejected and considered as incompatible with the own way of life.
- In the course of the last few years, however, child trafficking and child labour in West Africa has been perceived as a fact and recognized as a problem. Reports on the liberation of Mali children from the labour camps in the Ivory Coast are only one example. Also in the



Ivory Coast, reports on the circumstances there have meanwhile been published. Likewise, international studies, activities of the NGO's and UNICEF are being noticed in West Africa.

- The study does not contain any statement on the public's opinion of the countries of destination.

Living and working conditions in the plantations of the Ivory Coast

- Children and young people are kept involuntarily in the plantations, in some cases in chains, watched by overseers and forced to labour.
- They are assigned certain labour and will be threatened or punished if the performance is not to the owner's satisfaction.
- Their boarding is insufficient, in case of illness they are insufficiently cared for and they have hardly any or no contact at all to the outside world.

Labour that children and young people are forced to

- Farm labour (Ivory Coast)
- Trade, sale (Gabon)
- House work (in all states)
- Handicraft labour (Gabon)
- Camel riding (Gulf States)



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Contact & further Information

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