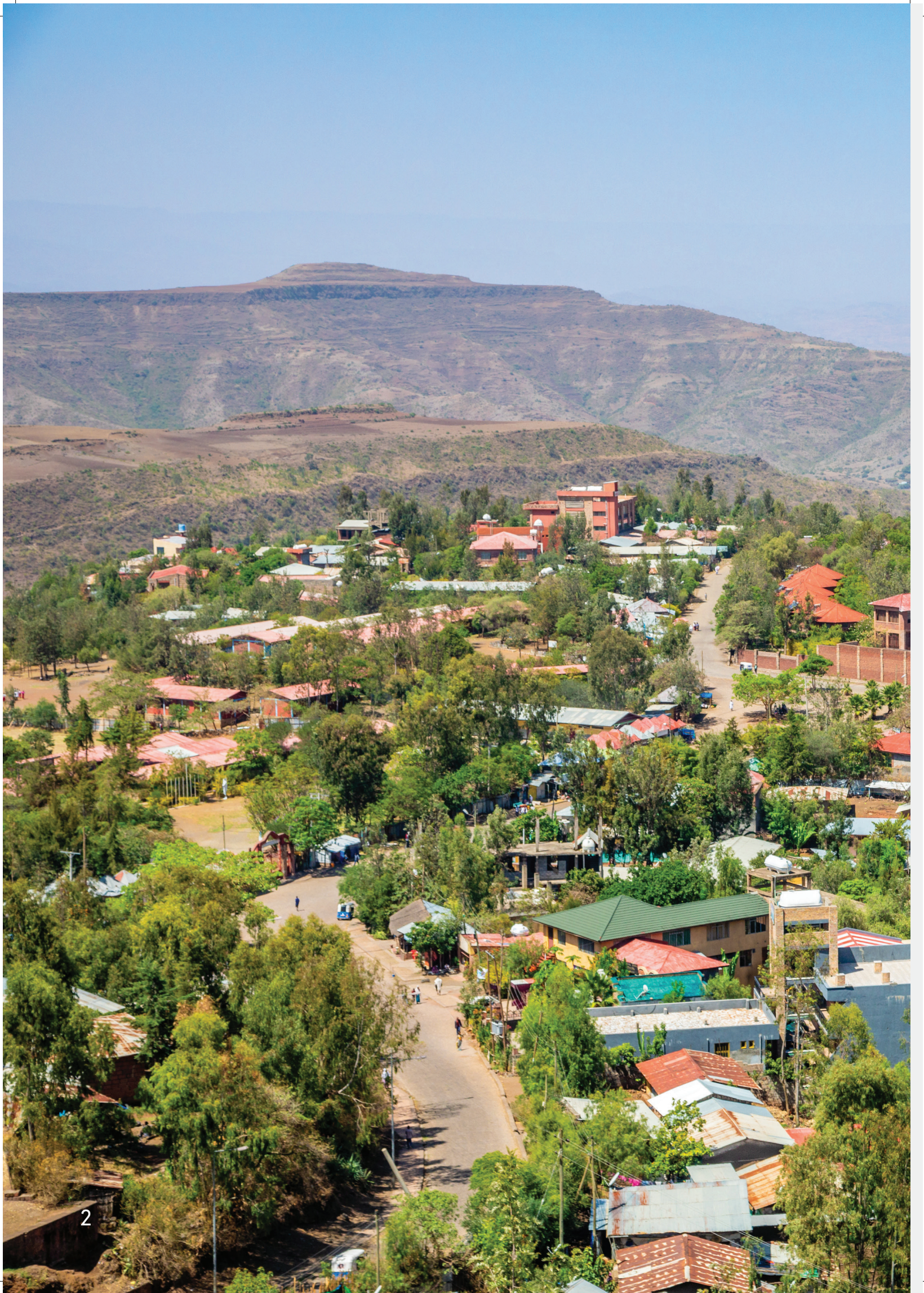




PROJECT TESFA RESEARCH SUMMARIES

Research on Social Norm Diagnostic and Behavioural Change on Modern Slavery by HTB Development Consultancy (2024) and Research on Child Trafficking in Ethiopia by Hope for Justice (2026)





Research on Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) for the Elimination of Slavery in Schools and Families (Tesfa) Project

By HTB Development Consultancy (2024)

The Tesfa Project

Hope for Justice has been implementing the Elimination of Slavery in Schools and Families (TESFA) project, funded by the UK Home Office through the Modern Slavery Innovation Fund (MSIF Phase III). The overall goal of the TESFA project is to help create a safer environment by using a whole community approach to reduce the vulnerability of girls and boys to modern slavery in seven woredas of the Wolaita Zone (Kindo Koisha, Kindo Didaye, and Kawo Koisha) and Hadiya Zone (Gembora, Lemmo, Analemo, and Jajura) of Southern and Central Ethiopia. The project uses a multi-level, community-based approach that involves children, school groups, teachers, caregivers, and community leaders. It aims to address the social, economic, and cultural factors that increase the risk of slavery in these communities. Its main focus is to change harmful social norms and reduce the systemic risks that make children vulnerable to exploitation, forced labor, and other forms of modern slavery.

The Social Norms Diagnostic Study Background

In 2024, Hope for Justice commissioned HTB Development Consultancy to conduct a formative social norms diagnostic study to inform the Tesfa Project's Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategy. This participatory research was designed to uncover the prevailing social norms, attitudes, behaviours, and practices related to modern slavery risks in the Wolaita and Hadiya zones. Recognizing that social, cultural, and economic forces have created systemic marginalisation enabling exploitation, the study aimed to understand the underlying factors perpetuating these practices. The findings provide a concise guiding framework for developing localised messaging and programming that addresses root causes and promotes sustainable behaviour change within communities.

The full version of the Social Norms Diagnostic Study on Modern Slavery in Ethiopia—which includes the Comprehensive Desk Research Report, the Social Norm Diagnostic, and the Social and Behavior Change (SBC) Campaign Strategy and Implementation Guideline, along with monitoring and evaluation guidelines—is available separately. This summary highlights the key findings and strategies identified.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods participatory research design to enable triangulation and provide a comprehensive understanding of social norms perpetuating modern slavery risks in the Wolaita and Hadiya zones of Ethiopia. The research was conducted across four randomly selected woredas (Kindo Didaye and Kawo Koysha in Wolaita, and Jajura and Gembora in Hadiya), from which eight kebeles were randomly sampled. A rigorous, stratified multi-stage cluster sampling technique was implemented to ensure representative population coverage. Quantitative data were collected through structured household surveys administered to 400 households across the sampled kebeles using KoboCollect for electronic data capture. The survey instrument incorporated vignette-based questions to diagnose perceived injunctive and descriptive norms related to child labour, school dropout, and marriage practices. Qualitative data were gathered

through 12 focus group discussions conducted separately with men, women, adolescent girls, and boys; 15 key informant interviews with teachers, community elders, religious leaders, women's group representatives, and government officials; 10 in-depth interviews with survivors of modern slavery; and systematic direct observations during market days and community events. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS employing descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and demographic disaggregation, while qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis using NVivo software through open, axial, and selective coding procedures with independent double-coding to enhance reliability. This comprehensive methodological approach ensured the generation of robust, contextualised insights to guide localised Social and Behaviour Change messaging and programming for the Tesfa Project.



Key Research Findings

A. Priority Norms Identification and Implications

This formative research on the Social Norms Diagnostic study provided critical insights into the underlying beliefs, perceived pressures, and expectations perpetuating modern slavery practices within local contexts. The research identified five priority harmful norms as focal points for strategic intervention, which are presented as follows.

Priority Norm 1: Fatalistic acceptance of exploitation risks in irregular migration

Rural youth in Wolaita and Hadiya zones increasingly undertake perilous irregular migration journeys through smuggler networks to the Middle East or South Africa seeking economic opportunities. However, they often lack awareness of the severe risks of human trafficking, forced labour exploitation, physical/sexual abuse, and other modern slavery practices along these unregulated pathways.

Research Findings Highlighting the Influence of this Norm

The social norms diagnostic study revealed alarming data points demonstrating how fatalistic mindsets and the normalisation of unsafe migration perpetuate this harmful practice:

- 96.75% of respondents identified unsafe, irregular migration as a key factor enabling exploitation of migrants.
- 99% attributed modern slavery risks to a lack of awareness of rights and legal protections among migrants.
- Knowledge gaps persist, with 72.3% believing that seeking opportunities abroad can inevitably lead to exploitation situations.
- In Hadiya zone, 82.6% perceived societal acceptance of unsafe migration as highly influential in driving modern slavery.

Implications and Linkages to Modern Slavery

This resounding normalisation of desperation-induced unsafe migration directly fuels the trafficking supply chain. Uninformed youth become vulnerable to deceptive recruitment by smugglers into harrowing situations of forced labour, debt bondage, physical/sexual abuse, and other exploitative contemporary slavery manifestations that proliferate in unregulated migration corridors lacking legal protections.

Priority Norm 2: Tolerant Attitudes Towards Hazardous Child Labour

The exploitation of children through hazardous labour remains a harsh reality across the target areas. Children are employed in sectors like agriculture, mining, construction, and domestic work that expose them to physical dangers, psychological trauma and developmental disruptions from missed education. However, harmful social norms perpetuate tolerance and even justify these practices.

Research Data on Prevalence and Perceptions

Quantitative data from the study reveal high rates and problematic attitudes condoning child labour:

- 58% of households in Hadiya zone reported employing children under 15 in labour.
- 72% expressed beliefs that child labour income is an economic necessity that families cannot survive without.
- 29.8% found it acceptable to underpay child workers very low wages due to poverty.
- Qualitative interviews highlighted a lack of awareness of the mental/physical harms caused by child labour.

Implications for Child Exploitation and Trafficking

When normalised and enabled by such tolerant social norms, child labour directly opens pathways to other, more severe forms of exploitation. Children engaged in hazardous work become vulnerable to labour trafficking, sexual exploitation, violence, and debt bondage within informal and unregulated work sites lacking monitoring or accountability.

Priority Norm 3: Regressive Gender Attitudes and Harmful Practices like Forced/Early Marriage

Deeply entrenched gender discriminatory attitudes and patriarchal values pervade the social fabric in the target regions. Notions of male supremacy and female subordination manifest in harmful practices that undermine the rights, development, and protection of girls and women.

Research Insights on Biases and Practices

The social norms diagnostic study provides alarming insights into regressive gender norms:

- 69.1% in Wolaita believe girls should obey elders' marriage choices over their own will.
- 54% perceive early marriage as a protective practice for girls, despite developmental harms.
- Over 40% feel community pressure expects child marriage regardless of parents' views.
- Only 35% believe girls should be allowed to refuse an arranged marital union.
- 62% think continuing girls' education is not as important as educating boys.

Implications for Girls' Vulnerability and Restricted Opportunities

Such widespread discriminatory attitudes create environments enabling child/forced marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. Lack of educational opportunities and economic disempowerment leave girls trapped in cycles of poverty, with increased susceptibility to sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, trafficking, and other manifestations of modern slavery.

Priority Norm 4: Restrictive Expectations of Youth Obedience and Deference to Elders

In the target communities, rigid social hierarchies and unquestioning deference to authority figures like elders and traditional leaders are an entrenched traditional norm. Youth, especially girls, are expected to demonstrate unwavering obedience and compliance to the dictates of their elders, with limited opportunities to voice dissent or participate in decisions affecting their lives.

Research Findings on Obedience Norms

The social norms diagnostic study surfaced concerning data points around this subjugation of youth autonomy:

- 69.1% in Wolaita believe children should obey elderly people without question.
- 82.6% reported that those deviating from community norms face harsh consequences.
- 74% feel youth should be restricted from critiquing harmful practices like child marriage.
- Qualitative accounts from youth highlighted their constrained ability to refuse directives from elders.

Implications for Enabling Exploitation and Detering Reporting

When youth lack the agency and platforms to openly express dissenting perspectives, harmful practices can persist unchallenged. This obedience norm creates environments where coercive situations, including forced labour or child marriage, are difficult to identify and refuse. It also inhibits reporting of abuse and access to protection services, as youth remain trapped in cycles of subjugation.





Priority Norm 5: Deterrence of Dissent and Reporting on Exploitation Cases Due to Fear of Retaliation and Stigma

While modern slavery manifests insidiously across the target areas, a pervasive “culture of silence” persists that deters both victims and bystanders from voicing concerns, reporting cases, or advocating for reform. Social sanctions, stigmatisation, and distrust in duty bearers sustain an environment of complicity.

Research Data on Deterrence Factors

The social norms diagnostic study quantified these deterrence barriers:

- 54.8% feel they have limited flexibility to safely dissent from harmful community norms.
- 15.5% cited fear of direct retaliation as a major barrier to reporting exploitation cases.
- 28.3% noted concerns about social stigma and reproach for reporting abuse.
- 8.8% expressed general distrust in the authorities’ ability or willingness to respond.

Implications for Impunity and Lack of Access to Justice

When communities are discouraged from collectively recognising and rejecting exploitation, a culture of impunity emerges, allowing human rights violations to persist unabated. Victims lack access to legal redress, protective services, or reintegration pathways when surrounded by silence.

Interlinkages between the Priority Norms

These five priority norms do not operate in isolation but intersect and compound to create environments highly conducive to modern slavery. Regressive gender attitudes that subordinate women’s autonomy combine with norms of unquestioning youth obedience, stripping young girls of agency to resist forced marriage. Economic desperation driving acceptance of child labour intersects with fatalistic views of migration, pushing families toward hazardous work abroad through trafficking networks. Stigma-driven silence around reporting further reinforces these exploitative patterns, creating a cyclical entrenchment of abuse. This intersectional dynamic – where limited education disempowers victims economically, childhood trauma increases vulnerability to re-trafficking, and generational acceptance normalises dehumanisation – demands integrated, multi-level intervention. Effectively tackling these norms requires holistically addressing individual attitudes, community complicity, and structural deficiencies to uproot the environments that enable modern slavery’s perpetuation.

B. Positive Counter-Narratives and Assets from Communities

The research also revealed positive counter-narratives from indigenous traditions and faith principles that could be uplifted to reject exploitation. This evidence was collected through consultations with over 200 participants, including rural parents, youth, elders, faith leaders, and government stakeholders, and methodologies like values mapping, research validation, etc.

Cultural and Religious Reframing, Promoting Human Rights

While many traditional practices have become distorted into norms that harm human rights, the core value systems of local cultures and faiths emphasise justice, human dignity, and protection for the vulnerable, when reexamined. Community dialogues highlighted longstanding positive principles that can be uplifted as counter-narratives, including:

- Equating all humans as inviolable before God/the divine
- Ethical responsibility to collectively safeguard children's well-being
- Spiritual elevation of women's sacred status deserving of honour
- Indigenous ideals of truth-telling, integrity, and moral courage

While certain regressive traditions and discriminatory scriptural interpretations have historically propagated harmful social norms enabling modern slavery, the research recognizes that the foundational value systems of local cultures and faiths, when constructively re-examined, emphasise justice, equality, human dignity, and upliftment of the marginalised.



Existing Community-Based Assets for Behavioural Change

Rather than bypassing these powerful narratives and their influences, the approach respectfully navigates and harnesses their transformative potential through different strategy/mechanisms:

1. **Community Dialogues:** Facilitated discussions critically examine distorted practices that have become entrenched as 'tradition', while elevating indigenous principles of collective responsibility, moral courage, and child protection that can serve as positive counter-narratives against exploitation. Continuous community consultations will re-integrate these authentic narratives and influential messengers within communities for catalytic impact in rejecting the normalisation of abuse as an affront to humanity's highest ideals.
2. **Community Ambassador Engagement:** Trusted traditional leaders, celebrated community elders, including survivors, and revered indigenous artform practitioners can be trained as credible voices reclaiming and modelling cultural ideals of gender equity, truth-telling, and mutual human regard that directly contrast modern slavery's dehumanisation. The engagement can apply innovative approaches, such as poetic storytelling, music, and folk theatre, to ensure cultural resonance and local ownership in addition to positive deviance.
3. **Faith Leader Mobilisation:** Progressive religious scholars will rehabilitate affirmative spiritual teachings emphasising every human's sacred value before the divine, offering resonant reframing that challenges gender discrimination, child exploitation, and bystander complicity.

Through this integrated, multi-level engagement strategy, initiatives can holistically address individual attitudes, community complicity, and structural deficiencies to uproot the environments perpetuating modern slavery.

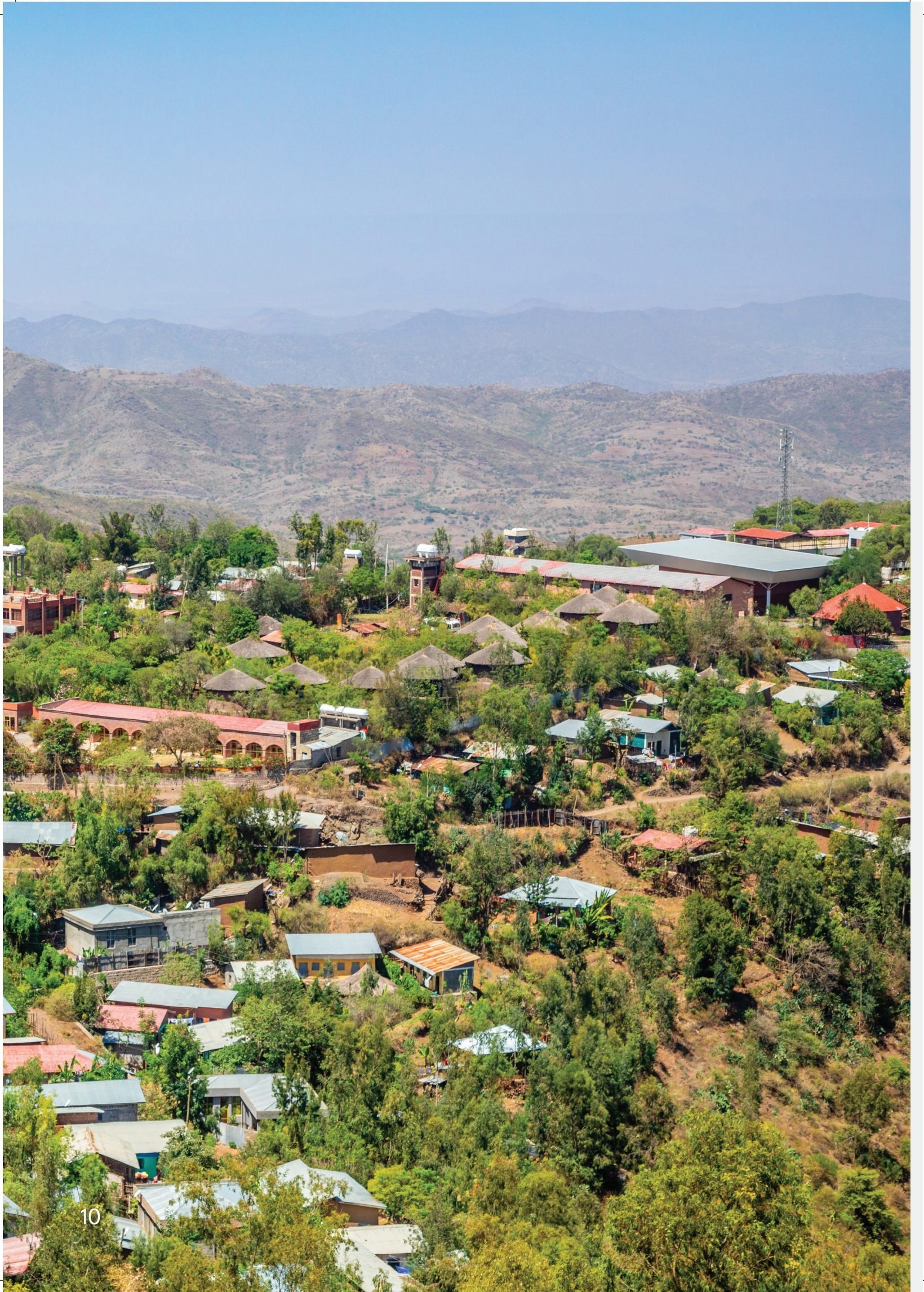
C. Conclusion

This study reveals that modern slavery risks in Wolaita and Hadiya zones are driven by a complex interplay of poverty, harmful social norms, and structural gaps. While knowledge of exploitation exists, problematic acceptance persists among specific groups, reinforced by pressures to conform and fear of social sanctions that silence dissent. Child labour, forced marriage, and human trafficking emerge as priority high-risk issues disproportionately affecting girls, women, adolescents, and marginalised populations. Crucially, these drivers do not operate in isolation; intersectional and regressive gender norms combine with youth obedience expectations to strip girls of agency, while economic desperation intersects with migration fatalism to fuel trafficking. Despite these challenges, strategic opportunities exist: widespread rejection of exploitation principles among many community members, the untapped potential of trusted influencers, growing desire for education among girls, and positive shifts in gender norms among younger generations all provide footholds for transformative change.

D. Recommendation

A comprehensive, multi-level Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) should be co-created with communities, integrating behavioural change theories such as Social Cognitive Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Diffusion of Innovations, and Community-Based Participatory Research to address identified drivers. This initiative must combine targeted awareness campaigns leveraging interpersonal networks and trusted influencers; community dialogue platforms creating safe spaces to challenge harmful norms; confidential reporting mechanisms linked to trauma-informed response systems; and localised victim support services encompassing counselling, healthcare, and socioeconomic reintegration. Poverty alleviation interventions, including vocational training and decent work opportunities, must underpin these efforts, given poverty's central role in driving exploitation. Continuous monitoring with community participation, coupled with institutionalising feedback structures, will enable data-driven refinement. Crucially, all interventions must be culturally attuned, adapting to hyperlocal contexts while empowering Positive Deviance Ambassadors (faith leaders, artists, survivors, and youth) to spearhead ongoing norm-busting campaigns that uproot environments perpetuating modern slavery.





Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Child Trafficking in Ethiopia: Lived Experiences, Familial Vulnerabilities, and Adequacy of Protection Frameworks

By Hope for Justice (February 2026)

Introduction

Child trafficking is a serious violation of children's rights and a global crime that affects children's lives, their families, and entire communities (UNICEF, 2025). The purpose of exploitation is enough to be considered child trafficking. In international law, a child cannot consent to their own exploitation (UNICEF, 2025). According to IOM & Walk Free (2021) research, on any given day in 2021, nearly 50 million people were in modern slavery, with 27.6 million people in forced labour (including commercial sexual exploitation and domestic servitude) and 22 million people in forced marriage.

Worldwide, 12 million children are estimated to be living in conditions of modern slavery.

In Ethiopia, an estimated 6.3 in every 1,000 people were in modern slavery at any point in 2021. In terms of the prevalence of modern slavery, Ethiopia ranks 71st globally and 13th within Africa. Domestic trafficking is often under-reported and normalised within communities, frequently involving family members as perpetrators. This complicity of families or communities complicates reintegration efforts (UNICEF, 2025).

Link to SBC Research

This study serves as a follow-up to the initial diagnostic on social norms and behavioral change drivers of modern slavery.

Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) research conducted in Wolaita and Hadiya zones by HTB Development Consultancy as part of the Tesfa Project, which is summarised in the first half of this booklet, highlights key social norm gaps. These were crucial for designing focused SBC interventions that inform and also actively change the underlying norms and beliefs that contribute to child trafficking risks at the community level. The research provides essential evidence to connect community-based prevention efforts with stronger protection frameworks and systemic responses for vulnerable children. This research goes beyond measuring awareness: it explores the complex interactions of individual and family-level factors that support harmful practices.

The Hope for Justice research team was inspired to conduct further research on detailed, individual, and family-level contributing factors, survivor profiles, trafficking patterns, traumatic events that trafficked children experienced, and their link with mental health problems. A particular focus was on exploring how parents and caregivers make decisions, especially when (despite knowing the dangers) they still engage in practices like debt-bonded child labour. This individual-level analysis is essential for developing nuanced prevention and protection strategies that address immediate familial pressures and poverty-related factors, which systemic solutions alone cannot resolve. Therefore, this study was conducted to comprehensively examine the dynamics of child trafficking in Ethiopia by analysing victim profiles, trafficking patterns, family-related factors, and rehabilitation processes to inform evidence-based programmatic interventions.

Methodology

This study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, with fieldwork conducted in Addis Ababa, Ziway, Hawassa, Hosana, and Wolaita Sodo. It involved recruiting 118 child trafficking survivors (aged 7 to 17 years old) from temporary transitional shelters in Addis Ababa; specifically, from Canaan and Deborah Lighthouses (transitional aftercare centres operated by Hope for Justice). Standardised instruments: the Parenting Styles Scale (PSS), Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), and Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) were used to assess survivors' mental health,

enabling a comprehensive integration of statistical and narrative findings. Additionally, qualitative data were collected through four FGDs, 45 semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, then transcribed and thoroughly analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis six-step framework. The research strictly followed ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, and trauma-informed approaches, all aligned with institutional safeguarding policies to ensure participant safety and data integrity.



Key Findings

Survivor Profile

- **Gender and Age:** 118 trafficked children, with a slight male majority (55.9%) and an average age of 12, ranging from 8 to 16 years. Their average age when first trafficked was 8–9 years old.
- **Household Education:** Most children's parents lack formal education, including more than half of fathers (55.9%) and most mothers (69.5%).
- **Family Structure:** More than half of the children (56.8%) originate from non-intact families, having experienced parental separation, divorce, or widowhood.
- **Economic and Educational Deprivation:** All fathers work in subsistence farming, and nearly all mothers (97.5%) are housemothers, reflecting a lack of formal employment. Over half of families (57.6%) rely on loans to meet basic needs.
- **Children's Low Educational Attainment:** Most children (57.6%) have only completed grades 1–2, while 8.5% have received no formal education at all.
- **Disrupted Living Arrangements:** Before trafficking, fewer than half of the children (46.6%) lived with both biological parents; many resided with extended family (22.9%), single parents, or stepparents.
- **Caregiving Structure Breakdown:** This displacement from nuclear families underscores the erosion of traditional caregiving structures, heightening children's vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation.

Patterns of Child Trafficking

Children are trafficked from deep rural areas to major cities like Addis Ababa for exploitation by local traffickers by deception, using the vulnerabilities of children and families.

- **False Expectations:** Nearly all children (97.5%) left home with unrealistically high hopes for a better urban life.
- **Normalised Practice:** Over half (55.9%) had siblings who had previously been trafficked, and 73.7% live in communities where returned trafficked children are wrongly seen as role models.
- **Lured by Deception:** The vast majority were drawn by false promises, with genuine consent extremely low (16.1%).
- **Family Involvement:** In nearly one-third of cases (31.4%), children were trafficked by their own family members.
- **Unmet Promises:** All children (100%) failed to achieve their expected better life after being trafficked.
- **Repeat Trafficking:** Over a third (36.4%) were trafficked more than once within a single year.



Form of exploitation among trafficked children before the age of eighteen

Among the 118 survivors, the past six months reveal a harrowing landscape of exploitation, starkly divided by gender. Child trafficking is a hidden crime, with the full scope of abuse, especially against girls, remaining invisible behind closed doors. Of the 118 survivors in this study:

- Domestic Servitude: Exclusively affects all 52 of the girls (100% of the females, 44.1% of the total children), confining them to invisible household labour before the age of 18.
- Hard Labour: Affects the boys exclusively, 27 of them (40.9% of the males); involving strenuous physical work like carrying heavy loads.
- Forced Begging: Only affects the boys, 12 of them (18.2% of the males), forced to beg on the streets.
- Human Weighing Scales: Only affects the boys, 12 of them (18.2% of the males), used as makeshift scales in public spaces.
- Traditional Weaving: Only affects the boys, 6 of them (9.1% of the males), engaged in exploitative artisanal labour.
- Street Vending: Only affects boys, 3 of them (4.5% of the males), forced to sell goods in public.
- Shoe Shining: Only affects boys, 3 of them (4.5% of males), working as shoe shiners on the streets.
- Scavenging: Only affects boys, 3 of them (4.5% of males), collecting plastics from garbage dumps.

Prevalence of child labour among trafficked children

The prevalence of child labour among these trafficked children is alarmingly high.

- Nearly two-thirds (64.5%) of survivors were directly engaged in exploitative labour before reaching the age of 18, meaning they were robbed of their childhood through premature entry into the workforce.
- More than a quarter (27.9%) of children were at risk of full-scale exploitation, having been on the brink of becoming child labourers, caught in a precarious gray zone between vulnerability and active servitude.
- A small but deeply alarming proportion (5.1%) endured the worst forms of labour, enslaved in the toxic, hazardous conditions of Addis Ababa's Koshe garbage dump scavenging for plastics, while another 2.5% were subjected to gruelling

traditional weaving, working 14 to 16 hours daily, seven days a week. These conditions exposed them to toxic environments, extreme physical exhaustion, and complete social isolation.



Types of traumatic events experienced by trafficked children

The traumatic events listed below that were endured by these trafficked children represent a catastrophic accumulation of adversities that thoroughly dismantle every dimension of healthy childhood development. The following were reported types of stressful life events experienced by survivors (N=118).

- Malnutrition (89%): Starvation robs children of physical growth and cognitive potential, weakening their bodies.
- Neglect (73.7%): The absence of care and protection teaches children they are worthless and unworthy of attention.
- Emotional & Verbal Abuse (70.3%): Constant humiliation and threats shatter self-esteem, conditioning children to accept degradation. One of the interviewees said: "My employer saw me as nothing more than a tireless animal, something that eats and works, and asks for nothing else."
- Witness to Domestic Violence (69.5%): Forced to observe brutality at home, children learn that violence is normal and home is unsafe.
- Physical Abuse (44%): Beatings and corporal punishment instill terror and normalise violence as a form of control.
- Multiple Parental Separations (44.1%): Repeated abandonment fractures the capacity to trust, creating lifelong attachment wounds.
- Financial Abuse (41.5%): Being treated as a commodity teaches children that their value lies only in what they produce for others.
- Loss of Significant People (28%): Grief from death or disappearance leaves children emotionally abandoned and deeply insecure.
- Sexual Abuse (15.3%): This profound violation destroys bodily integrity and the ability to form healthy intimate relationships.

Prevalence of PTSD, Depression, Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Resilience, and Self-Esteem by Sex of Trafficked Children

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The prevalence of complex PTSD among the trafficked children (30.5%) reveals a profound and gendered trauma burden. Intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hypervigilance were reported. One interviewee said: "My childhood was not simply lost; it was snatched away."

- An overwhelming 59.6% of female survivors suffer from 'very severe' PTSD, the highest possible classification. This reflects how domestic servitude exposed them to repeated sexual violence, complete isolation, and invisible trauma that shattered their core sense of safety and identity.
- At the 'severe' level, PTSD affects 10.6% of the boys in the study and 11.5% of the girls.
- While all trafficked children endure profound trauma, the unique horrors faced by girls drive them to the most extreme psychological devastation.



Depression

The pattern of depression further underscores the devastating emotional toll of trafficking (41.5%), with girls again bearing a disproportionately heavy burden.

- A staggering 71.2% of girls suffer from severe depression, the highest possible classification—compared to only 18.2% of boys, reflecting how the compounded trauma of domestic servitude, sexual abuse, and complete isolation annihilates their hope and will to live. The interviewee said, "Hopelessness and helplessness are all I feel when I look toward my future."

- Nearly half of all boys (45.5%) experience moderate depression, while none fall into the minimal category, revealing that although their suffering is significant, public-facing labour may provide slight buffering against complete psychological collapse.
- At the most severe level of depression, girls outnumber boys by nearly four to one, demonstrating how the hidden, relentless nature of their exploitation drives them to depths of despair that fundamentally destroy their capacity for joy, meaning, and future orientation. One interviewed girl responded that "I don't know what my childhood was supposed to be. I never acted like my peers because I wasn't living their life. I was working. Domestic servitude stole the connection to my own youth."

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

The constant state of threat and unpredictability inherent in trafficking environments is starkly illustrated by the GAD scores (45.8%).

- An overwhelming 80.8% of girls suffer from 'severe' anxiety, the highest classification, trapping them in a relentless state of hypervigilance and terror. One cause of this is the way in which domestic servitude offers no escape from their abusers and no moment of safety.
- Over a quarter of the boys (27.3%) experience 'moderate' anxiety, while half (50%) endure 'mild' anxiety, suggesting their public-facing exploitation, though brutal, allows intermittent relief from the constant dread that defines girls' hidden servitude.
- Girls experiencing 'severe' anxiety outnumber boys by more than four to one (80.8% vs. 18.2%), revealing how the invisible, inescapable nature of their abuse, locked behind closed doors with perpetrators, creates a profound and persistent state of psychological terror unknown to most boys.

Self-Esteem and Resilience

The erosion of self-worth and negative attitude towards themselves resulted as a direct consequence of the dehumanizing treatment they endured (33.1%). Besides, despite the extreme adversity they have faced, the capacity for resilience among these children is alarmingly low, particularly for girls (61%).

Analysis of Parenting Styles among Trafficked Children (N=118)

- The analysis of parenting styles among trafficked children in the Ethiopian context reveals that 'neglectful' parenting is the most prevalent approach overall, practiced by 45.8% of fathers and 42.4% of mothers. This is followed by 'authoritarian' parenting, reported by 29.7% of fathers and 33.9% of mothers, while 'authoritative' and 'indulgent' styles are markedly less common. Positive engagement through 'authoritative' remains exceptionally low for both sexes.
- The patterns of child-parent/caregiver relationships among trafficked children reveal a profound breakdown in the foundational bonds that should provide safety, guidance, and emotional security. The most striking findings centre on emotional disconnection and the absence of nurturing involvement: children report exceptionally low levels of parental expression of emotions ($M = 1.79$), minimal parental involvement in their activities ($M = 1.97$), and negligible child participation in family decision-making ($M = 1.97$), creating a household environment where children feel invisible and unheard. Families rely heavily on punitive strategies for disciplining children ($M = 2.83$), use threats and reprimands ($M = 2.70$), and employ uninvolved parenting control ($M = 2.70$); approaches that communicate rejection and hostility rather than care and guidance.
- When examining the impact of parenting styles, distinct patterns emerged for each sex. For girls, the highest mean PTSD score (57.69) and one of the highest depression scores (20.77) were associated with an 'authoritarian' parenting style, while the lowest resilience (14.65) was linked to a 'neglectful' style. In contrast, for boys, the most adverse outcomes were primarily linked to 'authoritarian' parenting, which was associated with the lowest self-esteem (14.82) and relatively lower resilience. However, a surprising finding for boys was that the 'neglectful' style, while detrimental, was paradoxically associated with the highest reported resilience (21.14) and self-esteem (24.07).
- The multiple regression analysis revealed that the combination of nine factors – including the survivor's age, parental marital status, types of abuse and work, work duration, circumstances of trafficking, resilience, and self-esteem – powerfully predicts PTSD among trafficked children. The model was highly significant and explained a substantial 77.5% of the variance in PTSD scores ($R^2 = .775$).
- The strongest unique contributor for severe developing PTSD was the type of work the child was forced into ($\beta = -.315$), followed by the child's level of resilience ($\beta = -.276$), the type of abuse endured ($\beta = -.242$, $p < .001$), lower self-esteem ($\beta = -.169$, $p = .001$), and a longer work duration since separation from family ($\beta = .175$, $p = .024$) also independently predicted higher PTSD scores.

Holistic Restorative Service among Trafficked Children

The baseline and exit assessments of self-esteem and resilience among trafficked children reveal remarkable therapeutic progress following the holistic restorative intervention at Hope for Justice Lighthouse centres.

At baseline, before any intervention, most children exhibited compromised psychological resources: only 27.1% possessed high self-esteem, and 21.2% demonstrated normal resilience.

By the time of the exit assessment, when children were deemed ready for family reintegration, the transformation was striking. High self-esteem nearly doubled to 43.2%, while normal self-esteem expanded from 39.8% to 54.3%. Similarly, resilience showed profound gains, with 'high' resilience increasing to 68.6% and 'low' resilience plummeting from 61.0% to just 4.3%.

This dramatic shift indicates that the restorative service, encompassing psychological counselling, education, life skills training, and safe shelter, successfully rebuilt the internal foundations that exploitation had shattered.

Gaps in the implementation of the Legal Framework for Child trafficking

Ethiopia has ratified international child rights instruments and made corresponding domestic legal reforms, including constitutional protections under Article 36 and provisions within the family code, criminal code, and labour proclamation.

This study reveals a profound and persistent gap between these legal frameworks and the lived realities of children. The mere existence of laws has proven insufficient to protect children from widespread violations, including domestic violence, early entry into labour, and engagement in hazardous work that is prohibited by both international standards and national legislation. Vulnerable children continue to be forced into formal and informal sector work, deprived of necessary care and protection, with their fundamental rights to education, health, safety, and wellbeing systematically denied.

The most critical failure in protecting exploited and trafficked children lies in the profound law enforcement gap. The robust legal frameworks that exist on paper are systematically undermined by insufficient commitment, cooperation, and capacity among implementing organs. Despite the existing prohibitions, the absence of a comprehensive national child code, weak anti-trafficking legislation, and poor enforcement of labour protections create an environment where perpetrators operate with near-total impunity. This enforcement deficit is compounded by the lack of specialised anti-trafficking units, inadequate legal aid, and minimal prosecution of complicit insiders. This undermines any meaningful deterrence and leaves the most vulnerable children without access to justice or remedies. The chasm between legislative intent and daily reality means that even when families and communities recognise trafficking harms, they encounter a law enforcement apparatus that is ill-equipped to respond, with reporting mechanisms that remain inaccessible or ineffective.



Recommendations

Effective intervention for trafficked children requires a multi-faceted approach that tackles both root causes and immediate protection needs. Economic empowerment programs, especially for women, should be expanded, alongside family planning, parental education, and lifestyle initiatives. This would reduce the level of household vulnerability, which drives child trafficking.

Community-based child labour monitoring and reporting systems need to be established at the kebele level, while existing awareness efforts by schools, woreda offices, and law enforcement agencies should be strengthened.

Law enforcement officers must receive specialised training to enable them to take meaningful legal actions, not just conduct awareness activities.

Educational programmes are equally vital: schools must become engaging, healthy, and meet minimum standards to attract and retain vulnerable children, with flexible learning options designed specifically for trafficked and at-risk children whose lack of education sustains their exploitation.

Critically, trafficked children must be explicitly identified as a distinct and vulnerable group in all research agendas and legal frameworks. Their isolation, invisibility, and unique abuse experiences require separate attention, rather than being combined with other forms of labour. Trauma-informed counselling programmes need to address the severe mental health effects documented among survivors, especially extreme PTSD, depression, anxiety, and low resilience in girls trapped in domestic servitude, who face compounded trauma from sexual abuse and isolation.

Ultimately, legislative reform alone cannot ensure protection; meaningful implementation demands coordinated efforts that address poverty, community engagement, institutional accountability, and comprehensive legal frameworks to bridge the gap between Ethiopia's international obligations and the daily suffering of its most vulnerable children.





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