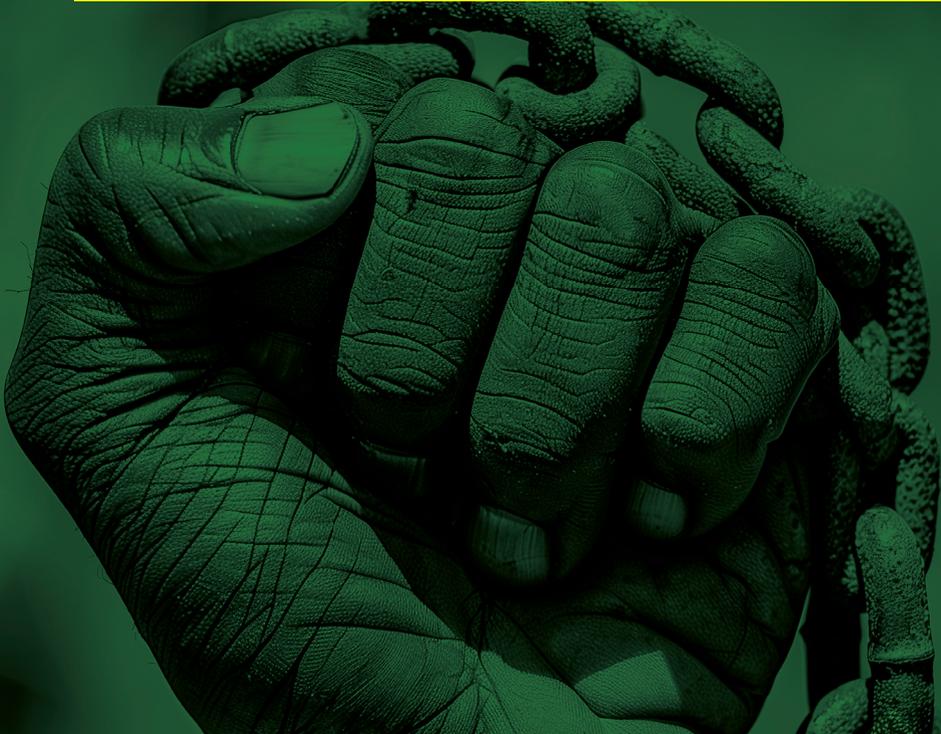




JOHN PAUL II JUSTICE AND PEACE CENTRE

HUMAN TRAFFICKING: A THREAT TO THE SOCIETY

An Assessment on Trafficking in Persons in Uganda



MAY 2025



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Acronyms

| | |
|---------------|---|
| USD | United States Dollars |
| UN | United Nations |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UNDS | United Nations Development Systems |
| TIP | Trafficking in Person |
| NGOS | Non-Governmental Organizations |
| JPIIJC | John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre |
| ODPP | Office of the Director of Public Prosecution |
| KCCA | Kampala Capital City Authority |
| LFPR | Lobour Force Participatory Rate |
| ALFS | Aid to Localities Financial Systems |
| HOCODI | Holistic Community Development Initiative |
| FIDA | The International Federation of Women Lawyers |
| PTSD | Post Traumatic Stress Disorder |
| CID | Criminal Investigation Department |
| CPS | Central Police Station |
| PDM | Parish Development Model |

Abstract

This study explores the growing crisis of trafficking in persons (TIP) in Uganda, a country increasingly caught up in the intersection of being a source, transit, and destination for human trafficking. With global estimates suggesting over 49 million victims of modern slavery, Uganda is witnessing a rise in both internal and transnational trafficking, affecting vulnerable populations, especially women, youth, and children. The study revealed that the Karamoja region is affected by internal trafficking while transnational trafficking affects all the regions with the intensity more in the central, and western regions. The women are more prone to sexual exploitation and domestic servitude (cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children). Children are disproportionately affected because of not being in school, hunger, parental neglect, and the connivance of the parents with the traffickers. The youth are vulnerable due to unemployment, curiosity, and peer influence. The research, commissioned by the John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre and Julius Nyerere Leadership Centre Makerere University, investigates the scope, trends, status of the survivors, and impact of trafficking in Uganda. Data was collected through qualitative and quantitative interviews involving survivors, government officials, NGO workers, and community leaders across Karamoja, Central, and Western regions. The findings reveal significant increase in trafficking incidents, with poverty, unemployment, peer influence, Hunger, insecurity, forced marriage and lack of knowledge, experience or sheer curiosity as the primary drivers of the vice. Survivors reported severe exploitation, including forced labor and sexual abuse, that has impacted them negatively with serious social, economic, psychological and health consequences. The vice of human trafficking is facilitated among other actors by both unregulated and registered labor recruitment companies, as well as private unscrupulous traffickers. The study highlights the psychological, social, and economic toll on victims and communities

while noting some progress in legal prosecution and government, civil society, and NGO interventions. Nonetheless, Uganda is making progress in combatting the vice. The report concludes with policy recommendations for prevention, survivor support, improved regulatory frameworks, and stronger multi-stakeholder collaboration to combat trafficking effectively.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Trafficking in Persons (TIP) is a global and widespread crime that exploits people, men, women, and children, for profit. The organized networks or individuals behind these crimes prey on vulnerable individuals, taking advantage of their desperation, lack of social safety nets, political instability, natural disasters, lack of opportunities, or desire for a better life. It is difficult to estimate the number of people trafficked; however, globally it is estimated that about 49.6 million people are trapped in modern slavery, and 12 million of them are children. **Child trafficking** is one of the **worst forms of violence against children**, affecting an alarming number of children worldwide. Trafficking in children generates an alarming 39 billion USD in revenue annually at the expense of millions of innocents. Again, 54% of those trapped in modern slavery are women and girls. It is estimated that commercial sexual exploitation generates \$173 billion annually. Human trafficking is a stain on the conscience of our society. It fuels crime, corruption, and violence; distorts economies and harms workers; and violates the fundamental right of all people to be free. There has been a 25% increase in 2024 in the number of trafficked victims detected compared to the pre-pandemic figures, with forced labor, sexual exploitation, and forced criminality being the most common forms of exploitation.

Under the *Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009)*, trafficking in persons occurs when a person “recruits, transports, transfers, harbors, or receives another person through means of fraud or deception for exploitation.” Forced labor is explicitly included within

this definition. The scope of human trafficking continues to evolve, now encompassing organ trafficking alongside traditional forms of labor and sexual exploitation. Exploitation includes but is not limited to, forced labor, sexual exploitation, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude, and organ removal. This crime transcends borders, affecting millions worldwide, regardless of age, gender, or nationality.

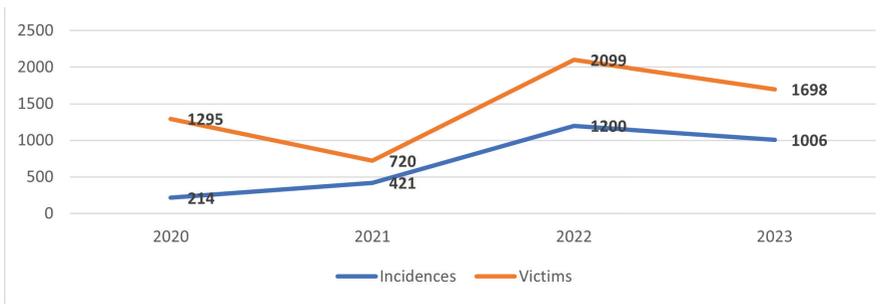
Trafficking in persons occurs in any community, and the traffickers use various methods to lure victims, including violence, manipulation, false promises of employment, and even romantic relationships. The clandestine nature of human trafficking makes it difficult to obtain precise data on the number of victims. The UN refers to it as “the hidden figure of crime.” Many trafficked individuals live in fear, with their rights systematically violated and their health endangered. Recognizing the gravity of this crime, John Paul II Justice and Peace Centre, in partnership with Julius Nyerere Leadership Centre Makerere University, commissioned a study to understand the scope of the vice of TIP in Uganda.

1.2 BACKGROUND

Uganda, like many nations across the globe, is grappling with the growing scourge of human trafficking, which has deeply permeated all regions of the country. Observations, reports from various agencies, survivor testimonies, and media coverage all paint a grim picture of an escalating crisis. Disturbing accounts continue to emerge from different parts of the country, revealing the harrowing reality of individuals being trafficked. Uganda is a source, transit, and destination for trafficking victims. According to this study, the trend of trafficking in persons in Uganda is on the increase. This is evident in the four year reports from the National report on countering trafficking in Uganda by the ministry of internal affairs. In 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 a total of 214, 421, 1200, and 1006 incidents of human trafficking

were respectively. In the same period, Government identified 1,295, 720, 2099 and 1698 victims respectively. According to the ministry in internal affairs there was an increase in human trafficking with a total of 3259 identified victims as of December 2024. Below is the graph showing the trend of Trafficking in persons in Uganda in the reporting period indicating incidences and victims as derived from United States Department of State reports.

Graph 1: Trend in Incidences and Victims



Source: US department of State reports 2021- 2024

The victims of trafficking in persons; Men, women, and children alike are subjected to inhumane exploitation, including forced labor, sexual slavery, and other forms of servitude. This crisis necessitates immediate and decisive action from the Ugandan government, private organizations, and individuals.

Our study has revealed that internally, trafficking is particularly prevalent in the districts of Napak and Moroto. Victims of transnational trafficking originate from all the regions, as well as from refugee populations in Uganda and neighboring countries. Children especially from Napak and Moroto are often exploited for labour and are forced into street begging in Kampala and other urban centers. Meanwhile, young men and women are more susceptible to transnational trafficking, lured by false promises of employment. Many are recruited for jobs as housemaids, security personnel, and supermarket

attendants, and a few are forced into commercial sex work. Tragically, a significant number of these individuals find themselves trapped in degrading conditions, particularly in prostitution, leading to profound psychological and emotional trauma.

While the Ugandan government has taken steps to combat human trafficking, substantial challenges remain. According to the 2024 US Department of State report, Uganda has yet to fully meet the standards required for the total eradication of trafficking. However, the government has demonstrated notable progress in improving its investigative, prosecutorial, and conviction rates compared to previous years. Nevertheless, Uganda remains classified as a Tier 2 country, an indication that while efforts are increasing, they remain insufficient.

This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the emerging trends in human trafficking, assess the current scope of the crisis, investigate its root causes, evaluate the conditions of survivors, assess the impact of trafficking in persons on the Ugandan Society, and propose policy options to strengthen efforts aimed at reducing and ultimately eliminating this pervasive crime.

1.3 MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The overall objective of this study is to explore the trend, status of survivors, and Impact of trafficking in persons on Ugandan society as well as propose policy recommendations to combat the vice.

Specific Objectives

1. To Understand the Current Status of Trafficking in Persons in Uganda
2. To Ascertain the Situation of the Victims of TIP Upon Their Return to Uganda.
3. To Assess the Impact of TIP on Ugandan Society.
4. To Provide Policy Options in Combating TIP in Uganda

1.4 THE SCOPE

The issue of human trafficking is widespread in Uganda. Many districts, if not all have been affected. However, the vice is widely reported in Karamoja and the central and western regions. To determine the extent of TIP in Uganda, JPIIJPC conducted a study in Karamoja, Central, and Western regions to establish the extent of trafficking in persons. In the central region, the study was carried out in Kampala, Wakiso, and Mityana. In Western Uganda, the study was conducted in Bundibugyo, Kasese, and Fort Portal. Lastly, in the Karamoja region, the study took place in Moroto and Napak. These areas were purposely chosen on account that they are the most prone to human trafficking. The Karamoja sub-region is prone to internal human trafficking, though it is also affected by external trafficking, especially to Kenya. The western and central regions are more prone to international trafficking.

In terms of the content, the study focused on the trend, the intensity, and the impact of trafficking in persons in Uganda. Concerning the trend, we looked at the sequence of trafficking in the country according to the selected regions. Specifically, it established whether the vice is being abated or is escalating. Regarding the intensity, the study focused on the prevalence of the vice within the selected regions. Finally, the effort was made to establish the impact of the vice concerning economic, social, psychological, and physical consequences.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

Both qualitative and quantitative interviews were used in the study to understand the status of TIP in Uganda, the condition of the survivors, the impact of TIP on Ugandan society, and to develop policy recommendations for the different stakeholders to minimize the vice. The quantitative method was used to determine the gravity of the vice, while the qualitative method helps us to determine the feelings and experiences of the survivors, which cannot be quantified. The categories of respondents included: The survivors (144), government officials (20), religious leaders (20), parents/ caretakers (50), and NGOs (10) involved in the fight against trafficking. The category of the respondents chosen was determined by our quest to understand the dynamics of the vice from those directly affected, indirectly affected, and those who are supposed to provide protection or prevent the vice. The interviews were often followed by further correspondence about specific questions. The total sample population for the study was 244, targeting 30 respondents per district plus 4 respondents from the line ministries in Kampala. Specifically, a representative sampling by Julie Young was used, namely, a subset of a population that seeks to accurately reflect the characteristics of the larger population.

Interviews were held with several survivors of human trafficking. This was essential in understanding their need for support, how they sought assistance, and the kind of support they received. Government officials and Representatives of NGOs were interviewed to establish: the support and help given to survivors, the improvements required on existing services to survivors, and the experience of survivors seeking assistance and support. Semi-structured questions focused on: the participants' victimization experience; the assistance they required, the support they received, the obstacles they encountered, and their suggestions about how existing services could be improved.

1.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Before data collection, the study team prepared an introductory letter to enable data collectors to create rapport with the authorities in the sample districts. The Local authorities were briefed about the study, and their support was sought. During the data collection before the interviews, the respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, and their consent to participate was sought. The respondents were assured of confidentiality in the use of the information they would give, given the sensitivity of the study. To that effect, pseudonyms were used in this study to protect the respondents. Once the participants agreed to be interviewed, a mutually agreeable time and day were identified. The participants' informed consent was confirmed at the beginning of the interview.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Given the sensitivity of the study's subject, some of the institutions sampled for interviews were not readily willing to participate. Human trafficking is a hidden crime committed by well-connected personalities who tend to threaten and intimidate those who stand in their way. This makes people afraid to give information lest they be victimized. Consequently, they shy away from discussing the subject. It was therefore no surprise that some organizations were reluctant to engage in the interviews. In addressing this challenge, the research team engaged the respondents on the study's objectives and how the information sought would help the survivors and eliminate the fear they held. Specifically, the assurance of confidentiality in terms of the use of the information they gave alleviated the fear for some of them, and they willingly gave information. Additionally, JPIIJPC had supported some of the survivors and had also worked with some key partners on the subject; this allayed the fear of these respondents, as they had already developed a certain level of trust.

1.8 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

The rationale of the study is to safeguard people from the abuse, neglect, exploitation, or even death associated with trafficking in persons. The outcome of this study is to create awareness of the enormity of human trafficking and ensure support to survivors. It is also meant to be used as a tool to advocate for action against this horror and provide practical policy options in terms of strengthening legislation for the various stakeholders in the fight. Finally, it gears towards building partnerships in the fight against trafficking in persons.

2.1 THE STATUS OF TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS IN UGANDA

Human trafficking remains a significant issue in Uganda, with the country serving as a source, transit, and destination for trafficked individuals. People are trafficked within Uganda, out of Uganda, and are often subjected to various forms of exploitation. These include forced labor, street begging, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse. Despite some efforts to combat trafficking, the vice seems to be rising, with both internal and external trafficking on the rise. At least 142 Ugandans are trafficked every month and 1,698 victims were registered in 2023. The victims, included juveniles, trafficked locally and transnationally. Of the 1,698 victims, 642 were adults while 1,056 were juveniles indicating Juveniles being most affected. A total of 1,006 cases were reported to police in 2023 and of these, 576 were submitted to the office of the Director of Public Prosecution (ODPP) for legal advice, 331 cases were taken to court, of which 11 cases secured convictions, one case was dismissed and 319 are pending in court.

Table 1: TIP Incidences in 2023

| Registered | | | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Total Victims | Monthly average | Juvenile | | Adults | |
| 1,698 | 142 | 1,058 | | 642 | |
| Prosecution | | | | | |
| Cases Reported to Police | Sent to DPP for advice | Taken to Court | Convictions | Dismissed | Pending |
| 1,006 | 557 | 311 | 11 | 1 | 319 |

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2023

2.1.1 Internal Trafficking

Internal trafficking in Uganda is particularly alarming. From the sampled districts, this study established that Napak contributes the largest share, accounting for 35% of internally trafficked persons. Similarly, an operation by KCCA in February 2024, rounded up 1044 people (Youth, children, and women), out of whom 938 were found to be from Napak upon screening. Many of the survivors were lured into trafficking through false promises of jobs in urban centers, specifically in Kampala, Mbale, Jinja, Soroti, Busia, Malaba, Kasese, and other towns. However, upon arrival in these towns, they face challenges, including language barriers, insults, and even physical abuse, leading to psychological distress. One survivor lamented: *“I could not speak the language, and people insulted and beat me. Even the police mistreated me.”*

Some of the internally trafficked survivors stated that they were lured by acquaintances who had previously moved to urban areas. *“They told us that life outside Karamoja is better, this made us believe that we can improve our economic situation by relocating”*, Karamoja street children in Kampala explained. Similarly, some of them said they were influenced by their peers who had left earlier and returned home and appeared to have made financial progress. Generally, it was established that the root causes of child/human trafficking in Karamoja stem from poverty, hunger, peer influence, Pressure from parents, early/forced marriages, diseases, and criminality, among others.

2.1.2 External Trafficking

The study revealed that external trafficking is a major concern, with Kasese leading at 38%, followed by Fort Portal at 19%. Again, women are disproportionately affected by trafficking, making up 96% of the survivors interviewed, compared to just 4% of men. The primary drivers of trafficking include poverty, financial instability, land acquisition, and curiosity. Many of the survivors alluded to false

promises of better opportunities as the catch to their vulnerability to exploitation. *“I was promised a well-paying job as domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. However, upon arrival, I realized that the promised opportunity was nonexistent and I was instead subjected to forced labor and other forms of exploitation”*, A survivor lamented.

Some survivors reported that the traffickers often transported them by road through neighboring countries or via registered labor recruitment companies. The common routes mentioned included: Uganda to Kenya, and then on to the Middle East; Uganda to Rwanda, then to the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia. Pharidah from Kampala indicated in her own words had this to say, *“I left Uganda using a bus through Kenya to Dubai”*. Harriet from Kabarole explained, *“I went using a truck that transported me to Rwanda, and then from there I went to Oman”*. The majority of the Survivors were recruited by legally registered companies. As of June 30th, 2020, already a total of 205 labor companies were licensed by the ministry of Gender Labor and Social Development. This is the most disheartening discovery of this study as 18 labor recruitment companies were mentioned by the survivors, raising concerns about the lack of regulation and oversight within the sector.

The survivors of external trafficking recounted that they were recruited by individuals they trusted, including friends, neighbors, family members, and peers: *“A friendly lady came to Mityana my hometown claiming to own a company in Kibuli in Kampala that sent women to Saudi Arabia for nanny jobs. I believed her, only to end up locked in a house with 17 other women.”* She recounted.

The Survivors described extreme forms of abuse in their respective destination countries. These included: physical abuse; beatings, burning, sleep deprivation, sexual abuse, forced servitude, and psychological torture. They were often deprived of basic needs like food, medical care, and basic women’s hygiene products. They

complained of being subjected to torturous tasks, such as cleaning crocodiles. Being overworked, denied wages, and being made to travel long distances to work were experiences that led to their further exploitation.

Generally, the study reveals that recruitment of the victims is a calculated process that involves deception, false promises, and exploitation of economic hardship. Traffickers use personal relationships, fake companies, and false job opportunities to lure victims into situations of forced labor or captivity.

2.2 THE DRIVING FACTORS OF TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS IN UGANDA

The key drivers of trafficking in persons established in this study include: unemployment, the search for better opportunities, family responsibilities such as caring for children, sick parents, harsh climatic conditions leading to water scarcity, peer pressure, escape from harmful cultural practices like early marriages, repayment of loans, and the allure of exploring life in distant lands. These factors, in varying degrees, contributed to the vulnerability of the survivors interviewed.

Table 2: Driving factors for trafficking in persons

| Driving factors | Total No. of Respondents | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Poverty | 244 | 195/244 | 80% |
| Unemployment | 244 | 183/244 | 75% |
| Curiosity (survivors) | 144 | 44/144 | 30% |
| Hunger (Karamoja) | 64 | 58/64 | 98% |
| Insecurity (Karamoja) | 64 | 37/64 | 58% |
| Peer Pressure (Karamoja) | 64 | 11/64 | 17% |
| Forced Marriage (Karamoja) | 64 | 3/64 | 5% |

Source: Respondents

2.2.1 Poverty

A significant number 195/244 (80%) of the total respondents identified poverty as the reason for vulnerability to trafficking. The factors contributing to this poverty especially in the rural settings are scarcity of natural resources, poor farming systems, lack of access to markets and poor infrastructure, and high population density. Despite progress made by the government in Uganda to reduce poverty, the absolute number of poor persons has been increasing over time, from 6.6 million in 2012/13 to 8.03 million in 2016/17 and then to 8.7 million in 2019/20. The most affected groups by this scenario include: widows, the jobless, single mothers, youth, the landless, and divorcees. A survivor shared her motivation: *“I went because I wanted to take care of my family’s medical bills.”* Another stated, *“I wanted to earn money to be independent.”* Yet another testified, *“I wanted to buy land and build a house for my children.”* These aspirations led them into exploitative situations. Traffickers exploited this vulnerability by offering them false promises of lucrative jobs and financial assistance, only to trap them in forced labor and abuse.

2.2.2 Unemployment

Uganda unemployment rate is alarming. It is estimated that the working-age population (aged 14-64 years) increased from 18.8m to 23.5m in 2016/17 and 2021 respectively. Indicating that, about 4.7m Ugandans joined the labour force in that period. Similarly, the number of employed people in Uganda subsequently increased from about 8.97million to 10m, indicating about 1.02m jobs were created in the period against the 3.1m who had joined the labour market. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) declined from 52.7% to 48.3%. Labour force participation rates gradually declined, irrespective of gender but worse among females (39.3%), a decline from 44.8% in 2016/17 and below the national LFPR of 48.8% and male LFPR of 57.9% in 2021. In addition, youth LFPR also declined in 2021 to 50.8%

from 61.9% in the ALFS 2018/19. The fact that female and youth LFPR were very low (57.9% for young males and 39.3% for young females), much worse for females below the national averages. This scenario, presents a gloomy picture for women and youth employment. No wonder then the women and youth have become vulnerable to traffickers.

Many of the survivors 183/244 (75%) recounted being deceived by traffickers offering well-paying jobs abroad. Muhumuza from Fort Portal recalled: *“I wanted a better-paying job because and he promised me a salary of 3.8m per month.”* Another survivor recounted: *“I left Uganda to look for a better-paying nanny job”*. A young woman from Mityana narrated: *“A businesswoman came to my village. She told my parents she was taking me to Kampala for a good-paying job abroad. My parents were excited and let me go with her. When we reached Kampala, I was locked in a room with many other girls until the police rescued us months later.”* Another survivor from Napak shared, *“I left home with a friend who said they were connecting me to work in Kampala.”* This shows the level desperation in their search for employment.

Others were drawn in by promises of work in foreign countries and being excited to travel outside the country for the first time appeared to them as a dream come true. One survivor confessed, *“I was desperate for a job and was promised a good life in Mexico. Upon arrival at my destinations, I realized I had been deceived, and to prevent my escape, my travel documents were confiscated”*. Ugandans, especially those in rural areas, face limited access to decent employment opportunities. Traffickers exploit these individuals by offering them false promises of well-paying jobs abroad, which leads to exploitation and abuse.

Therefore, the alarming unemployment rate in the country exacerbated by the poor education system that is not aligned with job market demands significantly contributes to a high level of

vulnerability.

2.2.3 Hunger

Despite the progress Uganda has made in social and economic growth and transformation, the country remains at risk to inclusive economic growth. Uganda is ranked 159 out of 193 countries in 2023 and its food insecurity level is classified as “serious”. Increasing frequency of droughts and floods continues to heighten the vulnerability of the peasants as they rely on rain-fed agriculture. The Government has made strides in addressing poverty and vulnerability through various social protection initiatives, but scope and coverage remain limited amid increasing needs. The findings especially from Karamoja indicated that severe constraint in accessing sufficient food is a major reason for vulnerability to traffickers. An overwhelming number 58/60 (98%) of respondents from Karamoja region reported not having enough food to eat as a major cause for their leaving of Karamoja. They attributed this situation to lack of money to buy food, poor climatic conditions resulting in poor crop yields and insecurity due to Cattle rustling with its resultant effect of loss of livestock. The loss of livestock has impacted the primary source of their livelihood and diminished their ability to generate income and access food.

2.2.4 Insecurity

Another major driver of trafficking in persons in Uganda is conflict-related, particularly for survivors from Karamoja. The region is plagued by cattle rustling, clan conflicts, and inter-tribal disputes. A total number of 37/64 (58%) of the survivors from Karamoja alluded to insecurity due to cattle rustling being one of the causes of trafficking in the region. *“I left my village because my brother murdered a neighbor, and my parents ran away. A friend connected me to a family in Kampala, but I ended up being exploited.”* Lokeris recounted. Similarly, a harrowing experience was shared by Loduk, *“I left Moroto for Lodwar after my parents were killed by raiders. I*

wanted to escape my sorrow, but I landed in an abusive situation.” Insecurity poses a great level of vulnerability among the youth and children which traffickers are exploiting in the Karamoja region.

2.2.5 Lack of Knowledge, Experience, or Sheer Curiosity

For some of the survivors, ignorance of the outside world and curiosity played a role in their trafficking. They had never traveled beyond their home villages and held idealized notions of life in big cities or foreign countries. A significant number of the survivors 44/144 (30%) asserted that it was an excitement for them to leave their villages and have an experience of other towns and cities. *“I left Uganda to explore the lifestyle of other countries, board a plane for the first time and experience how other people handle their affairs.”* Kansime regrettably admitted. *“I wanted to see Kampala for myself”,* a woman from Napak shared. The curiosity in them was so strong that even though they were warned of the dangers, they still felt that it was the best thing for them even at the cost of death.

2.2.6 Peer influence

This driving factor is again synonymous with Karamoja region. Those in urban centers invite their friends to join them. Similarly, those who have come back from the urban Centre looking better or having improved their condition with gifts for their families. These become attractive to their peers as well as other parents. Consequently, the Parents are willing to allow their children to go to urban centers instead of staying at home, oblivious of the danger involved. A total of 11/64 (17%) survivors reported that they were influenced by either their peers or parents into being trafficked. *“My mother asked told me to go to Kampala to make money for the family like other children in our village”* Nadim confessed. *“When I saw some of my friends coming back from Kampala with better clothes and shoes I also desired to join them”* Nakut explained. *My friends who were already in town asked me to join them and make money”* Nakorut said.

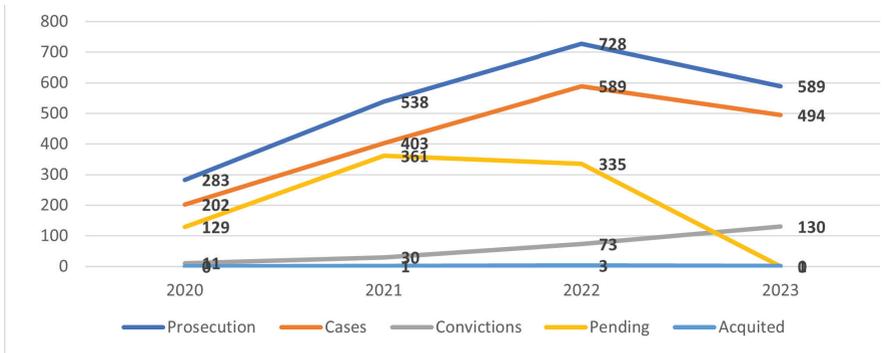
2.2.7 Forced Marriage

In some districts of the Karamoja sub-region, harmful cultural practices like forced marriage that violate the rights of children, especially girls, still exist. Among the Pokot in Amudat District, Karamoja sub-region, girls as young as 10 are considered ready for marriage. This practice, which robs girls of their childhood and violates their rights, is common. Some of the girls in avoiding such practices run away from their villages. Away from parental care and protection, they become vulnerable to traffickers as they need to survive. Three out of the 64 survivors interviewed in the study districts in Karamoja lamented their leaving home on grounds of being forced into marriage against their will. To compound it all, they were being married off to men much older than them by their parents. “I left home because my mother connived with my uncles to marry me off to man older than my father and on reaching Kampala I was even subjected to hard labor and sexually abused at the shelter we were living in”, Nakiru lamented.

2.3 EFFORTS IN COMBATTING THE VICE

The government and several organizations in Uganda are working to combat trafficking in persons (TIP) and support survivors. The following organizations were mentioned by respondents: Bakhita Anti-Human Trafficking Network Uganda, the Holistic Community Development Initiative (HOCODI), the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), and various government agencies. However, Uganda does not fully meet the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking but is making progress. Government efforts focus on increasing investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of traffickers.

Graph 2: Prosecution of TIP Cases 2020-2024



Source: US Department of State Reports 2021-2024

Despite progress, there are still several gaps and challenges in Uganda’s efforts to combat trafficking. One key issue is the complicity of registered labor companies, some of which have been involved in trafficking victims through legal channels, highlighting regulatory loopholes. Additionally, the government continues to rely heavily on civil society organizations (NGOs) to support victims, rather than providing adequate institutional support. Monitoring of trafficking routes, both land and air, is weak, allowing traffickers to exploit neighboring countries. Deception remains a key issue, with many victims still being misled into trafficking situations. Finally, legal enforcement is not strong enough, as more prosecutions and harsher penalties are needed to deter traffickers.

2.4 THE IMPACT OF TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS ON UGANDAN SOCIETY

The impact of Trafficking in Persons (TIP) on Ugandan society is profound and far-reaching, with various economic, social, psychological, and physical consequences. While it is difficult to fully quantify the scope due to the clandestine nature of trafficking and the hidden economies involved, there are several key impacts that stand out.

Economic Impact of Trafficking on Ugandan society include: Lost Human Resources and Productivity, loss of remittances, and strain on government resources. With respect to loss of human resources and productivity, some die abroad, others suffer permanent incapacitation due to torture and illness, or return home unable to contribute to the economy. The long-term loss of potential productivity is an irretrievable setback to Uganda's development. Additionally, the trafficked individuals are often not paid which prevents them from contributing remittances to their families and communities, further stalling economic progress. Again, Uganda loses remittances from trafficked persons, who are stuck in exploitative situations for extended periods, contributing to a loss of remarkable amounts of remittances that could be used for the development of the country. Furthermore, fighting trafficking requires significant resources for tracking and prosecuting traffickers, as well as rehabilitating survivors straining government resources. This creates a vicious cycle of slow economic growth and increases governmental expenses as funds are diverted from other developmental initiatives. The government spent 180 million Ugandan shillings UGX (\$47,682) on victim services in 2023 with NGOs providing most of the dedicated funds, compared with 52 million UGX (\$13,775) in 2022.

The Social Impact of trafficking in persons includes: Family breakdown and withdrawal from society. Most of the survivors left behind families, causing disruptions and neglect. *"I was rejected by my own people. My husband had married another woman and it really affected me"*, Night Elizabeth from Kabarole grieved. Their absence led to the breakdown of their family structures, with children and elderly relatives being left unattended. Some of the Survivors found themselves stigmatized, facing social exclusion and difficulties reintegrating into society. Others withdrew from their family and society. *"I faced rejection by family and friends as I am being looked at as a failure because I came with nothing"* Florence from Bundibugyo

regretted. They would not speak with anybody and continue to live in Isolation.

The Health and Physical impacts include physical ailments and psychological scars. Some of the survivors interviewed had lasting physical ailments due to abuse, exploitation, and neglect. They have chronic health issues such as reproductive health issues, Backaches, and injuries from forced labor or sexual violence. They were denied medical care leaving them vulnerable to untreated illnesses or injuries that persist long after they return. Beyond the physical harm, some of them were left with deep psychological scars. Many reported feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, and helplessness. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and panic attacks are common among them. These psychological issues have made it difficult for some of them to reintegrate fully into society. *“Depressed from the trauma faced, loss of job that I had before going, loss of time and failure to pay the loan I used to process my travel documents”*, Nantaba from Wakiso explained.

Insecurity: The pervasive nature of trafficking has made it difficult for the government to effectively safeguard citizens, particularly women and children, who are at higher risk. This is because Traffickers often exploit weaknesses in the country’s legal system and governance, to undermine efforts to protect vulnerable populations.

Dehumanization of citizens: the survivors felt that they were turned into commodities as their dignity was undermined. This made them question the role of government in upholding their human rights as some of them were even recruited by legally registered companies.

Strained Diplomatic relations: Most survivors developed hatred toward destination countries and questioned why the government didn’t take action on those countries mistreating them. No wonder Ugandan survivors demonstrated in front of the Saudi Arabia embassy

in 2022. This strains diplomatic relations

Trafficking in persons presents an array of challenges to Ugandan society, from economic losses, and health complications, to human rights violations, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Addressing these impacts requires comprehensive legislation and enforcement, effective political will, increased awareness, and a collaborative international approach to combat trafficking and support survivors.

2.5 THE STATUS OF SURVIVORS

The reintegration of survivors into society has been challenging and complex. Many of the survivors upon return faced difficulties in adjusting to their respective communities due to stigma, rejection, and economic hardship. However, some managed to rebuild their lives, while the majority struggled with psychological trauma and a lack of resources. Many government institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and families offered assistance to these survivors, though the level of support varied significantly.

2.5.1 Medical support

Almost all the survivors 140/144 (97%) have a medical condition that requires treatment though the degree varies. For some, the medical conditions are severe, like for Immaculate from Bundibugyo, *“Since I returned, I am always sick as a result of being tortured, raped, being locked in the house without food for extended periods of time. I can no longer do anything for myself. I need medication yet I don’t have money for treatment”*. Similarly, Magdalene from Fort Portal recounted *“I was given little food, brutally beaten and not allowed to communicate with my family. Now I feel back pain, chest pain, generally I am unwell and my parents are unable to finance my medication”*. Other conditions are mild like that of Ndyamuhaki from

Ntungamo, *“I was subjected to work without rest, beaten and poorly fed”*. *“Since I returned I have experienced serious eye problems”*, Roselyne from Bundibugyo explained.

2.5.2 The Socio-Economic Status of the Survivors

One of the challenges they faced was getting support for return. Many returned under difficult circumstances, with some having been repatriated 34/144 (24%) due to a lack of documentation, others with financial assistance from their employers 19/144 (13%), assistance from government 3/144 (2%) and 24/144 (17%) were helped by their family members and well-wishers, while 64/144 (44%) were internal cases. Jovia from Kasese shared her experience, stating, *“I was repatriated.”* Immaculate from Kasese returned home with the help of her employer, *“My boss paid for my ticket and I came back.”*. For Isa Abdurazake, family and friends mobilized funds by selling property, *“My family and relatives back home in Uganda helped me raise funds for the return ticket”*.

Back home, their struggle to reintegrate began. Many faced rejection from their families and communities. *“My father demanded that I refund the money used to buy my return ticket after my family had sold land to afford it”*, Rosemary from Kasese dejectedly explained. Some are stigmatized by the community *“When I came back, I faced stigma. People talked bad about me saying that I am a failure”*, Maureen from Kasese sadly recounted. Some of them who sent money home are frustrated because their money was misused by those to whom they sent it. *“I am stressed because the person to whom I was sending my money misused it and I can’t recover anything”*, Justin Lamented. Despite these hardships, a few managed to rebuild their lives. Biira from Kasese expressed optimism about her future: *“I am better than my friends who remained because I am now exposed. I have bought my land and I am building a house”*. However, success stories like Biira’s were rare, as most survivors confirmed experiencing economic

and social hardships.

The Internally trafficked survivors, 64/64 (100%) from Karamoja, experience the same challenges they had run away from upon their return. They left their home region seeking better opportunities but were repatriated without achieving the improved life they had hoped for. Instead, they returned to the same poverty, hunger, and insecurity that initially drove them away. *“I faced a lot of insults from the community members, emotional and physical abuses in that I did not bring anything from Kampala and poverty and insecurity still remains”*, Joan in Napak expressed her frustration. Similarly, Lucia in Napak is disappointed that upon her return, she lacks food, she is insecure, and her parents feel she should get married instead of going to school. These scenarios make the survivors vulnerable to the traffickers to the extent that they can easily be re-trafficked.

2.5.3 The Psychological Health Status

The psychological impact of trafficking is severe, with most of the survivors 135/144 (94%) reporting extreme physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Survivors describe their experiences in horrific terms, often recounting instances of violence, exploitation, and coercion. Levina shared her harrowing experience: *“The children of my boss raped me.”* Some of them were forced into degrading tasks. *“I was taking care of dogs and they forced me to breastfeed cats.”* Ithungu Betty stated. Others faced religious persecution and were forced to feed snakes. Kezabu from had this to say: *“They forced me to convert to their religion and I was also forced to feed their snake in the house.”* *“I was always under constant fear because of the maximum surveillance. I was given little food and expired medicines. I always experience hallucinations”*. Constance sadly explained.

Despite the severe trauma they have endured, many survivors have not yet received psychological treatment, and some prioritize basic

needs such as food and shelter over mental health care. Mudesta from Kasese voiced her desperate need for emotional support but lamented, *“I have yet to receive any services to address this need.”* Apart from the psychological trauma, some are struggling with physical health complications. One survivor described her ongoing struggles: *“Since I came back, I am always sick, I have eye problems and swollen legs.”*

2.5.4 Legal redress

Access to legal redress in this country presents challenges to poor people as the cost involved is exorbitant. Most poor people tend to shy away from court proceedings as the charges by the lawyers is very high. This presents a more difficult scenario for the survivors of trafficking in persons as they are economically disempowered. The study revealed that out of respondents only one was able to register a case at CID kibuli police station but was not able to follow up the case to its conclusion due to financial constraints. The cases highlighted by the survivors which require legal redress included: nonpayment of salary, embezzlement of proceeds sent home, Mistreatment/ torture by the employer, Rape by the employer and his children, Fraudulent recruitment by legally registered companies, non-adherence to obligation of follow up on the welfare of the immigrant workers among others. *“My employer never paid me all my money, I was beaten and was given little food and yet I was recruited through a legally registered recruitment company”*. I complained to them but I got no help. I need justice”, Assiimwe bitterly lamented.

Table 3: Critical needs of the Survivors

| Needs | Condition | Number(%) |
|----------------------|--|-------------|
| Legal redress | Seeking justice | 1 (0.75%) |
| Medical | Urinal track infections (UTIs), orthopedics, acute ulcers, stroke/hypertension, hernia. | 21 (15.90%) |
| Psychosocial support | Stigma, Low self-esteem, hallucination, nightmares, Withdrawal, | 51 (38.63%) |
| Skilling | Lack of skills in tailoring, bakery, hair dressing, knitting, solar installation and juice processing. | 54 (40.90%) |
| Formal Education | Two (2) had Ordinary level certificate and one (1) had primary leaving certificate | 5 (3.78%) |

Source: survivors' response

2.6 THE SUPPORT TO THE SURVIVORS

While some survivors of trafficking persons manage to rebuild their lives, the majority continue to struggle with economic hardship, psychological trauma, and social rejection. Government intervention has been minimal, leaving most of the reintegration efforts to NGOs, families, and communities. Although NGOs have made significant contributions, challenges such as survivors' reluctance to disclose their experiences and the lack of specialized government programs continue to hinder effective reintegration.

To improve the situation, there is a need for more coordinated efforts, including better awareness campaigns, improved access to psychological care, and targeted government policies. Survivors need long-term support, not just temporary relief, to ensure they can fully recover and contribute to society. The testimonies of survivors highlight the urgency of action needed to address their suffering and help them reclaim their dignity and future.

2.6.1 Government Support

The findings reveal that assistance to survivors by the government has been minimal. The majority of the survivors (142 / 144) indicated that they never received support from the government. One (1) out of one hundred and forty-four (144) asserted that she received legal aid, as her case was heard at Buganda Road Court after the government helped her file a case at the Central Police Station (CPS). Two (2) of them were repatriated by the government and promised job opportunities. Unfortunately to their dismay, this was not fulfilled and they ended up working in bars and salons. A smaller number (5) of the survivors benefited from general economic programs such as Emyooga and the Parish Development Model (PDM), but these programs are not specifically designed to support TIP survivors.

2.6.2 NGO Support

Several non-governmental organizations were identified by the survivors for having played a significant role in providing support. The organizations mentioned including JPIIIPC were FIDA Uganda, Compassion International, Welt Hunger, The St. Bakhita Anti-Human Trafficking Network Uganda, and HOCODI-Uganda. They provided support in the form of food, clothing, household items, hygiene products, temporary shelter, vocational training, startup capital, counseling, and reintegration into the community.

One survivor praised the support provided by The St. Bakhita Anti-Human Trafficking Network Uganda, saying, *“The sisters in this organization helped me to get peace of mind through their guidance and counseling sessions.”* However, NGOs face difficulties in their work, as many survivors hesitate to share their full experiences, making it difficult to provide them with adequate support. FIDA Uganda expressed concerns about this issue, acknowledging that it hampers their ability to help survivors effectively.

As for JPIIJPC, the demand for support by survivors is overwhelming yet there is a limited resource envelope to meet this need. Sometimes the center is forced to refer the survivors to other institutions for their needs.

2.6.3 Family/Community Support

Many survivors expressed that families and friends have been their main source of support upon their return. Birungi shared an emotional experience: *“My family cried when they saw me. They welcomed me warmly and supported me with startup capital to start a business.”* Another survivor confirmed that she was given land and livestock to help her restart her life. However, not all survivors received this kind of support. A small but significant number (20%) of the survivors reported being abandoned by their families, which has left them in worse conditions than before they were trafficked.

2.7 BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SUPPORT BY SURVIVORS

Despite the existence of government and NGO services tailored towards the support of the survivors, the respondents expressed that there were significant barriers that prevented them from accessing the necessary services. Many of them alluded to a lack of knowledge of the available assistance programs due to a lack of information, especially for those in remote areas where Phone and internet accessibility is limited. Additionally, they expressed fear and distrust of institutions discouraging them from seeking help, while language and cultural differences created further obstacles. Stigma and shame also prevented many of them from openly discussing their experiences and asking for assistance. Moreover, the lack of transportation and financial resources made it difficult for some of them to reach service providers, further isolating them from the support they desperately needed. In summary, the barriers are as follows:

- Inadequate knowledge about available services.
- Limited access to communication tools, such as phones or the internet.
- Fear and distrust of institutions and organizations that could assist them.
- Language and cultural barriers that make it difficult to seek help.
- Shame and stigma that prevent survivors from discussing their experiences.
- Lack of transportation to reach service providers.

3.1 CONCLUSION

Trafficking in Persons (TIP) in Uganda is a deeply ingrained and expanding crisis, presenting significant challenges across multiple dimensions of society. Despite efforts by the Ugandan government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to combat the vice, human trafficking continues to thrive due to systemic vulnerabilities, including poverty, lack of awareness, curiosity, peer influence, Insecurity, forced marriage, Hunger, weak regulatory frameworks, and poor enforcement of the laws. Even those who manage to come back, face challenges such as stigma, rejection, and limited access to support services. These further complicate efforts to address the vice and help victims rebuild their lives. The economic and social impacts are far-reaching, with significant losses to Uganda's workforce, and damage to family structures. Furthermore, TIP threatens national security and damages Uganda's international reputation, especially as diplomatic tensions with destination countries grow due to the exploitation of Ugandan nationals abroad. For instance, the Torture Survivors Movement in Uganda, demonstrated over the continued deaths and torture of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, at Saudi Arabia embassy in Kampala on August 23, 2022.

However, the government registered some success in prosecuting traffickers and raising awareness. Nevertheless, the lack of comprehensive victim protection and insufficient enforcement of anti-trafficking laws means that traffickers continue to operate with impunity. There is an urgent need for a more robust, victim-centered approach. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving public

awareness, providing more substantial victim support systems, and enhancing international cooperation. Establishing shelters, improving reintegration programs, and tightening regulation of recruitment agencies are essential steps toward mitigating the effects of trafficking in persons. Additionally, increasing collaboration between the government, civil society, and international partners will create a more cohesive and effective response to human trafficking.

Therefore, addressing the complex issue of TIP in Uganda requires coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, involving law enforcement, public health, education, and international diplomacy. Only through sustained action and a commitment to upholding human rights can Uganda hope to curtail human trafficking and protect vulnerable individuals from exploitation.

3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study policy options have been adopted for the various stakeholders (Government, Civil society organizations, and community members) to address the vice of human trafficking in Uganda.

Government

- Ensure government programs (Parish Development Model, (PDM), Presidential Initiative on Poverty and Hunger (PIPH), Emyooga (Specialized Skills Enterprises) for economic empowerment that address poverty eradication target the youth, and women whose vulnerabilities are exploited by the traffickers.
- Ensure the development of employable (skilling) and creative labor force to curtail the high rates of unemployment. The new Secondary curriculum is in the right direction as it provides for research and project work, talent development and creativity, hands-on experience work, and vocational studies (food, entrepreneurship and agriculture). The Presidential Initiative on Skilling the Girl/Boy Child (PISGBC) Project is another great step.

- Provide access to comprehensive survivor-centered services; vocation training, educational scholarships, startup financial support, legal services, and counseling Shelters to enable them to become self-sufficient and independent.
- Enforce the laws, protocols, and regulations on trafficking and labor externalization.
- Provide adequate resources (Human and financial) for institutions charged with the responsibility of fighting human trafficking.
- Create awareness of the vice to curtail the ignorance that makes some citizens fall victim to the traffickers.

Civil society

- Create awareness of human trafficking to reduce the dangers of citizens falling victim due to ignorance and curiosity to experience life outside of the country.
- Advocate against human trafficking involving the survivors to ensure that the voices of those affected are heard in the legislative and social policy arenas.
- Provide support to survivors of human trafficking - vocation training, educational scholarships, startup financial support, legal services, counseling, and Shelter to enable them to integrate into the community.

Community

- Provide the survivors the assistance they need to enhance their reintegration and recovery from stigma and trauma.
- Demand accountability from the responsible leaders, companies, and individuals for abuses and exploitation experienced by the survivors while in custody.
- Report cases of suspected trafficking in your community to the relevant authorities.

