

# Stolen Childhoods: Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mental Wellbeing among Adult Survivors of Child Labor

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## ABSTRACT

Child labor is a global issue that robs children off their childhood and exposes them to harmful and exploitative conditions. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study aims to explore the difficult childhood experiences of 17 adults subjected to child labor at very young ages of 6 and 7 years and the long-term effects their exposure had on their mental health. Through in-depth interviews, this study sheds light on the nature of the experiences of child labor; provides a deeper understanding of the challenges they faced. The study found that adult survivors of child labor experienced adverse childhoods in areas of poor relationship with parents and caregivers; toxic family/living environments; peer violence; and witnessing community violence. We conclude that adults who had experienced child labor often endured losses, separation, maltreatment, neglect and starvation during their formative years; that adult survivors of child labor exhibit symptoms of hyperarousal and grapple with intrusive memories related to their past traumas which impact their relationships and overall well-being. That these challenges pose significant mental health issues such as low self-esteem, vulnerabilities, psychological distress, among others. We court the attention of helping professionals to assist clients from trauma-informed perspectives to unearth deep-seated traumatic challenges of people who seek help.

**Keywords:** child labor, adverse childhood experiences, adult child labor survivors, mental health, hermeneutic phenomenology.

## INTRODUCTION

Disasters, such as child labor or hurricanes, can have significant psychological impacts on survivors. It is crucial for professional counselors to understand and assist these clients from a trauma-informed perspective. Child labor is considered a traumatic experience for children due to various risk factors affecting their physical, emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Research shows a direct link between child labor and trauma (Masiero et al., 2020; Agordzo Edoh-Torgah & Addai-Mununkum, 2024). Child labor is a significant issue that affects adults who grow up in the aftermath of adverse childhood experiences. The literature on child labor primarily focuses on its causes and effects on schooling and economic development. Yet, child labor is associated with trauma involving the loss of loved ones, identity loss, child development deficits, and separation (Agordzo Edoh-Torgah & Addai-Mununkum, 2024).

Literature search indicates paucity of work of understanding about the traumatic experiences of adult survivors of child labor (Agordzo, 2015). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are multifaceted challenging, traumatic events or conditions that participants experienced in the throes of child labor before age 18, leading to long-term negative outcomes in mental health. Adults who had experienced child labor often endured losses, separation, abuse, neglect and starvation during their very formative years yet, the literature is almost silent on the adversities that these population endures.

Children who experience neglect or abuse during early childhood may develop insecure attachment styles, which can negatively impact their emotional well-being and social interactions later in life. Child labor experiences therefore, can lead to problematic behaviors such as aggression, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and academic difficulties (Hamenoo & Sottie 2015). They are also at increased risk for developing mental health disorders such as borderline personality disorder, major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and antisocial personality disorder. Understanding the experiences of adult survivors of child

labor is crucial for understanding their constructions of the phenomenon and its effects on their mental well-being.

Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) highlighted the significance of early relationships between infants and caregivers in shaping emotional development and attachment styles. Children engaged in child labor may develop insecure attachment styles, negatively impacting their emotional well-being and social interactions that could lead to post traumatic stress disorder.

## Theory

Herman's (1992) trauma theory is used to understand ACEs in adults who experienced child labor. Traumatic experiences can impede psychological well-being through symptom clusters, lasting beyond the initial event (Van der Kolk, 2015). We use Herman's theory on hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction to understand the adverse childhood experiences among adult survivors of child labor. Hyperarousal arises from traumatic memory activation, causing anxiety and making the individual constantly expecting danger. It is the state of being that the individual finds themselves after a catastrophic phenomenon. Intrusion, however, is the effects that trauma events have on the individual. It is the effects on the state of being. While constriction is a symptom-cluster in response to hyperarousal, characterized by physiological, emotional, and cognitive unresponsiveness to stimuli. It is the individual's employment of variegated stratagem to coping with the traumatic event.

Traumatic experiences such as child labor significantly impact an individual's psychological well-being, leading to fragmentary images and vivid sensations, often in the form of nightmares. This can cause constant fear, disruption of inner schemas, and loss of control, connection, and meaning in life. These disorders can significantly impair an individual's quality of life and relationships throughout their lifespan. These presuppose that child labor experiences are endemic with traumatic experiences.

Ghana has a high rate of child labor, with 21% of the population involved (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2021). The Central Region, with 12.8% children aged 5-17 involved in economic activities and other child protection concerns (Government of Ghana & UNICEF, 2015). We, therefore, assumed that the Central Region is considered a potential area for adult survivors who would be open and willing to respond to and discuss their traumatic childhood experiences and their impact on their mental well-being. In our quest to explore the difficult childhoods of adults who missed on vital nurturing and care of their parents and families in the clutches of child labor and the effects their exposure has on their mental health, we ask:

1. What are the experiences of adults who engaged in child labor?
2. What long-term effects does child labor have on adults' mental health?

## METHODOLOGY

We undertook a hermeneutic phenomenological study which emphasizes individuals' experiences as critical in understanding the processes and meanings that they attach to their traumatic childhood experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Morrow & Smith, 2012). Heidegger (1962) postulated "that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by an individual's background or historicity". Interpretation is thus, critical to this process of understanding. This perspective provides a perfect paradigmatic understanding of 'lived' experiences of adults who have lived and experienced trauma in the context of child labor: a context fraught with frequently changing of varied residential status, varying masters, and the culture of silence or vulnerability within which children were raised. Hermeneutic phenomenological design allows participants to illuminate their own experiences, the meanings they attach to them, and the effects they hold about their experiences.

The original ACE-Q by Felitti and colleagues was adapted to collect qualitative data from 17 adults who experienced child labor in fishing through interviews and focus group discussions. To recruit participants, criterion-based and purposive sampling techniques were used. First, we made sure that every participant selected was in a unique position to respond to interview questions that would provide significant insight to

our collective understanding of the lost childhoods under difficult child labor circumstances (Creswell, 1998). Second, participants had to meet two requirements to be included: (a) participants had to have worked as child laborers, meeting any one of Agordzo's (2011) four defining characteristics of child labor; and (b) they had to complete a six-item screening questionnaire. Seventeen participants in all, ranging from 40 to 63 years, participated in this study. The decision to halt sampling was informed by data saturation. All initial in-person interviews were personally conducted by me. Follow-up interviews were through telephone interviews and social media applications like WhatsApp and text messaging to reduce costs and time and to access difficult-to-reach participants, despite potential network challenges. All seventeen participants were adults residing in the Central Region of Ghana at the time of this research.

### **Data instrument**

An in-depth interview protocol was developed and used to generate data from participants who shared their experiences. The protocol included questions on participants' experiences, incidents of child labor, ACEs, and effects of these experiences on them. The interviews which lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour were audio-recorded then transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic network analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data transcription took place immediately after each interview. Manual coding was done beginning with the open coding to open data for identifying and labelling emerging themes. This was followed by axial coding that developed categorizations of both a priori and in vivo themes. Two scholars in psychology served as research assessors who coded each data independently to arrive at inter-rater reliability of the data. Based on theory and the research questions of the study, thematic frameworks were developed, then raw data were indexed in a coherent logical framework using the conceptual map with the emerging themes on similarities and differences from the data. For ethical considerations, confidentiality of participants was protected by using pseudonyms. Participants were treated with complete acceptance and positive regard (Agordzo, 2011) and to facilitate participant validation, participants were presented with a summary of their narratives (Lindheim, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Methodological integrity**

Methodological integrity was enhanced through extended engagement with research participants for over 6 months who provided in-depth data on childhood experiences in fishing communities, ensuring participant consent and participant validation for credibility.

## **RESULTS**

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of adults who endured difficult child labor and to find out the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences on adults' mental well-being. The results are therefore, presented under themes that emerged in line with the two objectives that guided the study.

### **Theme 1: Difficult child labor experiences and general outcomes of adverse childhood experiences**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) emerged as a major theme relating to the nature of the lived experiences of participants during their engagement in child labor activities. Subthemes that evolved around participants' ACEs are in relation to their poor relationship with parents and caregivers; toxic family/living environments; peer violence; and witnessing community violence.

#### **Poor relationship with parents and caregivers**

Here, we have neglectful parents, early parental separation, lack of physiological needs, and children living with substance abuse caregivers.

## Neglectful Parents

Neglectful parents were parents who push their children into child labour or sometimes give their children into their relatives to care for them. But these relatives tend out to maltreat the children and put them into child labor. In fact, in some instances, some of these children were sold to other people using these children as child laborers. Neglectful parents were those parents who were not bothered or did not care about the welfare of their children. Some of them knew that their children were suffering yet they did little or nothing to protect their children or prevent them from suffering in the clutches of child labor like Mona said,

*I don't even know how I got into child labor. All I remember was my mum asking me to follow my uncle to Yeji that he will put me to school but when we reached Yeji I was not sent to school rather I was made to work on the fishing nets. I suffered for 12 years working for my uncle on his fishing trolley. My mother never cared to check up on me in all these 12 years. (Mona, 49, Businessman)*

This narrative resonates with what Leki shared...

*My father left my mother and for about 5 years we didn't know where our father was so that was when my mother asked us to stay with different people and I went to stay with a man who gave some money to my mother to trade with. And this was the beginning of my child labor journey. (Leki, 54, Pharmacist)*

These narratives indicate that children who have been neglected or abandoned by parents suffer developmental consequences such as failing to develop to accomplish developmental task. They also lack emotional attachments from their parents and care that is helpful to nurturing them. Children who had neglectful parents experience both emotional neglect and physical neglect.

### Early Parental Separation

All participants reported how they missed parental nurturing and support since they had to live with other people to work. By age 5, five participants had left their parents to live with others. By age 7, six participants were living with other people and by age 9, six participants were living with others. This is a clear indication that child labor denies its victims the opportunity to live with and get nurtured by their own families. Participants recounted with high emotions how they had to grow up without their siblings and other family members. The isolation and sense of loss was heightened especially during these formative years. Jared narrated that,

*It was difficult to live without your parents. When our mother brought us back*

*from Ivory Coast saying that she could no longer cater for us, I was devastated.*

*Our father was dead, so we had to fend for ourselves; me and my siblings.*

**(Jared, 42, Teacher)**

Early parental separation and being plunged into child labor was thus due to both parental loss and economic impoverishment. Children who lost their parents had no choice than to engage in child labor to make ends meet.

### Lack of provision of physiological needs

All participants in this study indicate that growing up, they lack basic needs of life such as good shelter, adequate food, good clothing, and education. Bobo recalled, *"as for going hungry, it was a common thing. I don't even remember having had a nice-looking shirt before"* and JJ followed up saying, *"to be a child laborer was synonymous with to be a hungry child"*. Participants narrated how they did not have enough to eat, walked barefooted with tattered clothes, did not go to school, and lacked medical care growing up. These necessities of life that mark every developmental phase of children eluded these individuals when they were growing up in the clutches of child labor.

Neglect has been identified by most participants as one form of abuse they had suffered. The properties of neglect are unsafe working environment, lack of good clothing, lack of medical attention and hunger or inadequate food. Participants reported that working in *unsafe environments* such as fishing on the big river, and diving to disentangle nets, had been nightmarish to them and they lacked protective clothing. The experience of Jared summed up this:

*I remember most often we had to dive into the deepest part of the river to disentangle fish nets. Some of the boys get drown in the process. This was frightening. (Jared, 42, Teacher)*

Regarding lack of medical attention, Jola intimated, “*Whether you are sick or not you have to work*”. And concerning hunger, Owner disclosed, “*In fact, what happened was that we were going to fishing without food. You had to go and come back before you eat something...*” and Jola concluded, “*If you don’t work, you’ll not eat*”.

Participants were starved and did not receive medical care when they fell ill neither were they properly clothed against the harsh weather in which they worked. All these posed health problems to them and denigrate them. Additionally, some participants were completely abandoned by their parents as in the case of Jared whose mother brought them back from Ivory Coast and left them to fend for themselves.

#### *Living with Substance Abuse Caregivers*

Participants lived with employers or caregivers who were abusing drugs such as smoking weed, cigarettes and or were heavy drunkards. Vava narrated:

*I was very young when I started buying cigarettes for my Caregiver. In fact,*

*I grew up to realize that some of the things that I was given to send to my*

*caregiver was what we call weed because they were roll up, I mean very*

*nicely. And then I’ll bring it to him. He will tell me that children don’t do*

*these things, but then he was using them. (Vava, 63 Businessman)*

Amano corroborated this narrative that:

*The men on the fishing net were drinking a lot. You know they said to be on the water you need to be strong, so they take the strong liquor (agogro). Sometimes they give us to drink. They told us it will make us strong. And most of the time, they beat us when they are drunk or the least thing they can throw you into the river as punishment. (Amano, 61, Building Contractor)*

Participants were not only exposed to adult abusing substance but some of them were introduced to these substances in early life. All these experiences left participants with difficult mental health challenges.

#### **Toxic family or living environment**

Participants experienced various negative and repulsive abusive and unstable environments that impact their mental well-being. Participants narrated how they were exposed to negative homes with some family members or caregivers suffering mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. Others recalled how some family members were in incarceration for one crime or the other. Additionally, all participants come from divorced or broken homes. Two critical causative reasons for participants’ engagement in child labour were parental divorce and death. Nine out of 17 participants lost their both parents before age 10, five lost their fathers before age 12, and three lost their mothers before age 10. In all, each participant had lost a parent or both before age 18 while they were still in child labor. Being in child labor at the time of the loss also exacerbated their traumatic experiences since they were not present and able to process the loss properly and put a closure to it.



The living environments of adult survivors of child labor were toxic and devoid of positive development of these individuals. Each participant in addition to the above, also experienced a combination of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse.

### Physical abuse

All participants reported that physical abuse was one main abuse that made their child labor experiences difficult to endure. Participants identified torture, beatings and hitting as some of the difficult physical abuse that they had experienced. Regarding torture as physical abuse, responses like the following emanated from participants' narratives:

*You know this nylon thread (triple twine), they made a loop with it and put it around my neck and ... pulled me on the ground around the whole village like a goat... (JKA, 50, Businessman)*

Stado confirmed this point,

*If you sleep on the boat, they'd throw you into the lake. ...when you sleep, they'd fetch water and pour it on you, they'd kick you, and they'd hit you with the paddle. (Stado, 40, Senior Accountant)*

The above scenarios bring to bear the existence of torture that child laborers endured and witnessed. Participants also disclosed that their employers and leaders hit and beat them mostly for no apparent reason. Jola disclosed that he received "*beatings for nothing*". Owner intimated that usually his father's workers "*got angry and beat me up*". The most painful and difficult aspect is the physical torture. Physical torture is when the participants reported being hit with the paddles, kicked in the groin, given blows, fishes thrown at them, and pushed into the lake. Participants compared their vulnerabilities in the hands of their employers and perpetrators "*like a soldier with a gun would do to another soldier without a gun whom he has overpowered*". The torture has left all participants with varying degrees of both physical and mental scars.

### Verbal abuse

Closely linked with the physical abuse is the verbal abuse of participants. Majority of participants reported several abuses that impacted on their emotions right from childhood to adulthood. The verbal abuse took the form of insults or name callings. They endured yelling, screaming, and humiliation. It emerged that though the physical abuse suffered by participants left physical scars on them as a proof sometimes of their sufferings and trauma, the verbal abuse is the more difficult to deal with. Stado reported, "*They'd insult you and beat you*". Stado disclosed how community members referred to him as "*never do well in life*" which rang bell in his ears till date. Though he worked hard to use such negative comments as motivation, these statements also intimidate him and made him afraid sometimes of his own capabilities and made him loose confidence in himself.

### Sexual abuse

Some participants experienced sexual abuse in the hands of their direct employers or middlemen/intermediaries during child labor. Two main forms of sexual abuse were identified in this study. While some participants were themselves subjected to sexual abuse as early as 6 years, others were forced to witness sexual activities and molestations of other children. Some participants revealed that they were sexually harassed and molested during the period of child labor. These experiences posed very difficult barriers to their survival. They disclosed that the sexual abuse was the most difficult of all abuses. According to Stado, he was forced to engage in anal sex at a very tender age while working on his father's boat on the Volta Lake at Yeji. This act was perpetrated by one of the workers who subjected him to it. Stado poignantly narrated thus:

*There was this older boy among the workers who used to have sex with me through my anus .... He used to do that, and I couldn't tell anybody... and anytime I remember, it pains me, and I feel sad. I think I should be around 6 or 7 years then when it [sexual abuse] started and it happened for about*

6 years. (Stado, 40, Senior Accountant)

JKA reiterated this,

*What had happened to me was bad, painful, and torturous, it was not good and like I said, some of them **I will never talk about**... A girl of 9 years had been brought from here [JKA's current location] to that place [Yeji] to serve as sex material for about 4 boys working there... And you know we were all sleeping in one room. And you know we were seeing what was happening ... the worst part was that when there was no girl available to service these aggressive older boys, then, they now turn their attention on the young boys.*

**(JKA, 50, Businessman)**

Participants who had been sexually abused in secret or in the presence of other children, and those who were forced to witness sexual abuse, reported difficulty in overcoming these experiences. They had flashbacks and dreamt of some of these scenes.

### **Peer violence**

Under this subtheme we identified bullying as fights and beatings and teasing among child laborers. JJ noted with pain that he could recalled when some of his colleague child laborers told him his penis was too small. He said, *"They even forced me on many occasions to pull out my it [manhood] out for them to see and they will all stand there laughing at it"*. Then others reported how they had to endure beating from their stronger colleagues and were even refused food for no reason. Participants recounted how they had to severally endure maltreatment and gang violence from other children.

### **Witnessing community violence**

Though majority of participants reported not experiencing community-based violence, four adults recounted how their communities of child labor were plundered in violent acts such as tribal fighting and shootings. Some narrated witnessing fierce fights in their communities. Skado recalled how he saw a young man beaten and killed in public. JKA reported that,

*There was this boy who attempted to run away from his master. Do you know what they did to him? He was beaten with the paddle. They hit him so hard all over his body: his ribs, head, legs, every part. After two days, the boy died.*

Participants witnessed directly or indirectly, fights, abuses and murder that happened in their communities when they were growing up in child labor. Community-based violence affected participants' sense of safety and security. These experiences heightened their vulnerabilities and sense of safety.

## **Theme 2: Child labor and adults' mental well-being**

Data revealed some negative effects that child labor has on participants. These include low self-esteem, stagnation and failure, vulnerability, psychological distress, and social stigma and discrimination. Participants identified these areas of their life which have been negatively affected because of the difficult experiences they had during child labor.

### **Low self-esteem**

All participants reported how their experiences as child laborers had affected their personal development during their formative years. They narrated that due to their status as child laborers they had poor self-concept about themselves and their future. They did not believe in themselves and were constantly seeking others approval in things that they did. They reported that they had to fight this especially during their adult life when they had realized that they have some potential and had largely "moved on". Bobo reported that, *"back then too I have low self-esteem and that accounted for my inability to socialize"* and Owner disclosed, *"I sustained*

*a lot of injuries on my legs ... Today, I feel shy to wear shorts even though I admire my friends wearing shorts”* and Sacus confirmed this:

*One of the things I remember vividly was the shyness that was attached to this sort of work. I was a young ... and I used to see my friends and their well-to-do families and they had dressed nicely. The cement could eat into your body making my body look pale and pallid and I couldn't dress properly. And you know, ... whenever I saw them [my classmates] I had to hide myself for them to pass...* **(Sacus, 51, Police Officer)**

Sacus was of the view that child labor breeds inferiority complex in its victims making them feel less important among their peers. Participants believed that child labor affected their self-identity and worth making them feel less important.

### **Failure and stagnation**

Data also revealed that child labor caused participants' failure in the areas of education which also led to stagnation during their development. Austa recounted her period of frustration and stagnation:

*Those 7 years I could refer to as the dark days of my early life. Those were the years I was stuck and nothing seemed to move in my life as a result of my work with my grand auntie that prevented me from learning and doing my academic work.* **(Austa, 55, Head Teacher)**

These two: failure and stagnation, also brought in frustration as participants could not bear their situations. Austa's statement reflects the summary of negative personal effects of frustration on participants. As a result of her experiences, Austa failed her examinations, lost confidence in herself, became anti-social, timid and depressed. She lost hope of ever making it in life.

### **Vulnerability**

All participants narrated how their conditions made them feel weak and lack control. They indicated that because they were children and working, they were susceptible to adult maltreatment that saw them powerless. They related that the vulnerability they suffered were *personal, physical, social and cultural*.

#### *Personal vulnerability*

Personal vulnerability was related to the traumatic nature of their unique child labor experiences such as fear of being drowned when ordered to dive into the river to set or disentangle nets; fear of being drowned by adults if their abuse is reported to other adults, and fear of the unknown: the fact that some of the participants reported being scared of not knowing what would happen to them next. Stado recounted:

*They carried me and threw me into the water ... they warned me that if I tell my father, then I should count myself dead ... so I didn't tell my father because I was afraid for myself and my father's business.* **(Stado, 40, Senior Accountant)**

As a child working on his own father's boat and being maltreated, Stado could not report his abuse to his father for fear of being killed or given worse maltreatment by his perpetrators. This refusal to report was also to protect his father's business. Participants said, these abuses kept them in constant fear and apprehension. Their conditions of work and their situation in relation to adult workers put an overwhelming fear and anxiety in them as working children.

#### *Physical vulnerability*

According to participants, child laborers are often vulnerable due to the conditions under which they carried out their work. To recapture JKA's earlier assertion that:

*I think the most painful and difficult aspect is the physical torture. Physical torture is when they hit you with the paddles, when you're being kicked in the groin, blows, throwing fishes at you, err, pushing you into the lake*



*... just do anything to you. Just picture a war situation. And see what a soldier with a gun would do to another soldier without a gun whom he has over powered (JKA, 50, Businessman)*

JKA's narrative gives a vivid description of physical vulnerability of child laborers. Working conditions such as weeding in thick forest, fishing and diving in the big lake, seem significant physical challenges faced by participants. The physical environment and context provide grounds for participants fear and it is full of danger to their physical being.

#### *Social vulnerability*

Another form of vulnerability suffered by participants with regards to stigmatization and disclosure. According to most participants, their communities seemed to stigmatize child laborers and people who had been child laborers to a large extent. Pepsi declared;

*... they would just say forget about that it [child labor] was in the past. It is not easy to talk about this because society is not ready to see it as a talking matter once you have made it in life, you have no problem about child labor again. But is this good? We still have scars. (FGD 2)*

As recounted by Pepsi, most participants disclosed that community members also desisted from acknowledging that adult individuals who had undergone child labor during their developmental years would have some long-lasting effects on them due to their traumatic experiences, and that these need to be talked about and treated.

#### *Cultural vulnerability*

Stado and Owner reported in a FGD that it was difficult for them to complain about their condition then. They were of the view that if they had complained for instance, about their maltreatment on the lake, they would have been regarded as disrespectful or liars and branded as lazy children. This, therefore, accounted for their refusal to inform their own parents about the abuses they were going through. This view was generally shared by all participants.

#### **Psychological distress**

One major consequence of the experiences of child labor in adult life on their psychological development is flashback of past painful trauma. Most participants reported transporting themselves back into those painful moments from time to time. Several participants expressed difficulty with memory and concentration that prevented them from reaching their goals such as passing their examination and overcoming their low self-esteem. Austa reported that he failed her GCE 'O' Level Examinations: she passed only two subjects because she was preoccupied with his traumatic condition. Most participants mentioned that their symptoms of depression delayed their survival and moving on. The depression has hurt their relationships with some significant others in their lives such as spouses, friends and family members and this has hindered them from working and relating with others effectively. In describing his depression affecting his education and relationship with others, Sparko indicated that he finds it difficult to understand why his wife and children are not smart while he is multitasking and could do many things at the same time. This he said, has been a source of conflict in his family.

Many participants described how thinking of the events and unwanted recurring memories of their child labor experiences still bothers them, makes them afraid and keeps them occasionally unhappy. Some participants are of the view that even though they have moved on largely, it is difficult for them to forget the memories which often distract them from performing their duties. Stado intimated that thinking of all that happened to him especially the sexual abuse and witnessing other children being drowned makes him very sad and aggressive sometimes.

## Social stigma and discrimination

Children who had to work to support themselves and their families are often negatively tagged and perceived as never-do-wells by the society. Sacus' narrative reveals his bitter experience where he was labelled by some community members as a boy who would not amount to anything because he was a child laborer. JKA also gave an account of similar experience. Indeed, most of the participants reported that at the time of their child labor experiences, most of the community members looked down upon them and saw no hope in them.

Furthermore, the social isolation and deprivation faced by children who work is inexplicable. Due to their status as child laborers, some families forbade their children from playing with them. Their own peers also isolated them and made pejorative remarks about them. In all, they were looked down upon, ostracized, stigmatized through humiliation and intimidations.

## DISCUSSION

This section discusses the ACEs experienced and the effects of these on adult participants through the lens of hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction to understand how these participants process their difficult childhood and its effects on them. This is to help to situate the study in traumatological research.

The study found that adult survivors of child labour experienced many forms of abuse during their child labor period which disconnect them from their social networks. They were separated from and lost loved ones or even witnessed the death of loved ones. This assertion resonates with the findings of Agordzo (2011) that the social network of trauma survivors is often shattered. Participants thought of their adversities especially sexual abuse and witnessing the death of other children made them still feel sad and aggressive sometimes. This finding supports the literature which recognized that people who have experienced life-threatening or traumatic experiences have an increased risk of suffering from psychological distress (Southeastern Centre Against Sexual Assault [SECASA], 2011-2014).

We found that participants lack emotional attachments from their parents and care that is helpful to nurturing them. Some of these adults find it difficult to provide nurturing and care to children. Children who had neglectful parents experience both emotional neglect and physical neglect. This finding resonates with Bombay et al., (2011) that intergenerational effects of ACEs increase depression risk for subjects had absent parents and where many individuals experienced neglect, abuse, and the trauma of separation from families and culture.

The current study shows that child exposure to violence against others had a higher risk of other ACE categories which resonates with findings of Lamers-Winkelmann et al. (2012). Most participants recounted involuntary re-experiencing of traumatic memories through flashbacks, nightmares, and other intrusive thoughts. These adult survivors grapple with intrusive memories related to their past traumas. These intrusive memories disrupt their daily functioning, trigger intense emotional responses, and contribute to their vulnerabilities and feelings of helplessness or despair. This finding resonates with Van der Kolk (2015) that traumatic experiences can impede psychological well-being through symptom clusters. Survivors however, reported that psychological distress, such as flashbacks, memory problems, depression, and nightmares were major barriers in establishing and maintaining stability (Agordzo Edoh-Torgah, 2021; Isakson, 2008).

Adult child labor survivors studied were found disconnecting from their emotions, avoiding situations that trigger memories of their past traumas, or avoiding engaging in self-destructive behaviors as a means of coping with their pain. This finding connects with Gordon (2009) when he worked on the passage of trauma through life. He suggests that reducing the intensity of distressing memories can help survivors connect to other past experiences and to let them become personal history episodes.

Adult child labor survivors who exhibited ACEs developed constriction to cope with overwhelming psychological distress and vulnerabilities or helplessness associated with their traumatic past. The result indicates that survivors who grappled with ACEs also struggled with emotional regulation and intimacy due to

the intrusion of lingering effects of their traumatic experiences. This study resonates with Herman (2015) that traumatized adult survivors may experience constriction to cope with overwhelming feelings.

The cumulative impact of hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction, stemming from adverse childhood experiences among child laborers can significantly influence their adult lives. Adult survivors of child labor with ACEs struggle with mental health issues such as low self-esteem, vulnerabilities, psychological distress, among others. This proves that there is a direct link between child labor and trauma (Masiero et al., 2020). It further supports the assertion by Hamenoo and Sottie (2015) that child labor experiences can lead to problematic behaviors such as aggression, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and academic difficulties. Though majority of studies conclude that general and specific populations that have ACE score correlates with both suicidal ideation and attempts (De Ravello, Abeita, & Brown, 2008; Friestad et al., 2014), this current study did not uncover suicidality among survivors of child labor who identified with high ACE scores.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Judith Herman's theory on hyperarousal, constriction, and intrusion provides a valuable framework for understanding how adverse childhood experiences among adult child labor survivors can shape their psychological development and influence their experiences in adulthood. We conclude that child labor experiences identified with ACE-Q as propounded by Felti and his colleagues. Major ACEs identified in this population are general outcomes of adverse childhood experiences such as poor relationship with parents and caregivers; toxic family/living environments; peer violence; and witnessing community violence. We also conclude that there is a relationship between child labor and adult survivors' mental well-being. That these adult survivors struggle with low self-esteem, stagnation and failure, vulnerability, psychological distress, and social stigma and discrimination as a result of child labor experiences.

## LIMITATIONS

The study appears to focus on retrospective accounts from adults reflecting on their childhood experiences. We acknowledge that the reliance on memory can also lead to inaccuracies or selective recall, further complicating the interpretation of results. Many potential participants could not be reached outside the study scope due to long distances. The Follow-up interviews through social media applications were affected by poor network challenges. While the study aims to explore individual experiences with child labor, it may not fully account for contextual factors that influence mental health outcomes, such as socio-economic status, family dynamics, cultural background, or access to mental health resources. These external factors can significantly impact an individual's psychological wellbeing and should be considered when interpreting the results.

## RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the effects of child labor on its victims can be reduced by individuals, parents and communities to foster care and nurturing to children who are forced to work to survive due to loss of parent or poor economic background. That schools could also teach learners to provide safe environment for peers who found themselves in early work. We court the attention of health professionals to assist clients from trauma-informed perspectives to unearth clients' presenting problems with deep-seated traumatic challenges. By recognizing these patterns and addressing them through trauma-informed interventions and support services, it is possible for counsellors to help survivors heal from their past traumas and build more resilient futures. By utilizing Herman's theory as a framework for studying stolen childhoods involving difficult childhoods in child labor, researchers and therapists can gain a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of such experiences on individuals' mental health and well-being. This approach is equally meant to inform interventions and policies aimed at supporting child labor survivors in their journey towards healing and recovery.

## Data availability statement

Data for this study are available and can be released upon an official request made to the author.

## Declaration of Interest

The author has no interest to declare in as much as idea conceptualization and conducting of this paper is concern.

## Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was approved and cleared by the University Research Ethics Committee, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana (UREC-UEW/23/003).

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