



Examining Religious Leaders' Engagement in Child Protection in Dzemeni, Volta Region, Ghana



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ABSTRACT

It is reported that ninety-four percent of children experience some form of abuse in Ghana. Where child abuse exists, an appropriate response is child protection. Dzemeni, a fishing community in the Volta Region of Ghana is noted to have a history of high prevalence of child abuse, trafficking, child labour, and exploitation. This study aims to explore the perspectives of religious leaders on child abuse and analyse efforts by religious leaders, including inter-religious engagements for child protection in Dzemeni. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected from 15 religious leaders, comprising eight clergy, four traditional leaders and three Muslim leaders. The results showed that, although religious leaders understood the concept of child protection and undertook measures such as education of the public and provision of psychosocial support for abused children, there were no inter-religious efforts towards child protection in the community. The paper posits that inter-religious engagements for child protection could contribute significantly to the prevention of child abuse in Dzemeni.

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INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is a public health concern in Ghana. Child abuse involves all kinds of maltreatment of children. UNICEF reports that approximately 90% of children in Ghana experience some form of abuse at some point in their lives.¹ These include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect. According to the World Health Organization, child maltreatment includes “all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that result in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, development or dignity.”²

Where violence against children exists, child protection becomes an urgent and appropriate response. The Child and Family Welfare Policy of Ghana indicates that “child protection seeks to guarantee the right of all children to a life free from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.”³ The policy further states that child protection has multiple players, which include children and the youth, families, communities, governments, civil societies, and private organizations. Consequently, religious leaders are

¹ Ghana United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Accra, *Child Protection Mapping: Number and Profile of Institutions Involved in Child Protection in Ghana* (Accra: UNICEF Ghana, 2018).

² World Health Organization, “Child Maltreatment,” 2022, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment#:~:text=It includes all types of,of responsibility%2C trust or power.>

³ Children and Social Protection. Ministry of Gender, “Child and Family Welfare Policy,” 2014, 14.

called upon to institute measures to ensure that children are not harmed.⁴ As a result, all stakeholders are called upon to put in place concrete measures to safeguard children.

Religion is an essential element in the lives of Ghanaians and has a considerable influence on the conduct of the people.⁵ Although Ghana is a secular state, the country is about 94 percent religious, with 71% Christians, 20 percent Muslim, and 3 percent adhering to traditional Religion.⁶ There is a growing interest in the role of religious leaders in the prevention of violence against children because religion is shown to influence violence against children. Further, religion is found to contribute to the safeguarding of children from abuse.⁷

The paper is through the lens that religious leaders play significant roles in the safeguarding of children in Ghana. During the last two years, the Department of Children (under the auspices of the Ministry of Gender Children & Social Protection – MoGCSP) has held a ‘Consultative Workshop with Religious Leaders’ on child protection issues in Ghana. This engagement aims to strengthen religious leaders’ capacity to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, and exploitation, and to protect children affected by violence.⁸

Over the last decade, several governmental and non-governmental efforts have been initiated to address the menace. However, there is limited data on the extent of the role of religious leaders in the fight against child abuse in the area. This study therefore aims to explore the role of Christian, Islamic and Traditional Religious leaders in the fight against child abuse in the community. The paper first examines the background and context of child abuse in Dzemeni. It further explores child protection measures put in place by religious leaders, including inter-religious engagement for child protection efforts in Dzemeni.

Concept of Child Abuse

Child abuse, neglect and exploitation are public health concerns globally and it has been observed that the number of reported cases keeps on increasing.⁹ The concept of child abuse is complex and its definition is influenced by the law and social norms of countries. Globally, the World Health Organization opines that child maltreatment includes “all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that result in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, development or dignity.”¹⁰ Although this concept addresses the key issues in terms of potential or actual harm to the health, dignity and development of the child, unpacking these areas of harm could be complex in the context of Africa. It is difficult to obtain a global prevalence of child abuse. However, it is estimated that approximately, 1 billion children aged 2–17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the year in 2021.¹¹

The Children’s Act of Ghana 1998 (Act 560) indicates that all persons below the age of 18 are considered children. Additionally, the Child and Family Welfare Policy of Ghana construes a child as one “who is still largely dependent on adults for the necessities of life.”¹² This implies that the construction of childhood is influenced by the perspectives of law and social norms. Therefore, child abuse in Ghana could be considered as all forms of maltreatment and violence against persons below the age of 18. Child abuse is not uncommon in Ghanaian communities. Although the data on national prevalence are scant,

⁴ Ministry of Gender Children & Social Protection of Ghana, “Engagement of Religious Leaders on Child Protection.,” 2022,22. <https://www.mogcsp.gov.gh/engagement-with-religious-leaders-on-child>.

⁵ Eric Oduro Wiafe and Joshua Awienagua Gariba, “The Role of Religion in Transforming Ghanaian Society: A Christian Perspective.,” *E-Journal of Religious & Theological Studies (ERATS)* 9, no. 2 (2023): 60–71, 60.

⁶ Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), *Ghana Population and Housing Census: General Report*, vol. 3c (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, 2021), 26.

⁷ Carola Eyber et al., “The Role and Experience of Local Faith Leaders in Promoting Child Protection: A Case Study from Malawi,” *Intervention Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas* 16, no. 1 (2018): 31–37, 31; Victor Ifeanyi Ede and Dominic Zuoke Kalu, “Child Abuse in Nigeria: Responses of Christian Churches and the Way Out,” *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field* 4, no. 4 (2018): 46–53, 46.

⁸ Ministry of Gender Children & Social Protection of Ghana, “Engagement of Religious Leaders on Child Protection.”

⁹ Joav Merrick, Donald E Greydanus, and Vincent J Palusci, “Child Abuse and Neglect in a Historic Perspective.,” *International Journal of Child & Adolescent Health* 10, no. 3 (2017), 275.

¹⁰ World Health Organization, “Child Maltreatment .”

¹¹ World Health Organization, “Child Maltreatment .”

¹² Ministry of Gender, “Child and Family Welfare Policy,” iv.

UNICEF reported that approximately 90% of children in Ghana have experienced some form of abuse.¹³ The abuse may take different forms such as physical, emotional, sexual abuse, exploitation and neglect.¹⁴

A growing number of children are vulnerable, making them susceptible to violence and abuse. The vulnerability of children includes those who are orphans, exposed to abuse, neglect and exploitation.¹⁵ Recent data from the Population and Housing Census revealed some vulnerability of children in Ghana.¹⁶ It was reported that about one-third of the population under 18 years of age representing 3,862,259 children, is multidimensionally poor; more than a million (1,215,546) children aged 4 to 17 years of age in Ghana are currently not attending school; about 846,627 children have lost at least one parent with over half a million (587,848) having only their mother alive; and approximately, 6,000 children in Ghana, mainly in urban areas, are living without shelter. These realities exacerbate the situation of child abuse.

The realities of child abuse in Ghana are influenced by several factors such as rural-urban migration, divorce or separation, family violence, and the increasing effect of poverty have reduced the ability of families to provide care and protection to children. Also, the poor implementation of legal frameworks for child protection and the low level of resources of institutions tasked with child protection have contributed to the increasing menace of child abuse in the country.¹⁷

Child abuse is a complex and multifaceted field, consequently, all stakeholders and several professionals are called upon to contribute to the response as well as the fight against the menace.¹⁸

Background of Dzemeni

Dzemeni is a typical fishing community located in the South Dayi District in the Volta Region of Ghana. Data from the District Assembly reveals that Dzemeni has vibrant religious activities. Christianity is the predominant religion among the population (88.3 percent), followed by Traditional religion (3.8 %) and Islam (3.3 %). Other religion forms 0.6 % whereas people who do not belong to any religion constitute about four percent.¹⁹

Child abuse, especially in the form of child labour, trafficking and economic exploitation of children is common in Ghanaian fishing communities and Dzemeni is not an exception. Available data points to the fact that child labour, trafficking and exploitation and involvement in hazardous work are most predominant in fishing communities, and at the same time, child protection progress is slow in these communities in Ghana.²⁰ Dzemeni is reported to have a long history of child abuse in Ghana.

In Dzemeni, girls are employed to work as domestic help or vendors in the market, while boys are also involved in fishing and assisting in selling in the market.²¹ Children are also trafficked from neighbouring communities and other parts of the country to work on Volta Lake. Some of the children are not in school due to their involvement in commercial activities such as fishing and selling in the community. In other instances, the children experience all forms of maltreatment and dehumanization since the majority of these children do not live with their own parents, and their caregivers' paid monies to their parents before leasing them for work in Dzemeni. Okyere reports that some of the children are forced into marriage by their masters to either a family or another enslaved child to bring birth to children who will also work for the masters.²² CHRAJ reports that girls engage in scaling and smoking of fish

¹³ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Accra, *Child Protection Mapping: Number and Profile of Institutions Involved in Child Protection in Ghana*.

¹⁴ Ebenezer Tetteh Kpalam and Eva Ahiataku, "An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 9, no. 7 (July 12, 2023): 304–17, <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2023976>.

¹⁵ Paul Alhassan Issahaku, "Understanding Child Abuse in Care Institutions in Ghana as a Child Protection Concern," *Ghana Social Science* 15, no. 1 (2018): 125.

¹⁶ Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), *Ghana Population and Housing Census: General Report*.

¹⁷ Ghana Health Service (GHS), "Capacity and Gaps of Ghana Health Sector's Response to Child Abuse," *Ghana Health Service/UNICEF*, 2018.

¹⁸ Kpalam and Ahiataku, "An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response," 2; Merrick, Greydanus, and Palusci, "Child Abuse and Neglect in a Historic Perspective," 275; Ministry of Gender Children & Social Protection of Ghana, "Engagement of Religious Leaders on Child Protection," 22.

¹⁹ South Dayi District Assembly. News Archives. <http://www.sdda.gov.gh/category/news/> Date of access 22/02/24

²⁰ A. Afram and J. Braimah, "Child Labour, Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery in Ghana," in *The State of Child Protection in Ghana*, ed. K. Frimpong-Manso and M.Z. Imoro (Accra: Participatory Development Associates Limited, 2020), 46–60, 51.

²¹ The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice [CHRAJ], Ghana. A qualitative study child labour in Ghana's fishing communities along the Volta Lake, 2021

²² Samuel Okyere, "Shock and Awe": A Critique of the Ghana-Centric Child Trafficking Discourse," *Anti-Trafficking Review*, no. 9 (2017): 92–105.

without safety equipment, consequently, sustaining a series of injuries. Boys, on the other hand, engage in fishing.²³

There have been several efforts by Governments and non-governmental organizations to help. For instance, it was reported that the South Dayi District organized a one-day training workshop for all stakeholders, including the clergy, traditional leaders, and imams in Dzemeni on Friday, July 22, 2022. The aim was to raise awareness of child tracking and labour, and the need for all stakeholders to join in the fight against the menace.²⁴

Religious Leaders' Engagement in Child Protection

The discussion on child abuse and protection in Ghana cannot be complete without the involvement of religious leaders. The Ghanaian population is made of 71% Christians, 20 percent Muslim, with 3 percent adhering to traditional Religion. This implies that the country is over 94% percent religious. Consequently, in every community, there are churches, mosques, and traditional authorities. Since religion plays a key role in the lives of Ghanaians, so influential figures also are religious leaders in Ghanaian communities. They are trusted and respected by their subjects in all matters in the community.²⁵ Also, religious leaders are the first point of care in times of crisis. Their followers who adhere to the teachings of the faith are more likely to carry out instructions received from their leaders.²⁶

Religious leaders continue to be active players in the pursuit of the wellbeing of children. According to UNICEF, "faith communities were, and have been significantly involved in the advocacy for the protection of millions of vulnerable children even before the inception of the work of UNICEF and government initiatives on child protection."²⁷ In Ghana, the Child and Family Welfare Policy mandates churches to:

*"provide communication and education initiatives that promote positive family values; provide direct help to vulnerable families and serve as their advocates; provide care and support services to families, children and adolescents; and participate in national co-ordination activities to minimize duplication and enhance the establishment of complementary programmes, projects and activities."*²⁸

Child Protection in Churches

Christians believe that children are special gifts from God to parents (Ps. 127:3-5). Kpalam and Light argue that although God gives children to parents, he places the responsibility on Christians to love and care for children, ensuring that no child is harmed.²⁹ A study initiated by World Vision reported that churches play a central role in ending violence against children.³⁰ The report further revealed that church leaders provide support to families and children and engage with formal child protection systems locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally. Christian faith communities are considered key in promoting the safeguarding efforts of children.³¹

Available data revealed that churches in Ghana play a key role in the development and child protection. Some of the activities undertaken by churches include sermon and bible teachings for

²³ The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice [CHRAJ], Ghana. A qualitative study child labour in Ghana's fishing communities along the Volta Lake, 2021

²⁴ South Dayi District Assembly. News Archives. <http://www.sdda.gov.gh/category/news/> Date of access 22/02/24

²⁵ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah, "Trusted and Influential: Religious and Traditional Leaders Can Be Assets in COVID-19 Fight," 2020, 1.

²⁶ Sanny and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah, "Trusted and Influential: Religious and Traditional Leaders Can Be Assets in COVID-19 Fight," 1.

²⁷ [UNICEF] United Nations Children's Fund, *Fulfilling the Commitment to Child Protection in Ghana* (New York: UNICEF, 2021), iii.

²⁸ Ministry of Gender, "Child and Family Welfare Policy."

²⁹ Ebenezer Tetteh, Kpalam and Vernon E. Light, *Our Children: The Place of Child Protection in the Church's Ministry* (Kinder Foundation, 2020), 70.

³⁰ Carola Eyber, Kanykey Jailobaeva, Karin Diaconu, and Alastair Ager. "Faith community contributions to ending violence against children: A final report for World Vision International." Edinburg: World Vision, 2021.

³¹ Eyber et al., "The Role and Experience of Local Faith Leaders in Promoting Child Protection: A Case Study from Malawi"; Ede and Kalu, "Child Abuse in Nigeria: Responses of Christian Churches and the Way Out."

congregation and children on child protection;³² formal education of children;³³ counselling and psychosocial support for children;³⁴ advocacy and media engagement on behalf of children; naming and giving children identity.³⁵ These findings are consistent with other studies in other places in Africa. For example, Palm and Eyber observe that churches' child protection efforts include teaching congregants, re-interpretation of scriptures, beliefs and practices that are used to endorse abuse of children and provide counselling for children and families.³⁶

Child Protection in Islam

The Islamic religion believes that children are gifts from God. And God places the responsibility on parents to care for, nurture and protect them.³⁷ Additionally, the Islamic faith upholds children's rights and, as a result, considers any form of maltreatment and violation of the universal rights of children as child abuse.³⁸ This is supported by Islamic law, which is also against all forms of violence against children and promotes the protection of children from all harm.³⁹ Ridho observed that "when biological parents of a child are incapable of performing their duties towards their child appropriately, Islam transfers the responsibility of caring for the child to the community."⁴⁰ This implies that Islam also places the responsibility on the whole Islamic community to protect children. This concept of God placing the onus on parents and the entire community to care for and protect children could also mean that neglecting this God-given responsibility contributes to child abuse.

It is reported that the Islamic faith requires that children be protected from abuse and violence such as physical, sexual, and economic exploitation, deprived of parental care, armed conflicts, and natural disasters.⁴¹ Consequently, practical measures are expected to be put in place in the Islamic faith community to ensure that children are protected. In Ghana, it is important to explore to what extent the Islamic community in Dzemeni is pursuing the issue of child protection.

Traditional Leaders in Child Protection

The integrative nature of the child protection system in Ghana requires the active participation of traditional leaders. According to the Child and Family Welfare Policy, traditional and community leaders such as elders, chiefs and queen mothers are encouraged to create awareness of child protection issues and provide education through community durbars.⁴² This is because traditional leaders already play an important role in community development. It is observed that community members trust their leaders and are more likely to follow their words than government officials.⁴³ Chiefs and queen mothers play an important role in giving children identity and socialization. In some cases, chiefs and queens settle issues related to child protection among families at the community level.

In a nutshell, the Ghanaian communitarian ethos underlines the notion that it takes a community to raise a child. This is in line with the value system for the notion of Ubuntu, which is crucial in child rearing in Ghana.⁴⁴ It calls on all hands to work to protect children. Therefore, it points to the need for

³² Kpalam and Ahiataku, "An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response," 11.

³³ Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, "An Examination of the Role of Public Theology in the Church's Efforts Toward National Transformation in Ghana," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 9, no. 6 (June 21, 2023): 238–52, <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2023964>.

³⁴ Ebenezer Tetteh Kpalam, "Child Protection in the Church of Pentecost in Winneba Municipality, Ghana," *Religion and Development* 2, no. 2 (2023): 197–212.

³⁵ Kpalam, "Child Protection in the Church of Pentecost in Winneba Municipality, Ghana," 11; Gertrude Otubea Dadey, "The Impact of Christianity on Traditional Naming Ceremony in the New Juaben Traditional Area," *The Cradle of Knowledge: African Journal of Educational and Social Science Research* 10, no. 3 (2022): 104–11.

³⁶ Selina Palm and Carola Eyber, "Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith? How Faith Communities Can Contribute to Ending Violence Against Children," *The Thinker* 98, no. 1 (2024): 37–48.

³⁷ Farhan Amin et al., "A Step toward Next-Generation Advancements in the Internet of Things Technologies," *Sensors* 22, no.20(2022): 8072.

³⁸ Amin et al., "A Step toward Next-Generation Advancements in the Internet of Things Technologies," 5-6.

³⁹ Samee-Ullah Bhat, "Islamic Approach to Prevent the Menace of Child Abuse in the Modern Times," *Social Work Bulletin* 1 (2020), 1.

⁴⁰ Miftahur Ridho, "Islamic perspective on child protection." *Lentera* 17, no. 2 (2015):187-198.

⁴¹ UNICEF, *Al-Azhar University, Children in Islam: Their Care, Upbringing and Protection* (New York: UNICEF, Al-Azhar University, 2005), 51.

⁴² Ministry of Gender, "Child and Family Welfare Policy," 21.

⁴³ Sanny and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah, "Trusted and Influential: Religious and Traditional Leaders Can Be Assets in COVID-19 Fight," 1.

⁴⁴ Kazi Abusaleh et al., "Ubuntu Model as a Child Protection Mechanism: A Comparative Analysis of Nigeria, Ghana, and Bangladesh," *The Ubuntu Practitioner: Social Work Perspectives*, 2023, 589.

religious leaders to find creative ways in the spirit of ubuntu to respond to the threat of child abuse, neglect, labour, and trafficking in Dzemeni.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach, with interviews as the method of data collection. The study aimed to explore respondents' understanding of child abuse and the roles they play in responding to the menace of child abuse in their capacity as leaders to ensure they and their constituents put in measures to safeguard children. The Purposive sampling technique was used because it allows for the selection of suitable participants with the experiences the researcher is interested in.⁴⁵ In all, fifteen religious leaders, comprising eight clergy, four traditional leaders and three Muslim leaders were selected. There were ten males and five females, within the age range of 40-60 years. The reason for less female participation was due to male dominance in terms of leadership roles at the community level in Ghana.

Separate one-on-one, face-to-face interviews were conducted with all the fifteen leaders after their consent was sought. Prior to the commencement of the interview, each participant was taken through questions that guided the interview and were made to seek clarification where necessary. This was also to ensure that they were comfortable responding to all the questions. The main questions were:

How do you understand child protection?; How do you understand child abuse; What are the incidences of child abuse in your community?; What factors contribute to child abuse in your locality?; what is your outfit doing to ensure child protection?; What collaborations exist between your outfit and other religious groups for child protection?; What challenges do you encounter in your child protection efforts?

The responses were carefully noted and analysed using the five steps described by O'Connor and Gibson.⁴⁶ The main focus was to assess where the participants and their respective outfits were in terms of understanding child abuse and measures to ensure the promotion of child protection in Dzemeni.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of the empirical data and discusses the data in light of literature to obtain a clear understanding of the situation in the context of Dzemeni. It touches on the understanding of religious leaders with regards to child abuse and protection, child protection measures as well as challenges encountered by religious leaders in their child protection efforts.

The Concept of Child Abuse

All respondents appreciate the concept of child abuse. There were no significant differences in the understanding of clergy, Muslims, and traditional leaders. For example, one respondent opined *"You are maltreating a child when you give work beyond and above a child, like, heavy load to carry."* Similarly, another participant maintained that *"child abuse is when you deny children of their right to go to school."* This understanding of child abuse is consistent with the World Health Organization's (WHO) concept of child abuse that *"it includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power."*⁴⁷

It was also observed that the incidences of abuse mentioned by respondents related to child labour and trafficking such as selling in the market, head porters, and fishing. Others also mention incidents of lack of sleep for children because they work on the lake all day. One respondent (a queen mother) lamented *"You often see a child, say 5 years, spending the whole night on the lake just because his mother took some money and left him to work."* It was noted that only one respondent cited sexual abuse as an example. It can be concluded that the respondents showed an understanding of child abuse in their context. This

⁴⁵ Friday Nyimbili and Leah Nyimbili, "Types of Purposive Sampling Techniques with Their Examples and Application in Qualitative Research Studies," *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies* 5, no. 1 (2024): 90–99, 98.

⁴⁶ Nancy Gibson and Helene O'Connor, "A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Analysis," *A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 1, no. 1 (2003): 62–90.

⁴⁷ World Health Organization, *Mental Health and COVID-19: Early Evidence of the Pandemic's Impact: Scientific Brief* (World Health Organization, 2022).

confirms Dako-Gyekye's report that religious leaders have an adequate understanding of child abuse and the diverse types of abuse that occur in their communities.⁴⁸

Religious Understanding of Child Protection

The study also investigated the understanding of the respondents about child protection. The participants understood child protection to be all efforts to ensure children are not harmed. On the notion of child protection, analysis of the responses showed no difference with regard to the concept of child protection among Christians, Muslims, and traditional leaders. One respondent opined that child protection is "not allowing anyone to harm children, either at home, school, or the community." Similarly, another participant said child protection "is *all about ensuring that all children of school-going age are in school and not in the market or on the lake fishing.*" Examination of the responses showed that the understanding of religious surveyed agreed with the notion of child protection as contained in the Child and Family Welfare Policy of Ghana and the Children's Act (Acts 560) of Ghana that child protection "seeks to guarantee the right of all children to a life free from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect." Additionally, the policy opines that child protection has multiple players, such as children and youth, families, communities, government, civil society, and private organizations. The concept of child protection as the responsibility of multiplayer is part of the construction of the respondents. For instance, one respondent intimated that child protection is "what we all have to do to ensure children are not harmed." This implies that religious leaders had the understanding that they had a role to play in ending the menace of child abuse and exploitation in the community.

It was noted from the responses that their concept of child protection is linked to the issues of abuse in their context. This is an indication of an adequate understanding of child protection among the religious leaders surveyed. This supports earlier studies that religious leaders have a good grasp of the concept of child protection. Kpalam revealed that church leaders in the Church of Pentecost in Winneba, Ghana hold an appreciable notion of child protection.⁴⁹ It also reported from a study in Malawi that religious leaders identified several child protection concerns in their communities.⁵⁰ The extent to which this understanding influences the practical actions and programmes put in place to ensure the protection of children is the focus of the section below.

Measures put in place to ensure Child Protection

The study also sought to investigate specific measures put in place by Christian, Islamic and traditional religious leaders, including inter-religious engagements for child protection in Dzemeni. This is in light of the fact religious leaders continue to play significant roles in the safeguarding efforts of children. This section discusses the findings in relation to the measures that leaders have put in to ensure the safeguarding of children in the community. The study revealed that all the leaders surveyed indicated that their outfits are making some efforts aimed at child protection in the Dzemeni community.

a. Church leaders

Churches are the most dominant religious groups in Dzemeni. This makes the role of Christian religious leaders important in the fight against child abuse in the area. It was observed that among other things, specific child protection measures put in place by churches include education and advocacy, provision of counselling and psychological support as well as financial assistance to alleviate poverty.

Firstly, awareness creation through the education of church members and the entire community was the main programme that had been put in place by the Christian religious leaders. All Christian religion respondents indicated that educating the congregants is the main activity they engage in. Education is done during Sunday church services as well as at dedicated events that focus on children or family life issues. For example, one respondent revealed, "*Every year, we have one week dedicated to marriage and life and we make sure that child protection and parenting issues are our focus.*" Another respondent intimated "*We usually preach sermons on God's mandate for us to ensure the children are taken care of so that they don't become wayward.*" It was observed that the education by churches centred

⁴⁸ Mavis Dako-Gyekye, "Perspectives of key informants on child abuse: qualitative evidence from northern Ghana." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 36, no. 2 (2019): 155.

⁴⁹ Kpalam and Ahiataku, "An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response," 10.

⁵⁰ Eyber et al., "The Role and Experience of Local Faith Leaders in Promoting Child Protection: A Case Study from Malawi," 1.

on teachings of the bible to protect children. The sermons also highlighted the civil responsibility of leaders and institutions to protect children.

Also, some of the respondents demonstrated knowledge of the laws created by the state which require that all children of school-going age be in school. One of the respondents indicated, *“We often tell them what the Bible says about training children in the way of the Lord and also the policy of the state to make sure children go to school.”* Another stated, *“I remember how I often tell them that it is illegal to give their children out for fishing when they are supposed to be in school.”* Furthermore, education is also provided in small group meetings and during home visits. Three of the respondents referred the fact that they provide awareness during women's group meetings and men's ministry meetings. A church leader stated, *“In our church, we have different meetings for women and men once every month and sometimes, we invite experts to talk to us about how to protect our children from exploitation.”* Another asserted, *“Sometimes, during visits to homes, we observed child abuse issues, we take the opportunity to educate the parents”*. Evidently, the role of religious leaders in educating their members on child protection is key to preventing child abuse. This is because, it meets the expectation of religious leaders by the Child and Family Welfare Policy, which requires churches to “provide communication and education- initiatives aimed at helping their members to promote the welfare of children.”⁵¹ Palm and Eyber revealed that teaching congregants through sermons, bible studies, and weekly messages on child protection are a significant role by church leaders in their effort to ensure the safeguard of children.⁵² Also, Kpalam observed among church leaders in the Church of Pentecost in Winneba that education of the congregation is the major child protection activity in the church’s ministry.⁵³

Another aspect of the efforts by church leaders is counselling for children and families who are experiencing abuse. Some leaders showed that counselling has helped respond to child abuse issues. For instance, one respondent narrated, *“Sometimes, child abuse brings confusion in families and these issues come to our knowledge, we step in to provide counselling for the families to bring peace.”* Similarly, another church leader said, *“Sometimes, the issue is delicate because if it is not handled well, it can destroy the marriage, so we have to quickly come in to help.”* From the study, it was observed that these supports to families contribute to a safe environment for children. This measure agrees with the Child and Family Welfare Policy which mandates churches to provide counselling to vulnerable children and their families.⁵⁴

Intricately linked to counselling is the provision of financial support. This is because poverty is an underlying issue of child abuse in the community. Some parents give their children out for fishing, fish processing and selling due to poverty. UNICEF (2018), reports that children who are not in school engage in risky behaviours such as child labour, child trafficking and exploitation. It was observed that some churches provide financial support in the areas of school supplies to keep the children in school. According to one respondent, *“Sometimes, we paid registration fees and buy books for children in JHS because, they go fishing and selling in the market to find money for school... we do it because, you can see that truly, the parents cannot afford.”* In this case, church aid reduces child labour and exploitation. This agrees with the demand of the Child and Family Welfare Policy to support children and their families.⁵⁵

Islam

Islam is the second most common religious group in Dzemeni. With regard to child protection efforts, the study observed that the education of congregants in mosques was the key to addressing child abuse. Some Islamic leaders preach sermons on the safeguarding of children on Fridays. One Iman said, *“Since I came here, I realized we have a big problem of children not in school, so we keep educating parents and children about the importance of going to school.”* It was noticed that the children are also educated about their role in safeguarding their lives. One leader indicated, *“We teach children also about the dangers of selling in the market instead of being in school.”* It could be said empowerment of children in their own protection

⁵¹ Ministry of Gender, “Child and Family Welfare Policy,” 22.

⁵² Palm and Eyber, “Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith? How Faith Communities Can Contribute to Ending Violence Against Children,” 40-43.

⁵³ Kpalam and Ahiataku, “An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response.”

⁵⁴ Ministry of Gender, “Child and Family Welfare Policy,” 22.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Gender, “Child and Family Welfare Policy,” 22.

is key. It is consistent with the Islamic teachings. For example, a companion of the prophet, Ali bin Abi Thalib observed, “*Teach your children things you did not learn when you were their age for, they have been created for a time that is different from your time.*”⁵⁶ Studies have shown that empowering children helps them protect themselves and other children from abuse and exploitation. Kpalam and Light have argued that children have the potential to play an active role in child protection. Similarly, it is reported that empowering children contributes to helping children help themselves and other children.⁵⁷

Another measure of child protection is sponsorship for the education of children whose parents cannot afford it. According to Islamic leaders, poverty is a common cause of child labour in the area. Consequently, local mosques have set aside funds to support children of members in need. One leader revealed, “*We know that the problem is poverty, so if we find that problem, we take money from our scholarship funds to support children to be in school.*” The respondents reported that this measure has produced meaningful results. For example, one respondent said, “*When it was noticed that some of our children go to the market to sell and serve as head potters, we discovered that their parents cannot support them and so we put in measures to help.*” This finding is consistent with Islamic continuous support for the secular education of children in Ghana. There is evidence that locals collaborate with reports that NGOs adhering to Islamic principles in their mission or programmatic offerings worked through local mosques to provide scholarships to support needy children to stay in school.⁵⁸ Ensuring children are enrolled in school and stay until they finish contributes to a significant reduction in child labour and abuse in the country. This is because children who are not in school are prone to child labour.

Traditional Religion

In this study, traditional leaders included chiefs and queen mothers. The finding revealed that traditional leaders are also involved in raising awareness of child abuse in the community. The queen mothers were active in the regular education of women in their constituency. One of the queen mothers stated, “*Because of this issue, we talk to the women about the importance of sending their children to school and not to the market.*” The involvement of traditional leaders in education on child abuse and protection is in line with the Child and Family Welfare Policy which encourages traditional leaders to create awareness about child abuse and neglect.⁵⁹ In the same vein, Tahiru observes that the traditional leader undertakes education and sensitization of community members on the elimination of poverty.⁶⁰

Another key role of chiefs and queen mothers observed in the study is resolving conflicts regarding the upkeep of children. Sometimes, when mothers feel that fathers have neglected their responsibility to take care of their children, the issue is reported to traditional leaders. According to one of the chiefs, “*Every now and then, we resolve conflicts between families because sometimes there is disagreement among parents as to whether a child should be in school or go fishing.*” It could be argued that this measure of child protection is consistent with the provision of the Child and Family that indicates to step in to resolve conflicts in families with regard to child neglect.⁶¹

Collaboration among the Religious Leaders

The study also sought to find out what collaborations exist among religious leaders in Dzemeni for child protection. It was observed that there was no form of collaboration among the Christian, Muslim, and Traditional religious leaders to foster child protection. Additionally, there was no collaboration among religious leaders and other stakeholders, except for one Christian leader who cited a collaboration with an NGO to provide education to children. An earlier study by Kpalam also revealed that there was no strategic alliance among the local churches surveyed in the Church of Pentecost in the Winneba Municipality of

⁵⁶ UNICEF, *Al-Azhar University, Children in Islam: Their Care, Upbringing and Protection*, 36.

⁵⁷ Ansie Fouche, Elmiën Truter, and Daniël F. Fouché. "Safeguarding children in South African townships against child sexual abuse: The voices of our children." *Child abuse review* 28, no. 6 (2019): 455.

⁵⁸ Yahaya Halidu and Alhassan Abdul-Rahman, "History of Foreign Partnership in the Development of Islamic Education in Ghana (1980s & 1990s)," *International Journal of Social and Humanities Sciences Research (JSHSR)* 11, no. 108 (2024): 1249–56, 1252; Sandy Zook and Cassidy Arndt, "Islamic NGOs in Education in Ghana: Analysis of the Scope, Activities, and Revenue Portfolios," *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies* 2, no. 2 (2021): 57–81, 57.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Gender, "Child and Family Welfare Policy," 21.

⁶⁰ Latifu Tahiru, "The Role of Traditional Authorities in the Implementation of the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) Cash Transfer Programme in Krachi East, Ghana," *ASC-TUFS Working Papers* 4 (2024): 11–38.

⁶¹ Ministry of Gender, "Child and Family Welfare Policy."

Ghana.⁶² The absence of collaboration could be due to the fact that religious groups do not have concrete measures to combat child protection in the community. The findings revealed that Christian, Muslim, and Traditional leaders focus their interventions on their congregations only. There are no efforts to address the problem in the whole community. The lack of community-mindedness in the intervention of religious groups falls short of the expectations outlined in the Child and Family Welfare Policy of Ghana.

Challenges with Regard to Child Protection

The study revealed that religious leaders encounter some challenges in their efforts to promote child protection in Dzemeni. It was reported that some parents and caregivers consider child labour as a social-career orientation and not abuse. In this notion, caregivers considered child labour as a form of training for the children to learn their vocation and to become responsible citizens. For example, a fisherman believes that his child needs to learn fishing while a fishmonger is convinced that it is her responsibility to teach her children the intricacies of the occupation. One respondent lamented “*I am just tired, anytime you try to talk to some parents, they think you do not want their children to help them and also learn the job.*” According to Afram and Braimah the cultural practice whereby it is child labour is acceptable as cheap labour for family business is a major obstacle to the fight against child labour, especially, in fishing communities.⁶³

Another challenge observed is poverty. It was observed that some parents give out their children for fishing because they claim they need money to cater for the family. Poverty has been cited as a major factor in child abuse in Ghana. Dako-Gyeke observed that poverty negatively impacts child protection in Ghana.⁶⁴ Similarly, Kpalam and Ahiataku maintain that poverty perpetrates and maintains child sexual abuse in Ghana.⁶⁵ This is because in some cases, the perpetrators are breadwinners of the family.

Associated with poverty is the issue of child trafficking. Some of the children have been trafficked to the area to work in the fishing industry. As a result, it is difficult to trace their parents when one notices abuse by their masters. One participant reported, “*There is a 7-year-old boy that is been physically abused on the lake by his master, but our investigation showed that no one in the community knows the parents.*” This situation makes it difficult for religious leaders to function as another response indicated that “*it is better to collaborate with the parents to get the child out of abuse because when you attempt, they ask if the child is yours.*” This is a key issue in fishing communities in Ghana. This finding is similar to a report by the International Justice Mission (IJM) which in 2015 indicated that 58% of children working in fishing on the Volta Lake were trafficked into forced labour, while one-fifth of the children were six years or younger.

From the ongoing analysis, education on the prevention of child abuse was vigorously pursued by leaders of all religious groups. However, educational campaigns by religious leaders focused only on their congregations. Child protection educational campaigns did not have a community focus. This is inconsistent with the value system for the notion of Ubuntu, which is crucial in child rearing in Ghana.⁶⁶ One would have thought that given the fact that Dzemeni is historically noted for child labour and abuse, religious leaders will be more visible, and their voices will be heard in the community. The advocacy role of the religious voices is missing in the fight against child abuse. It could be concluded that although religious leaders are trusted by communities, they did not extend their ministry of child protection to the community.

Also, there are no child protection policy guidelines, especially for churches and mosques in the community. This could have contributed to a lack of coordinated child protection efforts among the leaders. Better still, even though the religious leaders surveyed have knowledge of child labour and trafficking in the community, no mention was made of reporting any incident to the police. Lack of disclosure and reporting of child abuse by religious leaders to relevant state authorities constitute a significant gap in the mandate of the Child and Family Welfare Policy that requires religious and

⁶² Kpalam and Ahiataku, “An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response.”

⁶³ Afram and Braimah, “Child Labour, Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery in Ghana,” 59.

⁶⁴ Dako-Gyeke, “Perspectives of key informants on child abuse: qualitative evidence from northern Ghana.” 155.

⁶⁵ Ebenezer Tetteh Kpalam and Eva Ahiataku, “An Ecclesial Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Ghana: Implications for Pastoral Response.,” *E-Journal of Religious & Theological Studies (ERATS)* 9, no. 7 (2023), 705.

⁶⁶ Abusaleh et al., “Ubuntu Model as a Child Protection Mechanism: A Comparative Analysis of Nigeria, Ghana, and Bangladesh,” 589.

community leaders to collaborate with state agencies for the promotion of the safeguarding of children in the country. More comprehensive and practical measures, including reporting of child abuse cases to law enforcement agencies, are required, especially, in an endemic area of child labour, trafficking and commercial exploitation of children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, it is recommended that churches and mosques in Dzemeni develop child protection guidelines that will ensure a well-coordinated child protection effort, including the formation of community child protection teams. Furthermore, religious leaders in the community should forge strategic alliances among themselves and other stakeholders to develop context-specific programmes and activities that will respond appropriately to the menace of child abuse in the area. Finally, further research on the perspectives of religious leaders with regard to inter-religious leaders' engagement in child protection is imperative.

CONCLUSION

Child protection is a public issue and an endemic problem in Dzemeni. Using empirical data, the research sought to find out the religious leaders' understanding of child abuse and measures put in place to ensure the safeguarding of children, including inter-religious leaders' engagement in child protection. It was observed that the respondents understood the notion of child abuse and child protection. Some of the child safeguarding measures include education of congregants, provision of psychosocial support, support for education and conflict resolution in families regarding child abuse issues. Poverty, child neglect, and child labour as social-career orientation were the major factors hindering child protection efforts in the area. In spite of these measures, there was no inter-religious engagement for child protection. Also, there were no specific child protection guidelines for churches and mosques in Dzemeni. The study concluded that religious leaders are living below the expectations regarding their engagement with child protection in Dzemeni. More work needs to be done to protect children.

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