Psychosocial Vulnerabilities and Support Needs of Child Victims in Kete Krachi, Lake Volta: Implications for Child Protection Practice

[1]Dominic Garibah Mensah, [2]Julius Jerry Agortey,[3] Stephen Kyenkyehene Addae,[4] Abubakari Alhassan

[1]Atebubu College of Education, Bono East Region, Accra

[2]St. Francis College of Education, Hohoe

[3]St. Monica's College of Education, Asante Mampong

[4]Berekum College of Education, Berekum

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ABSTRACT

Child victimization in the fishing industry has become a global humanitarian concern, as children across regions are increasingly subjected to exploitative practices that threaten their physical, emotional, and social well-being. In Ghana, Kete Krachi on Lake Volta is a major hub of child victims in artisanal fisheries, where children face harsh working conditions, long hours, and severe abuses, often resulting in profound psychosocial problems. Despite international attention, limited scholarship has examined the psychosocial consequences of child victims in Ghana's fishing industry, particularly regarding their rehabilitation. This study, grounded in Social Capital Theory, explores the psychosocial problems experienced by child victims in Kete Krachi and demonstrates the role of physical education and sports (PES) as a psychosocial tool for reintegration. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through purposive and snowball sampling, including interviews with ten former child victims and two focus group discussions with community leaders and NGO rescuers. Thematic analysis revealed psychosocial consequences as worthlessness, emotional regulation struggles, and self-isolation, stemming from their emotional, physical, and sexual abuses. However, participation in team-based sports activities helped victims to rebuild trust, confidence, and social networks. The study concludes that PES offers a culturally adaptable and effective approach to psychosocial rehabilitation, while also contributing to the literature on child victims, sport-for-development, and social reintegration.

Keywords: Child victims, psychosocial problems, child victimization, Lake Volta, Ghana, physical education, sports rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

The fishing industry plays a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods, food security, and economic development across the globe. Millions of people depend directly on fisheries and aquaculture for subsistence and income, while many more rely on fish as a primary source of dietary protein (FAO, 2010; Lam et al., 2012; Pauly & Zeller, 2017). Yet, beneath its socio-economic contributions lies a troubling reality: fisheries are among the industries most associated with work exploitation, human trafficking, and human rights abuses (ILO, 2012; Derks, 2010). One of the most disturbing dimensions of this exploitation is child labour activities.

Globally, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2013) estimates that millions of children are engaged in hazardous work, including in fisheries, where they are deprived of education and exposed to abuses, injuries, and long-term developmental harm. In the fishing sector, children are often trafficked, coerced, or socially pressured into roles that undermine their basic rights. Tasks typically involve casting and hauling nets, sorting fish, diving to untangle traps, salting and smoking and processing fish, and transporting loads in dangerous conditions. For many, work begins before the age of ten, and it often extends into adolescence, robbing them of childhood and opportunities for formal education (Adeborna & Johnson, 2015).

Universally, the phenomenon is not confined to a single region but manifests globally in diverse forms. In Latin America, particularly in El Salvador, children are found harvesting shellfish in small-scale family enterprises, where boys and girls alike contribute from a very young age. Girls often supplement this work by selling the catch in local markets, thus combining labour-intensive harvesting with economic responsibilities (Iversen, 2006). In the Philippines, the infamous *Muro Ami* fishing system deploys children as swimmers and divers,

forcing them to chase fish into nets in hazardous waters, frequently at the cost of serious injury or death (Bonnet & Schlemmer, 2009; Olofson et al., 2000). Similar patterns emerge in southern Thailand, where children serve as factory workers, fish sorters, or crew members on deep-sea vessels that remain offshore for months. Their duties range from net repair to food preparation under harsh supervision, with some children subjected to confinement and physical punishment (Pearson et al., 2006; Morin, 2012).

In Africa, child victims in fisheries are also prevalent. In Uganda, children work long hours alongside adult fishers, frequently without safety equipment and with little to no compensation. Younger children (under 14) are typically relegated to supporting tasks, such as preparing bait or assisting in processing, but even these roles place them at risk of physical injury and emotional trauma (Walakira, 2010). Reports from Nigeria and Sierra Leone further reveal that children are commonly engaged in artisanal fishing, often compelled by poverty to contribute to household income at the expense of schooling (Agbesi, 2016; Margaret, 2009). These patterns underscore the pervasiveness of child victims in fisheries worldwide, linking the problem to structural poverty, sociocultural practices, and weak enforcement of labour rights.

In Ghana, while known for its vibrant fisheries sector, it has also become a site of severe child exploitation, particularly on Lake Volta, the world's largest man-made lake. Estimates suggest that between 4,000 and 10,000 children are trafficked annually into fisheries along the Lake Volta (Briffett, 2019; Hamenoo et al., 2015; Ratner, 2014). Employers, primarily boat owners, actively seek child workers due to their vulnerability, physical agility, tiny fingers, and low bargaining power. Many are recruited under pretenses, with promises of food, education, and wages that are rarely fulfilled (Cornell University, 2011).

The socio-economic context of Kete Krachi, a key town situated on a peninsula along Lake Volta, exacerbates this problem. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of social protection systems push families into desperate trade-offs, often accepting as little as fifty U.S. dollars from traffickers in exchange for their children's work (Adeborna & Johnson, 2015). Cultural traditions also reinforce the practice. Among Tongu households, fishing skills are considered an essential part of socialization, and children are expected to inherit their parents' trade. What begins as "light work" within the family is often distorted by outsiders into full-scale exploitation, where children are subjected to forced work, long hours, and abusive conditions (Novignon et al., 2012). Debt bondage compounds the problem, as parents' financial obligations are transferred onto children, binding them to exploitative masters.

Children working on Lake Volta face harrowing conditions. They dive into deep waters to untangle nets, exposing themselves to drowning, waterborne diseases, and attacks by reptiles. Others haul heavy loads, mend nets, or engage in fish smoking under hazardous environments. Girls, in particular, are vulnerable to sexual abuse, coercion, and harassment from masters and their sons (Solidarity Centre, 2008). These abuses create not only immediate harm but also long-term psychosocial scars.

The psychosocial problems or the consequences of child victims are not only physical but also deeply psychological and sexual. Victims often report worthlessness, stemming from constant verbal abuse, humiliation, and the internalization of inferiority (Ahuja, 2018). Emotional regulation struggles and self-isolation are common, as children avoid peers or public spaces out of shame, fear, or stigmatization. Many also struggle with depression, anxiety, and hopelessness, unable to envision a future beyond exploitation (Ahad et al., 2021).

Physical abuse-slapping, beating, or inflicting injuries-creates trauma that manifests in aggression, fear, and mistrust. Emotional abuse, such as insults and constant belittlement, strips children of their dignity, fostering alienation and despair. Sexual abuse is particularly devastating; female victims often recount experiences of coercion, molestation, and forced intimacy, leading to feelings of worthlessness, unwanted pregnancies, and lifelong distrust of men (Audu, Geidam & Jarma, 2009; Parcesepe et al., 2016). These psychosocial consequences persist well into adulthood if left unaddressed, creating cycles of trauma that affect victims, families, and communities.

The reality in Kete Krachi illustrates how child victims are entrapped in cycles of vulnerability, with exploitation undermining their education, health, and psychosocial development. What is striking, however, is the relative paucity of scholarly focus on the psychosocial dimensions of child victims. While economic and legal aspects

have received significant attention, the lived emotional and social consequences of victims remain underexplored, especially in the Ghanaian fishing industry.

In spite of these challenges, physical education and sports (PES) as a psychosocial tool emerged as a promising pathway for psychosocial rehabilitation. Play and physical activity are central to child development, fostering cooperation, resilience, and self-confidence. Studies have shown that structured participation in sports contributes to emotional stability, cognitive development, and social integration (Bailey, 2006; Henley et al., 2007; Sibley & Etnier, 2003). Team sports, in particular, cultivate trust, reciprocity, and solidarity, enabling victims of trauma to rebuild fractured social networks (Coakley, 2011; Svenson & Levin, 2017).

For child victims in Kete Krachi, who have endured self-isolation, emotional regulation struggles, sexual abuse, and loss of trust, PES offers a space for recovery. Through cooperative activities, they rediscover self-worth, learn to trust peers and mentors, and develop resilience against psychosocial stressors. Far from being mere recreation, PES functions as a psychosocial tool that transforms vulnerability into empowerment, making it central to rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.

Theory

To analyze how PES contributes to psychosocial recovery, this study draws on Social Capital Theory. This framework emphasizes the value of social networks, trust, and reciprocity as resources for individual and collective well-being.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to networks of mutual acquaintance and recognition. For Bourdieu, social capital is inseparable from power and inequality: it reflects the benefits derived from group membership, but also the exclusions it creates. Coleman (1990) shifted the focus to the functions of social capital, emphasizing obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness as the foundations for cooperative behaviour. His formulation highlights how social capital facilitates action within a social structure.

Lin (2001) elaborated on this perspective by defining social capital as "resources embedded in social networks, accessed and mobilized for purposive action." Lin underscores the instrumental role of social capital, stressing how networks enable access to resources unavailable to isolated individuals. Putnam (1993, 2000) popularized the civic dimension of social capital, describing how trust, reciprocity, and networks improve the efficiency of societies by facilitating coordination and cooperation.

Within Social Capital Theory, two dimensions are particularly relevant: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding capital arises from strong ties within homogeneous groups, such as family or close friends, fostering solidarity, identity, and emotional support (Putnam, 2000). Bridging capital, by contrast, emerges from weaker ties across diverse groups, expanding access to new resources, opportunities, and perspectives (Woodcock, 2001). Both are essential for the psychosocial recovery of child victims. Bonding capital provides the emotional foundation, support, care, and trust, while bridging capital creates pathways to reintegration into broader social networks, including schools, communities, and institutions.

Critiques of social capital theory caution against its limitations. Bourdieu (1986) noted that social capital can reinforce inequalities, as networks may exclude outsiders. Putnam (2000) also recognized that strong bonding capital, while supportive, can foster conformity and exclusion. Yet, these critiques highlight rather than diminish the potential of PES. By creating inclusive, structured environments where children participate in sports irrespective of background, PES nurtures both bonding and bridging capital, countering isolation and exclusion.

For child victims in Kete Krachi, participation in PES rebuilds trust, reciprocity, and solidarity. Team sports encourage cooperation, shared responsibility, and mutual respect. Coaches and mentors serve as bridging agents, connecting victims to new opportunities and support systems. As Glanville and Bienenstock (2009) argue, social capital can be conceptualized through network density, trust or reciprocity, and resource mobilization. Applied here, PES enhances network density through repeated interaction, strengthens trust through cooperative play, and provides psychosocial resources such as resilience, confidence, and social skills.

Empirical studies reinforce this application. Bailey (2006) observed that PES contributes significantly to cognitive, affective, and social development, while Dubey (2017) demonstrated the rehabilitative potential of martial arts (Taekwondo) for marginalized children. Henley et al. (2007) similarly found that sports participation aids trauma recovery, building resilience and social reintegration. By fostering both bonding and bridging social capital, PES provides a structured means of transforming psychosocial deficits into psychosocial assets, facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration of child victims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child victims have long been recognized as a global challenge, particularly in developing countries where poverty, unemployment, and cultural practices intersect to drive children into exploitative work. The ILO (2012) estimates that more than 160 million children worldwide are engaged in child work, with over half of them in hazardous conditions. Among these, fisheries rank among the most dangerous sectors, exposing children to long hours, harsh environments, and frequent abuse.

Psychosocial consequences of child victims are significant but have historically received less scholarly attention than economic or legal aspects. Research indicates that children in exploitative work are more likely to suffer from depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety disorders (Gelles & Straus, 1979; Nopembri & Sugiyama, 2015). In Indonesia, for example, child domestic workers reported persistent fear, humiliation, and withdrawal due to maltreatment by employers (Kumar & Fonagy, 2013). Similarly, in South Asia, trafficked children in fishing and brick kilns reported feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, hopelessness, and despair (Parcesepe et al., 2016).

This study also highlights long-term effects, including intergenerational cycles of poverty and trauma. Basu and Van (1998) observed that child victims lead to underinvestment in education, perpetuating low human capital and reinforcing poverty across generations. Emotional scars from abuse, particularly sexual and physical, translate into long-term behavioural disorders, relationship difficulties, and chronic mental health conditions (Audu, Geidam & Jarma, 2009; Abdalla et al., 2018).

In Africa, child victims in fisheries have been documented across Uganda, Nigeria, and Ghana. Walakira (2010) noted that Ugandan children often worked for long hours without safety equipment, exposing them to drowning, injury, and exhaustion. Margaret (2009) reported similar conditions in Nigeria, where children contributed to artisanal fishing while being denied education. These findings reveal how child victims in fisheries across Africa are closely linked to structural poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and sociocultural norms.

Psychosocial problems are evident in these contexts. Alem (2020) found that African child victims frequently experience trauma, isolation, and depression. Emotional abuse, often through verbal humiliation or neglect, compounds the physical dangers of fishing tasks. Girls are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, leading to early pregnancies, social stigmatization, and rejection from family or community structures (Fawole & Dagunduro, 2014).

Ghana’s Lake Volta is emblematic of child victims' exploitation. Research suggests that thousands of children, some as young as six, are trafficked annually to work in fisheries around Kete Krachi (Briffett, 2019; Reid Maki, 2013). Poverty remains the principal driver, with families accepting payments from traffickers to relieve immediate economic pressures (Adeborna & Johnson, 2015). However, cultural practices also play a role. Among Tongu communities in Ghana, fishing skills are considered essential for socialization, but this tradition is often exploited by traffickers who promise training while subjecting children to abuse (Novignon et al., 2012).

Psychosocial effects in Ghana mirror global findings but are exacerbated by the specific conditions of Lake Volta. Children are routinely exposed to life-threatening tasks such as diving to untangle nets. Many experience beatings, insults, and verbal abuse, leading to feelings of worthlessness and despair. Girls often suffer sexual harassment from boat owners and their sons, resulting in trauma, pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, and rejection (Solidarity Centre, 2008). Emotional regulation struggles, worthlessness, emotional withdrawal, fear and mistrust, and isolation are common outcomes (Ahad et al., 2021).

Scholars increasingly emphasize the role of physical education and sports (PES) in psychosocial rehabilitation. Bailey (2006) argued that PES contributes to children's cognitive, affective, and social development, promoting resilience and confidence. Henley et al. (2007) found that sports participation helps trauma survivors rebuild social trust and emotional stability. Dubey (2017), in a study on Taekwondo, demonstrated that sports can function as a "hook" for engaging disadvantaged children, fostering cooperation and resilience.

In Ghana, while PES is widely practiced, its potential as a deliberate psychosocial tool for child victims has not been fully explored. This gap underscores the relevance of the current study, which examines how PES can transform the psychosocial experiences of child victims in Kete Krachi from isolation and despair to confidence and social reintegration.

Study Design

Kete Krachi, a town situated on Lake Volta, was the location of the study. Fishing is a significant activity in the Municipality due to its location near the Volta Lake and the Oti River in Ghana and its immediate villages, as Ehiamankyene, Osramani, and Kate Krachi, the Municipal Capital. Krachi was chosen as the research site because of its primary role in Ghana's inland fisheries, the high prevalence of child victims, and its reputation as a transit hub for trafficked children. The Municipal Capital, where Krachi is located as the capital, has a population of over 61,128 people (GSS, 2021), with fishing and farming as the dominant economic activities. Poverty rates remain high, social protection systems are weak, and children are frequently engaged in fishing-related work to supplement family income. These structural conditions make Krachi and its surrounding communities an ideal setting for exploring the psychosocial problems of child victims.

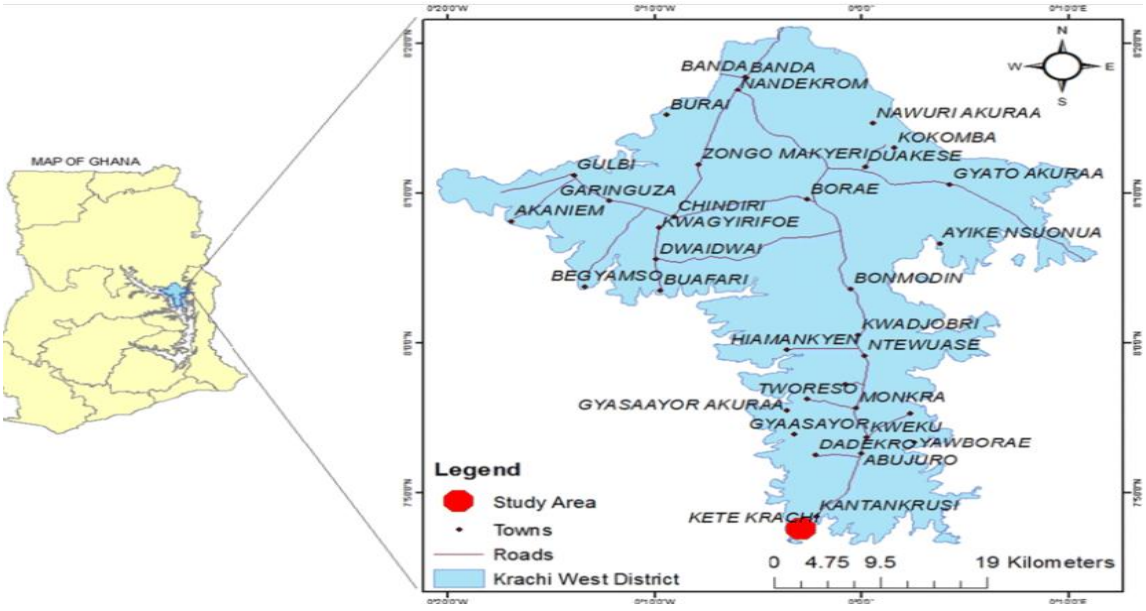

Figure 1: Source: Adapted from Krachi West District Assembly 2010

The study adopted a qualitative case study design, consistent with Yin's (2003) view that case studies are appropriate for investigating contemporary social phenomena within a real-life context. Child victims on Lake Volta are deeply embedded in the socioeconomic and cultural life of fishing communities, making it difficult to separate the phenomenon from its context. A case study design was therefore well-suited to capture the complex lived experiences of child victims, their psychosocial challenges, and the role of physical education and sports (PES) in rehabilitation.

To strengthen validity and depth, a collective case study approach was used (Stake, 2008). This enabled the study to draw insights from multiple groups: ex-child victims, local community leaders, and NGO, creating a broader picture of the problem.

The study relied on snowball sampling to recruit child victims, as this group was difficult to access due to the sensitivity of child victims and the risks associated with disclosure. Initial contact was made with three ex-child

victims who had a personal rapport with the researcher. These three equally led me to others, which finally made me recruit 14 more child victims. Out of these 14 ex-child victims, 10 of them were finally interviewed in-depth due to data saturation, as there were no new themes or perspectives that emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Boddy, 2016).

Below was the demographic background of these 10 ex-child victims who were rescued by the International Justice Mission (IJM) Ghana and housed in their Shelter.

Table 1.: The Demographics of Rescued Ex-Child Victims (Ex-CV) on Lake Volta at Kete Krachi

Ex-Child Victims Participants	**Gender**	**Age/ Year**	**Hometown**	**Parents Status**	**Years at the Shelter**	**Drop Out of School**
Ex-Child Victim-1	M	15	Salpong	Father-Dead & Mother-Dead	9 months	P-4
Ex-Child Victim-2	F	17	Battor	Father-Dead & Mother-Alive	5 months	P-6
Ex-Child Victim-3	M	15	Senya Breku	Father-Alive & Mother-Alive	12 months	P-6
Ex-Child Victim-4	M	14	Battor	Father-Alive & Mother-Alive	9 months	P-5
Ex-Child Victim-5	F	13	Apam	Father-Dead & Mother-Alive	6 months	P-4
Ex-Child Victim-6	F	15	Battor	Father-Dead & Mother-Alive	13 months	P-4
Ex-Child Victim-7	M	14	Senya Breku	Father-Dead & Mother-Dead	12 months	P-4
Ex-Child Victim-8	M	14	Salpong	Father-Dead & Mother-Alive	7 months	P-4
Ex-Child Victim-9	F	15	Senya Breku	Father-Dead & Mother-Alive	11 months	P-5
Ex-Child Victim-10	M	18	Big Ada	Father-Dead & Mother-Alive	10months	JHS-1

(Source: Interview Guide-Section 1)

The range of participants was between 13 and 18 years, with almost all of them coming from the coastal communities such as Senya Breku, Battor, Salpong, and Battor. A significant number of them were semi-orphans, with two apiece having either father or mother dead or alive. Several of them were dropouts at the primary level, with only one at the Junior High level before their rescue.

In addition to the ex-child victims, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized, based on purposive sampling. Research participants were deliberately selected based on their knowledge and experiences with child victims on the peninsula of Lake Volta at Krachi.

Data collection occurred between February and May 2024. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the 10 ex-child victims. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that allowed flexibility for probing while maintaining consistency across participants. Questions explored children's backgrounds, experiences of work on the lake, psychosocial challenges, and coping strategies. Each interview lasted between forty minutes and one hour. The interview was conducted at a safe location chosen by the research participants themselves (shelter grounds, playing fields, or place of stay).

Two FGDs were conducted, with each lasting between one and one and a half hours. Discussions were structured into two segments: FGDs were moderated by the researcher, with assistants managing recordings and note-taking. Open-ended questions encouraged interaction among participants, while probes drew out deeper insights (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The first of the two FGDs was made up of stakeholders in the community and some local leaders. This FGD consisted of 5 research participants, which included an Omanhene, an assemblyman, a parent, a community secretary, and a teacher. The second set of FGDs conducted was with the International Justice Mission, Ghana, which has its head office in Accra. Five research participants took part in the discussion, comprising a social worker, an instructor/coach, a health worker, a police officer, and a legal officer who normally assist in rescuing these child victims on Lake Volta.

Table 2: The Demographics of FGD-1 at Ehiamankyene on Lake Volta at Kete Krachi

FGD-1 (Ehiamankyene) Participants	**Sex/Gender**	**Age (Years)**	**Work Experience**	**Role/Responsibility in the Study Area**
FGD-E1	M	56	20	Omanhene
FGD-E2	F	46	10	Assemblyman
FGD-E3	M	45	10	Parent
FGD-E4	F	32	8	Teacher
FGD-E5	F	30	7	Community Secretary

(Source: Interview Guide-Section 2)

The research participants for focus group two (2) are workers at the Shelter. They were selected based on their experiences working on the challenges of rescued child victims on the Lake Volta.

Table 3: The Demographics of Focus Group Discussion 2 (FGD-2) at the International Justice Mission (IJM) Ghana

FGD-2 (International Justice Mission-IJM) Participants	**Sex/Gender**	**Age/ Years**	**Work Experience**	**Role/Responsibility in the Study Area**
FGD-E1	F	4yrs	6yrs	Social Worker
FGD-E2	F	9yrs	5yrs	Instructor/Coach
FGD-E3	M	5yrs	6yrs	Health Worker
FGD-E4	M	0yrs	3yrs	Police Officer
FGD-E5	M	6yrs	7yrs	Legal Officer

(Source: Interview Guide-Section 3)

These groups provided complementary perspectives at the community level, operational insights from rescuers, and psychosocial observations from caregivers working daily with rescued children.

Given the vulnerability of child participants, strict ethical standards guided the study. Informed consent was obtained from the quasi-parents and the research participants themselves. Names and identifying details were anonymized to protect confidentiality. Sensitive questions were handled with empathy, and participants showing signs of distress were referred to NGO counselors for follow-up support. The study complied with the ethical principles of the Ghana Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Interviews were conducted in Twi/Fanti and Ewe, the two dominant languages spoken in Kete Krachi, besides the local dialect and the participants' home communities. They were later translated and transcribed into English.

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With participants' consent, interviews were audio and video-recorded, supplemented with field notes capturing non-verbal cues and context during the interview.

Data Management

Data management in qualitative research is a process of gathering and arranging while keeping and protecting the information collected from the field so as to be easily retrieved for the intended purpose for which the data was collected (Cypress, 2018). This is done to ensure the confidentiality, integrity, and trustworthiness of the data. Interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and stored in password-protected digital folders. Hard copies of the notes were stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. The data of the study were analyzed using the thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Using the thematic analysis helped in identifying the findings that pertain to the research questions as:

i. Psychosocial challenges (social behaviour, health consequences).

ii. The role of PES as a psychosocial tool for rehabilitation.

The conclusions were themes highlighting the impact of child victims on the social behaviour and health of children, and the impact of physical education and sports as a psychosocial tool addressing the psychosocial problems of child victims on the peninsula of Lake Volta at Kete Krachi in the Oti Region of Ghana. The following process was adhered to in identifying the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a method well-suited for the identification of patterns across qualitative data. The process involved measures to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

Child victims on Lake Volta, particularly at Kete Krachi, are a deeply embedded phenomenon that goes beyond economic exploitation to reveal the harrowing psychosocial experiences of the children involved. Through interviews with ex-child victims and discussions with community leaders and rescuers, a consistent picture emerged and is, and the lives of these children were characterized by physical, sexual, and emotional abuses that left them traumatized, socially isolated, emotionally regulated struggles, and stripped of self-worth. Yet amidst these devastating realities, resilience mechanisms were also evident, particularly through physical education and sports (PES), which enabled some victims to regain confidence, trust, and a sense of social belonging. This section discusses the key psychosocial problems faced by child victims, their coping strategies, and the transformative role of PES, situating these findings within the framework of Social Capital Theory and relevant literature.

The narratives of the children reveal the brutality of their experiences. Physical abuse was a pervasive theme. Children described being whipped with wires, paddles, and fishing hooks when they failed to meet their masters' demands. Below are their excerpts validating the abuses suffered:

One 15-year-old ex-child victim recounted in Ewe:

"Nye dɔtɔ kple hatinyewo fiaa fu nye ŋutilă ale gbegbe. Abi kakɛwo wɔ ɖe nye agbalẽ me eye nye *ƒ*uwo hă ŋena ɖe ale si wonɔ alanuwo tsɔm (wayaka, gakpokɔnuwo, gakpowo) tsɔm nɔ xaxlăm ɖem la ta. Eye wo*ƒ*oam nenye be nyemewɔ ɖe wo*ƒ*e gbe dzi o la ta alo nyemewɔ ɖe ale si tututu wobe mawɔ o la ta alo nyemete ŋu ɖe nu me tso nu si ta nyemewɔ nane o la ta. Togbɔ be mevɔ̃na na wo hă la, wo*ƒ*e fuwɔme la va mam eye medzea agla ɖe nye veliawo ŋu. Nu sia va tena ɖe dzinye ya. Đe esia ta la. Esesẽna nam be magaɖo dze kpli wo eye nyemeganɔa kadodo nyui me kpli wo o. Nyemegawɔa hadome naneke kpli wo o."

("I was abused physically by my employer and older colleagues. I sustained multiple bruises and bone fractures because they hit me with sharp objects such as wire, winch, and paddles. Even though I was afraid of them, I became used to their abusive behaviour and acted aggressively toward my friends, which I later regretted. This

made it difficult to interact or maintain healthy relationships, and I could not actively participate in social activities.")

Accounts like this demonstrate the psychosocial toll of violence, where fear and trauma translate into aggression, withdrawal, and mistrust. These findings resonate with Gelles and Straus (1979) and Oluremi (2015), who emphasize that physical maltreatment in childhood often manifests in long-term psychological disorders, including aggression, anxiety, and self-isolation. The children's experiences also mirror WHO's (2020) findings that globally, one child dies every five minutes due to physical abuse.

Sexual abuse emerged as perhaps the most devastating psychosocial experience. Girls were especially vulnerable, suffering molestation from masters and even the sons of their employers.

A 17-year-old ex-child victim explained in Ewe:

"Nye a*ʃ*etɔ dɔa gbɔnye akpasesẽtɔe eye wòdoa ŋɔdzi nam be nenye be megblɔe na dzinyelawo alo ame bubu aɖe la, yeawum. Eyi edzi nɔa gbɔnye dɔm akpasesẽtɔe eye wòdoa fum heɖenɛ nam. Enye ŋɔdzinya kple nukpekeame nam. Dzi ɖe le *ʃ*onye eye meɖea ɖokuinye ɖe aga. Tso ema dzi la, melé fu ŋutsuwo eye meɖe adzɔgbe be nyemaɖe srɔ akpɔ o."

("My master forcibly slept with me and threatened to kill me if I told my parents or anyone. He continued to abuse me and got me pregnant, which he later forced me to abort. I was devastated, lost my confidence, and lived in isolation. Since then, I hated everything about men and vowed not to marry.")

Such testimonies highlight the extreme trauma and long-lasting psychosocial scars of sexual exploitation. Girls described nightmares, withdrawal from relationships, and even same-sex intimacy as a protective response. The stigma of pregnancies and forced abortions reinforced feelings of worthlessness. This aligns with UNICEF (1997) and Fawole and Dagunduro (2014), who stress that sexual abuse in child work settings often leads to deep psychological wounds, early motherhood, and life-long trauma. The narratives also reflect Parcesepe et al. (2016) finding that trafficked children often suffer depression, worthlessness, shame, and isolation.

Emotional abuse was equally destructive. Children were constantly insulted, called "useless/worthless" or "good for nothing," and told that their parents were beggars.

A 14-year-old boy recalled in Twi:

"M'adwumawura taa ka kyerɛɛ me sɛ meyɛ ɔkwasea, mennsɔ adwuma, na me papa yɛ onipã a ɔnyɛ onyinasofo sɛ ɔbɛwo mma a mfaso nni wɔn ho. Saa ayayade yi nyinaa yɛɛ sɛ me kra ne m'anidasoɔ a mewɔ wɔ daakye no butuw fam, na ɛmaa meyɛɛ sɛ ɔkwasea wɔ m'adamfo ne me kunuſo anim. Eyi maa me koraa tɛw me ho fi nnɔmmarima ne mmerewa a yɛyɛ adanfo no ho, na mepɔn koraa fii amammerɛ ne nnwuma a yɛyɛ bom nyinaa ho."

"My employer constantly told me that I was stupid, not fit to work, and that my father was irresponsible for producing worthless children. These abuses not only dampened my spirit and hope for the future, but also made me look stupid before my peers. I avoided social activities and withdrew from my friends because of my worthless nature".

This constant verbal humiliation reinforced worthlessness, emotionally regulated struggles, low self-esteem and social withdrawal, and isolation. Such patterns are well documented in Ahad et al. (2021) and Al-Gamal et al. (2013), who found that emotional abuse erodes children's confidence, fosters timidity, and triggers depressive disorders. Emotional degradation, more than physical punishment, often lingers as an invisible scar.

Across these experiences, the psychosocial consequences were stark: worthlessness, low self-esteem, emotional regulation struggles, social withdrawal, mistrust of others, aggression, depression, isolation, and hopelessness. Some children expressed suicidal ideation or vowed never to marry, fearing intimacy after sexual abuse. These findings corroborate Alem (2020) and Abdalla et al. (2018), who highlighted the prevalence of psychosocial problems among child victims in low-income settings.

Yet amidst the devastation, coping mechanisms emerged. For many, coping meant silence and withdrawal. Children described avoiding friendships, isolating themselves, or mistrusting men. Others coped through aggression, transferring anger onto peers or strangers as a defensive strategy. These behaviours, while maladaptive, reflect attempts at psychological survival in environments devoid of safety.

Significantly, the study revealed the transformative role of PES in rebuilding psychosocial well-being. At the International Justice Mission, Ghana, rescued children participated in football and cooperative games. Through these activities, they discovered solidarity, teamwork, and trust.

One of the FGD members explained:

"When the children join group exercises, you see their faces light up. They laugh, they share, they trust again. Through teamwork in sports, they slowly begin to talk about their past without fear."

Children themselves echoed this. A 14-year-old boy described how playing football with peers gave him "a reason to smile again," while another female explained that "running together made me feel strong, not weak like on the Lake." Such testimonies affirm Bailey's (2006) assertion that PES contributes to children's affective and social development, and Henley et al. (2007) observation that sports help trauma survivors rebuild trust.

From a theoretical point of view, these findings align strongly with Social Capital Theory. Participation in PES fostered bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) by building solidarity among children with similar backgrounds of trauma. At the same time, it generated bridging social capital, as children integrated into broader networks with the coach/instructor and community members. Trust, reciprocity, and cooperation are core constructs of social capital (Lin, 2001; Bourdieu, 1986), and were evident in how PES helped victims move from isolation, emotionally regulated struggles, and worthlessness to participation.

Moreover, PES provided both emotional support (companionship, encouragement) and instrumental support (structured activities, mentorship), echoing Caplan et al. (1976) distinction. This dual role illustrates how PES serves as a psychosocial tool, restoring children's self-confidence, resilience, and social integration. The children's recovery stories mirror Dubey's (2017) study of Taekwondo as a means of psychosocial rehabilitation, but extend the evidence by showing how PES works within the Ghanaian fishing context.

DISCUSSION

In discussing these findings, it has become increasingly evident that experiences of child victims on Lake Volta transcend the boundaries of economic hardship and cultural practice. Rather, they represent a deep-seated psychosocial emergency that affects children's emotional stability, social functioning, and long-term development trajectories. The abuses suffered by children destroy their sense of self and fracture their social ties. Yet the resilience demonstrated through PES participation provides hope for rehabilitation. This suggests that interventions should go beyond rescue operations to incorporate structured physical education and sports programmes as integral to child reintegration. By doing so, stakeholders, policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders can transform the despair of victims into pathways of healing, trust, and social capital.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence presented in this study confirms that child victims on Lake Volta, particularly in Kete Krachi Municipality, show a devastating one. A worrying one that calls for urgent action to salvage the situation. The testimonies of ex-child victims demonstrate how physical, sexual, and emotional abuse left them with lasting scars of self-isolation, emotional regulation struggles, worthlessness, mistrust, and deep trauma. These psychosocial wounds manifest in silence, aggression, and hopelessness, threatening to perpetuate cycles of abuse and exploitation across generations. However, the same narratives also reveal the resilience of children when given opportunities to participate in structured physical education and sports (PES), where laughter, teamwork, and trust offer a pathway to healing. Within this context, Social Capital Theory offers a powerful lens for understanding how participation in physical education and sports group-based activities rebuilds solidarity,

reciprocity, and confidence, transforming isolated individuals into empowered ones capable of reconnecting with society.

The conclusion that emerges from this study is therefore twofold. First, child victims on Lake Volta should be understood as both a human rights violation and a psychosocial emergency. Rescue operations, while crucial, cannot by themselves address the invisible scars left on victims. Secondly, rehabilitation must incorporate psychosocial interventions that prioritize structured engagement in PES, since this study demonstrates that sports are not merely recreational activities but vehicles for rebuilding self-worth, fostering resilience, and creating networks of support. This dual recognition has implications not only for policy but also for practice and research.

The implications of the study span multiple levels. For policymakers in Ghana and beyond, the findings emphasize that laws criminalizing child victims and trafficking must be accompanied by investment in psychosocial rehabilitation. Current interventions often focus on the legal and economic dimensions of child victims, removing children from exploitative contexts, prosecuting offenders, or providing livelihood support to families. While these measures are vital, they fail to address the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of the problem. The integration of PES into child protection policies and rehabilitation programmes can bridge this gap. By providing structured opportunities for play, recreation, and teamwork, children are not only physically re-energized but also enabled to rebuild trust and confidence, essential for their reintegration into communities.

For practitioners, particularly NGOs and social workers, the study underscores the importance of designing holistic programmes. Interventions that combine counselling, shelter, and PES activities are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes than those that focus narrowly on removal from abusive environments. The narratives from the International Justice Mission, Ghana, illustrate this point. Children who participated in football and group games showed marked improvements in self-expression, confidence, and trust. Such outcomes confirm Bailey's (2006) argument that PES contributes to affective and social development, and they extend Henley et al. (2007) evidence that sports can rehabilitate trauma survivors. Practitioners must therefore move beyond perceiving PES as optional or recreational, recognizing it instead as a core therapeutic tool in psychosocial recovery.

For academic research, the implications are equally significant. The study contributes to a growing body of literature on the intersection of child victims, psychosocial well-being, and sports, but it also opens new areas for inquiry. While much of the existing scholarship focuses on the economic determinants of child victims, this study demonstrates that psychosocial dimensions are equally critical. The findings invite further exploration of how different forms of sports-individual versus team-based, competitive versus recreational-impact psychosocial recovery. They also suggest the need for longitudinal studies to track the long-term outcomes of PES-based rehabilitation, asking whether such interventions not only heal immediate trauma but also improve educational attainment, employability, and social integration in adulthood.

The study is not without its limitations, which must be acknowledged. The qualitative design, while rich in depth and detail, relies on a relatively small sample of participants. Ten ex-child victims and two focus group discussions cannot capture the full diversity of experiences across the vast Lake Volta region. Moreover, the reliance on snowball and purposive sampling may have introduced bias, since participants were often recommended by gatekeepers and may not represent the most hidden or marginalized victims. Language and cultural dynamics may also have influenced data collection, as interviews conducted in Twi/Fante and Ewe were later translated into English, risking subtle loss of meaning. Finally, the study's focus on PES as a psychosocial tool, while justified by the findings, may have limited the exploration of other potentially valuable interventions such as art therapy, drama, or community-based rituals of healing.

These limitations point to opportunities for future research. Larger studies that incorporate quantitative surveys alongside qualitative interviews could provide more generalizable insights into the prevalence and psychosocial consequences of child victims. Comparative research across different regions of Ghana or other countries in sub-Saharan Africa would also help to situate the case at Kete Krachi Municipality within broader patterns, identifying both unique cultural dynamics and shared structural drivers. Importantly, future studies should evaluate the long-term impact of PES-based interventions, asking whether the gains in confidence, trust, and

social participation observed in shelters persist once children return to their communities or transition into adulthood. Research should also expand to include the voices of parents, masters, and community members, not only to understand the perpetuation of child victims but also to identify potential allies in its eradication.

From the evidence, several recommendations emerge. First, the Ghanaian government and child protection agencies must integrate PES into formal rehabilitation frameworks for trafficked and exploited children. Just as counselling and shelter are considered essential, so too should sports-based activities be institutionalized as part of psychosocial support. Second, NGOs and international organizations working on child victims should invest in training coaches, instructors, and social workers in trauma-sensitive approaches to PES, ensuring that activities are not only recreational but also deliberately structured to rebuild trust, cooperation, and resilience. Third, schools in communities around Lake Volta should be supported to expand access to physical education and sports with playing fields, recognizing that education itself cannot serve as prevention by providing safe spaces for children to learn, play, and grow. Fourth, community sensitization campaigns should highlight not only the illegality of child victims but also the psychosocial harm it causes, shifting cultural norms that see children's work as harmless training for adulthood. Fifth, the Government should consider making child labour a course and a subject at both the Colleges of Education and at the Primary and Junior High Schools levels. Finally, researchers and policymakers should collaborate to monitor and evaluate PES-based interventions, building a robust evidence base that can inform policy at national and international levels.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the fight against child victims must extend beyond economic and legal interventions to address the deep psychosocial scars left on victims. The narratives of children in Kete Krachi show that abuse erodes self-worth, confidence, and self-dependency, fractures social bonds, and breeds mistrust, but also that resilience is possible when children are given opportunities to reconnect through physical education and sports. Grounded in Social Capital Theory, the study shows how bonding and bridging relationships created through sports foster trust, reciprocity, and solidarity, transforming victims from isolated individuals into members of supportive communities. By integrating PES into rehabilitation programmes, policymakers and practitioners can provide child victims not only with freedom from exploitation but also with the tools to heal, belong, and thrive. This is the promise that lies at the heart of true reintegration and not merely rescuing children from the Lake Volta, but rescuing their dignity, their confidence, and their future.

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