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CHILD PROTECTION CONCERNS IN BUTEBA SUB-COUNTY, BUSIA DISTRICT, UGANDA: A REVIEW OF HARMFUL PRACTICES, EXPLOITATION, AND LOCAL RESPONSES

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Vol. 3. Issue 1.
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ABSTRACT

Abstract Buteba Sub-County in Busia District, eastern Uganda, presents a complex child protection landscape shaped by gold mining, cross-border dynamics, cultural practices, and persistent poverty. This review examines the major child protection concerns affecting children in Buteba, including the harmful practice of Disco Matanga (night funeral discos), child labour in artisanal gold mining, teenage pregnancy and school dropout, cross-border child trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation. Drawing on district government reports, academic research, civil society documentation, and media reporting, the article synthesizes evidence on the causes, magnitude, and consequences of these concerns. It finds that child protection in Buteba is compromised by the intersection of economic drivers (poverty, mining livelihoods), cultural norms (normalization of child labour, funeral disco practices), weak law enforcement (inadequate implementation of mining and child protection laws), and geographic vulnerability (porous border with Kenya). The review also documents promising local responses, including the Busia Child and Family Protection Bill, multi-stakeholder child labour elimination programmes, and cross-border collaboration between Ugandan and Kenyan authorities. It concludes that effective child protection in Buteba requires sustained multisectoral action to address both immediate harms and structural drivers. This article does not present original field findings; it synthesizes available evidence to inform policy, practice, and future research.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Child protection in Uganda is governed by a comprehensive legal and policy framework, including the Children Act, the National Child Policy, and various sectoral laws addressing child labour, trafficking, and sexual exploitation. At the district level, probation and social welfare officers, police child and family protection units, local councils, and civil society organizations share responsibility for preventing and responding to child protection violations.

Buteba Sub-County, located in Busia District in eastern Uganda, presents particular challenges for child protection. The sub-county borders Kenya to the east, hosts significant artisanal gold mining, and has a population with high poverty rates and limited access to services. These factors create conditions in which children face multiple, overlapping protection risks.

A district-level child protection dialogue held in Buteba in October 2024 identified Disco Matanga (night funeral discos) as one of the harmful practices leading to teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and early marriage, despite various interventions (Busia District Local Government, 2024). This finding reflects broader concerns documented across Busia District regarding child welfare.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Child protection concerns in Buteba Sub-County are not isolated incidents but interconnected problems rooted in structural conditions. Poverty drives families to send children to work in gold mines. Cultural practices normalize child labour, with parish officials describing communities where "you can't even talk of school; they'll laugh at you." The porous border with Kenya facilitates child trafficking, with authorities registering approximately four cases weekly. Harmful practices such as disco Matanga expose children to sexual violence and exploitation.

These concerns are not new. A 2022 study (Alungat, 2022) examining child abuse in Busia, including Buteba Sub-County, found that poverty, poor parenting, weak law enforcement, domestic violence, and substance abuse were among the leading causes, concluding that "child abuse remains prevalent in the district despite various legislations and mechanisms locally and globally to combat the same." The persistence of these problems despite legal frameworks and awareness campaigns raises questions about implementation, resources, and the adequacy of current approaches.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this review is to synthesize available evidence on child protection concerns in Buteba Sub-County, Busia District. The specific objectives are:

To describe the major child protection concerns affecting children in Buteba.

To analyze the causes and contributing factors of these concerns.

To examine the consequences for children's wellbeing and development.

To document existing responses and their limitations.

To propose recommendations for strengthening child protection in the sub-county.

Review Questions

Four questions guide the review:

What are the major child protection concerns in Buteba Sub-County?

What factors drive and sustain these concerns?

What are the consequences for children and communities?

What responses have been attempted, and what gaps remain?

Scope and Approach

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
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This is a narrative review based on publicly available sources: district government statements, academic research, civil society reports, and media documentation. It focuses on Buteba Sub-County while drawing on district-level and cross-border evidence where relevant. The article does not present original field data and acknowledges that available documentation is uneven across different child protection concerns.

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This article adopts a narrative literature review design. The review synthesizes publicly available district government statements, academic research, civil society and programme reports, international and sectoral documentation, and relevant media reports concerning child protection in Buteba Sub-County and the wider Busia and Uganda–Kenya border context. The review does not present original field findings. Instead, evidence is organized thematically around the major child protection concerns, their causes and contributing factors, consequences for children, existing responses, implementation gaps and recommendations. Priority is given to evidence directly addressing Buteba or Busia, while district-level and cross-border evidence is used where it helps explain the local context.

The review process involved four broad steps. First, relevant publicly accessible evidence was identified from the sources listed in the references. Second, information was screened for relevance to child protection concerns in Buteba, with attention to child labour, harmful practices, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Third, evidence was extracted and grouped under common analytical themes, including economic drivers, cultural norms, law enforcement, geographic vulnerability, family conditions, child wellbeing and institutional responses. Fourth, the evidence was synthesized narratively and interpreted through a socio-ecological perspective that recognizes interactions among children, families, communities, institutions and wider policy structures.

Because the review relies on existing publicly available information, no new human-subject interviews or identifiable field data were collected. The principal limitations are the uneven availability of evidence across child protection concerns, reliance on district-level evidence for some local issues, likely underreporting of hidden violations, and differences in the methods and purposes of the underlying sources. These limitations are considered when interpreting the findings.

Table 1: Summary of evidence sources used in the review

EVIDENCE SOURCE	GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS	MAIN AREAS OF EVIDENCE	CONTRIBUTION TO THE REVIEW
District government / local government documentation	Buteba and Busia	Disco Matanga, local child protection dialogue, proposed Child and Family Protection Bill	Identifies harmful practices and local policy responses.
Academic research	Busia/Buteba and wider Uganda	Child abuse, poverty, parenting, mining and child protection	Explains drivers, consequences and structural conditions.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

EVIDENCE SOURCE	GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS	MAIN AREAS OF EVIDENCE	CONTRIBUTION TO THE REVIEW
Civil society/programme documentation	Buteba, Busia and border communities	WNCB child labour programme, trafficking prevention, youth/community engagement	Provides programme results, implementation experience and community-level responses.
Media reporting	Busia and Uganda–Kenya border	Trafficking incidents, policy debates and local enforcement	Documents reported cases and public responses.
International/sectoral reports	Uganda and border areas	Child labour, commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking	Provides wider contextual evidence relevant to Buteba.

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

MAJOR CHILD PROTECTION CONCERNS

Disco Matanga: Harmful Cultural Practice

Disco Matanga is a night dance funeral used to raise funds for bereaved families, a practice that originated in Kenya and spread to Ugandan border districts including Busia. While ostensibly a fundraising mechanism, the practice has become associated with serious child protection violations.

A district intergenerational dialogue held in Buteba in October 2024 identified disco Matanga as "one of the harmful practices leading to teenage pregnancy, school dropout and early marriages despite various interventions." The District Vice Chairperson, Nasisamba Christine, and Assistant RDC, Doreen Nafuna, participated in the dialogue, which informed the Family and Child Protection Bill being processed by the District Council (Busia District Local Government, 2024).

The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights documented how disco Matanga events have been "corrupted and used as a haven for sexual orgies," with children sexually abused during night-time celebrations. The report cited "retrogressive cultural practices as largely contributing to violations against the children". It noted that "parents, guardians and some elements of the law enforcement agencies have also been cited as abetting cases of sexual abuse against children" (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, 2014).

Busia District authorities have attempted to regulate disco Matanga through the Child and Family Protection Bill 2023, which specifically addresses the practice. The bill has generated significant debate, with some councilors opposing it unless burial expenses are covered by the district (Bukedde, 2023, 2024). The district is "challenged with high rates of teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and gender-based violence due to mainly disco Matanga," according to Nasisamba.

CHILD LABOUR IN ARTISANAL GOLD MINING

Gold mining has been a livelihood activity in Busia District since the 1930s, passed down through generations. The traditional nature of mining has contributed to the normalization of child participation. Uganda has an estimated 50,000 artisanal and small-scale gold miners, approximately 30% (over 15,000) of whom are children. Although Uganda's Mineral Policy of 2001 intended to ban child labour in mining, this was never incorporated into mining regulations, and the minimum age protection of 16 years does not apply to children working without a formal employment relationship (UNEP, 2019).

The Busia gold fields, including areas in Buteba Sub-County, are among the largest in Uganda. The WNCB programme (WNCB, 2025a), implemented in 30

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

villages across Busitema, Buteba, Tiira Town Council, and Sikuda sub-counties, documented that "traditional gold mining activities have had a significant impact on school enrolment in the district, with many children dropping out of school to work in the mines."

Nancy Lillian Akitwi, parish chief in Mawero, Buteba Sub-County, described the cultural normalization of child labour (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026): "Here you can't even talk of school; they'll laugh at you. They'll ask what you, who has gone to school, have over them. Yet the level of financial illiteracy is equally high. When one gets money, they look for another woman to marry. Young girls, of course, follow the money too. We really need help."

A 16-year-old boy encountered at a gold processing site in the area, when asked if he should be at school, pointed to an expectant woman and said: "That's my wife over there. As you can see, I have responsibilities." The Tiira Small Scale Miners Association secretary explained that "children are raised with a mentality that gold mining is the family source of income, so it's normal to find minors working in mines or at processing centers." While association guidelines clearly stipulate that minors are not allowed to work, enforcement is absent (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026).

TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND SCHOOL DROPOUT

Teenage pregnancy is a significant concern in Busia District, with Buteba among the sub-counties reporting high numbers. According to district health information, 1,143 teenage girls aged 15–19 attended antenatal care in public health facilities in the third quarter of one financial year, though authorities believe the actual number is higher, as many cases are concealed or handled by traditional birth attendants. Buteba sub-county specifically recorded 68 cases, while other sub-counties reported higher numbers, including Masafu (138), Busitema (84), and Buyanga (105).

Okumu Semu, the district community development officer, reported that 95% of teenage pregnant girls end up in early marriages after being chased from home. UNICEF reported in 2021 that teenage pregnancy contributed to 28% of maternal deaths and 20% of infant deaths.

Drivers of teenage pregnancy in Busia include poverty, poor parenting, moral decay, exposure to uncensored information technology, peer groups, and disco Matanga. Busia District Police Commander Didas Byaruhanga stated that 1-10 cases of defilement are registered daily at Busia Police Station. However, most parents report cases but fail to bring victims for medical examination, making it difficult to prosecute suspects due to lack of doctor's reports.

The consequences extend beyond the immediate pregnancy. Okumu noted that early marriages have "negatively affected the economic development of Busia as all teenagers starting families are unemployed, depending on their parents who are also poor." The district is "grappling with uneducated and unexposed mothers, not capable of even administering treatment to their babies, which has significantly resulted in increased cases of malnutrition."

CROSS-BORDER CHILD TRAFFICKING

Buteba's location on the Uganda-Kenya border places children at heightened risk of trafficking and exploitation. A 2026 meeting between Kenyan and Ugandan authorities in Busia town brought together political leaders, government officials, and stakeholders to address "rampant child trafficking and exploitation at border points." Achieng Everlyne, Linda Mutoto project leader from Malaba, Kenya, revealed that perpetrators exploit porous border points to traffic children, registering "around four cases weekly" (Uganda Radio Network, 2026).

The operations cover a 10-kilometer radius on both sides of the border, with activities extending to Buteba (Teso South) on the Kenyan side. Raphael Osacha, the Busia District Probation Officer, noted that "cases of

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

child abuse peak during school holidays and worsen during teachers' strikes" (Uganda Radio Network, 2026).

A January 2025 incident illustrated the scale of the problem. Busia police rescued 22 Ugandan children aged 4 to 17 who were being transported to Kenya under false promises of free education. Four suspects were arrested, including a teacher at a children's center in Kampala and individuals associated with a Kenyan academy. The children were found without proper documentation or contact information for their parents or guardians. Moses Mugwe, Bukedi

South region police spokesperson, confirmed the rescue and noted that authorities were working to identify and contact the children's relatives (Uganda Observer, 2025).

The Salvation Army, working along Kenya's western borders, reported that "communities in hotspots such as Malaba, Busia, Isebania and Kehancha continue to face growing risks, with traffickers taking advantage of widespread economic desperation, weakened family structures and porous borders." Evaluation consultant Jackson Ongoma cited "increasing cases of missing children, sexual abuse and minors being moved across the Kenya–Tanzania border under pretenses" (Kenya News Agency, 2025).

COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Table 2: Summary of major child protection concerns in Buteba Sub-County

CHILD PROTECTION CONCERN	EVIDENCE IN THE ARTICLE	MAIN CONTRIBUTING FACTORS	PRINCIPAL CONSEQUENCES
Disco Matanga	Night funeral discos associated with teenage pregnancy, school dropout, early marriage and sexual abuse.	Cultural acceptance, funeral fundraising needs, weak enforcement.	Sexual exploitation, pregnancy, dropout, early marriage.
Child labour in artisanal gold mining	Children participate in mining and processing; mining affects school enrolment.	Poverty, inherited mining livelihoods, financial insecurity, weak enforcement.	School dropout, hazardous work, mercury/substance exposure, intergenerational poverty.
Teenage pregnancy and school dropout	Buteba recorded 68 teenage pregnancy cases in the cited district health data.	Poverty, poor parenting, peer influence, technology exposure, disco Matanga, defilement.	Health risks, early marriage, school interruption, malnutrition, poverty.
Cross-border child trafficking	Authorities reported recurring trafficking concerns and a January 2025 rescue of 22 children.	Porous border, economic desperation, weakened family structures.	Trauma, exploitation, disrupted education and family separation.
Commercial sexual exploitation	Busia is identified as a location where commercial sexual exploitation of children occurs.	Cross-border trade, trafficking, mining, trucking and economic vulnerability.	Sexual exploitation, health risks, loss of education and wellbeing.

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Busia District has been identified as a location where commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) occurs. A sectoral study conducted by Uganda Youth Development Link, commissioned by the ILO and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, found that "various forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children exist and are on the rise in Uganda." ECPAT International reported that the number of children exploited in commercial sex in Kabarole, Lira, Mbale, and Busia districts is between 7,000 and 12,000.

The cross-border context facilitates exploitation. A 2010 World Vision annual report argued that "children in Busia are at risk as the district is known for its cross-border trade, child trafficking and child prostitution." The area's gold mining activities, trucking routes along the Busia-Jinja highway, and fishing communities create conditions where children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

CAUSES AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Poverty and Economic Vulnerability

Poverty is consistently identified as a primary driver of child protection violations in Buteba. A 2022 study on child abuse in Busia (Alungat, 2022) found that "poverty, poor parenting and attitude towards child protection, poor enforcement of laws, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse and urbanization" were cited by respondents as causes. The study concluded that "child abuse remains prevalent in the district despite various legislations and mechanisms locally and globally to combat the same."

Research on poverty in Buteba Sub-County documented how "poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and, partly for this reason, to suffer health, behavioral, and developmental conditions." The study noted that poverty "changes the way the brain develops in young children" and that children growing up poor "experience multiple stressful events, including neighborhood crime and drug use, divorce, parental conflict, and other family problems, including abuse and neglect by their parents."

For families in gold mining areas, the economic rationale for child labour is compelling. The WNCB programme (WNCB, 2025a) noted that "access to financial services for families is limited and parents' low socioeconomic status has a strong influence on the educational aspirations of children and youth." After the COVID-19 lockdown, "more girls are dropping out of school, and without support these girls are likely to end up in child labour or get married and hence miss out on education opportunities."

CULTURAL NORMS AND PRACTICES

Cultural practices and norms play a significant role in perpetuating child protection concerns. Disco Matanga is described as a "cherished" tradition that communities are reluctant to abandon. When Busia District moved to ban the practice, "opposition from a section of residents who had turned the practice into a business by being hired as emcees" emerged. One councilor stated he would only support the bill if the district promised to meet all burial expenses, demonstrating how economic interests intersect with child protection.

In mining communities, the normalization of child labour is deeply embedded. The Tiira Small Scale Miners Association secretary explained that gold mining "has been handed down for generations since 1930" and that "children are raised with a mentality that gold mining is the family source of income" (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026). Nancy Lillian Akitwi's observation that mining communities "laugh at" the suggestion of education reflects how cultural norms can override legal protections and awareness messages.

WEAK LAW ENFORCEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

Despite comprehensive legal frameworks, enforcement remains weak. The WNCB programme (WNCB, 2025a) identified "the gap between policy and practice remains significant, with insufficient resources to effectively implement the policies." A general lack of

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

awareness of existing policies and laws "renders underprivileged communities to miss out on the benefits and opportunities provided by policies."

In mining, although the Mineral Policy of 2001 intended to ban child labour, this was never incorporated into mining regulations, and minimum age protections do not apply to children working without formal employment relationships. The Mining and Minerals Bill 2026 imposes harsh penalties for unlicensed mining, but artisanal miners argue that it "only caters for the interests of foreign investors" and criminalizes traditional livelihoods without providing viable alternatives.

For disco Matanga, the District Security Committee "tried but failed to enforce a ban" due to "non-compliance of some sub-county and village chairpersons." The first ordinance was delayed by the Solicitor General, leaving authorities to attempt a bylaw instead (Bukedde, 2023).

Table 3: Causes and contributing factors underlying child protection concerns

FACTOR	HOW IT OPERATES IN THE BUTEBA CONTEXT	PROTECTION CONCERN(S) AFFECTED
Poverty and economic vulnerability	Families rely on children's labour and harmful economic activities; limited financial services reduce alternatives.	Child labour, school dropout, early marriage and exploitation.
Cultural norms and practices	Disco Matanga and the intergenerational normalization of mining shape community behavior.	Resistance to regulation and acceptance of child labour.
Weak law enforcement and implementation gaps	Policies and laws exist, but resources, enforcement and regulatory coverage remain inadequate.	Persistent violations despite legislation and awareness efforts.
Geographic vulnerability	Uganda–Kenya border and porous crossing points facilitate movement and exploitation.	Trafficking and cross-border exploitation.
Family and parenting challenges	Poor parenting, domestic violence and long periods of caregiver absence increase vulnerability.	Neglect, instability, trafficking risk and exposure to exploitation.

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

Poor parenting and family dysfunction are significant contributors to child protection violations. The 2022 child abuse study in Busia (Alungat, 2022) identified "poor parenting and attitude towards child protection" as causes. Parish chief Akitwi noted that parents in mining communities "devote large amounts of time to mining and leave children unattended for long periods" (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026).

GEOGRAPHIC VULNERABILITY

Buteba's location on the Uganda-Kenya border creates specific vulnerabilities. The porous border facilitates trafficking, with authorities noting that "perpetrators exploit porous border points" (Uganda Radio Network, 2026). The Salvation Army's evaluation found that "communities in hotspots such as Malaba,

Busia, Isebania and Kehancha continue to face growing risks, with traffickers taking advantage of widespread economic desperation, weakened family structures and porous borders" (Kenya News Agency, 2025).

Busia and Malaba are "key entry points with people coming from as far as DRC and Rwanda," with travelers often resting in Bungoma and Eldoret before moving onward. This transit traffic creates conditions conducive to exploitation.

FAMILY AND PARENTING CHALLENGES

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Domestic violence was also identified as pushing "children out of unstable homes and into situations where traffickers easily prey on them." The intersection of family instability, poverty, and external exploitation creates compounded vulnerability.

CONSEQUENCES FOR CHILDREN

Health Impacts

Child protection violations in Buteba have serious health consequences. Mercury exposure from gold mining affects both adults and children, with respondents in Busia showing inadequate knowledge of preventive mechanisms. The study found that "none of the respondents in Busia mentioned inhalation, eating fish, and ingestion as an entry of mercury into the body, yet these are the common modes of entry." Substance abuse was described as "a common trend at ASGM sites" affecting both adult and child miners.

Teenage pregnancy carries significant health risks. UNICEF reported that teenage pregnancy contributed to 28% of maternal deaths and 20% of infant deaths. The district community development officer noted that uneducated and unexposed mothers are "not capable of even administering treatment to their babies, which has significantly resulted in increased cases of malnutrition."

EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION

School dropout is a major consequence of child protection concerns. In mining areas, "traditional gold mining activities have had a significant impact on school enrolment in the district, with many children dropping out of school to work in the mines." The result is "alarmingly high" rates of illiteracy and school dropout.

For pregnant girls, re-entry into school is challenging. Research in Busia found that "there is no policy on school re-enrolment and schools act in the interest of discipline instead of supporting the pregnant girls and young mothers." Some parents were reported to be "working secretly with these men for a payoff" when girls were impregnated.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL HARM

The psychological consequences of abuse, exploitation, and family disruption are profound. The 2022 child abuse study (Alungat, 2022) noted that the vice "continues to deprive many children in the world of their rights and freedoms and compromises their well-being and development due to the various physical, psychological, emotional and health impacts associated with it."

Children rescued from trafficking face trauma and uncertainty. The 22 children rescued in January 2025 were "receiving shelter and care at the Tororo Child and Family Protection Unit" (Uganda Observer, 2025) while authorities worked to identify their relatives. The disruption to their lives, education, and family connections has lasting effects.

INTERGENERATIONAL POVERTY

Child protection violations perpetuate poverty across generations. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy mean that "all teenagers starting families are unemployed, depending on their parents who are also poor." Children who work in mines instead of attending school lack the education and skills needed for future employment, trapping them in low-wage, hazardous work.

The poverty research in Buteba Sub-County documented how "poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition" and how poverty "helps to ensure that poverty will persist across generations." Breaking this cycle requires addressing the child protection concerns that contribute to it.

EXISTING RESPONSES AND INTERVENTIONS

The Child and Family Protection Bill

Busia District has been working to pass a Child and Family Protection Bill that specifically addresses disco Matanga and related child protection concerns. The bill, tabled in the District Council, is described as "the most overlooked and cherished bill the district council has ever handled in 27 years of its existence" (Bukedde,

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

2024). The bill draws on Section 38 Cap. 243, which empowers the district council to make laws not inconsistent with the Constitution.

The bill has faced opposition from some councilors and community members. One councilor stated he would only support it if the district committed to meeting burial expenses for residents. Others argued the bill should have been passed two years earlier, noting that "they cannot just sit and watch children's future being messed up." The bill is supported by Action for Health Uganda and Women with a Vision, which have assisted with community sensitization.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CHILD LABOUR ELIMINATION PROGRAMME

The WNCB (Work: No Child's Business) programme, implemented by Environmental Women in Action for Development (EWAD) and partners including HIVOS, Save the Children, Uganda National Teachers Union, and Nascent Research and Development Organization, has worked in 30 villages across Busitema, Buteba, Tiira Town Council, and Sikuda sub-counties. The programme reached over 4,280 households (WNCB, 2025a).

The programme achieved significant results. In Busia District, the proportion of children engaged in child labour decreased from 68% to 47%. A total of 1,326 young people in Busia were withdrawn from child labour and enrolled in school or other services. By the end of the programme in 2024, 84% of children in Busia were in school. Additionally, 107 young people (19 males and 88 females) received community-based training, and 240 artisanal miners received skills training in group formation, resulting in the formation of 16 associations in four villages (WNCB, 2025a, 2025b).

The programme employed an area-based approach tackling all forms of child labour at the community level, combined with a supply chain approach working with mining companies. Key strategies included training local government officials and mining community leaders, leading to "improved wages, more safety at work and the incorporation of child labour policies." Over 500 teachers were trained in psychosocial support, gender, research, tracking and referral, and child-friendly teaching methods between 2021-2023. Village Savings and Loan Associations were established, with 35.4% of families in the implementation area engaged in VSLAs and income-generating activities (WNCB, 2025a, 2025b).

CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION

Kenyan and Ugandan authorities have intensified collaboration to combat child trafficking at border points. A meeting held in Busia town in 2026 brought together political leaders, government officials, and stakeholders from Busia and Malaba counties in Kenya and Busia and Tororo districts in Uganda. Participants "resolved to intensify operations to arrest culprits and conduct frequent community sensitization to curb child trafficking, child marriage, child labour, and teenage pregnancies" (Uganda Radio Network, 2026).

The operations cover a 10-kilometer radius on both sides of the border, with activities extending to Matayos, Malaba, Angurai, Moding, Adongosi, and Buteba (Teso South) on the Kenyan side. George Osinde, the Tororo District LCV chairperson representative, blamed "rising cases of child trafficking and abuse on high poverty levels in border communities, urging more government intervention" (Uganda Radio Network, 2026).

The Salvation Army's Oyana Anti-Human Trafficking Project has also worked along the border, training volunteers in border villages to conduct awareness campaigns and supporting survivors through case management, counselling, and reintegration support. The project reported that "more than 70 per cent of residents are now able to recognize trafficking and use formal reporting channels" (Kenya News Agency, 2025).

COMMUNITY SENSITIZATION AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Table 4: Existing child protection responses and reported contributions

RESPONSE/INTERVENTION	LOCATION/ACTORS	MAIN STRATEGY	REPORTED CONTRIBUTION/LIMITATION
Child and Family Protection Bill	Busia District	Regulation of disco Matanga and related protection concerns.	Provides a local legal response but has faced debate, delay and implementation challenges.
WNCB multi-stakeholder child labour programme	30 villages across Busitema, Buteba, Tiira Town Council and Sikuda	Area-based and supply-chain approaches, household support, training, school participation and community mobilization.	Child labour reportedly reduced from 68% to 47%; 1,326 young people withdrawn; 84% of children in school by 2024.
Cross-border collaboration	Uganda–Kenya border	Joint operations, information sharing and sensitization against trafficking, child marriage and child labour.	Shows strengthened regional cooperation, but continued risks require sustained action.
Salvation Army/Oyana anti-trafficking work	Border villages	Volunteer training, awareness, case management, counselling and reintegration support.	Reported improved recognition of trafficking and use of formal reporting channels.
Community sensitization and youth engagement	Buteba and Busia	Intergenerational dialogue, youth empowerment, school and community sensitization.	Improves awareness and youth participation, but sensitization alone does not address structural drivers.

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

Various organizations have engaged communities and youth in child protection efforts. EASSI, under the PowerToYouthUganda consortium, supported an intergenerational dialogue in Buteba on issues affecting young people, which informed the Family and Child Protection Bill (Busia District Local Government, 2024). Jannet Nabwire, the area focal for the Power to Youth project, noted that "youths have been trained and empowered to amplify their voices by identifying, referring and reporting all forms of abuse and rights violations."

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

The district community liaison department has "intensified sensitization in schools and the community." However, the persistence of concerns despite these efforts indicates that sensitization alone is insufficient without addressing structural drivers.

GAPS AND CHALLENGES

Implementation Gap

The most significant challenge is the gap between policy and practice. Despite Uganda's comprehensive legal framework for child protection, the 2022 study (Alungat, 2022) concluded that "child abuse remains prevalent in the district despite various pieces of legislation and mechanisms locally and globally to combat the same." The WNCB programme similarly noted "insufficient resources to effectively implement the policies" and "general lack of awareness on existing policies and laws" (WNCB, 2025a).

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Child protection services in Buteba and across Busia District are under-resourced. The district probation and social welfare office, police child and family protection units, and local councils lack the personnel, funding, and infrastructure to effectively prevent and respond to violations. The DPC's observation that parents report cases but fail to bring victims for medical examination reflects both community factors and the logistical challenges of accessing services.

CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Efforts to address harmful practices such as disco Matanga face cultural resistance. The practice is "cherished" by many community members, and attempts to regulate it have generated significant opposition. In mining communities, the normalization of child labour is deeply embedded, and awareness messages are often dismissed. Changing these norms requires sustained engagement that addresses the economic and social functions these practices serve.

DATA AND DOCUMENTATION GAPS

Available documentation on child protection in Buteba is uneven. While some concerns (child labour, disco Matanga) are relatively well-documented, others (commercial sexual exploitation, specific trafficking patterns in Buteba) lack systematic data. The hidden nature of many violations makes accurate measurement difficult, and underreporting is likely.

COORDINATION CHALLENGES

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Table 5: Major implementation gaps and suggested directions

GAP/CHALLENGE	EVIDENCE FROM THE ARTICLE	SUGGESTED DIRECTION
Implementation gap	Policy and legislation do not consistently translate into effective local enforcement.	Allocate resources, clarify responsibilities, strengthen enforcement and monitoring.
Resource constraints	Probation/social welfare, police child protection and local structures lack adequate personnel, funding and infrastructure.	Recruit/train staff, equip units and improve accessible referral services.
Cultural resistance	Some harmful practices are economically and socially embedded.	Use sustained participatory engagement and provide viable alternatives.
Data and documentation gaps	Evidence is uneven, especially for trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.	Establish baseline data, routine reporting and systematic research.
Coordination challenges	Multiple actors operate with inconsistent coordination and delayed policy processes.	Strengthen formal coordination mechanisms, referral pathways and accountability.

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

While multi-stakeholder and cross-border collaborations have been established, coordination remains challenging. The district's attempt to pass a Child Protection Bill has been delayed by procedural issues, and enforcement of existing regulations is inconsistent. The involvement of multiple actors like government, civil society, international organizations, and community groups requires effective coordination mechanisms that are often lacking.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Socio-Ecological Model

A socio-ecological framework helps understand child protection concerns in Buteba as the product of interacting factors at multiple levels. At the individual level, children's vulnerability is shaped by age, gender, disability, and personal circumstances. At the family level, poverty, parenting practices, and domestic violence influence protection. At the community level, cultural norms, peer influences, and local economic conditions matter. At the societal level, legal frameworks, enforcement capacity, and economic policies create the broader context.

Effective interventions must address multiple levels simultaneously. Awareness campaigns targeting individuals and families are insufficient without addressing community norms and structural drivers. Legal reforms are necessary but not sufficient without enforcement capacity and community engagement.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

The concept of structural violence illuminates how social arrangements harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. In Buteba, poverty, limited educational and economic opportunities, and geographic marginalization create conditions in which child protection violations flourish. Families send children to mines not because they are ignorant of risks but because they need income. Communities resist banning disco Matanga not because they support child abuse but because funeral expenses are beyond their means.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
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Addressing child protection concerns therefore requires addressing the structural conditions that produce them. This includes economic empowerment, accessible education, and social protection systems that reduce the pressure on families to rely on children's labour or to engage in harmful practices for economic reasons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For District and Local Government

First, expedite passage and implementation of the Child and Family Protection Bill. The bill should address disco Matanga and other harmful practices while providing support for bereaved families to reduce the economic pressure that sustains the practice.

Second, strengthen enforcement of child labour laws in mining areas. This requires not only penalties for violations but also support for families to access alternative income sources and for children to return to school or access vocational training.

Third, invest in child protection infrastructure. This includes recruiting and training probation and social welfare officers, equipping police child and family protection units, and establishing accessible reporting and referral mechanisms.

Fourth, support community-based child protection mechanisms. Local councils, religious leaders, and community groups can play important roles in prevention and response if adequately supported and coordinated.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

First, continue and expand multi-stakeholder child labour elimination programmes. The WNCB model, which combines area-based and supply-chain approaches, has demonstrated effectiveness and should be scaled up with sustained funding.

Second, strengthen cross-border collaboration on child trafficking. Joint operations, information sharing, and coordinated sensitization between Ugandan and Kenyan authorities are essential given the porous border.

Third, support economic empowerment for vulnerable families. Village Savings and Loan Associations, vocational training, and income-generating activities reduce the economic pressures that drive child labour and early marriage.

Fourth, engage communities in designing and implementing interventions. Top-down approaches face resistance; participatory methods that involve community members in identifying problems and solutions are more likely to succeed.

FOR NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

First, incorporate child labour prohibitions into mining regulations and ensure enforcement. The gap between the Mineral Policy's intent and actual regulations must be closed.

Second, allocate adequate resources for child protection at district level. National commitments to child protection must be matched with funding for personnel, infrastructure, and programmes.

Third, address the structural drivers of child protection violations. Poverty reduction, universal education, and social protection are essential complements to child protection-specific interventions.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

First, conduct systematic assessments of child protection concerns in Buteba to establish baseline data and enable monitoring of trends over time.

Second, evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions, including the Child and Family Protection Bill once implemented and the WNCB programme's long-term outcomes.

Third, investigate the specific dynamics of child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation in Buteba, which are less documented than child labour and disco Matanga.

Fourth, examine the economic dimensions of harmful practices to inform interventions that address underlying drivers.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Table 6: Consolidated recommendations by stakeholder

STAKEHOLDER	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS
District and local government	Expedite and implement the Child and Family Protection Bill; strengthen mining child-labour enforcement; invest in child protection infrastructure; support community mechanisms.
Civil society and development partners	Scale multi-stakeholder child-labour programmes; strengthen cross-border anti-trafficking work; expand family economic empowerment; use participatory approaches.
National government	Incorporate child-labour prohibitions into mining regulations; fund district child protection; address poverty, education and social protection.
Future research	Establish baseline data; evaluate interventions; investigate trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation; examine economic dimensions of harmful practices.

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

CONCLUSION

Child protection in Buteba Sub- County, Busia District, presents a complex picture of persistent concerns and emerging responses. Children face multiple, overlapping risks: harmful cultural practices such as disco Matanga, labour in artisanal gold mines, teenage pregnancy and school dropout, cross-border trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation. These concerns are driven by poverty, cultural norms, weak enforcement, geographic vulnerability, and family challenges.

The consequences for children are severe and lasting: health problems, educational disruption, psychological harm, and intergenerational poverty. Yet the picture is not entirely bleak. The Child and Family Protection Bill, multi-stakeholder child labour elimination programmes, and cross-border collaborations demonstrate commitment and progress. The reduction in child labour in Busia from 68% to 47% and the increase in school enrolment to 84% show that change is possible with sustained, multi-sectoral effort.

What is needed now is scaling and sustaining these efforts. Child protection cannot be achieved through isolated projects or awareness campaigns alone. It requires addressing the structural conditions like poverty, limited opportunities, and weak enforcement that produce vulnerability. It requires coordination across government, civil society, communities, and international partners. And it requires sustained commitment over time, recognizing that changing deeply embedded norms and practices is a long-term endeavor.

For the children of Buteba, the stakes are high. Their futures depend on whether the commitments expressed in policies, bills, and programmes translate into real changes in their daily lives. This review offers a synthesis of what is known and a framework for action, but the work of protecting children is ultimately done in communities, families, and institutions. It is there that the difference must be made.

Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

Table 7: Key child protection data reported in the article

INDICATOR	REPORTED FIGURE	SOURCE
Child labour rate in Busia (baseline)	68%	WNCB
Child labour rate in Busia (2024)	47%	WNCB
Children in school in Busia (2024)	84%	WNCB
Children withdrawn from child labour (Busia)	1,326	WNCB
Households reached by WNCB in Busia	4,280+	WNCB
Children in ASGM in Uganda	15,000+ (30% of miners)	UNEP
Teenage ANC attendance (Busia, Q3)	1,143 (15–19 years)	District Health
Teenage pregnancies in Buteba	68	District Health
Child trafficking cases registered weekly	~4	URURN
Children rescued from trafficking (Jan 2025)	22	Observer
Defilement cases registered daily (Busia)	1–10	DPC
Children in commercial sex (Busia, Kabarole, Lira, Mbale)	7,000–12,000	ECPAT

Source: Compiled by the author from the reviewed literature and documents.

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