

Betrayed By The Mother And Failed By The Community”- What Could Have Been Done To Prevent The Kidnapping And Trafficking Of Joshlin Smith: A Social Work Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The disappearance of Joshlin Smith in February 2024 and the subsequent conviction of her biological mother and two co-accused of kidnapping and human trafficking constitute one of South Africa’s most distressing child protection cases. This paper critically examines the case from a social work and human rights perspective to explore how Joshlin Smith’s rights were violated through parental betrayal, systemic shortcomings, and community inaction. **Method:** A qualitative case study design was employed, drawing on the final conviction and sentencing judgments, media reports, and relevant scholarly literature. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key issues emerging from the available evidence. Three major themes were identified: the betrayal of Joshlin Smith by her biological mother, the failure of community members to report known warning signs that could have prevented the trafficking, and the perpetrators’ lack of remorse throughout the legal process. **Significance of the paper:** Guided by the Human Rights Approach, the study argues that the case reflects serious violations of constitutional and children's rights, including the rights to protection, family care, education, freedom of movement, and potentially the right to life. **Findings and Discussion:** The findings highlight the need to strengthen family preservation services, early statutory intervention, parenting support programmes, community awareness initiatives, and multidisciplinary collaboration among social workers, law enforcement agencies, schools, healthcare providers, and community structures. The paper concludes that preventing child trafficking requires coordinated action across families, communities, and state institutions, firmly grounded in the best interests of the child and human rights principles. Despite its reliance on a single case and publicly available sources, the study offers valuable insights for strengthening child protection policy, social work practice, and future research on child trafficking prevention.

Keywords: *Child trafficking, community responsibility, Joshlin Smith, human rights violations, South Africa.*

INTRODUCTION:

This paper analyses the tragic case of Joshlin Smith, who has been missing since February 2024 because she was sold by her biological mother to unknown people. On 7 March 2024, the police officials arrested her mother (Racquel Kelly Smith), her stepfather (Jacquen Appolliss), and their associate (Steveno van Rhyn), and they were charged and sentenced to life imprisonment for kidnapping and human trafficking (The Citizen, 2025). The case is of significant concern not only to the social work profession, which is responsible for safeguarding and protecting children, but also to the broader public. It therefore warrants

critical discussion to generate meaningful recommendations on how similar cases can be better handled in the future. This paper is also unique because it investigates an extraordinary case wherein the biological mother, namely Kelly Smith, conceptualized and implemented a plan to kidnap and traffic her daughter, Joshlin Smith. To this end, cases like this call for new considerations, and this case sends a strong message that children's rights are of paramount importance (National Prosecuting Authority, 2025).

The case of Joshlin Smith is about child kidnapping and trafficking, and it caught the attention of all sectors in South Africa and made news headlines globally. According to Kimathi (2023, p. 78) child trafficking is defined “as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child through the use of force, threats, coercion, abuse of power, or exploitation of a child’s vulnerability, including the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to obtain consent from a person who has control over the child”. Human Trafficking is said to be a worldwide phenomenon and is one of the most lucrative criminal enterprises globally (Mabaso & Maluleke, 2017). According to Swart (2011), South Africa serves both as a source and destination for international human trafficking, while the trafficking of women and children within its own borders is even more widespread. South Africa functions both as a source and a transit country in human trafficking. As a source country, its citizens are trafficked within the country and across international borders. As a transit country, traffickers exploit its borders to transport victims from neighboring countries to other destinations (Nel, 2025). The problem of human trafficking is not only limited to South Africa, but also affects other countries, including African countries. According to Olayiwola (2026), Nigeria is widely known for the large number of women and girls trafficked to Europe; however, trafficking within the country itself is also prevalent. It is observed that Thailand serves as a destination country for men, women, and children trafficked from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, the People’s Republic of China, Russia, and Uzbekistan for purposes of sexual and labor exploitation (Sorajjakool, 2013).

Although not justifiable, there are different reasons for the kidnapping and trafficking of children worldwide. According to Sambo (2009) children are increasingly being trafficked for purposes of sexual and labor exploitation. Victims are frequently subjected to rape and abuse, and are repeatedly sold; many are coerced into drug addiction to ensure compliance, while others ultimately become homeless, incarcerated, or lose their lives (Makoe, 2025, p. 1). Based on the available facts and the court record, Joshlin Smith was sold by her biological mother for R20,000 (approximately \$1,100 or £850). During the court trial, the testimony of the state’s key witness, Ms. Laurentia Lombard, who claims that she only became aware of Kelly Smith’s plan to sell Joshlin Smith a night before the child was reported missing, indicated that Joshlin Smith was sold to a sangoma (traditional healer) for her eyes and skin in order for the sangoma to use them for muthi [traditional medicine] (eNCA, 2025a). According to members of the coastal community of Middelpoort in Diazville, Joshlin Smith is known as “the green-eyed girl” (Le Roux, 2024). If indeed it is true that Joshlin Smith was used for muthi purposes, it means that her right to life has been violated. I must pause here and indicate that, as a responsible social worker, the sangomas in South Africa are recognized and regulated by relevant government regulations. As such, it can only be witchdoctors who can use human body parts in their activities, and therefore, the sangomas cannot be associated with that practice.

There is no doubt that victims of trafficking experience various challenges during their ordeal of being trafficked, and for the purpose of this paper, it is submitted that Joshlin Smith is not immune to that. To this effect, Warria and Chikadzi (2018) state that trafficked children have multi-faceted needs ranging from physical, psycho-emotional, and medical ones to social and legal needs. According to Pearce (2011, p. 1426) “when children or young people who have been trafficked from overseas arrive in a foreign country, they may encounter issues that make them particularly susceptible to “internal” re-trafficking”. Language barriers and insufficient interpreter services exacerbate this. In support of this observation, Nel (2025) states that one of the ways of identifying possible victims of trafficking is that they are often unable to speak any local languages or seem to be coerced or controlled in their replies. A study conducted in England, which focused on the experiences of children and young people who were victims of trafficking, found that trafficking abuse was experienced as severe acts of cruelty, violence, and neglect, and processes of deceit, manipulation, and commodification (Gearon, 2022).

Against this background, the paper seeks to demonstrate, with reference to the two court judgments in this case, namely the conviction and sentencing judgments, how Ms. Kelly Smith betrayed her biological daughter, Joshlin Smith, by selling her to unknown individuals. It further examines the author's perspective on the role of community members who were friends with Ms. Kelly Smith and failed to report her plan to sell Joshlin Smith to the police in a timely manner, which, if it had been done, might have prevented her sale, abduction, and trafficking. Finally, the paper considers the implications for social work as a profession committed to promoting, protecting, and upholding the human rights of children as a vulnerable group. At the time of writing, the whereabouts of Joshlin Smith, as well as the circumstances surrounding her disappearance, remain unknown to both the South African public and law enforcement authorities. Media reports indicate that the South African Police Service continues to investigate the matter.

Method

In writing this paper, a case study has been employed as the methodological approach to develop a comprehensive understanding of a contemporary issue or phenomenon within a defined context (Coombs, 2022). According to Gerring (2017, p. 28), a case study is highly focused, meaning that the researcher spends considerable time analyzing and subsequently presenting the chosen case or cases. The case is viewed as providing important evidence for the argument. For this paper, the author examined the finalized court case concerning Joshlin Smith, who has been missing since 19 February 2024. In this matter, her biological mother and co-accused were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of kidnapping and human trafficking. The analysis focused on two specific court judgments: the accused's conviction and sentencing. Both finalized judgments were obtained from the Southern African Legal Information Institute (SAFLII) website. The cases are titled *The State v Jacquen Rohwan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, and Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn* (High Court of South Africa, Western Cape Division, Cape Town, 2025). The conviction judgment was delivered on 2 May 2025, while the sentencing judgment was handed down on 29 May 2025. Furthermore, relevant newspaper articles and televised reports were consulted to enrich the discussion. The case of Joshlin Smith is particularly distinctive, as it involves a crime typically perpetrated by strangers rather than biological parents. As such, it represents an unprecedented scenario with significant implications for childcare and protection services within the family system in the South African context. After reading and analyzing the consulted documents, three thematic areas were identified, which align with the paper title. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the facts of the case as presented in the documents consulted and other relevant sources. As one of the most widely used methods in qualitative research, thematic analysis facilitates the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns and themes within rich, descriptive qualitative data (Naeem et al., 2023).

Findings and Discussions

The betrayal of Joshlin Smith by her biological mother

The available information indicates that Joshlin Smith, a 6-year-old girl, went missing in February 2024 from her home in Middelpos informal settlement in Saldanha Bay, Western Cape province of South Africa, which she shared with her mother, stepfather, and two siblings (The Citizen, 2025). At the time Joshlin Smith was sold to her traffickers by her mother, it was reported that Ms. Kelly Smith and her co-accused were using drugs, which may have contributed to the commission of the offenses. However, the court dismissed this factor, as the accused chose to remain silent throughout the proceedings and failed to present any evidence to challenge the allegations against them (*"The State and Jacquen Rowhan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn," 2025*).

In this section of the paper, the focus is on answering the question of how Ms. Kelly Smith betrayed Joshlin Smith. It is important to examine her conduct from the conceptualization of the plan through its execution, and during and after the court proceedings. In the ideal world, Ms. Kelly Smith was not supposed to have conceptualized the plan to kidnap, sell, and traffic Joshlin Smith. It is for these reasons that Sandberg (2018) suggests the main way to protect children from all forms of violence, as understood by Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is to prevent it from occurring. Prevention may take

various forms, including situations in which an individual refrains from formulating or carrying out intentions to harm a child, or in which others become aware of such intentions and proactively report them to appropriate authorities, such as the police or social workers. However, in the case of Joshlin Smith, available evidence suggests that her mother was not only willing to sell her to strangers but also attempted to conceal this by feigning ignorance regarding her daughter's whereabouts. To this end, Judge Erasmus remarked that the stepfather, namely, Appollis, and the mother's (Kelly Smith) conduct was not that of a concerned parent, and this was because they knew exactly what happened to the child (The Citizen, 2025).

It is further concluded that, beyond the act of selling her daughter, Ms. Kelly Smith also betrayed Joshlin Smith by misleading the search efforts undertaken by both community members and law enforcement authorities. Following the visit by the Minister of Police and the Premier of the Western Cape to the area where Joshlin Smith resided, police officials from across the province, drawn from various detective units within the South African Police Services (SAPS), together with community members, organizations, and other concerned individuals, conducted an extensive search in the greater Saldanha Bay area extending towards Jacobs Bay (*"The State and Jacquen Rowhan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn," 2025, p. 20*). Ms. Smith's behavior during the search for her daughter not only betrayed her daughter but also amounted to defeating the ends of justice as she participated in the search for Joshlin Smith, knowing very well that it was just a waste of police resources and time of the people who were genuinely assisting in the search. For example, on 24 February 2024, police K9 unit search dogs, alongside Non-Governmental Organizations and volunteers, thoroughly combed the area by going door to door and inspecting drains, while a helicopter surveyed hard-to-reach locations and rescue boats were deployed (Cruywagen, 2025). To this end, during the sentencing proceedings in court, Judge Erasmus had the following to say about the conduct of Ms. Kelly Smith:

Your mother's victim impact statement clearly conveyed her desire to support you, even in the face of your drug use and abuse. A helping hand was pushed away in a threatening manner. Until now, I have not observed any signs of remorse. Regarding the personal circumstances, I do not see any mitigating factors." (*"The State and Jacquen Rowhan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn," 2025, p. 9*).

The above statement indicates that Ms. Kelly Smith both used and abused substances, which posed a significant risk to her ability to provide adequate care and protection for her children. In this regard, Todman and Galvani (2025) argue that children living with parents who misuse substances are often exposed to a persistent cycle of unpredictability, stemming from noticeable changes in their parents' behavior. A further important observation from Judge Erasmus's remarks is that throughout the trial proceedings, Ms. Kelly Smith showed no remorse for the circumstances she subjected her daughter to. In my view, her conduct constitutes an extreme form of betrayal that a child could endure. Moreover, during both the trial and sentencing phases, she chose to remain silent, which is within her legal rights. Consequently, the court record does not reflect her account of what transpired or the reasons behind her decision to sell her daughter.

The failure of community members to report the warning signs that could have prevented the trafficking

This section aims to address what I consider the inability and failure of certain community members who were aware that Joshlin Smith might be sold by her mother yet chose not to act on the information they had. It is important to clarify that I do not intend to assign blame to community members or individuals who testified in the Joshlin Smith case. However, I submit that, based on what is now known and with the benefit of hindsight, these community members could have taken more direct action upon learning of Kelly Smith's intention to sell Joshlin Smith. For instance, during the testimony, a witness, a pastor, said Kelly Smith told him in 2023 that she planned to sell her daughter (Frane-Presse & Reuters, 2025). The court records reflect that Ms. Lombaard, who was initially charged as a co-accused but later became a state witness, testified that she overheard Ms. Kelly Smith informing Mr. Appollis (the stepfather) that she had received R20,000. Ms. Lombaard further stated that she subsequently approached Ms. Smith in the presence of Mr. Van Rhyn (a co-accused) to seek clarity. In response, Ms. Smith allegedly admitted that

she had sold her child, Joshlin, and acknowledged having done something wrong. It was further indicated that Ms. Smith used emphatic language and offered Ms. Lombaard R1,000 and Mr. Van Rhyn R1,200 in exchange for their silence. According to Ms. Lombaard, both she and Mr. Van Rhyn accepted the offer. She testified that these events occurred on 18 February 2024, one day before Joshlin Smith was reported missing. Lastly, Ms. Lombaard testified that she witnessed Ms. Kelly Smith hand over Joshlin Smith to a woman driving a white Polo on 19 February 2024 (*"The State and Jacquen Rohwan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn," 2025, p. 11*).

In an ideal situation, the pastor, Ms. Lombaard, Mr. Appollis, and Mr. Van Rhyn ought to have reported the mother's intentions to the South African Police Service and social workers to enable the implementation of appropriate statutory intervention. In my view, their failure to report the matter timeously constitutes a dereliction of their duty, as members of the community, to protect Joshlin Smith. It is important to note that, under section 38 of the South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996, which concerns the "Enforcement of rights" enshrined in the Bill of Rights, the pastor was required to report this matter. Section 38 states that:

Anyone listed in this section has the right to approach a competent court, alleging that a right in the Bill of Rights has been infringed or threatened, and the court may grant appropriate relief, including a declaration of rights. The persons who may approach a court are- (a) anyone acting on their own interest; (b) anyone acting on behalf of another person who cannot act in their own name; (c) anyone acting as a member of, or in the interest of, a group or class of persons; (d) anyone acting in the public interest; and (e) an association acting in the interests of its members. (Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 20).

In relation to the above-mentioned subsections of section 38, what was required was a report to the South African Police Services and Social Workers so that an investigation could be undertaken. In terms of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, social workers are clothed with the responsibility to place a child, such as Joshlin Smith, in an alternative care to safeguard her best interests, as she needed care and protection against her biological mother. For a child to be placed in alternative care, social workers must take the matter to the Children's Court, and the Presiding Officer will issue a court order that legalizes the child's removal from his or her family environment and placement in alternative care.

The perpetrators' lack of remorse throughout the legal process

In further examining the debate over how Joshlin Smith was betrayed by her mother and let down by the co-accused's failure to report the matter to law enforcement, it is important to consider the apparent lack of remorse shown by Ms. Kelly Smith and her co-accused. Throughout both the trial and pre-sentencing proceedings, they chose not to testify, with their legal representatives addressing the court on their behalf. As a result, it was challenging to assess their emotional responses or determine whether they felt any remorse for their actions. Nonetheless, the court ultimately concluded that no remorse had been demonstrated. Remorse is an indication that the accused has realized that a wrong was done and has, to that extent, been rehabilitated (*"The State v Maspopi Lebogang Tsiane and Other," 2024*).

It is therefore unsurprising that the accused in this matter displayed no remorse for their conduct. The case of Joshlin Smith clearly falls within the realm of a premeditated and planned offense, perpetrated by adults against a vulnerable and powerless child. In *S v PM 2014 (2) SACR 481 (GP)*, the court defined premeditation as conduct undertaken deliberately, following rational consideration of the timing or method, and calculated either to enhance the likelihood of success or to avoid detection or apprehension. Similarly, a planned act has been described as a scheme or method devised in advance, structured as a process aimed at optimally achieving a particular objective (Mokose, 2021). Looking at the facts of the case of Joshlin Smith, initially, Ms. Kelly Smith had successfully managed to deceive the police officials as well as the community members who were searching for Joshlin Smith, as she reported that the child was missing and did not know her whereabouts, while in reality, she knew that she had sold her daughter. However, the police investigations identified contradictions in Ms. Kelly Smith's statements, leading to her arrest and that of the co-accused. One of the police officers, Captain Lombard, described Ms. Kelly Smith as

emotionless and cold, detached from the investigation prior to the efforts to clarify the issues (*"The State and Jacquen Rohwan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn," 2025*).

Theoretical Framework

Theory allows us to critically examine underlying assumptions and established practices that may disadvantage service users. In doing so, it broadens our ability to consider a wider range of practice approaches beyond what might be apparent through a purely commonsense perspective (Healy, 2022, p. 23). In this paper, the Human Rights Approach is adopted as the theoretical framework to demonstrate how the betrayal of Joshlin Smith by her mother, as well as the silence of community members who were aware of her mother's intention to sell her to strangers, amounted to a violation of Joshlin's human rights as a child. Social work is a human right-based profession and, as such, strives to promote, protect, uphold, and restore the rights of the most vulnerable groups in society, including children. In the context of this study, this applies to Joshlin Smith, who was only six years old at the time she was sold and subsequently reported as missing. According to Miley and Dubois (2026, p. 13) Human rights are those rights accorded to individuals by virtue of their being human. Human rights are universal and indivisible. They can neither be granted nor taken away but only protected or violated.

The case of Joshlin Smith serves as a clear illustration of the arbitrary violation of both child and human rights by the very person who not only gave birth to her, having carried her for nine months, but who is also constitutionally and legally obliged to act as her primary caregiver, protector, and to ensure that she is not subjected to harm or trauma. It must be unequivocally stated that a child is conceived and born because of parents exercising their fundamental reproductive rights. This process inherently creates a bond between the mother and the unborn child, with the reasonable expectation that such attachment will deepen after birth, naturally giving rise to the provision of care and protection. The exercise of reproductive rights, therefore, carries with it a corresponding duty to provide parental and family care. The purpose of such care includes, among other things, safeguarding children from maltreatment, neglect, abuse, or degradation, as envisaged in section 28(1)(d) of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

In discussing the human rights of Joshlin Smith, which her mother has obviously violated, the co-accused, as well as those alleged to have bought her from her mother, the Bill of Rights, which is Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, will form the basis for the arguments (Republic of South Africa, 1996). According to Yacoob J in *"Lawyers for Human Rights, Ann Francis Eveleth versus Minister of Home Affairs, Director General: Department of Home Affairs"* (2004), these rights, contained in the Bill of Rights, are integral to the values of human dignity, equality, and freedom that are fundamental to our constitutional order. Human trafficking violates basic human rights and causes immeasurable trauma to victims, their families, and communities (Mabaso & Maluleke, 2017). According to Sambo (2025) survivors face significant challenges in rebuilding their lives, often suffering from trauma, stigmatization, and difficulties in reintegrating into society. Child trafficking and other forms of repeated or prolonged trauma are linked to more complex post-traumatic outcomes, most clearly reflected in symptoms such as emotional dysregulation, changes in self-perception, and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (Ottisova et al., 2018).

Children are human too and have a right to live without violence. They need to be protected at all times, perhaps even more so, given their age and ability, because they do not have the strength or resources to fight for their rights (Ngubane & Mkhize, 2021, p. 89). In support of this observation, the then Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng of the Constitutional Court of South Africa states that "children are indeed vulnerable and delicate. They are not always able to protect themselves and may not know what to do in the event of a breach of the law prejudicial to their best interests" (*"Freedom of Religion South Africa v Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development and Others," 2019, p. 26*). It is, therefore, unsurprising that, during the delivery of the conviction judgment, Erasmus J remarked that it is our duty to ensure that every child in our village is protected, and as members of society, we must uphold this responsibility. We are collectively responsible for safeguarding all individuals, thereby enabling each child to grow into an active and contributing member of society (*"The State and Jacquen Rohwan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn," 2025, p. 3*).

The right to freedom of movement and residence is in section 21 of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), and its violation occurred the moment Ms. Kelly Smith handed Joshlin Smith over to her traffickers or buyers. Court records indicate that the state's key witness, Ms. Lombaard, testified that Ms. Smith escorted Joshlin to a car driven by the woman who had purchased her, who then drove away with Joshlin on 19 February 2024 (*"The State and Jacquen Rohwan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn,"* 2025). It is submitted that the violation of Joshlin Smith's freedom of movement marked the beginning of a broader infringement of her fundamental human rights, a process facilitated by her own biological mother. By handing Joshlin over, her mother not only consented to potential harm but effectively granted those who took her unrestricted power to act as they wished. This conduct represents an extreme form of betrayal by the very person entrusted with her care, protection, and well-being.

At the time that Joshlin Smith went missing, she was attending school and in Grade 1 at Diazville Primary School (eNCA, 2025b). Therefore, her disappearance means that her right to education has been violated as she has now been separated from not only her family but also the school. According to Serfontein (2015, p. 2272), education is a vital instrument that enables learners to acquire and develop the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to navigate the complexities of socio-professional life, perform their productive roles effectively, and contribute to future social cohesion, prosperity, and sustainability. Education plays a pivotal role in enabling children to realize their full potential. Conversely, the absence of education perpetuates a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. To this end, the African Children's Charter affirms every child's right to education in Article 11 (Union, 2016).

Another deep concerning observation, as previously noted in the introduction and background of this paper, is the allegation that Joshlin Smith may have been exploited for her eyes and skin in the preparation of traditional medicine by a traditional healer, which purportedly motivated her mother to sell her. If this allegation holds any truth, it will imply that Joshlin has been killed, thereby constituting a grave violation of her right to life. According to Scholtz et al. (1997), a ritual or muti murders are a form of human sacrifice, and the murder is carried out after the body parts are removed while the victim is still alive. This implies that human life is brutally taken by the perpetrators of this heinous crime. In *"The State versus T. Makwanyane and M. Mchunu"* (1995), Chaskalson P, states that the death of a person terminates not only the right to life but also all other personal rights that had vested in the individual under Chapter Three of the Constitution. The right to life is strongly safeguarded in the Constitution of South Africa, and no person or authority, including the state, may unlawfully take another's life (Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Implications for Social Work

The thrust of this paper has been on demonstrating that Ms. Kelly Smith, as the biological mother to Joshlin Smith, has not only violated her rights but also betrayed her beyond what one can imagine. According to Lewis (2025), the betrayal that occurs when a caregiver, expected to offer protection, becomes the source of harm can have enduring effects, particularly within mother-daughter relationships. As previously noted, the bond between a mother and her child typically develops naturally through pregnancy and childbirth. It is evident that, despite her mother's shortcomings, including substance abuse, Joshlin Smith had formed a strong emotional attachment and affection toward her. Ms. Kelly Smith's betrayal of this trust and attachment highlights the urgent need to strengthen and restructure family preservation services, particularly for families identified as dysfunctional, such as the Smith family discussed in this paper.

The available information shows that the case of Joshlin Smith is not an isolated case wherein the biological mother sold her child in South Africa. For instance, in late 2024, a 2-year-old, namely, Kutlwano Shalaba from Vanderbijlpark in Gauteng province of South Africa, was reported missing by his mother, Keneilwe Shalaba, who claimed he had been abducted. Investigations revealed that she allegedly sold him for R75,000, which she received the same day. His remains were later found in a shallow grave, leading to charges of human trafficking, premeditated murder, and conspiracy against her and an alleged accomplice (Dube, 2026). Another incident occurred in Mpumalanga, where three women—including the child's mother, Nomasonto Angel Khoza—were arrested for allegedly selling her one-year-old daughter for R5,000. Fortunately, the child was later found alive in Springs, Gauteng, and the suspected buyer was also

taken into custody (Petersen, 2015). These cases are deeply concerning and highlight the need for further social work research to identify the factors that may predispose biological mothers to sell their children to strangers as though they were commodities. Such research should also examine the profiles of these mothers and propose comprehensive, evidence-based social work interventions.

The evidence presented in court by one of the social workers portrays Ms. Kelly Smith as a violent individual. It indicates that, while she was pregnant with Joshlin in 2026, she threatened to stab her young son, verbally abused him, and threatened to assault her grandmother (Erasmus, 2025). The court further observed that Ms. Kelly Smith had attended a rehabilitation center on two separate occasions because of drug use and abuse, the first instance occurring when Joshlin was still an infant (*"The State and Jacquen Rowhan Appollis, Racquel Chantel Smith, Steveno Dumaizo Duwayne van Rhyn,"* 2025). This history reflects evident shortcomings in her parenting capacity and suggests that she posed a potential risk to her children's upbringing. Considering this, it is essential for communities to implement social work-facilitated parenting programs that emphasize the importance of healthy parent-child relationships and aim to strengthen these bonds. Similar initiatives have been implemented in the Tiwi Islands in Australia's Northern Territory, where findings indicate that parents who participated in the "Play to Connect (P2C) parent-child program" reported gaining a better understanding of their children and experienced improved relationships through dedicated 'special time' spent together (Stock et al., 2025, p. 666).

Eliminating human trafficking, including child trafficking, cannot be accomplished by any single sector; it demands coordinated efforts from all sectors of society and people from every walk of life (Todres & Diaz, 2019, p. 4). There is no doubt that the matter of addressing human trafficking and child trafficking requires that the law enforcement agencies, which have the capabilities of crime intelligence to detect and prevent crime within communities, perform visible policing within communities that are identified as hotspot areas for crime. But this will require community members to actively support law enforcement officials. Community policing strategies are effective only when the community is willing and prepared to actively participate (Modise, 2023). A study conducted within the Roodekrans Neighborhood Watch in the West Rand region of Gauteng Province found that the police are primarily responsible for responding to crime, while the neighborhood watch focuses on crime prevention and serves as the "eyes and ears" of the police. Most crime-related information is collected directly from the community, and the neighborhood watch plays a key role in promoting greater crime prevention awareness among residents (Meyer & Van Graan, 2011).

Once the pastor and the co-accused of Ms. Joshlin Smith became aware of the mother's intention to sell Joshlin Smith as though she were a commodity, they bore a duty to report the matter to the police and social workers. However, this obligation was not fulfilled. This failure may be attributed either to a lack of awareness that the act would indeed be carried out or to insufficient knowledge of their legal duty under the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Children's Act to report such concerns. This situation underscores the need for bystander awareness programs facilitated by social workers in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the Child and Family Protection Unit responsible for child protection services. The central message of these programs should emphasize that "it takes a village to raise a child," underscoring that safeguarding children is a collective responsibility shared by the entire community.

CONCLUSION:

The case of Joshlin Smith represents a profound violation of child rights and a deeply troubling example of betrayal within the family system. The analysis has demonstrated that her biological mother not only failed in her legal and moral duty to protect her but also actively facilitated her exploitation through premeditated actions. This conduct stands in direct contradiction to the constitutional principle of the best interests of the child and underscores the vulnerability of children within unsafe family environments. Furthermore, the apparent failure of certain community members to report known risks highlights critical gaps in collective responsibility and early intervention mechanisms. The perpetrators' lack of remorse underscores the crime's severity and its irreversible consequences. From a human rights approach, this case illustrates how multiple rights—including the rights to life, protection, family care, and education—can be

simultaneously violated. Ultimately, the case underscores the urgent need for stronger preventative, protective, and collaborative measures across social, legal, and community systems to safeguard children.

Limitations of this paper

This paper is limited by its reliance on a single case study of Joshlin Smith and the analysis of publicly available court judgments, media reports, and relevant literature. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all cases of child kidnapping and trafficking in South Africa or other settings. The study is further constrained by the absence of primary empirical data collected through interviews with key stakeholders, including social workers, law enforcement officials, community members, and the accused. Furthermore, as Joshlin Smith has not yet been located, critical information regarding her experiences, current circumstances, and the full scope of the trafficking network remains unavailable. Accordingly, some interpretations are necessarily based on evidence presented during court proceedings and other publicly accessible sources. Notwithstanding these limitations, the case offers important insights into gaps in child protection systems, community accountability, and the role of social work in preventing child trafficking, strengthening policy responses, and informing future research.

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