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Child Labor in Ghana: An analysis of perceptions and practices

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Child Labor in Ghana:

An analysis of perceptions and practices



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Abstract

After talking to children, parents, people in organizations as well as in government, I have gathered many different views on what I will temporarily, for lack of a better phrase, label as child labour. Parents frustrated me with their inability to see that the work their kids were doing was too much, and saddened me with their acknowledgement that they don't want to make them work, but they have to. Government and organisational official made me admire them for their genuine dedication to the idea of change, but made me skeptical with their inconsistent ability to actually effect that change.

Unlike most issue I've explored in the past, I can't these differences opposing views. Granted, every argument has two sides. But I feel that in this case, I've found too much that is right in each to call one right and one wrong.

Having said that, I think it is only fair for me to introduce this paper as a forum for differing perspectives, both in defining and tolerating child labour.

INTRODUCTION

What is Child Labour?

One of the biggest problems with child labour is the existence of the phrase “child labour”. It carries with it a lot of weight, but very little meaning. What do people think when they hear it? What do people mean when they say it?

There is no single definition for “child labour”. Some people think having a child do part-time work while in school is wrong, while others don't think twice about sending their children out onto a farm all day, everyday.

To call all child work child labour would be oversimplification, laying out a term that only makes sense in a vacuum. Thus, in order to define child labour, one must first look at the context in which it is being used. How does society define it, based on historical traditions and current beliefs? How do individuals define it, based on their socioeconomic status, education and past experiences? How does the government define it, based on both the legislation that is in place, and how that legislation is enforced?

Working Definitions

For the sake of clarity, I will distinguish between positive, negative and neutral reference to the act of children working.

- I will use the phrase ***child labour*** only to refer to the phenomenon, the issue being discussed.
- I will use the phrase ***child work*** when I am referring to any and all forms of child work, without labeling that work as being good or bad.
- I will use the phrase ***light work*** when referring to acceptable child work, and ***exploitative work*** when referring to unacceptable work.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews

Since my intention was to conduct an independent study project that I could not have conducted in my own country, I decided that I wanted most of my information to come from interviews. I conducted formal interviews with about 20 people, more than half of which were children.

My first-hand observations of child labour came mostly from a week-long visit to Yindure, a village outside of Bolgatanga, in the Upper East Region. Several factors brought me to that particular location. I knew that I wanted to get a rural perspective, preferably in relation to farming, and that I wanted to travel to the North. I had a friend who said he was from a rural, agricultural-based village in the North, and who was willing to travel with me. Realizing that gaining entry into any location, especially where I didn't speak the language, would be difficult, I jumped at the opportunity. I knew that my topic was sensitive, and my questioning would be quite time-consuming, especially to someone who didn't understand my purpose, and who had better things to do – namely, working.

Unfortunately, my timing was off. Although the rainy season in the South had stirred agricultural work, the North was dry, the agricultural work slim. I couldn't see the children doing agricultural work, because they weren't doing any agricultural work.

But perhaps this was for the best. Since the children weren't working all day on the farm, they have some time to sit and talk with me. Any contrary to my initial worry, I did get to see them working. When they're not farming, these kids will do just about anything for even the smallest amount of money or food. This showed me that these kids don't choose to work. They have to work.

I talked to six boys and six girls, ranging in age from 5 to 15. For the sake of consistency, I asked each of them the same questions, as follows:

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- How many people are in your family?
- How many of those people are working?
- What jobs do they each do?
- Do you work?
- What work do you do?
- For whom do you work?
- What time do you start? Finish? How many days a week?

- At what age did you start working?
- Do you keep the money you make (if money is earned), or do you give it to your family?
- Do you go to school?
 - If yes, how does your work affect school? Do you work before/ after? Does it make you tired?
 - If no, when did you stop? Why? Do you plan to go back? Do you want to ? Can you?
- Which do you like more: work or school? Which is more important?
- Can you read?
- What do you want to do when you get older? Does the work you're doing now help prepare you for that work? Does school?

In some cases, I have listed several questions that may or may not have elicited the same responses. I found that many of my questions lost their meaning somewhere in the translation, and that by telling my translator the same question several different ways, he was better able to decide how my idea, and not necessarily my words, translated best into their language, Frafra.

Some interviews stirred follow-up questions, the most interesting of which came from a response I got during my first interview. When I asked the first boy I talked to what he planned to do when he got older, after saying he wanted to be a farmer, he went on to say that he wanted to move to the South. I subsequently asked each of the following children where they thought they would live when they got older, and found an interesting trend, which I will discuss at length with the rest of the case study.

I conducted my interviews with the boys as a group interview. I found that the more boys were around, the more comfortable they became answering my questions. With the girls, however, this method was unsuccessful. The first girl would respond to my questions with only a shy smile, finally mumbling out an answer after being asked several times. Halfway through the second interview, I became skeptical of the responses I was getting. Although I couldn't understand exactly what was being said, I knew that the amount of information I had in my notebook could not have come from the few words that had come out of her mouth. I asked my translator, and he told me that because she wouldn't answer my questions, he had rephrased them to be yes-or-no questions. Although technically I was still getting the same information, I felt like by asking in this manner, we were planting ideas in her head. I decided it would be best to discard this information, and started over, conducting individual interviews. The individual interviews went much more smoothly, and I felt comfortable that the information I was receiving was more accurate.

My intention was to interview all of the children's parents, but many of them weren't available to talk to me. I was able to conduct three interviews with adults – two with parents, and one with the chief's wife, with whom one of the girls I interviewed stays, I asked all three adults the following questions:

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- How many people are there in your family?
- What work does each parent in the house do? For how long?
- Did you work as a child?
- What work did you do?
- For whom did you work?
- What time did you start? Finish? How many days a week?
- At what age did you start working?
- Did you work for your own gain, or to supplement your family's income?
- Did you go to school?
 - If yes, how did your work affect school?
 - If no, when did you stop?
- Did your work prepare you for your occupation?
- Do your children work? What do they do? What effect does work have on them?
- Is the work your kids do good or bad for them? If it isn't bad, what kind of work would be bad?
- Do your kids go to school?
 - If yes how does their work affect school?
 - If no, why not?
- Which is more important: work or school?
- What aspirations do you have for your kids?

I had problems during my parent interviews similar to those I had during my group interview with the girls. When I tried to talk to one woman, several more came over and joined us. They started harassing the woman I was interviewing, so much that she got up and left. She returned, but only after it was clear that the other women had left.

Additionally, I felt that the interviews with the parents were less open, both on my part and on theirs. I felt like I had to be careful how I worded questions, so as not to imply that what they were doing was wrong. I felt like they were equally careful with their responses, also so as not to imply that they were doing anything wrong.

My interview with the chief's wife, however, was one of the most informative ones of my entire project. She was my translator's grandmother, so he knew how to talk to her, and she knew that she could trust him. Also, because her children were grown, she was more willing to talk about the negative effects of child work than the other parents were. I went on to ask her general questions about the village: what are the major problems this village faces, and how do they relate to having children work? Does she see child work as a problem? How could it be fixed.

The rest of my interviews were with people in organizations and government. With each, I went in with a definite list of questions, but shifted away from that list almost immediately. I felt like the questions I had prepared were ones that I intended to answer in my paper, but that could only be answered by analyzing my interviewees' responses to other, less pointed questions.

Limitations

As is probably often the case, one of my major limitations was time. With each interview, I was introduced to a new topic that in and of itself could have been an independent study project.

Poor health also had its way with me, on two occasions. Most recently, an entire week of research got cut down to a day because I got sick while in Accra. Unfortunately, this meant that I missed out on an important aspect of my research: a second group of kids with whom to compare my findings from the North. Thus, I have unfortunately had to ignore the most visible group of child labourers in all of Ghana: the street children of Accra.

My first health battle was more grave, and also more productive. Wanting to see the boys in Yindure's work firsthand, I decided to spend two hours of my second day traveling with them to where they bring the village cattle to graze. The trip takes them almost to Bolgatanga, and keeps them out from about 8 am until 7 pm. I decided to go with them to the river, which they said was an hour away. By the time we reached the river, I only had a quarter of my water left, and was ready to pass out. Two of the boys came back with my translator and me. When we reached home, I started to black out.

By the time I returned to Cape Coast, I was still suffering from my battle with dehydration. My translator was in even worse shape. During our hike, he sacrificed his water so I would remain slightly hydrated, taking a chance by drinking water from a river. As a result, he ended up getting guinea worm, and was seriously ill for about a week.

Although I would never have intentionally jeopardized our health, in retrospect, I value the lesson that only experience could have taught me. Not just watching the boys work, but actually feeling, on just a small scale, what is it that they endure helped me to identify with the problem I was trying to study. We barely survived six hours to travel. These boys do this for 11 hours, and still find the energy to hunt afterward.

A Framework for Change: From Promise to Practice

The World Summit for Children, 1990

In the largest gathering of heads of state and government in history, 71 Presidents and Prime Ministers came together on September 30, 1990, for the first World Summit for Children. The Outcome: a promise to provide basic protection for the development of all the world's children.

As stated in the Summit's Declaration:

The children of the world are innocent, vulnerable and dependent. They are also curious, active and full of hope. Their time should be one of joy and peace, of playing, learning and growing. Their future should be shaped in harmony and co-operation. Their lives should mature, as they broaden their perspectives and gain new experiences.

But for many children, the reality of childhood is altogether different¹

The Declaration goes on to describe the challenges faced by children worldwide, the opportunity for change, the task at hand for all nations, the commitment to take action, and the next steps necessary for change to become a reality.

The Plan of Action of the World Summit addresses the issues of "children in especially difficult circumstances." Among the problems is child labor.

More than 100 million children are engaged in employment, often heavy and hazardous and in contravention of international conventions which provide for their protection from economic exploitation and from performing work that interferes with their education and is harmful to their health and full development. With this in mind, all States should work to end such child-labour practices and see how the conditions and circumstances of children in legitimate employment can be protected to provide adequate opportunity for their healthy upbringing and development.²

In The State of the World's Children, 1991, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) sums up the urgency of keeping this promise. "There will always be something more immediate. There will never be anything more important."³

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *The State of the World's Children*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.

² *Ibid*, 66

³ *Ibid*, 27

Among the Summit's goals was the early ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 29, 1989. According to UNICEF, in order to realize this goal, "the early 1990s will have to see the increasing involvement of politicians, press, and public in measuring their own societies against the provisions of the Convention. Adherence to, or breach of, the CRC should rapidly become a matter of national concern, of national pride or of national shame."⁴

Skeptical of these promises, a reporter for The New York Times further emphasized the importance of action:

The largest summit meeting in history pledged to do better by the world's children. Their promises were eloquent, their goals ambitious. But children survive or thrive on promises. The world's leaders now have an obligation to find the resources and the political will necessary to translate hope into reality.⁵

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1999

Where the World Summit laid out goals for change, the Convention on the Rights of the Child provided the tools to implement that change. It gave each country specific guidelines, not to adopt blindly, but rather, to analyse and consider within the context of their country's particular circumstances.

The Convention speaks of three main rights of a child: the right to survival, the right to development, and the right to protection.⁶ As it relates to these main rights, the Convention addresses child labor, stating in Article 32 that children should be protected from any work that threatens their health, education or development. It says that "state parties should take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to ensure the implementation of the present article."⁷ These measures should include setting a minimum age for employment, regulating the hours and conditions of employment, and making penalties or sanctions to ensure enforcement.

Ghana Reacts: The Children's Act, 1998

As the first country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Ghana showed its dedication to bettering the lives of its children. Parliament took this devotion a step further in 1998, passing the Children's Act. Drafted by the Ghana National Commission on Children

⁴ Ibid, 36

⁵ Ibid, 11

⁶ Ibid, 35

⁷ Ibid, 89

(GNCC), it guarantees that “every child has the right to life, dignity, respect, leisure, liberty, health, education and shelter from his parents.”⁸

The Act addresses the CRC’s provisions for measures to be taken with regard to child labor. It prohibits exploitative child labor and night work. It also sets the minimum age for child labor at 15, the minimum age for light work at 13, and the minimum age for hazardous work at 18. The Act defines each type of work as follows:

- **Exploitative labor** is any work that deprives the child of its health, education or development.
- **Night work** is any work between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am.
- **Light work** is any work that is not likely to be harmful to the health or development of the child and does not affect the child’s attendance at school or the capacity of the child to benefit from schoolwork.
- **Hazardous work** includes going to sea, mining and quarrying, portorage of heavy loads, or working in locations where they’d be exposed to immoral behaviour, such as at bars.

These provisions apply to employment in both the formal and informal sectors. As suggested in the CRC, the Act designates punishment, with fines for non-compliance not exceeding 10 million cedis or imprisonment for less than two years, or both.

⁸ Ghana National Commission on Children (GNCC). The Children’s Act (Ghana, 1998), 7.

Child Labor in Ghana

The Current Situation

Despite legislative devotion to ending child labor in Ghana, children are still a highly visible, dominant force in the labor market. One needs only to walk down the street in any major city in Ghana to see a *kayayoo*, a girl headloading heavy items for little pay. At the beach, one can find boys mending broken nets, or trying to help their fishermen fathers drag in the fish-filled ones from the sea. It is estimated that about 11 percent of school-age children in Ghana and 56.5 percent of rural school-age children in Northern Ghana work part or full time.⁹ Parents and government officials alike have admitted to me that having children work at all is unfortunate. But is this work wrong? And even if so, is it preventable?

Children in Ghana work not just for pocket change, but for survival, according to GNCC Research Officer Esme Bentil. “I believe that 90 percent of children in Ghana are working,” Mrs. Bentil said. “It’s wrong for them to have to assume adult responsibility at the age, but it’s not child labor because it’s not exploitative. They are working for money. They are working to survive.”¹⁰

Throughout the course of our interview, Mrs. Bentil used every pause between questions to work on the final paperwork for a study she had just completed. Ten years after the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the GNCC was monitoring what had since been accomplished. She said that studies had been conducted earlier, but “nobody was asking the children, and they were the ones who were actually being affected by the Convention.”¹¹

What she found was that when it came to child labor, the children she interviewed were puzzled by her line of questioning. “They see working as a last resort, so when I started asking them if they thought the work was bad, they saw the question as strange.”¹²

A country’s standard of living has a lot to do with determining how tolerant that country’s people will be when it comes to child work. “Let’s look at your country, for example,” she told me. “Your children also work. But then maybe it’s only during the summer, or after school. Most aren’t working because they need to, they’re working because they want to.”¹³ Since the reasons for working are different, the types of work that are tolerated are also different.

In the midst of her vast library of information on children’s issues, I found an unidentified paper, which she told me was one of the background reports written in preparation for the Children’s Act. It juxtaposed both the historical and present-day differences between the developed and developing worlds in relation to child labor.

⁹ UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Ghana*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123.

¹⁰ GNCC Research Officer Esme Bentil, interview by author, 4 May 2001, Accra, notes in possession of author

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Child labor is not a new phenomenon. It reared itself as far back as the late seventeenth century with the wake of the industrial revolution in Europe. Quite interestingly, at the time child labour was being debated in Europe, Africa had not yet had a taste of the phenomenon because of the subsistent and simple nature of the then existing economies. Ironically in modern times however, while the developed world has to a very large extent solved its child labour problems, the reverse seems to be manifested itself in the young economies of Africa.¹⁴

A poster on the wall in her office read “Arret au travail des enfants,” (“Stop child work”) and pictured a young girl wearing a hard hat, her face and arms covered with dirt. Before starting this project, that was the sort of image my mind would conjure when I heard the phrase “child labor” As far as I was concerned, putting children to work in factories or elsewhere in the formal sector was the only problematic child work. Mrs. Bentil echoed what I had already heard from both the Ministry of Labour and from the National Council for Women and Development – that this type of child labor just does not exist in Ghana.

Although several secondary sources have also voiced this opinion, I must disclose that I did find references that implied the probable existence of child labor in the formal sector. The background paper to the Children’s Act revealed that some construction firms in Northern Ghana were employing and exploiting children, mostly females, paying them no more than 1000 cedis a day for the work of masons. One state-run organisation was among those accused. Although it was well known in the community that these children were being exploited, “no one cared to sanction the exploiters.”¹⁵

In the same binder that held that paper, I found a 1988 report by the GNCC responding to allegations that the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation at Obuasi was exploiting child workers. It neither admitted nor denied the existence of child labor, but rather listed the findings of an investigation, admitting to the possibility of child labor but leaving the issue open for interpretation.¹⁶

Despite the existence of these two examples of child work in the formal sector, the majority of child work in Ghana is performed in the informal sector. Children who work for their families either at home or on the farm account for 85 percent of school-age working children in Ghana.¹⁷ This type of work is more difficult to monitor, thus accounting for undercounting and lack of enforcement of the legislation preventing it. UNICEF reports that universally, “most children work on farms and plantations or houses, far from the reach of labour inspectors and from media

¹⁴ GNCC, *Untitled (Ghana)*, 48

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 51

¹⁶ GNCC. *Report on the Use of Child Labour by the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation at Obuasi*, Aug. 1988).

¹⁷ UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Ghana*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 126

scrutiny.”¹⁸ They go on to say that the plight of the domestic labourer is worst of all: “Child domestic workers are the world’s most forgotten children.”¹⁹

Differences arise not only in relation to which sector of the industry one studies, but also in relation to which part of the country one looks at. In the rural North, poor infrastructure and lack of resources, particularly clean water, abound. Severely deprived financially, children are often pushed out of school and onto the farm, as I will describe later as it relates to my case study.

The urban South feels the pain of urbanization, with 36 percent of the population urbanized in 1995.²⁰ The average growth rate of the urban population has increased from 3.3 percent from 1965 to 1980, to 4.3 percent from 1980 to 1995.²¹ Overcrowding causes housing scarcity and poor sanitation. Migrant children often find themselves on the streets, carrying good from one place to another for as little as 100 cedis a trip.²²

¹⁸ UNICEF. The State of the World’s Children, with a focus on Child Labor. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 21

¹⁹ Ibid, 32

²⁰ Ibid, 95

²¹ Ibid, 95

²² Bearing the Weight: The Kayayoo –Ghana’s Working Girl Child. (Legon: University of Ghana, May 1997)

Causal Factors of Child Labor

Poverty

Parents and government officials alike told me that child labor in Ghana is not a matter of choice, but rather, of necessity. With about percent of Ghanaians living below the absolute poverty line, parents are compelled to depend on their children for the extra income needed for survival.²³ In a labor market that can't afford to pay a minimum wage of only about 5000 cedis a day to adults, child labourers are an appealing alternative. Children can be more easily underpaid. Thus, at times, the children in a family are the only ones who can get jobs, and they provide the only income in the house. "Put simply, children are employed because they are easier to exploit."²⁴

With poverty comes the expectation that the aggregate demand for labor will fall. This heightens people's fears that they will lose their jobs. To provide "insurance" against the risk of having a household lose its entire income if the adult members become unemployed, those families who have thus far kept their children out of the labor market will apt to send their kids to work.²⁵

Government documents recognise the inevitability of child labour as a direct result of poverty. As stated in the background report to the Children's Act.

The committee takes the view that the present economic circumstances do not permit a wholesale ban on child employment and that a law which seeks to eradicate it completely would be unimplementable and unrealistic. What Ghana needs as a developing country is a piece of legislation which would allow children to work but under certain conditions.²⁶

Paul Amegee, principal labor officer in charge of legal and international relation at the Department of Labor, echoed this connection between poverty and child labor. He said that child labour is a matter of multiplicity: there are a lot of factors, and all of them must be addressed collectively. "Ultimately, if the government can reduced the poverty level, it will be working toward the elimination of child labour," he said. "But to do that, people must address all the issues simultaneously. Otherwise, while they're tackling this one, another one will continue growing, preventing the elimination of child labour."²⁷

Child labor is a problem in Ghana, but not an issue, according to Evans Quaidero, Assistant to the Coordinator at the Central Region's National Council for Women and Development. "Personally, I see it as a problem," he said, "but it's not an issue because most people don't see it as

²³ GNCC. Untitled. (Ghana), 49

²⁴ UNICEF. *The State of the World's Children, with a focus on Child Labor*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.

²⁵ UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Ghana*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 127

²⁶ GNCC. Untitled. (Ghana), 50

²⁷ Paul Amegee, Principal Labor Officer in charge of Legal and International Relations, interview by author, 4 May 2001, Accra, notes in possession of author.

a problem.”²⁸ He said that most people don’t recognise that the existence of poverty does not eradicate the problems of child labor because they are not educated. The adult literacy rate in 1995 was 76 percent for men, and only 54 percent for women.²⁹ Only 27 percent of Ghanaians had radios in 1993, and 16 percent had televisions.³⁰ With that in mind, even though Mrs. Bantil said the GNCC promoted the CRC through the newspaper, television and radio, how effective could it have been if so few people were able to access those mediums?

Those who are educated also use poverty to justify child labor, according to a study of the informal sector child labor on the University of Cape Coast campus. The author found that “ironically, members of the university community who are supposed to know better seem to be aiding and abetting child labour.”³¹ The study shows that even those who recognize the negativity of child labor are willing to accept it because of people’s poor economic circumstances.

UNICEF argues against this point, addressing poverty as it relates to one of four myths about child labor in *The State of the World’s Children*. They said that the idea that “child labor will never be eliminated until poverty disappears” is untrue.

We are told we must tolerate the intolerable until world poverty is ended... The fact remains that when a child is engaged in hazardous labour, someone – an employer, a customer or a parent – benefits from that labour. It is the element of exploitation that if overlooked by those who see child labour as inseparable from poverty. However poor their families might be, children would not be harmed by work if there were not people prepared and able to exploit them. And child labour, in fact, can perpetuate poverty, as a working child grows into an adult trapped in unskilled and badly paid jobs. ...The end of hazardous child labour does not have to – and must not – wait for the end of poverty.³²

Traditional Beliefs and the Family

Many child labor practices are rooted in tradition, making their elimination all the more difficult. According to UNICEF, “bringing about a change in the ethical climate in which such opinions flourished was, and in many case still is, the most difficult part of the long struggle for a more just society.”³³ Changing societal attitudes to fit today’s ethical

²⁸ Evans Quaidero, Assistant to the Coordinator, National Council for Women and Development, Central Region, interview by author, 27 April 2001, Cape Coast, notes in possession of author.

²⁹ UNICEF. *The State of the World’s Children*, with a focus on Child Labor. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95

³⁰ *Ibid*, 95

³¹ Theophilus Ayitey Quaye. *Causes and Effects of Child Labour in Ghana: A Case study of Children Offering Services on the University of Cape Coast campus*. (Cape Coast, June 1996).

³² *Ibid*, 20

³³ UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991f), 27

standards is a difficult task, for the simple fact that people are reluctant to any change, especially when the roots of what is being changed are deep.

According to Mrs. Bentil, part of the problem with educating people about the changing views on child labor is the inconsistency of definitions. She said everyone believes “child labour” means something different, so when you don’t define it well when you’re trying to tell people that it is wrong, they are apt not to want to listen. “People hear child labour and think you mean that children shouldn’t work at all. That’s why they’re resistant.”³⁴ By not first speaking in terms that are understood by the person who’s beliefs one is challenging, any efforts to change the person’s mind fall on deaf ears.

Traditional African beliefs encourage the persistence of child work, according to Mr. Amegee. He said parents see child work as preparation for their future occupations. Although legally children aren’t supposed to go to sea until they are 18 years old, fishermen believe that boys to start their training before adulthood, preparing their minds and bodies for fishing.³⁵

Child work is also perpetuated by traditional perceptions of the family and the corresponding obligations placed on members in that family. Historically, having more children has meant having more hands to help on the farm. Beyond tradition, economics also play an important role here. People just don’t have the money to pay people to help, thus further necessitating the burden placed on children to work for their parents.

The GNCC recognizes these cultural barriers to societal acceptance of modern thought with regard to child labor. While the Convention stresses the importance of a “first call” for children, “the traditional Ghanaian society is adult oriented and the principle ‘first call’ has very little or no meaning.”³⁶ Although there is legislation in place to prevent exploitative child work, child protection laws are rarely invoked, because “culturally it is felt more appropriate for abuse and neglect to be dealt with at a family and community level.”³⁷

³⁴ GNCC. Research Officer Esme Bentil, interview by author, 4 May 2001, notes in possession of author.

³⁵ Paul Amegee, Principal Labor Officer in charge of Legal and International Relation, interview by author, 4 May 2001, Accra, notes in possession of author.

³⁶ GNCC The Ghana Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (Ghana, 1997), 6.

³⁷ Ibid, 4.

Child Labor and Education

One cannot look at child labour without also looking at education. A look at the Children's Act reveals this connection, as the minimum age for child labour is also the same age at which a child is expected to finish junior secondary school. As both a possible means for improving working conditions and a possible reason for sending to work, education can both be scrutinized as a cause and revered as a solution to problems with child labour.

Although education cannot guarantee socioeconomic mobility or even financial stability, it offers a child the possibility of having a better life than his parents had. Ghana recognized the importance of education with the Education Act of 1961 and the Constitution of 1992, both of which provided for free compulsory primary education.³⁸ Unfortunately, the word "free" is relative, according to Mr. Quaidero. "They tell a boy that school is free, but he pays for a lot – books, supplies. He even pays for the furniture he sits on."³⁹ Additionally, as described earlier, poverty and traditional views often encourage children to go to work rather than to school. The demand for boys as farmhands inversely affects male enrollment and attendance, particularly in Northern Ghana, while the demand for domestic labor falls heavily on girls.⁴⁰

Parents often justify sending their children to work by saying that their earnings will go toward their school fees.⁴¹ But according to UNICEF, working has such adverse effects on schooling that one must question how significant school is to the working child. Some children spend too much time working, making school attendance impossible. Of those that do attend, some are so tired from working that they cannot concentrate. The intense, seasonal demand of agricultural work often cause farm labourers enrolled in school to miss too many days to be successful. The social environment of work often undermines the value children place on education, especially among street children. Additionally, those who are participating in hazardous, exploitative work are sometimes so mistreated that they are traumatized, unable to concentrate in class, and possibly becoming disruptive.⁴²

One of the major goals for child survival, development and protection identified in the Plan of Action at the World Summit for Children was that by the year 2000, there would be "universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 percent of primary school-age children"⁴³ Ghana had almost achieved this goal in 1999, with about 79.4 percent of

³⁸ UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Ghana*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 98

³⁹ Evans Quaidero, Assistant to the Coordinator, National Council for Women and Development, Central Region, interview by author, 27 April 2001, Cape Coast, notes in possession of author.

⁴⁰ UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Ghana*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 94

⁴¹ GNCC. Untitled. (Ghana), 49

⁴² UNICEF. *The State of the World's Children, with a focus on Child Labor*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25

⁴³ UNICEF. *The State of the World's Children, with a focus on Child Labor*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997),

primary school-age children enrolled in school.⁴⁴ However, gender and regional analyses show that girls and children in the North are marginalized. The gross enrollment rate for primary school-age girls in 1997 was 10 percent lower than that of boys.⁴⁵ The gross enrollment rate for primary school-age in 1998 was 52 percent in the Upper West, 45 percent in the Northern region, and only 42 percent in the Upper East.⁴⁶ And while primary school enrollment is substantial, with 80 percent of primary school children reaching grade five from 1990 to 1995, there is a significant drop-out rate. The secondary school enrollment rate between 1990 and 1994 was 44 percent of males, and 28 percent of females.

Another alarming trend is the education level of working children. In 1987, 62.8 percent of working children were attending primary school. In 1997, 70.4 percent of working children had never attended school at all.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ UNICEF. Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Ghana. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 81

⁴⁵ Ibid, 81

⁴⁶ Ibid, 82

⁴⁷ Ibid, 126

Children at Work: A Case Study of the Children in Yindure

Life is difficult for the people of Yindure, a village just outside of Bolgatanga in the Upper East region. The village is an hour's walk from the main road. It has no electricity. The land is dry, and a single small creek serves as the village's only water source. The day I arrived, Boapok, the chief's wife and my translator's grandmother, offered me a small fruit, the only food that was observably abundant. When food is scarce like it is now, people eat them just to keep their stomachs full.

Most of the children I interviewed said they were literate, and have at least attended school at some point in their lives. Family size didn't seem to show any pattern, each family having between one and nine kids. Most of their parents were farmers, and for the most of the children, at least some part of their work was agricultural. All of the children said their work was not done for personal gain, but rather to contribute either food or money to their families. The amount of time spent working was, in their eyes, neither short nor excessive. They all said they enjoyed the work they were doing, and that they thought it was good for their development.

One interesting pattern was their thoughts on the future. Many of them wanted to do exactly what their parents did, and most wanted to move to the south because they thought they'd make more money there. Some of their parents, in fact, are already living in the South, while the children stay with relatives in the North.

Gender disparities were also quite interesting, and quite prevalent. The boys said they enjoyed their work, and saw it as useful for their futures, which for all seemed to include becoming farmers. Their jobs were skill-building, and seemed to be the crucial first steps toward their occupations. They said they enjoyed school too, but thought that work was more useful. The gains from work are immediate –if they work today, they bring home food or money today. Although they gave most of the money to their families, the boys seemed to be working for themselves, self-initiating small service endeavours. One boy said he even farms his own plot of land.

Girls, however, took part mostly in chores around the house, or in selling goods for their mothers or food that their fathers had farmed. While the boys seemed to be working for themselves, the girls worked for others, and sometimes didn't receive any compensation. The girls said they were more interested in going to school than in doing the work they were doing, because they said school would prepare them for careers. One girl said learning in school would make it easier for her to learn as an apprentice to a seamstress.

For the sake of comparison, I have laid out a summary of those responses that varied by gender, below.

BOYS	GIRLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work is mostly agricultural, skill-building, leading to employment, and specifically, a job aspiring for. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work is mostly domestic, not occupational, and unrelated to job aspiring for.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work for wages, or sell food they grow themselves. Sometimes, keep some of the money. Financial responsibility and accountability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work unpaid, or sell for their parents. Handle less money than boys do. Less financial responsibility and accountability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Think work is more important than school. Some work instead of going to school. Some skip school for work; think work is better because they make money, get strong, and learn skills from it. Immediate gains are priority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Think school is more important than work. Some work instead of going to school, but only because they have to. Most don't think work will prepare them for the occupation they are aspiring for. Intellectual investment a priority.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most want to go South; think there is more money there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Half want to stay, half want to go South for more money.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most want to be farmers, or will do whatever work they can get. All want to do what they dads do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three want to be seamstresses, one teacher, one cook, one in Obuasi gold mine. None want the same job as their parents.

The Future of Child Labor

Conclusion: Justice in Principle, Inconsistency by Practice

I walked into the Ministry of Social Welfare, admittedly armed with a common American stereotype – that people in government say a lot but actually do very little. This is not the case in Ghana. – or at least, not for Margaret Kutsoiti, Deputy Director in charge of Justice Administration.

I had not sooner told her my name and mission, when Mrs. Kutsoiti turned her attention to Samuel Bakame, my translator. She barraged him with questions: how old was he, and why wasn't he in school? He told her that he was 19, had finished secondary school, and was currently working. She asked about further education, and he told her that would come later. "No, don't wait, do it now," she said., "because before you know it, you'll find yourself married and raising kids, and you won't have time to do it."⁴⁸

The questions she asked Samuel told me more than answers to any of my prepared questions ever could have. She showed me exactly how she tries to end child labor – one-on-one advice, on kid at a time.

When children are working for the sheer adventure of it, as she suspected Samuel was, she said she encourages them to go back to school, sooner rather than later. In cases where it's matter of money, and the financial gap is not too large, she said she tries to talk to the parents. She tries to explain the importance of schooling, and tries to arrange either for payments to be made in installment, or for the children to be "financially fostered," having their school fees paid for by an individual, NGO or District Assembly.

My interview with Mrs. Kutsoiti depicts a trend I found with each governmental interview I conducted. The passion for change and the dedication to children are abundant. But unfortunately, the resources to effect change on a grand scale area lacking.

One of the biggest problems I observed was a lack of accountability, out of inability rather than indifference. When I went to the National Council on Women and Development (NCWD), they sent me to the Central Region's GNCC office. There, I met a woman whose duties seemed to be those of a secretary. Upon returning to the NCWD, Mr Quaidero informed me that this women basically was the region's GNCC office; her supervisor did her work from Takoradi, and was seldom around. As a result, he said the NCWD basically served as the region's GNCC office, handling children's issues in addition to women's. Scarcity of resources, he said, meant that often

⁴⁸ Margaret Kutsoiti, Deputy Director in charge of Justice Administration, Ministry of Social Welfare, interview by author, 4 May 2001, Accra, notes in possession of author.

times, the children's issues got related to the background.⁴⁹ With responsibility resting in so many different hands – already occupied hands, at that – effectiveness and enforcement are compromised.

Despite these problems, many groups are taking steps toward change that must be acknowledged. Recognizing that ending child labor in one motion is impossible, the government is endorsing the International Labor Organisation's Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, 1999. The "Send your girl child to school" campaign must also be commended. Sending girls to school means taking them out of their premature role in the labour market. Additionally, the media has also made efforts for bettering the welfare of children. Just last weekend, GTV had an extensive segment on children's issues.

Suggestions for further study

Sitting in the GNCC office in Accra, I thumbed through field study after field study about child labour in Ghana. Although each one had its own focus, I began to ask myself a fundamental question: if so many other people have researched this topic, how important can be study be?

One of the biggest problems with child labour in Ghana is the perception of child labour in Ghana. And the only way to change perceptions is by introducing new ones, over and over and over again. With that I would have to say that any type of further study, whether it be of the street children in Accra or the Trokosi girls of the Volta Region, can only bring more attention to the issue.

⁴⁹ Evans Quaidero, Assistant to the Coordinator, National Council for Women and Development, Central Region, interview by author, 27 April 2001, Cape Coast, notes in possession of author.

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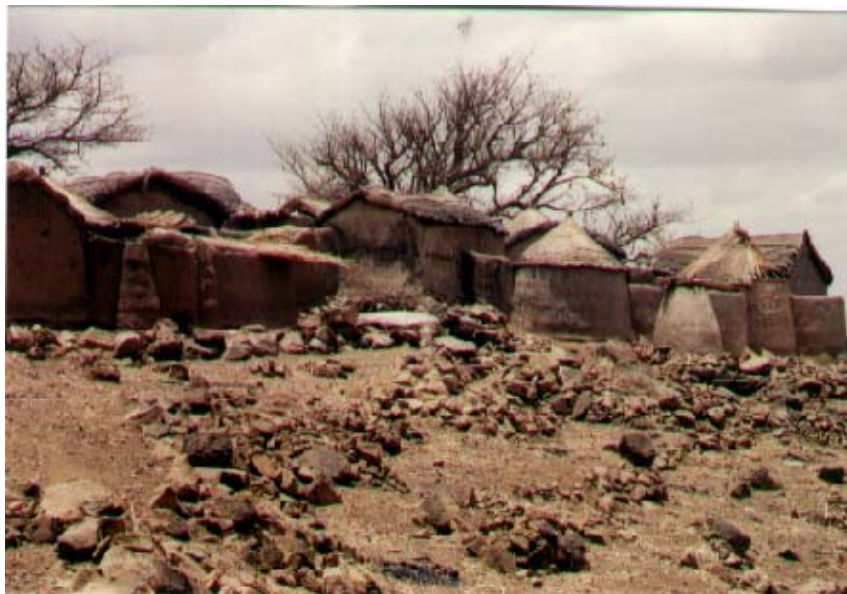
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Appendix 1: Portraits of Yindure



The Village of Yindure



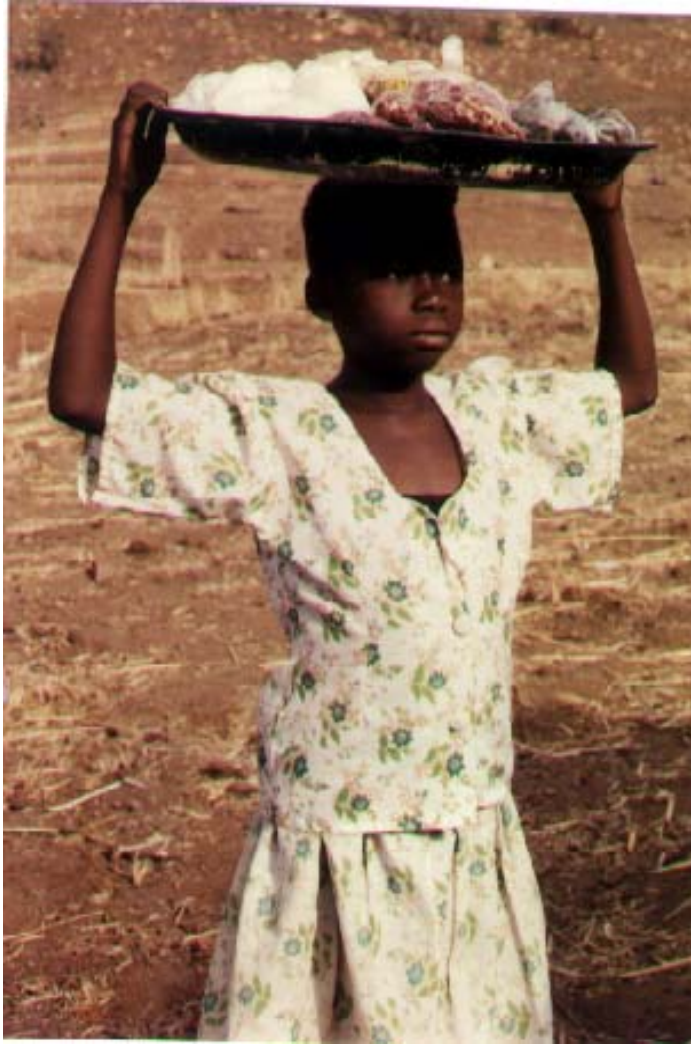
Kofi, 8, weaves straw into rope to be used on the roof of his house Kofi has never been to school because his father died when he was young, and his mom says she can't afford to send him. He farms when the time is right. The rest of the year, he goes to the bush, cutting straw for the roof or gathering any food he can find. He also goes from house-to-house, performing odd jobs throughout the village. His mom says that she wishes Kofi didn't have to work, but because she can't afford to support him, he has to in order to survive. In the dry season, she says Kofi will suffer a lot before he gets work.



Akosua (left), 11, fetches water with another girl. She performs this and other domestic jobs for the chief's wife in exchange for food to eat and a place to stay. She says she used to go to school, but had to stop when her dad started complaining that there was too much work around the house that needed to be done.



Augustina (right), 6, demonstrates how she and her siblings help plant on their father's farm. She goes to school, and works before and after school and on the weekends. She says she doesn't have time to study because of the work she does. Sometimes, her parents make her skip school to work.



Anastina, 10, sells goods for her mother. She works on the farm, does work around the house, and sells for her mom, all in addition to going to school. She says she started working when she was 2. she wants to become a teacher, and doesn't see how the work she is doing now will help her do that.



Joshua, 12, demonstrates weeding. He both goes to school and farms, doing most of the hard work on the weekends. He says his work doesn't affect school; he had been doing it for so long that he doesn't feel it anymore. If he doesn't want to go to school or thinks it's boring, he says he goes to the farm instead of going to school. At the moment, he plans to be a farmer when he gets older, but if school brings him to another job, that works too.



Vic, 11, sweeps the floor at her house. She does work around the house and sells tomatoes in the morning before going to school. She says she is often late, and gets yelled at by her teachers.



Children help their parents build by gathering and moving rocks.



The boys of Yindure bring their cattle to graze. The trip takes them almost to Bolgatanga, and will keep them out from 8 am until 7 pm