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Addressing the Labour Market Vulnerabilities of Female Head Porters (Kayayei) in Urban Ghana: An Optimal Policy Approach

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Abstract:

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing influx of female migrants from northern Ghana to the urban centres in the south, to undertake menial jobs for survival. Many of them are engaged as head porters (kayayei), carrying loads from one place to another for a fee. Using secondary data comprising journal articles, books, online documentaries, media and internet sources, this paper undertakes a descriptive analysis of the working conditions of the kayayei in the informal economy. It delves into the trend and the push and pull factors of their migration. It further examines the impacts of their work on the well being of the female migrants, the sending households as well as the urban economy. The paper argues that despite the labour market vulnerabilities of kayayei work, the phenomenon remains a viable alternative livelihood strategy for the migrants and the sending households, besides providing cheap labour to the urban economy. Thus, away from prevailing policies and interventions to curtail kayayei migration, this paper rather proposes a forward-looking and optimal policy approach to formalise and streamline the kayayei work, in a way that leverages on the potentials of the female migrants for economic growth and development.

Keywords: migration, kayayei, labour market, vulnerabilities, urban Ghana

1. Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing influx of female migrants (kayayei) from northern Ghana to the urban centres in the south to undertake menial jobs for survival (Boakye-Yiadom, 2007). These female migrants include teenage girls and young women with limited skills and education. As a result, they tend to pick up lowly paid jobs in the informal sector (Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011, 23).

The word kayayo is coined with two words from two different Ghanaian local languages: “**kaya**” in Hausa which means ‘load’ and “**yoo**” in Ga language, which means ‘carry.’ Kayayo¹ therefore literally means ‘to carry load.’ In this sense, Kayayo is more or less a form of occupation in which people (particularly young women) carry loads of goods on their heads from one place to another for a fee. In contemporary usage, the term is also understood to mean a *migrant young woman* or *teenage girl* who is engaged in informal work in the urban centres (Opare, 2003). This could range from working as shop attendants and babysitting to carrying of loads. In this paper, any of the two meanings may be implied depending on the specific context it is being used.

It is important to state at the outset that both males and females are engaged in the kayayei work, but this paper limits its focus to the situation of the females. Even though the female engagement in this occupation is relatively recent (starting around the late 80s to the early 90s), it is estimated that they currently constitute about 80% of the kayayei population in the cities (Kwankye, Anarfi, Tagoe and Castaldo, 2007; Ziem, n.d.). International and local civil society organisations have raised serious labour rights concerns regarding the relatively young ages of some female kayayei and the hazardous nature of their work, which tend to contravene national and international labour laws.² The extremely deplorable living conditions of these young girls in the cities coupled with the spate at which the kayayei phenomenon is gaining currency in recent times have also attracted considerable attention in the media and policy circles in Ghana (Agarwal, 1994; Nolan, 2009, etc.).³ The discussions have over the years centred on questions regarding the main causes and impacts of this phenomenon and ways by which the state, non-non-state actors and families can build a synergy to curb the trend of kayayei migration (Brockhoff and Eu, 1993; Opare, 2003; Boakye-Yiadom and McKay, 2007).

¹ The plural is kayayei

² The female migrants also constitute the most vulnerable and exploited category of the Kayayei, and their work is riskier than that of the men. Generally, the men use ‘trucks’ (locally made trolleys to carry goods, compared to the females who usually use head pans to carry the goods; yet the latter receive very little for their labour (Awumbila, 2007, Zaami, 2010) because they normally lack the bargaining power, as there is no fixed or minimum rate for their services.

³ <http://news.peacefonline.com/features/201211/148030.php>

This paper contributes to the burgeoning policy debate on the kayayei phenomenon in Ghana. Firstly, it devotes some space to the major push and pulls factors driving the phenomenon. Secondly, it sheds light on the impacts of the kayayei on the wellbeing of the female migrants, the sending households and the urban economy, but again attempts to bring out the labour rights issues involved in their work. Finally, while the paper highlights on previous and current policy approaches to addressing the kayayei phenomenon, it goes further to prescribe an optimal policy pathway for streamlining the kayayei work in line with relevant national and international labour laws.

2. Rural-Urban Migration in Ghana: The Historic Trajectory

Research has shown that rural-urban migration from the north to the southern sector is not a new phenomenon (Caldwell, 1968). The practice can be traced back to the colonial era, when young energetic men from the north used to commute to the south to work in cocoa farms and coffee plantations in return for money (Caldwell, 1968; Kuusaana, 2009). Caldwell estimates that of the increase in population of over one million in the urban areas in Ghana between 1948 and 1960, at least 400,000 was due to internal rural-urban migration (Caldwell, 1968).

However, the most disturbing turn in this rural-urban migration is the recent phenomenon of female migration involving teenage girls for the purpose of kayayei (Agarwal, 1994; Huijsmans, 2012). Even though, data on the exact numbers, particularly on a yearly basis is lacking, the Ghana Statistical Service suggest that the incidence has been on the increase over the past two decades (Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), 2010).

The age grade of the girls engaged in the kayayei coupled with the hazardous nature of their work has recently cast a slur on Ghana in the international arena with regard to issues of child labour and exploitation (US Department of Labour, 2008; Jawula 2010). This is what makes kayayei a compelling social problem, requiring urgent and pragmatic policy attention. In the ensuing section this paper examines the main pull and push factors for this type of migration.

3. The Kayayei Dynamics: The Push and Pull Factors

Regardless of the motive, kayayei migration over the years has been facilitated by the pervasive forces of globalisation and market liberalisation that have led increasingly to easy access to information through modern communication technology and means of transportation (Awumbila, 2007). Additionally, networks with pre-existing migrants and relatives have equally made subsequent kayayei migration and urban integration less challenging.

Indeed, for the average Kayayo girl, the predominant reasons for migrating from the north of the country to the urban centres have been economic; and most of them perceive the kayayei business as an alternative livelihood strategy (van den Berg, 2007; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011). Opere points out that majority of these young girls move from the north to the urban centres as a result of the limited employment and income earning opportunities in the north of the country (Opere, 2003).

This is due to the fact that, most of the industries in Ghana are located in the South, partly due to disoriented colonial development policies, which have created a wide development gap between the North and the South (Awumbila, 2007). The situation is further compounded by erratic rainfall patterns in the largely agricultural regions in the north over last two decades, due to climatic change (Ahlvin, 2012). According to Opere, in the past decades, the unpredictable rainfall patterns, unfertile soil due to excessive farming are accompanied with crop failures, low yields and ultimately, low incomes (Opere 2003). These have therefore made rural agriculture less productive and unprofitable to attract and retain the youth.

Awumbila also alludes to the fact that “liberalisation and structural adjustment programmes” implemented in Ghana around the 1980s seriously undermined the development of the north, particularly agriculture, basically through “the removal of fertiliser subsidies and subsidies on health care and other social services” (Awumbila 2007:1). Krueger (1989, cited in Opere 2003) had earlier expressed a similar view, arguing that the removal of agricultural subsidies made farming more expensive for women who already have limited access to credit. The cumulative effect has been increasing poverty in the north; with the youth abandoning agriculture and moving to the cities in search for white colour jobs, albeit without the requisite skills.

Quite related to the above is also the influence of friends and parents (van den Berg, 2007). It is sometimes true that after pursuing their dreams vigorously in the urban centres, some Kayayei do succeed in mobilising some money to support their families back home, pay their own school fees or acquire other household and personal effects required for marriage as young girls (van den Berg, 2007; Ahlvin, 2012).

Often times, one of the ways Kayayei girls support their families from the urban centres is through regular remittances of money and material gifts. In view of this, other young girls who see this from their colleagues in the urban centres are encouraged to follow suit. Sometimes parents might even encourage their young ones to also go, with the hope that they will equally get money and send them remittances. Ahlvin, citing Opere reiterates this view, when he points out that many Kayayei are normally “encouraged by their families in northern Ghana to go to the cities due to financial hardships on the home front” (Ahlvin 2012:4, citing Opere, 2003).

The Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA) observes that there are a number of ethnic and chieftaincy related conflicts in the north, and these have also been part of the push factors for Kayayei migration (2011). Most of these conflicts, which broke out in the north in the late 80s to the early 90s partly triggered the upsurge in Kayayei migration during the early 1990s. These conflicts have been resurfacing intermittently over the years, especially, the Komkomba-Nanumba and the Komkomba-Bimoba conflict in the Northern Region as well as the intractable Bawku conflict between the Mamprusi and Kusasi in the Upper East Region (Aapengnuo, 2008).

The intermittent outbreak of these conflicts, according to some experts, have contributed to a general sense of insecurity in some parts of the north, thus, compelling some of the youth including the females to move to the urban centres for fear of their own safety and

security (FOSDA, 2011). FOSDA is of the view that women tend to bear the brunt of the various conflicts in the northern parts of Ghana over the past several decades (2011).

Studies have also highlighted some socio-cultural push factors for the female migration to the urban areas (Opare, 2003). Prominent among these is the female genital circumcision practiced in some parts of northern Ghana, especially in the Upper East Region (Oduro, Ansah, Hodgson, Afful, Baiden, Adongo and Koram, 2006). Ordinarily it is part of the customs of some ethnic groups in the north to circumcise females, as part of a rite of passage to usher them into adulthood. Therefore, all young girls are supposed to undergo this practice upon reaching puberty and before marriage (Oduro et al, 2006). Though the practice of female circumcision has received widespread condemnation over the years, it is still being done in some parts of the north. To this effect, some of the young girls choose to run away just before reaching puberty, in order to avert been circumcised in accordance with this obnoxious custom. Awumbila suggest that the big cities of Accra and Kumasi often remain the places of their last resort, since they guarantee them anonymity (Awumbila, 2007).

In a recent study on the Kayaye phenomenon in the capital of Accra, van den Berg (2007) also identified other factors such as marriage breakdowns, forced marriages, lack of education, peer pressure and parental irresponsibility as some of the factors that compel the young girls to migrate to the urban centres. As it were, these Kayayei girls migrate either forcibly or out of choice to the urban centres in search for jobs, money as well as better living conditions for themselves and also their families (van den Berg, 2007). One writer also argues that, in the poor rural areas of Ghana, most parents in the attempt to look for alternative means of livelihood for themselves and their young daughters, tend give them out for marriage at an early age (Zana, 2012). However, with society frowning upon this teenage marriage practice, the trend has progressively shifted to forcing these girls into the cities to do Kayayei. In some instances, these Kayayei girls also run away themselves to the cities because they had been betrothed or given out into early marriage by their parents (Zana, 2012).

Alongside the above push factors, there are also pull factors that tend to attract the young girls to the cities. Research has established that the girls' general perception that there are more opportunities for employment and income generation in the urban centres (Opare, 2003), the feeling that there is personal safety and security; and also that there is guarantee of anonymity and freedom from societal pressure in the cities (FOSDA, 2012) are some of the predominant pull factors for Kayaye migrants from the rural north.

As earlier pointed out, the fact that some of the Kayayei migrants do manage to succeed in mobilising capital and personal effects before they return to their home towns, tend to reinforce other young girls' belief that they can make it by travelling down to the south, especially to the big cities of Accra and Kumasi (Paz, 2009). By migrating to the urban centres, the young girls do not only feel a sense of independence, but also, the urban environment is seen to offer them anonymity and protection from the undesirable social customs and practices of the rural society.

4. Kayayei Migration: Any Gainers and Losers?

Rural-urban migration for Kayayei, like many other forms of labour migration is not a zero-sum phenomenon (Bakewell, 2009). There are both positives and negatives for the Kayayei themselves, their households and the host cities (Boakye-Yiadom and McKay, 2007; Kwankye et al., 2007).

Firstly, it is important to admit that the Kayayei ladies encounter a lot of challenges in the urban centres. One Al-Jazeera documentary on the work of the Kayayei in Accra in March, 2009 revealed that most of these girls lack accommodation. They normally sleep in shanties, along the open streets and in the markets; thus, making them extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape (Nolan, 2009; Ahlvin, 2012 etc.). The report also highlighted labour exploitation, as the Kayayei are often offered paltry sums of money by clients for the laborious services they render (Nolan, 2009).

Awumbila reveals that the Kayayei girls suffer a lot of physical, verbal and sexual abuse in the course of their business (Awumbila, 2007). Additionally, they live under unhygienic conditions and are very prone to diseases. Outbreak of cholera for instance is a perennial epidemic in the Kayayei slum of Agbogbloshi, near the Korle Lagoon in Accra (Ziblim, 2015).

These notwithstanding, there are equally some gains for both the migrants and the urban economy in which they work. In a recent study to examine the impact of rural-urban migration on migrants' welfare in Ghana, Boakye-Yiadom and McKay found that even though some "rural-urban migrants experience welfare losses, on average, rural-urban migration significantly enhance the welfare of internal migrants" (2007, p.1). The Aljazeera report in 2009 on the Kayayei working in the Accra Central Market also admitted that the market could not have functioned effectively without the services of the Kayayei (Nolan, 2009).

Unfortunately, in Ghana, there is generally lack of statistical data on the contribution of the Kayayei business to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Despite this, the literature suggests a number of benefits. A study by Ahlvin points out that for some of the young girls, the Kayayei business is only a temporary and off-farm season economic activity that they undertake, and that enable them to raise capital and return home to create their own businesses or to cultivate their farms in the next farming season (Ahlvin, 2012). Opare (2003) similarly finds that for some Kayayei girls, the earnings are saved in order to build enough capital to enter into large-scale businesses or other sedentary occupations.

One study also reveals that some of the Kayayei are students, who use their school vacations to work in the cities, so as to mobilise savings to support their parents in paying their own school fees, and buying uniforms and books (Pulitzer Centre, 2009). Besides, a good number of them are breadwinners of their families; since they are purposefully sent by their parents to work and get money, so they can send them remittances to take care of the household (Awumbila, 2007).

Furthermore, in the rural Ghanaian society, parents are expected to prepare their daughters both materially and financially for their marriage. But, in most cases, because parents are not able to meet these responsibilities due to poverty, young girls take it upon

themselves to mobilise money through the kayaye business to prepare themselves for their future marital life and responsibilities (Pulitzer Centre, 2009).

In view of the above, Awumbila asserts that despite their “negative experiences,” female migrant porters are “important engines for poverty reduction and growth” (Awumbila 2007:3). Kwankye et al., equally sums it up, when they suggest that Kayayei offer several opportunities which includes “the possibility of earning an income from the informal sector, being able to save and if possible remit to families back home in the north, be these remittances in cash....or other items” (2007:25).

In another breadth, despite arguments that rural-urban migration leads to urban congestion, potential social vices and also tend to put pressure on the limited urban infrastructure and social amenities, the Kayayei migrants equally provide a number of benefits to the urban economy. The Kayayei offer cheap labour to the urban residents and businesses, sometimes even at a seemingly exploitative rate. There is no fixed rate for the services that the kayayei render. Consequently, individuals and businesses tend to hire their services at any fee, and most of the time at a relatively lower rate (Nolan, 2009). This tend enhance the profits of firms and businesses and thereby contributes to the booming urban economy, as the businesses always have ready access to the cheap labour of the Kayayei.

What’s more, they add up to the growing urban market in terms of the demand for goods and services. Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah have clearly pointed out the indispensable contribution of the Kayayei in their recent work, when they noted that the Kayayei are normally employed by “travellers, shop owners, general shoppers, or traders,” and “...are used to offset the difficulty of vehicles accessing the centre of the markets to load or discharge goods” (2009:1). The authors’ assertion is true in the sense that most of the markets in the urban cities in Ghana, especially in Accra and Kumasi are not only congested, but also, very poorly planned. Therefore without the services of these Kayayei, it will be difficult for most businesses to get their wares conveyed to or from their stores, due to lack of access routes to such stores.

5. The Labour Rights Implications of Kayayei Work

This section examines two main problems with the kayayei business. First is the relatively young ages of most of the girls engaged in it and second is the exploitative and hazardous nature of their work within the context of the Ghana Labour Act 2003 (Act 651) and other relevant international labour laws. Here, this paper argues that these problems can be traced mainly to the fact that the Kayayei are not registered; and like other informal sector workers, their engagement is not formalised, thus, making it difficult for them to seek protection under the national labour laws.

The Ghana Labour Act 2003 (Act 651) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention prohibit child labour, where a child is defined as a person below the age of 18 years (Constitution of Ghana, 1992). The ILO convention 138 defines child labour as labour performed by a child who is under the minimum age for the kind of work (as defined by national legislation, in accordance with accepted international standards) and that has the tendency to hinder the child's education and full development (Jawula, 2010). Therefore, child labour depends on the age of the child, the type and nature of work, and also the number of hours worked per day, among other factors.

The ILO has noted that child labour can occur in its worst forms. The ILO convention (No. 182) on the Elimination of Worst forms of Child Labour (EWCL) define “child labour in its worst forms” to include the engagement of children under eighteen (18) years in all manner of slavery and similar practices, prostitution and pornography, illicit activities and hazardous work; and work which by its nature or the circumstances under which it is carried out, has the tendency to harm the health, safety or morals of children (Jawula, 2010). The conditions of kayayei girls is not far from these, given their relatively young ages, the squalid and dehumanising environments in which they live and the unregulated and exploitative nature of their work.

The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) under its own Child Labour Survey in 2003 (GCLS 2003) revealed that out of the estimated 6.36 million children aged between 15 and 17 years, nearly 20% of them (about 1.27million) were engaged in activities classified as child labour(GSS, 2003). Similar findings were noted by the Ghana Ministry of Youth and Employment in August 2000, when it reported that out of over 800,000 children working countrywide, 18,000 (2.25%) of those children were working in Accra alone, and most of them were involved in the kayayei business (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2000, as cited in Awumbila, 2007).

Therefore on a daily basis, teenage Kayayei girls are made to perform jobs that can fairly be classified as hazardous in our cities (Ghana Labour Act, 2003(Act 651). The Labour Act (Act 651) stipulates clearly in section 58 (1) that “a young person shall not be engaged in any type of employment or work likely to expose the person to physical or moral hazard.” Recent statistics published by the US department of state explain that 24.2 percent of working children in Ghana (between 5-14 years) as at the year 2000 were engaged in the worst forms of child labour (US Department of Labour, 2008).

Since this report, there has not being any significant change. At the moment, it is estimated that there are about 40,000 Kayayei residing in the sprawling slum known as ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ at Agbogbloshi, a suburb of Accra, the national capital (Essel, 2009). Others also live in nearby towns of Tudu, Madina and Nima, all in Accra as well as other big cities across the country. Awumbila reveals that these young girls are sometimes harassed by the law enforcement agencies for hawking along the streets in the cities (Awumbila, 2007).

In September 2009, the media in Ghana carried a story about a demonstration by the Kayayei living in Accra, which was in protest against the government’s plan to evict the estimated 40,000 kayayei slum dwellers and to convey them back to the north (Essel, 2009). This policy response was simply a reflection of the fact that kayayei has over the years being perceived as a social problem, despite its established benefits to the urban economy and the welfare of the migrants and their families back home. The persistent failure of policies and interventions by government, NGOs and civil society organisations to curb the increasing trend of kayayei or forcefully eject them from the cities, calls for an alternative policy approach to dealing with the kayayei phenomenon.

6. The Existing Policy Approaches and the Way Forward

In light of the push and pull factors of the kayayei phenomenon, which have been well delineated earlier in this paper, policy approaches that seek to stop kayayei migration in the short term could include technical and vocational skills training for the young girls who are illiterate or school dropouts, systematic public education on the need for parents to send their young girls to school as well as strict enforcement of regulations banning negative socio-cultural practices, among others. A medium to long term solution should include establishing light industries in the north to create jobs, so as to employ and retain the youth.

Indeed, over the years government initiatives have fallen along the above policy pathways, with serious efforts being made to increase the girl-child enrolment and also retention rate in schools. The Canada-Ghana Girl-Child Education Enhancement Project and others by Action Aid Ghana have also sought to reverse the Kayayei trend through education and sensitisation on gender issues. Recently, some NGOs such as BIBIR-Ghana have started alternative vocational education and training schemes for kayayei returnees and prospective ones in the sending villages in northern Ghana (Kuyini, n.d.). Meanwhile, notwithstanding all these interventions, limited success has been achieved in combating the kayayei trend.

However, considering the economic contribution of the kayayei migrants, an optimal policy approach should be to streamline their work, in order to maximise their output within the framework of the law. This is particularly urgent in light of the failure of successive policies and interventions to stop the trend. I argue that the way forward is to formalise and regulate their work through kayayei recruitment agencies.

7. Kayayei Recruitment/Registration Agencies

In this section, this paper proposes the establishment of kayayei recruitment and registration agencies in all urban centres across the country. These agencies will help to formalise the kayayei work; and in so doing, edge out the illegal and hazardous work components of it; and thus, optimising its benefits for the kayayei, the sending households as well as the urban economy.

These agencies should be responsible for ensuring that all kayayei migrants are duly registered and issued with work permit cards before they can operate legally. These centres should also ensure that young girls below the legal working age are not registered. This measure, if strictly adhered to, could address the engagement of minors in the business, contrary to national and international labour laws. It will also discourage parents from forcing their underage daughters to embark on kayayei, since they will be aware that such children will not be registered to work. This will help, not only in addressing the disturbing child labour issues underlying the kayayei work, but also, it will assist in the long term to reduce the kayayei migration trend in general.

However, the registration exercise needs to be done alongside public education of parents on why they should not encourage their teenage girls to migrate to the city centres for kayayei. The general public, restaurants operators and shop owners who hire the services of these kayayei girls should also be registered and educated regularly to understand the legal implications and the possible sanctions of hiring underage kayayei or kayayei who will not have work permit cards.

Secondly, the Kayayei Recruitment Agencies should also work in closer collaboration with the various national and international non-governmental organisations such as the International Organisation on Migration (IOM), UNICEF, BIBIR-Ghana and other civil society organisations which are committed to addressing this kayayei problem. Through an effective collaboration with these NGOs, identified teenage girls already in the Kayayei business can be enrolled into formal education or equipped with the relevant entrepreneurial skills, such as technical, vocational and skills training.

After giving them the training, these young girls should be assisted with start-up capital to settle back home in the north. Government should also liaise with the Micro Finance and Small Loans Centres (MASLOC) in the various districts, municipal and metropolitan assemblies to assist in giving credit to these kayayei trainees to start up in their various chosen occupations.

Finally, the Kayayei Recruitment Agencies in collaboration with the Ghana National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) should also embark on rigorous public education of the general public especially the business men and women; restaurants and shop owners in the city markets, on the basic provisions relating to the employment of young persons on hazardous work as contained in Section (58) of the Ghana Labour Act 2003 (Act 651) and other relevant provisions within the international labour laws.

8. Conclusion

This paper has attempted a descriptive analysis of the working conditions of migrant female head porters (Kayayei) who migrate from the north to urban Ghana to carry loads for a pay, as a means of livelihood. It has highlighted how issues of personal security and adverse economic and socio-cultural conditions in rural Ghana interlace with expectations of a better life, drive a pervasive trend of kayayei as an alternative livelihood strategy for young girls. The paper argues that despite its challenges, kayayei has enormous live transforming impact on the migrants, the sending households as well as the urban economy. Nonetheless, it draws attention to critical labour rights issues, entailing the engagement of minors in hazardous work, contrary to national and international labour laws. Hence, to address this, the paper finally puts forward a national policy to regulate and streamline the Kayayei work in a way that will optimise its benefits for the Kayayei themselves, the sending households and the urban economy, through the establishment special kayayei recruitment agencies across the urban centres.

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