

Child Domestic Labour-The invisible thief of children's rights in Ghana

A summary of the paper presented at the International Conference on Child Labour and child Exploitation- 2-5 August, Cairns, Australia

Introduction

In 1998, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that around 12.5 percent of children aged 10-14 were engaged in some form of labour the world over. (ILO 2006)

In 2006, this figure had risen to estimated to around 218 million children and in 1997, the World Bank study estimated that approximately 12.6 per cent of Ghana labour force consisted of children, whilst in the rural areas, over 80 percent of children were engaged in some form of labour.

Whilst children contributing their quota to minimal and supervised household chores can be understood, it is difficult to comprehend children engaged in fairly strenuous work for or on behalf of the family and as a result missing out on their childhood and infringing on their rights.

There is also the risk of children being caught up in domestic violence There have been international efforts to combat child labour and according to the ILO (2008) this has resulted in some reduction in the incidence of child labour, however not all countries have realised this decline and there is ongoing need to resolve this problem.

A recent report on the situation in Ghana revealed that 61.9 of males and 69.8 percent of females aged 5 participated in household chores of a minimum of 1 hour per day.

The report further suggested that by age 14 years, 86 percent of males and 90.9 percent of females undertook house chores of a minimum of 1 hour per day (ILO 2006)

Definition of Key terms

The author is aware of the need to explore a working definition of the key terms used within this paper in order to minimise the likelihood misunderstanding.

For the purposes of this paper, a "child" is used to mean any person under the age of 18 years as stipulated by the United Nations and the Children's Act of Ghana 1998.

Child labour is defined as 'work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity and that is harmful to physical and mental development' (IPEC online).

In extreme forms, child labour can involve separation from their parents, slavery or trafficking.

What constitutes child labour is often open to interpretation by various countries and governments, in line with other local and national legislation and policies.

Child domestic labour is used to refer to work within the household and often includes tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, petty trading, collecting water, childminding, for example. This type of labour is largely performed by girls, although it can also include boys.

The background to child domestic labour in Ghana

The problem of child domestic labour in Ghana is not a new phenomenon. Historically, parents and carers expected children to contribute to household chores such as cooking, washing, cleaning, childminding, petty trading and so on and as Williams (2000) suggests "child work is part and parcel of the fabric of Ghanaian society" (p 215). This was viewed as part of growing up into responsible adulthood, with the skills to manage a home and family.

It is also usual to find, that due to strong extended family and cultural ties, children are "sent away" to live with relatives in exchange for the possibility of a brighter future. The majority of adults who engaged in this practice viewed it as a way of supporting less wealthy extended family members and their children. Indeed, it could be argued that this was seen as a "noble" act, worthy of gratitude. This practice has developed over the years into a back door unregulated practice of unpaid child labour, where the welfare of the child is secondary to the domestic expectations of the host families.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to establish where genuine help for children and their families' ends and cruelty and abuse begins.

Children who work within households are vulnerable because there is no set time or working hours. In short, they can be called upon at any time in the day or during the night to tend to one chore or the other.

The unregulated nature of this practice means that children's range of needs are likely to be unmet by their hosts and there is little scope for intervention by the state and other welfare authorities.

Children employed within the family home and environment and this sort of informal arrangement, hence making it impossible to monitor and enhance the well being of these children.

Contributory factors

Whilst no excuses should be given for nor tolerated for continued use of child domestic workers, there are a number of factors which have contributed to the every growing use of children for unpaid work within and around the home.

Among the many factors that contribute to parents and carers permitting their children to work as domestic helpers are: poverty, illiteracy, cultural and traditional roles within the home.

Family Poverty

Children from households which are considered to be “poor” are more likely to be engaged in labour in comparison to children from fairly wealthy families and households.

ILO (2004) argue that poverty causes child labour and child labour causes poverty.

Children in families where high levels of illiteracy exists, where there is a lone parent due to death or desertion, mental illness and other health-related problems, drug and substance abuse, many children are more likely to be candidates for domestic work due to the impact of poverty (ILO 2004)

Traditional and Cultural roles

Traditional and cultural roles can have a detrimental impact on childhood and children in Ghana.

On the other side of the debate are the users of child domestic helpers.

Gender and child domestic labour

Gender debates should be central to any discussion on the issue of child domestic labour as gender plays a role in determining the nature and patterns of labour that children are engaged in.

Work within the home is generally considered as female role and in Ghana, girls face economic, social and cultural barriers which further impede on their ability to fully enjoy their childhood and impact on their ability to access education.

Legislation and Policy

There are a number of separate pieces of legislation which promote and protect the rights of children in Ghana.

➤ **The Children’s Act 1998**

The children’s Act 1998 sets the minimum age for employment as 15 years old, although there is scope for children aged 13 to engage in light, non-hazardous work.

This excludes apprenticeships which should adhere to employment regulations to ensure the safety of the children and young people working with them

- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The Elimination of all forms of harmful practices
- The Domestic Violence Act 2007

In terms of the United Nations conventions, Ghana has ratified the following:

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, ratified on 5th February 1990.
- ILO Convention No. 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, ratified on 13th June 2000.
- ILO Convention No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour, 1957, ratified on 15th December 1958.

- ILO Convention No. 59 on the Minimum Age (Industry), 1937, ratified on
- 30th May 1957.
- ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, 1932, ratified on 20th May 1957.

In addition to the above legislation, a number of governmental and non-governmental organisations are working for and on behalf of children. These include: Worldvision, Save the children, Action Aid, Christian Aid, DFID

A series of Government-led events to promote the rights of children are held annually. Some of these dates are:

12th June - World Day against Child Labour.

In 2008, the theme for this was 'Education: the right response to child labour.

16th June is designated the Day of the African Child, which originated from the Soweto massacre in South Africa in 1976.

This is a national event and is used to highlight various issues concerning children through themes such as- child labour, early marriages and so on

15 May is designated the international Day of the family and is celebrated in Ghana on an annual basis, again focusing on specific issues. In 2008, the theme is around "Involving Fathers" and there was evidence of this theme being promoted by the government during the visit.

31 August- The day of the Ghanaian Child- This is also a National annual event which is well publicised and supported by other sectors including health, education, police and welfare services. 2008 marks the 10th anniversary of the Children's Act (1998) and the proposed theme is about evaluating the success of the Act, 10 years on.

In addition to the above, the Ministry of Health runs a "Child Health Promotion Week", every year which is multi-sectoral in nature and addresses issues of child and maternal health, infant mortality, access to health care, immunisations and so on. They also run educational programmes in various dialects to aid the dissemination of up to date research findings.

The Department of Children has a research team who are engaged in research on various issues around children's rights and development

Children's rights

Ghana was one of the first countries to ratify the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and has since then, reported regularly on the state of children's rights to the United Nations. The most recent report from Ghana, jointly published by UNICEF and the Ministry of Women and Children (MOWAC), was in 2005.

Article 32 of the UNCRC states clearly that children should be “protected from economic exploitation and from any work that is likely to interfere with a child’s education or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development”.

Article 24 of the UNCRC is concerned with promoting the highest standards of children’s health.

Children have a right, under Article 6 of the UNCRC to be registered and entitled to a name and nationality.

In an attempt to fulfil children’s rights obligations in Ghana, the Government has initiated the following:

Children’s rights ought to be viewed as the right to protection rather than liberation and according to Fuller (1979 pg 102)

The child’s capacity for acting upon the world, and changing it, will always be less than that of an adult. This cannot be ‘equalised’ by social transformation: even by socialist transformation...the child’s right is thus not to a formal equality but to a relatively protected space in which childhood can take place.

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) agreed the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the Child in 1990 and re-iterated the discrepancies between international law and its implementation within African cultures and countries. The charter takes into account the particular qualities of African childhood and in particular the fact that children in Africa are seen as part of a community and not as individuals. With this comes the view that children rely on their parents just as parents rely on their children.

The findings of a study carried out in March 2008 reveal no correlation between adults’ understanding of children’s rights and the ongoing use of children for labour of a domestic nature.

A full report from the study will be published in the future.

Strategies towards prevention

- Community education in different languages
- Deployment of specially trained multi-professional workers
- Child birth and death registration
- The role of the media
- Government regulation of home/house help
- The role of NGO’s and the private sector

Conclusion

Few studies have focused on the attitudes, beliefs and justification of adults who employ child workers within the domestic setting. Research on children and children’s rights is an interesting and growing area, however there needs to be a shift in focus to adults, carers and parents as it is important to understand how they contribute to the ongoing infringement of children’s rights through the use of children for labour.

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International programme on the elimination of child labour (IPEC) online at www.ilo.org/ipec/facts

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