

# CHILD LABOR: THE SILENT THIEF OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN GHANA

**Kwadwo Ofori-Dua, M.Phil., Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology, Ghana**

*The phenomenon of child labour is subtly destroying the future leaders of Ghana. This narrative describes the author's experiences with child labour, the nature of child labour, and the practices that promote it in the informal sector of Ghana. It also provides additional stories and experiences of victims of child labour and those who have identified with them. The narrative concludes with lessons learned and recommendations meant to ensure that economic prosperity is not gained at the expense of children. All names of children in this narrative have been changed.*

## **Introduction**

The phenomenon of child labour has existed for many generations in virtually all parts of the world. In 1998, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that around 12.5 % of children between the ages of 10-14 were engaged in some form of labour the world over (ILO 2006). In 2008 there were about 215 million children working illegally in the eyes of international law across the world. About 14 % of children around the world under the age of eighteen are engaged in child labour. An estimated number of 115 million children under age fourteen are engaged in hazardous work (Acheampong, 2010).

The phenomenon of child labour in Ghana is gradually becoming a threat to the lives of children. In 1997, the World Bank estimated that approximately 12.6 % of Ghana's entire labour force was made up of children, with over 80 % of children in rural areas engaged in some form of labour (Tadam, 2009). A study conducted by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) in 2001 estimated that out of the estimated 6,361,111 children in Ghana, approximately 20% of them were engaged in various forms of child labour; about 3.8% of this figure were engaged in activities classified as hazardous work, such as: head porters, domestic work, commercial or ritual servitude, small scale mining and quarrying, fishing, commercial agriculture, and commercial sex (Opere, 2007). The Western and Eastern

regions, along with three regions in the North have the highest reported cases of child labour (Acheampong, 2010).

## **The Nature of Child Labour in Ghana**

In Ghana, most child labour activities are confined to the informal sector. Children as young as seven years old work as domestic labourers, head porters, hawkers (selling items on the street and in open markets), miners, quarry workers, fare collectors, and in agriculture industry. The fishing industry on Lake Volta had a particularly high number of child labourers engaged in hazardous work, such as deep diving. Child labourers are poorly paid and subject to physical abuse. They receive little or no health care and generally do not attend school (Public agenda, 2005).

As a young boy, I was brought up in the rural forest belt of the Ashanti region of Ghana and thus witnessed the exploitation of children similar to my age. There is ample evidence to prove that the agricultural industry has been the main sector responsible for employing children in rural areas. It is a common practice in Ghana for cocoa farmers to engage family members (both young and old) in the production of cocoa. Adults see the involvement of children in farm work as a form of apprenticeship in the cocoa industry, but in many cases the reason may be because parents cannot afford to hire farm hands. It is also seen as a way of training children to take

over from their parents when they are old (Kuapa, 2009). However, what could have been a good practice and discipline is sometimes abused to the detriment of child's development. Children are often made to engage in farming activities such as handling dangerous farm tools and chemicals, and undertaking work which is beyond what they can manage. In some communities children engage in farm activities at the expense of their education and physical development, due to the fact that either there are no schools in the hamlets or the quality of education is poor.

Along the coastal areas of Ghana, fishing has been one of the major industries that employ children. In the Volta Lake region of Ghana, the "Tongus" regard fishing as an integral aspect of their cultural identity, and insist that their children inculcate the fishing processes and occupation, no matter the circumstances. Therefore, Tongu households of all social classes ensure that their members begin absorbing the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values associated with fishing and fish processing as children. Children are trained from an early age to acquire skills in swimming, handling the fishing net, and diving through apprenticeship. Female children are not left out, and are also taught fish-processing skills. Thus, children from this ethnic group have to contribute to the household fishing activities whether in school or not.

Child labour in fishing and fish processing therefore becomes the socio-cultural mechanism or indigenous traditional practices by which the fishing culture is transferred from one generation to the next.

The migration of children is also associated with the fishing industry. By early adolescence, some of the children who have acquired enough skills and confidence in fishing migrate to other communities to engage in fishing and related labour. It is a common practice for children of the Tongu ethnic group to travel to thriving fishing communities during school holidays to engage in fishing and return when school re-opens. But in some cases the movement is permanent. There is ample evidence that children from other fishing communities in Ghana travel to towns like Yeji, Battor, Buipe, and Yapei, along the banks of

the Volta River to pursue fishing as means of supporting their families.

Child trafficking is a phenomenon directly related to child migration in the fishing industry. Fisher-entrepreneurs actively look for young workers and, with the consent of parents or guardians, such children (both males and females) are taken away from their hometowns to work under a verbal agreement that lasts for as long as five years. When the term of the agreement is up, they are rewarded in cash or kind. Boys are usually rewarded with a cow, and girls may receive a sewing machine or cash. This transaction may or may not be facilitated by an intermediary.

Parents who are financially indebted to boat owners participate in another cultural practice that promotes child labour by releasing their children to work for their creditors, thus placing their children in debt bondage.

### **The Six-Year-Old Fisherman**

Kete Krachi is a town in the Volta Region of Ghana and is adjacent to Lake Volta. Because of its proximity to the Volta River, most people living there engage in fishing activities. It is a common practice for children to be leased into servitude by their parents, guardians, or child traffickers. The narration below describes one young boy's ordeal under his master:

*"Mark is 6 years old. About 30 pounds, he looks more like an oversized toddler than a boat hand. He is too little to understand why he has wound up in this fishing community, a two-day trek from his home. But the three older boys who work with him know why."*

*"Like Mark, they are indentured servants, leased by their parents to Mr. Takyi for as little as \$20 a year. Until their servitude ends in three or four years, they are trapped like the fish in their nets, forced to work up to 14 hours a day, seven days a week, in a trade that even adult fishermen here call punishing and, at times, dangerous."*

*"Just before 5 a.m., with the sky still dark over Lake Volta, Mark is roused from his sleeping spot on the damp dirty floor. It is time for work. Shivering in the predawn chill, he helps paddle a canoe a mile out from shore. For five more hours, as his co-workers yank up the fishing net, inch by inch, Mark bails water to keep the canoe from sinking. He last ate the day before. His broken wooden paddle is so heavy he can barely lift it. But he raptly follows each command from Mr. Takyi (his master), the powerfully built 31-year-old in the back of the canoe who freely deals out beatings. 'I don't like it here,' he whispered, out of Mr. Takyi's earshot. Mr. Takyi's boys are conscripted into a miniature labour camp. They are deprived of schooling, basic necessities and freedom."* (www.cosay.com)

### **The Donkey Boy**

The most impoverished regions in Ghana are the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions. The national average of poverty is estimated as 39%, but in the Northern region it is 69%, 88% in the Upper East region, and 84 % in the Upper West region (Abagali, 2002).

Savelugu (in the Northern region) used to have access to a regular supply of potable water. However, the supply is no longer able to meet the needs of a growing population. People living on the outskirts of the town are severely affected, and now rely on other sources, such as untreated dam water and hand-dug wells. Accessing water from these sources requires a 5-6 kilometre trek. Due to these long distances, young school aged boys use donkeys to haul drums of water from the dam and other sources to sell in the town centre. These water vendors are known as "donkey boys." In order to sell water, some of these children have either dropped out of school, do not attend class regularly. In any random group of ten vendors, only one or two are likely to be in school. One such drop-out is 23-year-old Sulemana:

*"Sulemana has been a water vendor since he was 8 years old. He does not go to school. He had the privilege of enrolling in a basic school only to drop out at class one. He said: 'I was in class one when my father took my brother and I to farm in Walewale. After harvesting, my father sold his farm products and bought this donkey for us to cart water for sale.'*

*"Sulemana's day begins as early as 5:30 a.m. He carts water back and forth until 1 p.m. Sometimes, to keep up with customers' demands, he resumes working at 4 p.m. Since they have only one donkey for their business, his elder brother goes round the town to solicit customers whilst Sulemana carts the water.*

*"A drum of water often goes for 6.00 Ghana cedis (about 67 cents). On an average day, the brothers sell about five drums. All the money they earn goes to their father, who uses it to buy food and other necessities for the family.*

*"Even though Sulemana's wish is to be in school instead of carting water every day, he seems to have resigned to his fate because it doesn't seem to be achievable for now."* (www.cosay.com)

### **The 11-Year-Old Head Porter**

Accra, the capital of Ghana, stretches along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and was originally built around a port. Its architecture ranges from large and elegant 19th century colonial buildings to modern offices and apartment blocks made of concrete, glass and steel (www.ghanaweb.com).

The majority of Accra's ever-expanding population can be found in Shanty towns at the edge of the city. The central business district of Accra houses most of the banks, department stores, and Ministries, where the government administration is concentrated.

The roads leading to the city centre are lined with people selling all manner of things ranging from food, pastries, clothing, and electronic gadgets to cast iron gates. Visitors to Accra for the first time would be greeted by women with their babies strapped at their backs selling all sorts of things by the road side ([www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com)). Thousands of children live and work on the streets of this diversified city. Amina, an 11-year-old orphan from Northern region, is one such child:

*"Amina, 11, is an orphan who works as a head porter in Nima, a suburb of Accra. Porters like Amina, known in local dialect as 'kayayei', carry heavy loads in a basin balanced on their heads. She said in an interview that she came to Accra in 2007, when she was nine, after her parents were killed. They were returning home from their farm on a bicycle when her parents were hit by a car and killed.*

*"Although she has aunts and uncles, they not only declined to take in the orphan but they also accused her of causing her parents' deaths. Since she had no other family to run to, her only option was to head to Accra to find work and take care of herself. She now carries loads for shoppers in the Nima market for a fee.*

*"She charges 70 pesewas (\$ .50 U.S.) for a small load and one cedi (\$ .68 U.S.) for a bigger load. After the day's work, she waits for shops to close so that she can sleep in front of one of them. She indicated that she has been robbed a few times of money she made that day.*

*"She appealed to the government to come to the aid of child labourers like her and provide them with shelter and support. She asked that her full name should not be disclosed because she feared for her safety if her relatives should learn of her whereabouts."* (Nyarkoh, 2009)

There are many such children in Accra. They are deprived of basic needs such as shelter, education, and protection.

### **The Chop Bar Worker**

"Michael is a 14-year-old boy from Nkawie in the Ashanti region of Ghana. He is the third born of his parents, and has four other siblings. In 2007, the Nkawie District Social Welfare Officer found Michael in Bibiani a town in the Western region of Ghana working in a local restaurant (chop bar). His job was to pound 'fufu' (a local meal in Ghana). The activity involves using a wooden pestle to pound food substance in a wooden mortar. His wage was three Ghana cedis (\$2.08 U.S.) a day. In addition to the wage, he was also fed twice a day from the restaurant. According to the District Social Welfare Officer, this activity is hazardous to his health, and can also negatively affect his future development since he does not attend school.

*"Narrating his story, Michael claimed he dropped out of school because his parents were poor and could not afford to take care of his education. He indicated that even though he did not get the opportunity to have a formal education, he doesn't want his other siblings after him to suffer the same fate. As a result of this, he has taken to work in the local restaurant so that he can support his parents to educate his junior siblings. He sent part of the income he received to his parents to take care of the family needs and also the education of his siblings.*

The above narrations give credence to the problem of child labour in Ghana. There are a large number of trafficked children working in the fishing industry, quarries, cocoa and rice plantations, in most rural areas. In the cities, girls mostly work as domestic servants, bread

bakers, head porters, street hawkers, and prostitutes. Boys also work as construction workers, cart pushers, news paper vendors, street hawkers, and in mining towns, as scavengers in abandoned gem and gold mines ([www.cosay.com](http://www.cosay.com)).

There are some important lessons to be learned from the narrations. First, it is a fact that cultural practices and poverty are among the main factors that account for child labour in Ghana. Among the Tongus for instance, there is nothing like child labour. Even though children are made to participate in fishing activities, this is interpreted as apprenticeship; a process through which the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values associated with fishing are inculcated in their children to sustain the family business. Cocoa and other farmers in the forest belt who engage their children in farming activities also have the same views about teaching their children the family business. Child labour in Ghana, to some extent, can be said to be rooted in cultural and indigenous traditional practices.

Second, the narrations have also amply demonstrated that parents who lease their children to servitude are compelled by poverty to do so.

A final lesson considers the protections of children against child labour. From the narrations, one wonders whether there are laws in Ghana that protect children and enjoins the Government to provide basic necessities to its citizenry. Ironically, Article 28 of the *Constitution of Ghana* provides that "...every child has the right to be protected from engaging in work that constitutes a threat to health, education or development." However, the enforcement of this provision has not been effective, thereby giving the perpetrators of this inhuman activity free reign to operate. To some extent the government and its agencies cannot also escape blame for the existence of child labour in Ghana.

### **The Way Forward**

How can Ghana as a country curb the menace of child labour? The way forward is for the Government to show commitment to the fight by strengthening and giving resources

to the Department of Social Welfare to rise up to the task and deal with the problem.

Parliament should review the penalty for the contravention of the *Children's Act* and make it more punitive. As it stands now, the penalty for the violation of child labour laws in Ghana is not enough of a deterrent. For instance, Section 15 of the *Children's Act* states that, "...any person who contravenes a provision of the act commits an offence and is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding GHc 500.00 or to a term of imprisonment not exceeding one year or both." Offenders deserve a more stiff punishment.

Additionally, the government should institute measures that would ensure the seizure—in part or full—of any property acquired through exploitative child labour. For those executing government's projects, the state should, in addition to this seizure of property cancel their contracts and withdraw their license of operation. The seized property may be sold and the proceeds paid into children's funds to help educate victims of child labour.

In conclusion, it is evident that child labour is harmful and hazardous to the health and safety of the child. It affects the mental, physical, and social development of the children. In some cases it interferes with their schooling, while it completely deprives other children of the opportunity to attend school. Ghana cannot afford to mortgage its future by engaging her children in labour activities instead of schooling. The time to halt the phenomenon is now.

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Kwadwo Ofori-Dua, M.Phil, is a Lecturer at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology, in Kumasi, Ghana. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: [koforidua.socs@knust.edu.gh](mailto:koforidua.socs@knust.edu.gh) or [kooforidua@yahoo.com](mailto:kooforidua@yahoo.com)

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