

INTERNAL MIGRATION, VULNERABILITY AND FEMALE PORTERS IN ACCRA, GHANA

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Introduction

Internal migration particularly from the north to the south has been ongoing in Ghana for several decades, with historical antecedents. Historically as a result of British colonial policy, the north was promoted largely as a labour reserve for the south. Consequently little investment in infrastructure or services was made in the north, while conscious efforts were made to develop the forest and coastal belts of the south for the production of minerals, cash crops and timber products for export facilitated by the creation of ports and harbours on the coast. The result has been high rates of migration from the north to the large towns and the cocoa growing areas of the south. More recently, liberalisation and structural adjustment programmes have seriously affected northern development and particularly agriculture, primarily through the removal of fertiliser subsidies and subsidies on health care and other social services. The consequence of this uneven development has been that the north has constituted a major source of labour supply for the industries and agriculture in the south, reflecting the impoverishment in the north and the relative buoyant urban economy in the south. These factors have contributed to the north having the highest concentrations of the poor in Ghana. Recent studies estimate that eighty percent of the population in the three northern regions is now poor, while almost seventy percent is extremely poor. Other indicators such as child under-nutrition and adult literacy rates are the highest in Ghana and point to the degree of under-development and poverty in the area (Ghana Statistical Service, 2000, 2005, Norton et al, 1995). Despite a reduction in national poverty levels from 51.7% to 39.5% from 1991/92 to 1998/99, the period also shows increases in poverty and evidence of the intensification of vulnerability and exclusion in the rural and urban savannah of the north, (Norton et al, 1995, Ghana Statistical Service, 2000, 2005 Government of Ghana, 2003).

Until recently this pattern of north - south migration in Ghana has been male-dominated, long-term and long distance in nature, with females joining husbands or moving to stay with relatives for economic and social reasons. However in recent times a dominant migration stream from north to south has been that of female adolescents, moving independent of family, largely towards the cities of Accra and Kumasi, and not always with positive outcomes for the migrants. A recent phenomenon in this migration trend is the migration of young girls from rural areas, particularly the northern regions, to markets

in urban centers to serve as *kayayei*, girl porters who carry goods on their heads for a negotiated fee. Girls as young as 8 years old work as *kayas*. Away from support from their home communities and families, most end up living and working under very poor conditions and are vulnerable to both physical and reproductive health risks, especially sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS. This migration has reportedly led to an increase in the numbers of street children and working children in urban areas. In August 2000, Ghana's Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare reported that out of 800,000 children working countrywide, 18,000 children were working in Accra.

The paper examines the characteristics of young female migrants working as head load porters (*kayayei*) in markets in Accra and the impact of migration on their vulnerability. It also examines the intersecting social relations of gender, poverty, vulnerability and livelihoods, within the specific context of the female porters. It discusses the variations in their experiences and analyses the adaptive and survival strategies used to overcome poverty and to deal with issues of risk and vulnerability especially in respect of their reproductive and health rights and social isolation. The implications for migration policies and poverty reduction strategies are discussed.

Data and Research Methods

The study was undertaken in Makola market, the largest market in Accra, Ghana, and surrounding satellite markets of Tema Station and Novotel /Tudu areas. Structured questionnaires were administered on a sample of 60 porters made up of ten male and 50 female porters. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, case studies and life histories of female and male porters in the markets, as well non-governmental organizations working on this issue, were also undertaken.

Migration, Gender and Vulnerability: Research Findings

The study finds that most of the female porters were aged between 9 and 22 years old. Source of origin of the porters was gendered with female *kaya* originating mainly from the northern region while male *kaya* were from the southern parts of Ghana and were aged much older.

The study identifies poverty, lack of education and employment opportunities, the need to acquire household items and clothes for preparation towards marriage and life, and socio-cultural factors as major reasons for migration of young girls to Accra. Migration is identified as part of a pattern of labour circulation between the north of Ghana and Accra, with female porters (*kayayei*), engaged in a cyclical pattern of migration. Many of the *kayayei* had worked in markets in Accra and Kumasi and returned several times, with one woman returning to Accra four times since 2001 and working as a *kaya* in Makola and Agboghloshie markets.

It finds a high degree of organisation in head load carrying as an occupation despite their low incomes. The activity is highly gendered with male porters transporting the more remunerative, heavier loads of large scale traders and over greater distances using carts and trolleys, while female porters carry on their heads, the smaller loads of petty traders and travelers, which provide lower fees. Male porters also combined to rent and subsequently to own trolleys, while the young girls operated on a more individualistic basis with each woman renting or purchasing her own head pan even though combining into portering teams would enhance access to finances and use of energy saving pottering technologies. Motivated by financial benefits which enables remittances to family, and their ability to save for investment for future business, head load carrying by females is used as a transient economic activity. Duration of work as a kayayoo during each migrant period was therefore short, with an average of between six to twelve months, with a maximum of eighteen months. Involvement in the kaya business is therefore viewed as short term, the purpose of involvement being to attain sufficient savings to convert to a more lucrative and less arduous occupation. The intention to return to Accra as a kayayoo is low, but lack of employment opportunities makes many of them return to Accra. The girls suffer a lot of physical, verbal and sexual abuse. Despite these negative experiences female migrant porters send remittances home to their families and are thus important engines for poverty reduction and growth.

The survival strategies of head porters vary by gender, age and marital status. Female porters have developed various ways of surviving involving a collection of strategies which include collective credit (*susu*) schemes, carving out of survival and ethnic spaces (to minimize conflicts with other kayayei and rape attempts), forming semi-permanent conjugal unions and sexual partnerships for both protection and financial support. They also take a lot of physical and verbal abuse without taking any action thus compounding the feeling of powerlessness. Many of these strategies increase the *kayayei*'s risk and vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, rape and impacts on their reproductive and health rights.

Implications for Policy and Poverty Reduction Strategies

The findings indicate that migration entails risks and vulnerabilities to migrants particularly for young female migrants and that as a transforming experience; it can improve or worsen the position of young women in families and society. Although men and women share many of the burdens of poverty, poverty is gendered in its predisposing factors, processes, impact and the adaptive strategies employed. Migration and female head-load carrying or *Kaya* as an adaptive response to poverty may indeed increase vulnerability to poverty and health risks. Yet, despite the recent presence of women and young girls in the migration process and the potential for migration to strengthen poor women's agency within structures that normally offer them few opportunities in Ghana, there is a lack of policy attention to women in the migration process. Policies on migration are assumed to be gender neutral and not specific to experiences, needs and expectations of men and women. While recent policies have tended to focus on international migration, there is also the need for gender sensitive comprehensive policies

to ensure that the rights and welfare of internal migrants even in their own countries are addressed and that risks especially in respect of their reproductive and health rights are minimized.

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