

Towards Secure and Decent Work for Migrant Youth in Ghana

Poverty and poor livelihood prospects are driving tens of thousands of young people from rural northern regions to southern cities in Ghana in the hope of achieving better jobs and greater social mobility. However, while some are realising their ambitions, the majority face precarious living situations and uncertain work trajectories which result from the limited opportunities open to them in the informal sector. Based on evidence on young migrants in Ghana, the government needs to extend awareness campaigns to young people in the north on the risks associated with city work, and enforce laws to protect migrant workers in order to prevent their exploitation.

While Ghana has experienced strong economic growth in recent decades, the creation of new formal sector jobs has not matched the number of new entrants to the labour market. This phenomenon of jobless growth has combined with globalisation, economic restructuring and transformation of labour markets in reducing employment opportunities for many young people. The implication is that many young people, especially rural–urban migrants, find themselves in precarious informal sector jobs. Table 1 presents findings from a study of 30 rural–urban migrant workers aged between 13 and 25 in Accra in 2016. All the females were head-porters while the males engaged in the other kinds of jobs. They entered these jobs through financial assistance to purchase head pans or were introduced to prospective employers via their social networks.

Table 1 Type of work undertaken by 30 rural–urban migrants in Accra, 2016

| Type of work | Females | Males |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Head-portering (Kayeyei) | 18 | - |
| Construction working | - | 5 |
| Scrap dealing | - | 2 |
| Driving (includes being a driver's mate or bus station worker) | - | 2 |
| Photography | - | 1 |
| Repairing | - | 1 |
| Multiple jobs | - | 1 |
| Total | 18 | 12 |

Uncertain work trajectories

The work of young migrants is characterised by interlocking challenges and schedules that involve high levels of uncertainty.

I wake up around 4am and goes straight to yam market. By this time the lorry from north will have arrived to offload yam. I go there to see if I will get some load to carry. Sometimes you will get something to carry. Other times... errhmmmm nothing. From there I go to the CMB to see if I will get load. During the day, it is all about walking and walking. If you are lucky you will get every load if you are not, you won't get anything to carry. I take break in the afternoon with my friends under a tree. We talk about our lives and how we can make it here and play. By 4pm I return to the market to look for some load to carry.

(Asana, 13 years old from Gushegu)

Day-to-day work-related activity is characterised by no assurance as to whether their services will be required. The task of 'walking and walking' for long hours, looking for something to carry inevitably leads to fatigue and stress.

Irregular, low or no wages

Study findings revealed that average daily income ranged from GH¢3 to GH¢26 depending on the kind of job. However, on some days some young people earned nothing. Susceptibility to low or irregular wages is linked to the fortunes of the market, employers' attitudes, clients, gender and power relations, as well as lack of written work contracts or standards that could guide the amount charged or payment of wages.

Initially it was difficult to get work or load to carry when I first came to Accra but now it is quite okay. The payment for our services is irregular. People

don't treat us fairly. They pay any amount they want. Sometimes you can earn nothing. (Mariama, 18 years old from Tamale)

Because most female head-porters are desperate to get something to carry, they fail to properly negotiate with their clients beforehand. Lack of standards or written contracts that could guide the amount charged and payments means that customers sometimes pay amounts that are not commensurate with the weight of the luggage or other items carried and the distance covered.

Unequal power relations and hardships

The lower income earnings of females are also influenced by issues of power relations and patriarchy embedded in the fabric of the local culture. Patriarchal structures dominant in Ghana often paint a picture of the 'ideal woman or girl' as submissive, respectful, tractable, and less vociferous, and it is expected that every woman or girl, irrespective of age, occupation and educational status, will fit nicely into this already made straightjacket. Thus, any articulation of dissatisfaction or expression

of displeasure in their own language is often misconstrued as insults which attract reproach, intimidation and physical abuse.

The males employed by companies also had their fair share of challenges. For example, employers fail to pay the wages of the migrants, often due to negligence.

They normally pay us on monthly for the work through a time card. Just last month they misplaced my time card so they said they can't pay me about GH¢300.00, about five of us. There was nothing I could do. My problem now is getting new job.

(Alhassan, 24 years old from Bimbila)

Failure of customers and employers to pay wages, or lowering them arbitrarily, can deepen young migrants' feeling of powerlessness and subservience. It may also have far-reaching ramifications on ability to weave a resource base and save towards fulfilling their aspirations. It leads to socioeconomic hardships, including inability to meet daily subsistence needs and engage in the symbolic culture of sending remittances to meet left-behind household expenditure.

Policy recommendations

1. Extend awareness campaigns to the originating communities in the Upper East, Upper West and northern regions of Ghana, to educate parents and prospective young migrants about the adverse socioeconomic realities and precarious employment trajectories associated with working in the urban informal economy, while encouraging education at least up to secondary level or training in vocational skills (for example, seamstressing, bakery and masonry). This could improve the chances of rural youth acquiring better paid jobs in their destination areas. Such initiatives could be pursued at district level and funded by the various decentralised local government administrations.
2. Take deliberate actions and enforce laws to protect informal sector workers by preventing exploitation by clients and employers. While several laws, including Ghana's Labour Act 2003, exist and are expected to regularise and protect the rights of all workers (including migrants), these are only enforced in the formal sector. The enforcement of existing laws and regulations in Ghana's informal sector is fundamentally weak and this impacts particularly heavily on migrant youth. The operations of those mandated with the task of enforcing laws, for example the Ghana Labour Commission, Department of Social Welfare, Ministries of Employment and Labour Relations as well as Gender, Social Protection and Children, need to be strengthened. Such agencies must dedicate time to monitor processes of recruitment, wage payment and work conditions of informal sector workers, particularly migrants. Government must also establish a centre where vulnerable migrant youth could channel their grievances of exploitation and abuse for justice and equality.



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Further reading

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Yeboah, T. (2017, forthcoming) 'Navigating Precarious Employment: Social Networks among Migrant Youth in Ghana', *IDS Bulletin* 48.3

Credits

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