



Gender dimensions of rural child labour in Africa

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Abstract

This paper looks into some key issues that should be considered in research and policies on rural child labour in Africa, by providing gender-specific data on rural child labour and children's economic activities in Africa and especially Ghana. The term child labour here refers to work that harms children's well-being and hinders their education, development and future livelihoods and that is in conflict with national and/or international legislation. Firstly, the exclusion of non-economic activities from many child labour surveys is identified as a major constraint to the availability of sound data on rural child labour, because it limits an accurate assessment of the total workload of rural girls (and to a less degree boys) who combine agricultural work with household chores.

The paper discusses differences in participation in agriculture between boys and girls, and highlights some gender-specific tasks and sub-sectors. Focus is on family-based work, as 90% of child work in Africa consists of unpaid family work in their parents' fields, fishing enterprise or household. Available data suggest that more boys than girls work in agriculture and that boys are more exposed to hazards and long work hours in agriculture. However, the availability of sex-disaggregated data on children's activities in local food crop farming is limited, which is relevant from a gender perspective as it is often the domain of women and probably girls. Surveys that take into account children's economic and non-economic work indicate that on average, rural girls have longer working days, which is likely to have a negative effect on their education. It is concluded that research and policy needs to include children's non-economic work as well as their work in local food crop farming in order to address child labour among boys *and* girls in rural Africa.

Key words: child labour, Africa, Ghana, gender, family-farms

1. Introduction

The elimination of child labour is one of the objectives of the decent work agenda¹. The term child labour is used by the international community to refer to work that harms children's well-being and hinders their education, development and future livelihoods (ILO-IPEC 2006). The existing international legal framework requires that states set a minimum age for admission to work, which should not be lower than 14. The conventions also require that states set a minimum age for light work, which should not be lower than 12, as well as a minimum age of 18 years for engagement in so-called hazardous activities (ILO 1973; ILO 1999). All work that is performed by a child who is younger than the age specified for that type of work is considered child labour and hence targeted for elimination under the ILO Conventions 138 and 182. The ILO-IPEC² stresses that not all work is bad for children and that age-appropriate tasks that are low risk and do not interfere with a child's schooling and right to leisure time are not at issue (ILO-IPEC 2007; 48)³.

Child labour constitutes a violation of children's rights⁴, can suppress wages for adults and discourage the implementation of productivity-enhancing farm technologies or practices (ILO-IPEC 2006). Child labour can be either paid or unpaid and should be distinguished from the more neutral categories of *economic activity* and *child work*; which are not necessarily bad for children. According to ILO estimates from 2006, 132 million economically active children under 15 years of age are working in the agricultural sector (ILO-IPEC 2007: 48; ILO-IPEC: 2006b).⁵

Child labour-specific interventions in the agricultural sector are therefore currently high on the agenda of the ILO as well as international organizations engaged in agriculture. In June 2007 the FAO, ILO, IFAD, IFAP, IUF and IFPRI⁶ signed a Declaration of Intent for Cooperation on Child labour in Agriculture. Girls are mentioned as a group that deserves special attention in the promotion of action, along with other groups of children with special vulnerabilities or needs (FAO 2007).

The use of a gender lens is helpful to better understand child labour problems. It has been argued that girls and boys are vulnerable to child labour exploitation in different ways, that they face different problems and have different coping strategies (Haspels and Suriyasarn 2003; 1). This paper provides information on some key issues regarding gender dimensions of rural child labour, including agriculture, in Africa. Special attention will be given to the case of Ghana.

In terms of human development index (HDI), Ghana ranks 135 out of 177 countries (UNDP data 2007/2008). With every 100 literate men, 76 literate women can be found in Ghana which is in line with the average for sub-Saharan Africa. Education figures from 2006, however, indicate that the gender gap in education has almost disappeared in rural areas, even at secondary levels: 35.2 % of girls of secondary school age are attending secondary school as compared to 36% of boys. Net primary school attendance in rural areas is 70.6% for boys and 69.6 % for girls (UNICEF et al. 2006).

2. Constraints in available data on the topic

A major constraint for any quantitative, gendered, analysis of child labour is the fact that to date, most child labour surveys have excluded non-economic activities such as household chores and child care for siblings (ILO-IPEC/SIMPOC 2007: 3.6)⁷. This is surprising, regarding the generally accepted definition of child labour which covers both economic and non economic activities (ILO-IPEC 2007). The reason for excluding household chores could be related to efforts not to label as child labour forms of “helping in the house” which are beneficial for the child’s development. This reasoning, however, ignores the possibility that much time is spent on household chores, that it can jeopardize education and health, in similar ways as economic work does. Excluding non-economic activities results in most cases in an underestimation of the incidence of girl child labour, because girls often spend more time on domestic chores.

This “exclusion” has been identified as a problem by many actors, including ILO’s Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child labour (ILO-IPEC/SIMPOC 2007). As a response to these concerns, a resolution was adopted at the eighteenth International Conference for Labour Statisticians, in December 2008. This resolution, which aims to set standards for the collection, analysis and compilation of national child labour statistics, recommends including “unpaid household services” in measurements of children’s productive activities. The resolution states that these forms of work can amount to child labour, and should be measured as such, if they are performed under the following conditions: (a) for long hours, (b) in an unhealthy environment, involving unsafe equipment or heavy loads, (c) in dangerous locations, and so on. It is furthermore stated that “The definition of long hours in unpaid household services of children, relative to their age, may differ from the one applied in respect to children in employment. The effect on a child’s education should also be considered when determining what constitutes long hours” (ILO 2009: 61).

This acknowledgement of the fact that unpaid household services, under specific conditions should be considered child labour in statistical surveys, is likely to increase the availability of sound data to analyze child labour in agriculture because girls (as well as boys to a lesser degree) often combine agricultural tasks with household chores. IPEC considers the issue of girls combining work in agriculture with domestic chores “one of the key issues not fully addressed in many studies covering girl child labour in agriculture” (ILO-IPEC 2007). Andvig, Canagarajah and Kielland noted in 2001: “The dominant activity of the children is related to farming, but domestic activities should also be included because the focus is the effects on the children’s welfare and the development of their productive potential: whether the children carry water for cows or people is of little relevance” (2001:9).

However, it should be noted that not all organizations collecting data on child labour follow the ILO definitions or recommendations. From data from UNICEF it appears that even if non-economic work is taken into account, it is given much less

“weight” than economic activities. In its Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), UNICEF considers a child to be in child labour if during the week preceding the survey if it has done at least *one* hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work (for 5-11 years) or at least 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work (for 12-14 year old children) (UNICEF et al. 2006).

Including time spent on unpaid household chores in statistical data collection is particular relevant to acquire an accurate picture of child labour among rural African girls, for the following reasons. Firstly, data show that in Africa, especially girls are engaged in non-economic work, especially household chores (ILO-IPEC 2007). Country specific research from Ghana and Benin confirms that all different household chores are predominantly done by girls (ILO 2004; UNDP 1998 in Kielland and Tovo 2006: 59.) Secondly, the reality of rural Africa challenges the assumption that household tasks automatically qualify as harmless or even beneficial to the child. The low level of development and high level of rural poverty in rural Africa make household chores such as cooking and fetching water or firewood, very time consuming and sometimes dangerous. Depending on the duration and nature of work, they can, in itself or in combination with agriculture amount to child labour.

3. Gendered divisions in children’s work⁸

I will now look at the gendered division of children’s work, within agriculture as a productive sector, but will keep in mind that especially girls often combine these tasks with other (household) work, such as cooking, fetching water and firewood for the household, child care and washing clothing and dishes (UNDP in Kielland and Tovo 2006).

ILO reports indicate that worldwide there are more boys than girls working in agriculture (e.g. ILO-IPEC 2007). Specific data for Ghana draw the same picture: in the 2001 Child Labour Survey it was concluded that 44% of working girls and 69% of working boys work in agriculture/forestry/ fishing (GSS 2003). Time use data from Benin also indicated that the participation rate of boys aged 6-14 in agriculture (excluding hunting and herding) was more than twice as high as the girls’ participation (UNDP 1998 in Kielland and Tovo 2006: 59). Ghana’s most recent certification report on child labour in cocoa shows more boys’ participation in almost all cocoa farming activities. Only in sowing, fetching water for spraying, gathering and heaping pods and carting of fermented pods an equal gender participation is found (MMYE/ NPCLC 2008).

Several studies on child labour in agriculture in Africa or worldwide indicate that boys and girls between 6 and 9 years do more or less the same tasks in the field, usually within their mother’s sphere (Nkamleu and Kielland 2006: 327; Bradley 1993: 81). These studies also point out that when children get older, they increasingly take on the tasks that are typical for the adults of their gender. The Ghana survey, for instance, shows that a major activity of girls is trading (68% of children engaged in wholesale and retail

trade are girls); for rural girls this is likely to include trading of agricultural produce (GSS 2003).

Not many quantitative data are available on the labour divisions within sub-sectors in Africa, such as fisheries. The Ghana Child Labour Survey, however, shows that almost seven times more boys than girls are estimated to work in fishing⁹ (GSS 2003: 64). It is not clear if this number also includes the processing activities in the fisheries sector, such as drying and frying (which are usually done by females), but it is clear that there are more boys than girls working in this sector. Recent qualitative research in coastal and inland fishing communities in Ghana (Zdunnek et al. forthcoming) shows that girls mainly engage in fish processing and trading, often in combination with household chores and sometimes farming, whilst the actual fishing and work on the boats and the shores is mainly done by men and boys.

Another activity that is typically done by boys, and only exceptionally by adult men, women or girls, is cattle herding, either for an employer or unpaid for their own household or relative. Cattle herding is an important activity when it comes to child labour because cross-cultural research (Bradley 1993) as well as several case studies (see some examples in Kielland and Tovo 2006: 71) have shown that among many ethnic groups it is almost entirely done by children¹⁰. The Benin time-use study suggests an almost complete absence of girls in herding (UNDP 1998 in Kielland and Tovo 2006: 59). The Ghana rapid assessment (ILO 2004) also showed that in livestock farming, more boys (24%) than girls (5%) were involved, which parents explained by the tedious character of the activity. In two recent studies from Ghana (Afenyadu 2008; Zdunnek et al. 2009) only boys were encountered herding the cattle. According to Bradley, this can be explained by the fact that the care for large animals is the domain of men in most societies and because adults are mainly in control of children of their own gender (Bradley 1993: 86), after they are around 9 years old and gradually move out of their mothers' spheres. There is no clear indication from the available data on the gender division of children herding small animals, which could be due to the fact that some studies look at "herding" more generally, but different sources indicate that children herding small animals are on average younger (often younger than 10 and sometimes younger than six years) (Bradley 1993: 91). This would be understandable as women are more involved in the care for small animals than for cattle and younger children are more closely tied to their mothers' sphere (Bradley 1993: 88; Kielland and Tovo 2006: 71).

The largest part of child work in Africa consists of unpaid family work. For rural areas, most estimates indicate that over 90% of children's work is in their parents' farm, fishing enterprise or household (Andvig, Canagarajah and Kielland 2001). Specific data for Ghana and Côte d' Ivoire confirm this (GSS 2003¹¹; Canagaraja and Coulombe 1997: 10; Nkamleu and Kielland 2006). The small group of waged labourers consists of children hired as temporary or permanent workers on farms, fishing enterprises and plantations. However, a study on child labour in cocoa growing areas in Ghana by the Ghana Agricultural workers union, suggests that in specific areas it is quite common for

children to work for money for employers. In cocoa growing areas in Ghana, only 24% of the 328 children interviewed indicated that they had never worked on cocoa farms for money (GAWU 2006: 57), yet it should be noted that this mainly concerned temporary work. Much of the available data is not disaggregated by gender, but the same study on child labour in the cocoa sector concluded that most waged child workers in the sector were male and temporary and were aged on average 13.5 years (GAWU 2006).

Based on evidence on temporary workers in the cocoa sector, it appears that there is no or hardly any difference in payments received by boys and girls, although one study suggests that boys earn slightly more (depending on age group, from 1%-9%). (GAWU 2006. MMYE/ NPECLC 2007). It should be noted that average daily wages were observed to be higher than the minimum adult wage in Ghana (GAWU 2006). This suggests that the demand for child labour may be related to scarce and costly adult labour. There is, however, no convincing data indicating that cutting down production costs is the main or only reason for hiring children. The GAWU research in the cocoa area as well as qualitative research in cotton areas in Burkina Faso (de Lange 2007) suggests that “easier supervision of children” also plays an important role in the decision to employ children instead of adults.

The category of children who work for money, food or items (such as a bike¹² or a cow¹³) on farms also covers children who have migrated from other areas or countries, in search of work. World Bank data from Benin show that 8 percent of rural children in Benin have left for work, mainly boys. On the basis of data from Burkina Faso (Ouensavi and Kielland 2003) it is estimated that 4.7% of children aged 6-17 had left to work. It appears that girls end up in different work settings, probably less frequently in farm work. Qualitative research in Ghana, Togo and Burkina Faso show varying realities for children who work in agriculture away from home; they can be engaged in cattle herding, fishing, cotton, cocoa or vegetable farming (Afenyadu 2008; De Lange 2007: 160; Plan Togo 2005; Zdunnek et al. forthcoming). A common, and often exploitative, feature seems to be a system of deferred payments in which children are living at the worksite and are paid after completion of an oral contract which can last up to four years. Girls seem to migrate less frequently for paid agricultural work. However, it was observed in the Volta region by Zdunnek et al. that girls working in fish processing and trading also often originate from other areas and that their contracts are similar to those of boys.

Albeit not well-documented, it is also common in at least some parts of Africa that children earn some money by farming on their own plot (see Pamela Reynolds in Kielland and Tovo 2006: 62 for Zimbabwe; de Lange 2007 for Burkina Faso; Hashim 2005: 5 for Ghana). Not much is known about this practice and the manner it affects boys and girls in different ways.

It should be noted that not much (sex-disaggregated) data are available on children’s participation in local food crop farming because much of the research has focused on exportable cash crop sectors, linked to Western markets¹⁴. *More research on*

local food crop production could possibly In Africa, women are generally more active in the production of food crop for own consumption and for local traditional markets whilst men are usually responsible for crops for national or international markets (IFAD/TWB/FAO 2008: 28; Nkamleu and Kielland 2006). We have seen that when children get older, they increasingly do tasks that are the responsibility of the parent of the same sex. This suggests that girls are also more likely to be involved in the local food crop farming. Research on child labour, however, often looks at the engagement of children in the production of a certain cash crop, rather than at their involvement in all agricultural tasks.¹⁵ It should be noted however, that the most recent survey on child labour in cocoa in Ghana, looks at the gendered labour participation in different cocoa farming activities, including non-cocoa farming. It appears to be the only activity in which girls are be more likely to participate than boys (MMYE/ NPCLC 2008: 134).

Overall, available data suggest that boys appear to spend more time on agricultural activities but that rural girls spend more time working than boys (Bradley 1993; Andvig, Canagarajah and Kielland 2001). Andvig et al. contribute this to the heavier workload of women on family farms including domestic work, and the fact that girls do more women's tasks than boys.

4. Gender dimensions of child labour

These descriptions of differences in boys' and girls' tasks only constitute a part of the information needed to examine gendered differences in the engagement in child labour. In order to establish the incidence of *child labour*, we have to know if the work is jeopardizing the child's education and/or health.

Hazards

According to ILO Convection 182, hazardous child labour is work which by nature or circumstances under which it done is likely to harm the health, safety, morals and/or development of the child.

The ILO thinks that working boys in general are more exposed to hazards than girls and that this difference becomes more pronounced the older children get (ILO-IPEC 2006b). There is some evidence suggesting that this observation also applies to the agriculture sector. Data from the cocoa sectors in Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire show that boys work longer hours and that they are more engaged in spraying pesticides (GAWU 2006; MMYE/ NPCLC 2008; Nkamleu and Kielland 2006). The Ghanaian cocoa certification report shows that, apart from working without adequate basic protective equipment, boys engage more than girls in all other hazardous activities. In activities such as clearing forest, burning a bush and harvesting overhead pods, boys participated over 8 times more than girls. Boys were observed to be 6 times more likely than girls to work in isolation, and 5 times more likely to break pods. Boys used a cutlass 3 times more than girls and worked with agrochemicals twice more (MMYE/ NPECLC 2008: 147). The authors explain this difference mainly through gender roles which prescribe

that girls spend more time on domestic chores while boys spend more time farming, which exposes them more to hazards. Boys were also reported to be much more likely to do “high intensity” work, meaning more than 7 hours a day or more than 4 hours during more than 5 days a week) (MMYE/ NPECLC 2008: 141).

In fishing, more boys than girls are engaged in the riskier tasks such as diving to disentangle nets and going to sea etc (Zdunnek et al. forthcoming). Tasks of girls in processing and sales seem less hazardous but exposure to smoke as well as burns suffered while working at the oven or preparing the fire were frequently mentioned (Zdunnek et al.). Also, girls are often involved in carrying loads in different sectors, including fishing and cocoa farming, which can constitute a major health risk in the long run. Moreover, household work also often involves the carrying of heavy buckets of water, fire wood.

Hardly anything is known about the working hours, exposure to chemicals and use of dangerous tools and age of children engaged in the farming of traditional food crops such as millet, maize or cassava, for family subsistence or sales. The fact that women are more active in these sectors suggests that a relatively large share of girls as well as children (boys and girls) under age 10, engage in this type of work.

Education

It should be noted that rural children are more likely to be in work *and* school than urban children (Andvig, Canagarajah and Kielland 2001; GSS 2003) and work and school are not always mutually exclusive categories. Work which is done after school only becomes child labour if it prevents the child from attending school¹⁶ or if it makes the child too tired to be concentrated.

The alleged, on average longer working hours of girls suggest that work affects education of girls more than of boys, in terms of non-enrolment and drop-out. Moreover, as is noted in the Rapid Assessment for Ghana (ILO 2004: 255): “Girl children are at a particular disadvantage because they are the least favoured for schooling.” Reasons for non-enrollment of girls are not in all cases related to the need to work, but can also be related to other factors (financial, socio-cultural or religious). Yet rural girls of school-age who are out of school do often engage in work and are counted in statistics as child labourers.

There is increasing consensus that only *quality* education can reduce child labour for boys and girls (see for instance Odonkor 2007). In Ghana it was found that although over 90 percent of the children aged 5-17 in cocoa growing areas were attending schools, only 52% of these girls and 56% of these boys were able to read and write a simple statement about their daily lives (MMYE/ NPECLC 2008: 105). Convincing rural parents and children to (continue to) invest in education for boys and girls is only possible if the education available has a certain value. This seems to be especially crucial in rural areas,

where education is often of low quality but has to compete with “socializing” and short-term financial benefits of (full time) work on the farm and in the household.

The link to poverty

The causal link between household poverty and child labour in rural Africa is complex, which is likely to be related to the fact that so much child work is unpaid work for the family farm or household. The Ghana child labour survey (GSS 2003) for example found that children from the poorest households are more likely to be engaged in the labour force without attending school than children from households with higher per capita expenditure. Differences are somewhat more pronounced among boys (20.3% versus 2.2%) than among girls (17.8% versus 4.3%). (GSS 2003). Yet several other researchers on child labour in Ghana and Africa, have found the relationship between household welfare and children’s labour participation to be “very weak” (Canagarajah and Coulombe 1997). Bhalotra and Heady (2000) indicated that in Ghana there is no significant correlation for boys between the hours spent in farm work and the standard of living of the household as measured by its per capita food expenditure, “though there is a hint of the expected negative relation for girls”. They even show with data from Ghana that when farmland increases, child labour participation increases, including work in the household. A similar paradox, in which more assets creates more demand for labour was observed in Northern Ghana by Zdunnek et al. (forthcoming), who concluded in their case study on cattle boys that it is by no means the poorest boys who engage in this activity, because mainly better-off families own cattle and engage their own sons for the herding.

5. Conclusions

In order to address rural child labour (or child labour in agriculture) in Africa in a gender sensitive way that is child rights based, one should take the following into account:

- Non-economic tasks in the household should be included in measurements of the work load of children and the occurrence of child labour, as indicated in a resolution which was adopted by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2008. Agricultural tasks might only become burdensome or start interfering with education, when they are assigned in combination with domestic chores. This happens especially among girls.
- Available studies suggest that boys who work in agriculture are more exposed to hazards and work more hours in agriculture than girls. Yet it should be taken into account that hardly any data is available on the gendered labour distribution, working hours and hazards which children face in food-crop production for local markets and for family subsistence. It is expected that relatively many girls and younger children can be found in this sub-sector.

- It is therefore recommended that surveys look at the involvement of children in all agricultural and domestic tasks performed at a farm, rather than their engagement in the production in one specific crop or product. This recommendation is in particular relevant for studies that start from consumer concerns on the use of child labour in one specific value chain or product.
- Children (boys and girls taken together) do overall more women's tasks than men's and their work is often assigned by women. It can therefore be argued that the unequal rural labour distributions between adults can contribute to the demand for household child labour.
- At the same time, this also implies that in efforts to reduce rural child labour (including the care for smaller siblings) the possible impact on women's workload should be considered. The fact that children often do the same tasks as women means that their reduced labour participation can charge women with more unpaid family labour.
- The relationship between household wealth and child labour is complex in rural Africa. Research indicates that ownership of land or livestock can even increase rather than reduce the hours that children from the household work, because their labour is used to make these assets productive.

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¹ Decent work is a framework to address employment issues which been adopted by the ILO in 1999 and subsequently taken up by the UN System based on the recognition of the central role of work in people's lives. The elimination of child labour falls under the "standards and rights at work pillar".

² IPEC is ILO's child labour programme and stands for International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour.

³ It should be noted however, that the statistical definition of child labour used by ILO regards, amongst others, all children aged 5-11 who are economically active as child labourers (ILO-IPEC/ SIMPOC 2007).

⁴ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes the right of children to be protected from economic exploitation and from work which is likely to be hazardous, which interferes with their education or is harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development (article 32). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of the African states that "every child should be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (Organization of African Unity 1999 in Zdunnek et al. forthcoming).

⁵ ILO-IPEC 2006 and 2007 indicate that this number refers to child labourers in agriculture. The figures in ILO-IPEC 2006 suggest that it rather concerns economically active (or working) children under 15.

⁶ FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN; IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development); IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations); IFAP (International Federation of Agricultural Producers); IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute)

⁷ Note that those who are engaged as domestic workers or maids in other people's houses are considered to be in economic activity (ILO-IPEC/SIMPOC 2007).

⁸ Note that we here look at children’s work, which is a neutral term covering economic and domestic tasks of children.

⁹ In absolute numbers this was 42.893 boys and 6.292 girls.

¹⁰ The Fulani, and possibly other pastoralist ethnic groups seem to form an exception , at least in some countries (see Zdunnek et al. forthcoming).

¹¹ GSS 2003: The employment status data for urban and rural areas in Ghana indicate that a significant proportion (about 88%) of working children were unpaid family workers or unpaid apprentices, while 5.9 percent are own account workers.

¹² De Lange 2007; Plan Togo 2005

¹³ Zdunnek et al. forthcoming

¹⁴ Research and interventions on child labour in agriculture in Africa have mainly focused on “commercial farming”, usually on larger plantations and agri-businesses rather than on small scale family farms. A recent trend, related to consumer concerns on child labour, has been the multi-stakeholder initiatives concerning a specific crop, in which the private sector is involved (e.g. tobacco and tea and cocoa) (ILO-IPEC 2007: 50).

¹⁵ This latter observation attribute Kielland and Tovo (2006: 22) to “probably substitution effects between parental farm work and domestic work”.