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ADDRESSING CHILD LABOR AND RELATED VULNERABILITIES IN GHANA: THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Lorretta Owusu Domfeh

The creation of a safe habitable society is of absolute relevance to the survival of children. And with the global 2030 agenda of building a society that leaves no one behind, it is important to work towards removing all forms of circumstantial factors that aggravate children's vulnerability. To be able to effectively tackle the unaddressed issues of child vulnerabilities in Ghana, we need to ask ourselves some basic questions: Are our children really safe? Are their needs adequately met? Are their best interests' paramount in every decision we make? Are they given the outmost support to grow in a peaceful and healthy environment?

Answers to these questions may vary greatly from one country to the other and from community to community. In Ghana, issues of protecting children from abuse and exploitation have not been adequately pursued despite existence of numerous legal frameworks to dealing with such menaces. Child labour for instance is a phenomenon that has persistently received very little attention regardless of its horrifying effects on children and society as a whole. Children by nature are deemed vulnerable due to their level of physical, emotional and intellectual abilities. However, in today's society, poverty mixed with urbanisation and modernism place more children in perilous conditions as some children are left to their own fate to work and fend for themselves. Extreme poverty, broken homes, high fertility rates, high unemployment rates, streetism, and reduced economic support are some of the causal socioeconomic factors that conspire with modern life to ruin the lives of vulnerable children. Children in such situations are subjected to all forms of abuse and exploitation; ranging from physical, emotional, sexual to educational. The resulting effects of social changes caused by socioeconomic failures and urbanization have affected some families greatly, and by extension, the rights, living conditions and roles of children in the family.

Historically, children have always played important roles in family systems; such as running errands for the home, undertaking minor household chores and sometimes babysitting. But in recent times, some children are seen undertaking roles that are known to be that of their parents and guardians in addition to their original roles. For this reason, we see children engage in economic activities and hazardous works that are inimical to their growth and development.

An economic activity can be defined as any work or activity performed for pay (in cash or in kind), for profit or for family gain. Now, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children's Act of Ghana 1998 defines a child as a person below the age of eighteen years. The term "child labour" does not encompass all economic activities undertaken by children. It refers to employment or work carried out by children that neither conforms to the provisions of national legislations, such as the Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560), nor international instruments such as ILO Convention No. 138 and 182, which define the boundaries of work undertaken by children that is appropriate for their development. This means that, children can participate in works that do not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling. This may include activities such as helping their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays. These kinds of activities contribute

to the development and welfare of children, and their families; equipping them with skills and experience, and grooming them to be productive members of society during their adult life. According to ILO, the term “child labour” connotes works that deprive children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that:

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and
- interferes with their schooling;
- deprives children of the opportunity to attend school;
- obliges children to leave school prematurely;
- Requires children to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

Works that take the form such as these are known to be exploitative and in extreme cases, hazardous. The Children’s Act of Ghana, 1998 defines exploitative labour as “work that deprives the child of his or her health, education or development”. In Ghana, the minimum age for admission into employment is 15 years for general employment, 13 years for light work and 18 years for hazardous work. Light work is defined by ILO Convention 138 as any work that is; not likely to be harmful to the health or development of children; and which will not prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by a competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received. Hazardous work is also defined by the Children’s Act as “work posing a danger to the health, safety or morals of a person”. This includes but not limited to fishing, mining and quarrying, porter age or carrying of heavy loads, work involving the production or use of chemicals, and work in places where there is a risk of exposure to immoral behaviour.

Referring to the most current national data on child labour, the Ghana Living Standard Survey (GLSS) 6 of 2014 estimates that, about 2.5 million children between the ages of 5-17 (28.5%) are involved in economic activities. About 1.9 million children between the ages of 5-17 (21.8%) are involved in child labour, and 1.2 million children between the ages of 5-17 (14.2%) are also involved in hazardous activities.(GSS, 2014) The GLSS report gives 9 years as the average working age in Ghana. These numbers are disheartening, looking at the value we place on children in our society. Ghana, being the first nation to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, and its promptness in ratifying the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention and signing unto the ILO/IPEC Programme in 2000 affirmed the country’s recognition of the problem and commitment to addressing it (Employment & Welfare Policy, 2010). Children involved in child labour are not only subjected to abuse and exploitation, the activities they engage in also has numerous negative effects on their lives. These negative effects range from physical to health to social and moral as well as educational.

Ghana has over the years developed several strategies in the fight against child labour; the institution of the elimination of child labour programme in 2000, the development of the national plan of action which established the Ghana child labour monitoring system, the hazardous activity framework for the cocoa sector of Ghana (HAF) and the standard operation procedures and guidelines (SOPs) for child labour in Ghana. These institutional frameworks have however not translated into full scale practical actions towards eliminating child exploitation from social and economic spaces in Ghana. It is important to note that, children do not live and grow in isolation; they grow up in families. Ideally, the family is to ensure the protection of the child, provide for the basic needs of the child and perform other support functions. But due to poverty, divorce, weakened extended family systems amongst other factors, some families renege on their responsibilities to children. In the absence of a strong social support system, such children are plunged into labour in order to survive.

To conclude, child labour, has been widely agreed to be the cause of poverty, broken homes, high unemployment rates, reduced economic support, and among others. Evidently, children involved in child labour use their earnings to pay for their school fees, cater for themselves and their family and pay other bills. Therefore, a more sustainable solution that tackles the malfunction of the family system will go a long way in addressing child labour and its accompanying problems.

The negative effects of child labour on children and the society should not be overlooked. Taking into consideration the ages of children engaged in such activities, the hazardous nature of the work cannot be underestimated. And as such, all forms of abuse and exploitation that hinder children's development must be addressed with urgency and with a collective effort. A complete success will require all stakeholders to come on board and help build a desirable and an abuse free society for our children. Efforts must be geared towards strengthening family systems to become very efficient and effective in protecting and providing the needs of children. This can be done through capacity building programs for families and members of the society. These programs will not only sensitize them on the causes and effects of child labour, but enhance their social functioning.

Getting and sustaining children in school is another great idea, but parents must also be supported with needed resources that would sustain the family and the child whilst in school. This can also be achieved through equipping parents and guardians in poor and vulnerable households with skills that will enable them create gainful employment for themselves. This will be fundamental to mitigating the incidence and effects of child labour in Ghana, as its primary cause would be tackled.

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