

Growing Up in Ghana: Deregulation and the Employment of Children

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Nima, a run-down district of the city of Accra, was where we chose to conduct fieldwork for our analysis of the correlation between the crisis currently afflicting families and households in Ghana and the increasingly intensive use of child labour in the country's urban centres.¹ The crisis in question has grown over nearly a decade of structural adjustment policies inspired and managed by the international financial institutions, in particular the IMF and World Bank. Deregulation of the labour market, of social legislation and institutional control over the economy ties in with social deregulation, a process having such an effect on social reproduction patterns that the customary capacities of the family and household to protect and socialize are being eroded.

'Household' here is understood to mean a relatively stable community of permanent residents and consumers. More often than not, family groups primarily structured on bonds of kinship and marriage have been falling apart in urban environments largely owing to labour migration, redundancies, changing patterns of social behaviour and changing internal roles. It follows that while households and family units may occasionally coincide, they are rarely ever one and the same. Most households are shifting assemblies cobbled together from divided and conflicting bonds of kinship, marriage, neighbourhood, membership and friendship (Dwyer 1988).

By 'domestic deregulation' we are referring to the break-up of family units combined with the increasing fragility and destabilization of households which has been gathering pace and becoming more serious under the impact of the policies of liberalization through structural adjustment. A connection exists between the deregulation of the labour market and what we call domestic deregulation. Clearer still is the correlation between both these processes and the general spread of child labour. Until recently, critical diagnosis of adjustment policies was mainly based on global, macro-economic or sector-based analyses. Yet those policies are deeply rooted within the very social fabric they claim to be reshaping (Nash 1983). To examine the crisis

to which the household is subjected as a result, we have chosen to focus on the troubled interface between the macro-economic and micro-social, between world level and local level (Verlet 1992). If the changes generated in the social and economic role of women in domestic life by the outside world's mandatory free-market strategies have been receiving a lot of attention of late, the attention given to the revived forms of child employment and exploitation stimulated by household deregulation seems to have been rather more discreet and less systematic.

From this point of view, a case study of Ghana is particularly illustrative. Ghana first became embroiled in adjustment policies in April 1983 (Rothchild 1991) and they have since been pursued with greater verve and perseverance here than anywhere else (World Bank 1994). International institutions are quick to present it as the outstanding example of an African nation miraculously cured by adjustment. It stands as the IMF and World Bank showcase model for the rest of the continent to emulate (Campbell and Loxley 1989). Since 1986, the World Bank has found itself having to provide remedies that are ultimately more symbolic than effective for the social groups directly suffering the most negative and disastrous social effects of the macro-economic adjustment strategies (Pamscad 1990).

Nima is an equally useful case study for our focal subject of domestic deregulation and the proletarianization of children in working-class areas of Ghanaian cities. Nima is a shanty town, a hinterland suburb historically reputed to be a melting pot for the Ghanaian labouring classes. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, it attracted migrants coming from the north in search of work. Within the space of a few years, its masses of largely untrained and unskilled country people had been transformed into a stable, disciplined and hard-working force of urbanite labour. This swift conversion caused the Accra working classes to swell. Nima men were largely recruited as manual labourers, security guards and domestic servants or joined the lower ranks of the police force and army. Two to three generations of migrants were proletarianized in this way (Sandbrook 1977). Yet they were to be the first casualties of the state's public sector restructuring and privatization programmes. Formerly established men suddenly found themselves out of work, feeling irretrievably worthless and incapable of retraining. Redundancy not only stripped them of their social status and income, but left them petrified, marginalized, no longer the family protector, chief and guide. Women then took over as breadwinners and saw their domestic role grow broader and more complex (Pellow 1977). Nearly 40 per cent of Nima households are now headed by a woman. But their activities alone have ceased to suffice. Hence the introduction and growth of child labour as a necessary means of supplementing, if not the sole source of, household incomes (Unicef 1990).

Our definition of a 'child' is primarily sociological and generational. We are looking at a whole generation of children tossed around on the waves of liberalization, having grown up under adjustment with no vision of the

future other than that mapped out and muddled by international macro-economic constraints (Verlet 1993). This generation of 'child labourers' is quite unlike any of its predecessors. The conditions, the degree of exploitation, the functions and fruits of underage labour differ greatly. It is the generation of the 'adjusted child', whose work has lost its value in terms of domestic use and become a unit of exchange, a negotiable labour-market good instantly convertible into cash. The children in question are aged from six to sixteen years (Government of Ghana 1992).

Before going any further, let us draw a distinction between 'child labour' and 'domestic work'. The latter refers to the everyday tasks children have always done for the general maintenance of the family unit and as part of the normal run of socialization. The former differs in that it oversteps the bounds of socially acceptable norms and uses (Hammond 1993). Furthermore, its end purpose is monetary gain. Between these two opposite and opposing poles, children are open to a wide range of varying degrees and conditions of domestic work or exploitation which all lead to widespread premature proletarianization. It is not a matter of gradation but degradation; domestic work progressively slips into tougher forms of exploitation that tend to remove children from their family milieu, from the lands and life-paths of childhood, and cast them on to the labour market. Domestic ideology serves to mask and legitimize such changes (Avorti 1990; de Souza 1990). In the vast majority of cases, the child's access to the labour market will be brokered by a family friend, parent or relative (mother, maternal aunt, elder brother). Channels of recruitment and exploitation techniques all capitalize on bonds of kinship and friendship, even if the former are often fictitious and the latter dubious.

Nima: From Melting Pot to Scrap-heap

Nima, once a melting pot where thousands of northern migrants were shaped into a working class, a proletariat, has become a dumping ground for a brutally depreciated labour force. It has happened in little over a decade (1983-94) alongside the successive structural adjustment plans applied in Ghana. Nima's history has above all been that of stratum after stratum of northern migrants, strangers to the town yet attracted to it by the prospect of waged work (Frimbong-Yeboah 1975, Chambas 1977).

With World War II, the setting up of army bases and a growing labour market, the town's population grew considerably in size. That was when it began gaining a reputation as the gateway from labour migration to wage-earner status, the training ground then residence for an urban labouring class. During Ghana's twenty-year transition from colonialism to independence, the population of Nima more than doubled (Annorbah-Sarpei 1969) as the state structures expanded and a vast industrial and commercial public sector developed, capable of absorbing a large number of the newcomers to

the town via the area's network of recruitment channels. In addition to openings in neighbouring residential districts for domestic servants, people could otherwise try their hand in (sometimes self-employed) services or trading activities. The town's labour force at the time was chiefly composed of young, single men.

Nima was then officially incorporated into Accra, but the move was not followed by any immediate redevelopment and amenities work (Wellington 1968). Conditions had begun becoming difficult with the deepening economic slump of the 1970s. Overpopulated and congested, the town's growth gradually slowed down. A number of urban planning projects were drawn up (Darmstadt University 1972); at one point the authorities were even toying with the idea of simply tearing down the whole of what they saw to be an unhealthy and dangerous shanty town and moving the population to Madina, north-east of Accra (MWH 1973). The project was eventually scrapped due to staunch opposition, not to mention its sheer cost. Soon after that, the Nima Highway was laid, cutting through the agglomeration from north to south, opening it up to the outside world and abruptly ending its insularity. It stimulated a flurry of trading activity: wealthier members of the community opened shops along the roadside and, with the markets of Accra within easier reach, the women went into retailing (80 per cent of them today work in the informal sector).

The deteriorating economic climate complicated access to waged work. Yet the people of Nima managed to adapt: black market, smuggling, buying political influence (for the better-off), accumulating jobs, secondary activity (for some wage-earners) or becoming self-employed and acquiring professional qualifications. Many chose to migrate, attracted by the powerful illusion of the Nigerian economic 'boom' which began in 1975. The most constantly adopted means of coping, however, was a more systematic and intensive use of female labour in a wider range of activities. Some of the effects of the economic chaos, which was to continue deepening until 1984-85, taking a heavy toll on daily life, were dampened or delayed.

The structural adjustment strategies launched in 1983 undermined precisely what had until then been the social and economic lifeblood of Nima: stable, low-skilled, waged employment for adult men. One constantly recurring and much-feared term summed up this change of perspective: 'redeployment'. To the worker it meant losing his post, having to learn a new trade and being cast from the position of wage-earner into the condition of a redundant person, hunting for work in a clogged-up labour market.²

The private sector did not compensate for the slow erosion of public sector employment – too slow according to the international financial institutions. In many cases, the subsequent second phase of Ghanaian adjustment – i.e. the accelerated privatization of publicly owned companies (Kambur 1994) – amounted to pure liquidation and cuts in the numbers of state sector employees.

A team of University of Ghana geographers, sketching a profile of population changes in Accra, classified Nima-Mamobi as a 'low income – old migrant residential area' (University of Ghana 1990). So Nima has found itself justifiably branded as a centre for labour migration and poverty. True enough, the vast majority of inhabitants are poor, but it does have a narrow band of residents (just under 10 per cent of the population) who are relatively well-off after having prospered from commerce, crafts, monetary speculation and real estate. What appears to have shaped Nima most profoundly and given it its patent originality is the (unevenly accomplished) passage from village to town, from 'zongo' to shanty town, from migrant to wage-earner.

Nima is unlikely ever again to be the accommodating place it once was for migrants. Its image as a prototype proletarian suburb is fading and the wage-earner is no longer the sole model of worker. Now superimposed on that is the spectacle of informal sector workers, female traders, child rag-and-bone merchants.

Meanwhile, Nima's history of in-migration, wage-earning classes and poverty provides an excellent backdrop for assessing the impact of 'redeployment' and its traumatic effects on the lives of households. Redeployment may not be the only critical factor to have sparked off domestic destabilization (even though a third of families and households have directly suffered its consequences over the past ten years), but it is both the symbol and the symptom of the decline which has seen Nima the proletarian melting pot become Nima the scrap-heap, where public policies simply dump whole generations of wage-earners.

The Household Crisis

Analysis here focuses on the crisis currently besetting the households of Nima after Ghana's decade of structural adjustment. It does not mean to say that all the factors contributing to this crisis stem directly from the adjustment policies themselves; simply that the liberalization process has permeated social relations and now seriously affects the ways in which households attempt to cope with the multiple hardships they are having to endure.

This present critical sequence seems marked by a double paradox. First of all it began just as domestic groups were starting to resemble family units more closely. The migrant had settled in Nima. The unmarried worker had founded a family: he had his wife or wives living with him; his children were born there. And the town's population was gradually settling into a certain normality. Yet becoming the head of a family meant greater responsibilities and, hence, a greater burden to bear, posing a threat to the relative stability of the family unit. Second, the town was just beginning to see the installation of previously lacking public utilities such as water and electricity. The shanty town was edging its way towards urbanization (Aboagye-Atta 1990). Yet the germs of modernization had a downside in these impoverished districts.

Responding to everyday needs and making life easier entails heavier costs. This double paradox reveals the link between the household crisis and financial constraints.

One of the fundamental factors here is the working man's loss of position as the family breadwinner, the protector, the cornerstone of the household. The case of the worker hit by 'redeployment' may appear extreme, even though it is an experience widely shared in Nima. Yet it is just one excessive manifestation of the erosion undermining the organization of most households. The term 'redeployee' has extended from referring to the public sector worker made redundant to embrace private sector employees hit by company restructuring. The term 'redeployment' suggests vocational retraining, a mapped-out passage from one type of activity to another, from the public to the private sector, from wage-earning class to the informal economy.

'Redeployment' has obviously had a less disastrous impact on people losing only one of two jobs or reaching retirement age. And the impact may also have been cushioned for those receiving generous severance pay linked to rank and long service.³ Mostly, though, restructuring has left the lower strata of the labouring classes in an impasse. Many exits remain sealed. They cannot face the shame of returning to their place of birth without outward (ostentatious) proof of success. Exile is out of the question because of their age and lack of qualifications. And waiting around for a hypothetical paid job to turn up in the private sector is simply draining. Some manage to find a way out: those who have acquired occupational skills (builders, plumbers, electricians, drivers, mechanics); or those who have established a strong support and solidarity network through their work or social circles. Yet these are the exceptions.

The most common path leads into decline. A redundant wage-earner is left without resources. He sees himself as an outcast and becomes withdrawn, isolated. When the protector becomes the protected and dependent upon his household, he will go absent. Waiting, aimlessness and idleness make him lose his bearings formerly instilled in him as a worker. Sometimes he will take the initiative of splitting the family unit and seeking a relative to take care of one or more of the children; he may send the younger ones back to the home village with his wife (or one of his wives). In other cases the man leaves the family and goes to live alone or with a friend, only returning for the odd brief visit, getting by on the occasional job or handout, existing on meagre resources while awaiting an opening on the waged labour market.

Women are often the ones who choose to leave, taking the rest of the family with them. Some decide to return home to their parents. Others take in a sister, relative, friend or even, if the marriage has ended, a protector, and eventual sexual partner, enabling the household to increase its working capacity and bring in more income. In some cases, unemployed men are marginalized in their own homes, becoming outcasts or, more rarely, being thrown out. Prospects are less grim for households whose women have previously managed

to build up a prospering business. They are then in a position to loan the man a sum of money to start up a business of his own. An already well-established relative may take him on as a casual assistant, use his services or help him open a small business. This narrows the otherwise materially and psychologically impossible gap he has to cross between regulated, stable, waged work and insecure, fluctuating work in the informal sector. In any event, the redeployee most commonly experiences a depreciation of his position within a household over which he once had total or shared responsibility, as well as the loss of his role as guarantor and protector. Then, in subsequent efforts to cobble the household back together again, the woman will play the prime role in mustering working capacities and resources.

This erosion of the man's social and economic role – rendered extreme by the experience of redeployment – is most widespread among the poorest families, even those not suffering the direct impact of lost earnings or whose family head is engaged in unwaged work. The income generated by the men is rarely enough to satisfy the daily needs of the family and home,⁴ so women's work is first necessary and then vital as a growing share of daily consumption progressively comes to depend upon it. Women's work thus takes a central position in the organization of relations within the remodelled household group, but, as it becomes more widespread, it encounters some of the same constraints as male labour. Most households feel that their condition is deteriorating and financial pressures are growing increasingly burdensome. A series of particularly heavy expenses are perceived as playing a decisive role in that deterioration.

First of all there are the expenses linked to the home. Only 10 per cent of families are actually home-owners. The majority (70 per cent) are tenants. This proportion is growing as a share of the 20 per cent who claim to have been living rent-free ten years ago become tenants. Demand for housing is on the increase but little land remains for building new homes and public works projects such as the Nima Highway or Kanda Road have reduced the amount of inhabitable space available. To add to that, soaring rents in other parts of Accra are driving ever larger numbers of young, single people into Nima in search of cheaper accommodation.

Then there is the pressure exerted by the tax department. Taxation has become tougher over the last decade and now targets even the smallest-scale informal trading activity. Income tax is deducted straight from wages. And for unwaged labour, the tax department sets a lump sum amount according to the activity, payable at relatively short, regular intervals. Furthermore, the Accra Municipal Assembly (AMA) collects local taxes daily from the market-places, streets and in city districts. As soon as tax collectors spot an informal activity, it is tolerated as long as it is registered, which will mean levies and various forms of extortion.

Another burden is education. There are several contributing factors here. First of all, Accra parents are keener these days to send their children to

school. Far from waning, its attraction is ever stronger. But school education does not come cheap and the education system reforms initiated in 1986 have served only to push the costs even higher. Many regard the school fees parents have to pay every quarter as the chief obstacle preventing children from being sent to and kept at school. School fees vary greatly depending on the school and grades. On average, they range from between 10,000 and 30,000 Cedi per quarter. Added to that, however, are the related expenses: purchasing a school uniform (around C 10,000), exercise books, textbooks, stationery as well as the child's daily travel expenses (C 100–C 150) and food (C 100–C 200). This means an accumulation of costs – some periodic, others daily – multiplied by the number of children (most Nima women have an average of six children to raise). Professional apprenticeship gives rise to even greater difficulties. Parents or tutors face an entrance fee of C 30,000 to C 120,000, plus a range of customary gifts. The same sum will be demanded as an 'exit fee' at the end of the course. The child also needs to buy his or her basic tools or instruments. An apprentice in the garments trade, for instance, has to own a sewing machine. A new one can cost anything from C 60,000 to C 130,000, and that is for a manually-operated machine. Second-hand, they sell for 10–30 per cent less. Apart from that, there are the same sundry outlays on daily necessities, travel and food as with school pupils.

Travel costs also add to the strain on the household budget. When Nima was still isolated from the rest of Accra, working men used to walk to work and back. Most still do. However, the women with business interests outside Nima have no choice but to take the minibus (or '*trotro*'), which usually means spending between C 200 and C 400 a day.

Less predictable are the healthcare costs. Disease, especially malaria, is common in environments as insalubrious as that of Nima (Larbi 1989). Medicine for a normal bout comes to around C 1000. A more serious attack will require a hospital visit (C 1500 a time) plus more costly treatment (C 4000 to C 5000). Alternatively there is the option of a herbalist (around C 800). Special attention will be paid to children's health. Routine visits, compulsory tests, infant vaccinations will entail monthly outlays to the tune of C 500. A serious illness calling for hospitalization or even surgery amounts to a real domestic disaster, forcing the household to raise a large sum of outside money.

New needs emerge when people settle in an urban environment. The men take up smoking and gambling. These needs, exacerbated by the wave of liberalization and the temptation of imported consumer goods – more popular, say seniors, among the younger generations – generate much spending, especially on leisure-time activities. This goes hand in hand with the phenomenon of individualization with regard to income, expenditure and consumption. The woman earning her own income is expected to take care of most everyday expenses such as food and clothing. And the man, while

paying occasional bills (rent, school fees), has come to play a supporting role in the household's daily expenses for which the woman is now responsible. The latter's absence during the day means costly individualized food consumption whereby each individual buys his or her own portion, while evening meals are by and large prepared for the whole group.

Coping with this financial adversity pushes people to opt for a combination of various solutions. Working men attempt to diversify their income sources, either through a second job (doing piecework in their spare time, chiefly at weekends) or by seeking to make extra earnings from their main job (bonuses, fiddles). Some may be forced into debt, although borrowing is becoming harder and more expensive in Nima. Alternatively, more and more of them are sending their women out to work. They encourage them to do so largely by procuring the capital to help them start up and run a small business. Female labour is no longer confined to run-of-the-mill vending at market or on the streets; it is becoming diversified, specialized, professionalized.

Female labour, though, is subject to a number of limitations: taxes, harassment of vendors on roadsides or along railway tracks, rental costs for an authorized fixed sales point, stall, shelter or shop. Other constraints tie in with their child-bearing role and routine domestic responsibilities. Faced with the greater competition and shrinking markets of Nima, women are driven to sales points ever further afield, thus incurring heavier travel expenses and longer hours outside the home. Meanwhile they have to contend with an even more fundamental problem: shortage of capital which steadily dwindles due to the daily costs of consumption. In organizing their time and work, working women soon come to depend on their daughters either to take care of a large share of domestic chores or to help them with their businesses.

Gradually, domestic poverty-line economics become the norm. Food consumption is first to be rationed: there is less to eat, of a lower quality. Social interaction then suffers as the sharing of food and drink is restricted to ever tighter circles, as if it were some sort of clandestine activity. Next come cuts in spending on the home and adult healthcare. Financial hardship eventually leads to one or more children being removed from school, which may in turn incite parents to place their children in the keeping of a relative in Accra or the home village, or else, more rarely, to work as an assistant to a friend or acquaintance.

One crucial aspect of such poverty-line economics is that the struggling household will mobilize all able-bodied members in order to generate extra income. The most common symptom of this in Nima today is child labour.

Domestic Deregulation and Putting Children to Work

There are two hybrid, intermediary situations between children's domestic work on the one hand and child labour on the other. The first is that of schoolchildren, especially young girls, involved in part-time retail sales. It is

often an extension of their mother's, maternal aunt's or elder sister's work as hawkers or vendors in the marketplace or streets, in order to raise more money for the housekeeping or to contribute towards school fees. Rather than pushing children away from the home environment, it gives them an active role helping the household contend with its financial difficulties. Their work is sporadic and encourages them to take partial charge of building themselves a future. It is nothing like putting a child prematurely to work as a domestic servant in another person's house.

The second situation is where elderly relatives (for the most part grandparents) ask for a child to be sent to stay with them, often in rural areas, to assist them around the house or in the fields. Although it may help to consolidate family ties and relations by marriage while establishing the child's place in the family network, it also plays a role in the splitting of the family unit. Once again, though, there is no question here of their being *put to work* in the strictest sense of the term.

Having said that, the best-known forms of child labour are a manifestation of the household crisis. Some children may of course decide to look for work of their own accord: to escape a restrictive school education system or conflict in the home; or else, in more exceptional cases, with a very precise, personal career plan in mind. They may take the decision without their parents' prior knowledge, against their will; and it involves a variable degree of distancing, or breaking away, from the family unit. Such cases are extremely rare, though. Most children admit to having been driven to become child workers because they absolutely had to earn enough to provide for both their own needs and, more generally, to diversify the household's sources of income.

More often than not, the parents encourage and broker the admission into the world of work. A father or his brother might arrange and pay for an apprenticeship, standing surety with an employer. Or else he may place his child with a relative, friend or acquaintance to work as a servant or assistant until times change for the better. But the women are the ones who play the key role in putting young children to work. This generally applies first to the girls, as they are easier to remove from school than boys. Young girls are frequently left in charge of the day-to-day running of the household while their mothers are out at work. They are more systematically and consistently drawn into a money-making activity where they increase the labour power of their mothers or female relatives, usually in petty retailing or street vending. As a rule, girls are kept close to the household, within its protection. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to find themselves in a work environment separated from the home. The woman's action and influence are once again decisive factors in their admission to employment. As soon as a boy leaves school, she will watch over him, often putting up the capital he needs to start a lucrative business of his own. Children's earnings help to boost the housekeeping; the money is regularly handed over to the

woman who then decides how it will be used and distributed once she has deducted the child's daily expenses (transport, food) and the amount needing to be put back into the business.

The household's role in the mechanics of premature employment is not to be ignored. First of all it shows how a share of economic exploitation is rooted in, if not initiated by, the household. And the fact that a child enters employment via family channels ultimately ends up lending a domestic feel to working relations, giving them a veneer of kinship. An employer can then adopt a pseudo-parental role on the grounds that his authority comes from the parents, from the child's own home environment. The domestication of working relations and the ways in which it is used serve as a mask for exploitation.

Analysis of 'working environments' reveals the complicated, varied and shifting relationship between working environment and home environment and between family relations and exploitation-based relations. From this point of view, a number of major sets of working environment can be differentiated.

The first corresponds to that which has strong connections with the household. These chiefly include:

- the residence, when an adult member of the household uses it as a work base for sales, repairs, processing or services and the child helps with the work itself or, more commonly, concentrates on selling the goods outside
- the point of sales in the retailing trade
- the route in street vending

In this set, the children (mostly small girls) work together with other members of the household, which continues to provide them with their moorings and their main bearings.

A second set suggests clearer divisions between the household and working life. It chiefly includes:

- shops, hairdressing salons
- workshops (clothing, repairs, garages)
- chop bars
- apprenticeships

In the majority of these cases, a family member plays a fundamental role in a child's recruitment or apprenticeship. These environments in particular are where working and exploitation-based relationships are contrived to appear domestic.

Another set also making use of domestication and featuring a clean break from the household is represented by what we call 'factories' and 'building sites'. Large numbers of children can be found working in such places: forty at a furniture factory, sixty at an industrial bakery. In both cases, the employer will have hired them in his home town or neighbouring villages, with their parents' consent. They live full-time on the premises and can therefore be

made to work nights if need be. They may spend five to seven years at the factory before the employer decides to send them back home. Although temporary, for the time they are there they are totally cut off from the home environment.

Yet another set is comprised of the working environments created away from and independently of the household, where the networks of connections leading to recruitment are based not on kinship but on acquaintanceship, social relations, affinities, peer groups. The relationship between older and younger children plays an important role here, provided it falls within that narrow age group where childhood is blending into adolescence. Each environment has its own hierarchy, its own rules, code of conduct, forms of protection and social interaction. They are largely male-dominated and chiefly include:

- the queue: attracting hordes of child street vendors on the busiest thoroughfares
- the team: a specialized working environment with strong affinities and children monopolizing recruitment
- the gang: the *kaya kaya* (porters), for instance, living full time in certain marketplaces
- vagrancy: totally autonomous children of no fixed abode, with no ties
- exile: especially the girls who migrate to the Ivory Coast and Nigeria, often totally losing touch with their families

Far from always resolving the household crisis, the vast range of child labour seen in the above-listed working environments can, in some extreme cases, even serve to deepen it. Far from offsetting domestic deregulation, child labour can actually fuel it.

‘Ruthlessly Serviceable’: A Generalized System of Supply and Demand

Whenever the issue of child labour crops up in Ghana, it is instantly plastered with images of street children. Yet the street child is merely the visible side of a more far-reaching phenomenon. There are other, more common, more excessive forms of exploitation. Those linked to apprenticeships are well known. Those at the core of the household crisis are more difficult to recognize. Some working environments (the factory, building site, gang) are purely and simply ignored. At this stage of our analysis, however, perhaps we should look beyond the notion of the ‘domestication’ of exploitative relations as it contaminates only one segment of the spectrum of working environments. Let us also describe two complementary yet possibly more crucial aspects of the working relationship and its conversion into exploitation: the dialectics of good-will and willingness; ‘serviceability’, the state of being ‘ruthlessly serviceable’.

The exploitative relationship builds within a constant tension between two poles: good-will and willingness. The dialectics between the two are, of course, rooted in and cultivated by the domestication of the working relationship. They demonstrate the asymmetry between the position of the master and the condition of the working child. The master's good-will gives him the power to do what he will. His desires, his needs and moods govern the wages, set the working hours, assign the tasks and influence the quality of the relationship. Willingness means the availability, the obedience expected of a child. Vulnerable children seeking protection and support see themselves bound over to remain meek, ever-present, ever-willing. Their labour power is malleable, flexible. This polarization of good-will and willingness is both line of force and field of live current. Although rarely breaking into open confrontation, the children have several forms of resistance, evasion and retaliation simmering below the surface.

An inventory of the types of work being done by children reveals it to be highly concentrated in the services sector. And even when it is a matter of production work, the form of working relationship will disguise them as services. As such, we therefore see a sort of slide from the legal to the prohibited, from the licit to the illicit, more commonly from one job to another. One job can cover another, can lead to another. There is nothing to prevent the employer from shifting the boundaries of the required work as he sees fit. But this extension to the demands stemming from the good-will of the master or client may be echoed in a greater willingness to serve; a good-will and a willingness whose limits are established neither by contract nor by job description. For instance, an apprentice may sometimes be required to satisfy other demands, perform other tasks or services than originally agreed (household chores or prostitution for girls; building-site labouring for boys). Child labour puts children in the position of general service suppliers. With the small groups of *kaya kayas* living in the marketplaces, for example, supply and demand of general services can range from carrying parcels to sexual intercourse. Sometimes the same sort of crossover can be observed in certain hairdressing salons, sewing shops or, more commonly, in the chop bars.

Child workers 'enter service' – formerly a term applying to domestic servants – and become dependent and available. It may be tempting to describe it as 'servile labour'. But 'servile' has the drawback of being too directly linked to the state of slavery and serfdom. So we have chosen to use 'serviceability' as a means of describing a personal, transitory condition of dependence and submissiveness which in many cases forces children into a generalized system of service supply and demand.

It can therefore be said that the children prematurely sucked into working and exploitative relations are fated to become 'ruthlessly serviceable'. Such is their lot.

Conclusion

Two brief comments to conclude this analysis. The first concerns making children subservient or autonomous; the second, how they see the future.

Children sent to work for the sake of their much-needed earnings are placed in the position of household protectors, breadwinners. They are primarily cast in the role – lessening the effects of the domestic poverty-line economy – by the women, their mothers in particular. Now that they are partially responsible for the reproduction and survival of the household, their bonds with their mothers are deeper. At the same time, the children made to work in an environment away from home are likely to take their distance and gain a more often than not illusory autonomy.

Entrepreneurs without an enterprise, proletarians without wages and, 'ruthlessly serviceable', all Nima boys harbour the same dream for the future: exile.

Notes

1. The fieldwork was undertaken in collaboration with Bugri Nachinaba, senior research assistant at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

2. One analysis of employment fluctuations in Ghana which includes companies employing ten or more wage-earners gives an idea of the scale of the collapse of the wage-earning classes affecting Nima today (source: Ghana Statistical Service). In 1960, a total of 332,900 wage-earners were found to be working across the board in all sectors of activity. The figures peaked in 1979 at 482,100. They then began to slide in 1986, dropping to 166,300 by 1991. During the decade of adjustment, the industrial sector crumbled with the exception of ore extraction. Waged employment in the services sector was no stop-gap. Public sector employment figures stood at 184,300 in 1960. They peaked at 359,300 in 1978 and began to slide in 1986, falling to 155,700 by 1991. The decline began earlier in the private sector: in 1960, employee figures stood at 148,500, then fell and languished before climbing back to 143,900 by 1977. By 1991, they had plummeted to 30,600.

3. 'Redeployees' receive severance pay whose amount depends on length of service at the establishment, qualifications, grade, the establishment's status and specific collective redundancy plans. They also receive a lump sum payment to cover travelling expenses for themselves and their families. This settlement – large or small, depending on the case – may well be paid some time, often several months, after dismissal and in instalments, thus considerably reducing its incentive power. It is supposed to provide for a range of options: unemployed people can either move back to their home villages, invest it as start-up capital in a retailing or services business, or even use it to pay for technical training to improve their bargaining power on a troubled labour market.

4. In November 1994, the statutory minimum daily wage in the public sector stood at 790 Cedi, the national currency of Ghana. It was then raised to 1200 Cedi in January 1995 (at which time US\$ 1 = C 1080 on the foreign exchange market).

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