



Adolescent girls at the intersection of poverty, migration, and gender

The [International Labor Organization](#) estimates that, globally, 9.6% of children aged 5–17 years are child labourers, and that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of child labour (24%) compared with other regions in the world. The International Labor Organization draws attention to [migrant child labourers](#) as an under-reported and highly vulnerable group, a substantial proportion of whom are girls with no formal education. Unaccompanied child migration and child labour are intricately related, as many unaccompanied migrant children need to work to financially survive.¹ Therefore, unaccompanied child migration often results in hazardous child labour and leads to several disproportionate risks.¹

Specifically, unaccompanied child migration for labour creates a pathway to heightened vulnerability and risk, as unaccompanied child migrants are more vulnerable to negative outcomes during and after migration (eg, sexual exploitation, trafficking, involuntary homelessness, physical maltreatment, poorer physical and mental health, and higher risk for harmful drug misuse). These outcomes are due to adverse working and living conditions, an absence of community relations and parental oversight, heightened disenfranchisement, and an absence of identity documentation, with unaccompanied child migrants also being less likely to return to education.²

Both girls and boys are at risk of experiencing these negative outcomes when migrating for labour, but girls are more likely than boys to experience trafficking and sexual exploitation due to societal gender norms that both devalue and underserve girls. Girls who migrate for labour purposes are furthermore at increased risk of poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes, including unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV.²

Poverty across sub-Saharan Africa leads to unaccompanied rural–urban child migration and drives the high incidence of child labour, with familial background also being a key contributing factor.² Child maltreatment and abuse, including physical and sexual violence, forced marriage, and traditional gender roles enforced within the family, put girls at a disadvantage.²



[Ghana](#) is one example in sub-Saharan Africa where child labour prevalence is high at 22%, including unaccompanied child migrants engaged in labour. In Ghana, increasing numbers of unaccompanied girls migrate from regions in the north to urban centres in the south to work in the informal economy, which is a sector that is neither monitored nor protected by any governing body.^{3,4}

Family commitment to girls' education is often undermined in the face of low financial resources, and school attendance and graduation are rarely emphasised for girls due to traditional gender norms.^{3,4} Only 34% of girls complete upper secondary [education in Ghana](#), with even lower completion rates in the more rural and lower-income northern regions where adolescent girls mostly migrate from.

Education is an essential means to acquire human capital to lift an individual or a family from poverty.⁵ Yet, children's engagement in labour constitutes a substantial threat to their education, hindering their chance to break the cycle of poverty.⁵ This is even more crucial for girls, as staying in formal education delays marriage, increases their chances to enter the paid labour market, and improves health outcomes for women and girls and their children if they become mothers, with lower infant mortality and better child nutrition. Without education opportunities, adolescent girls aged 10–17 years living in poverty increasingly make up the majority of the north–south migrants in Ghana, mainly working as head load carriers (kayayei),^{3,4} which is a hazardous but attractive job for poor girls who have discontinued their education. Head load carrying requires no capital investment, and adolescent girls have the opportunity to immediately earn small amounts of money.^{3,4}

Adolescent girls working as kayayei list push factors including poverty, family, and education-related expenses as key drivers for their unaccompanied migration to big cities.^{3,4} Many of these girls do not have safe places to sleep at night and are compelled to sleep on the streets, on verandas, or in unfinished structures. The conditions under which they work and live expose them to several risks, including involuntary sex work, rape, and unwanted pregnancies.⁴ Despite the risks and negative outcomes, few interventions have focused on reducing unaccompanied child migration and, to our knowledge, none have focused on the adolescent girls who are most susceptible to this high-risk situation. Recent child welfare efforts in Ghana have focused on addressing child trafficking and forced labour, and on strengthening policies and monitoring systems for children specifically working in the cocoa sector.

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These programmes are critically important but have substantial limitations, as they tend to target one aspect of the problem and do not address the immediate needs of the families that lead to unaccompanied migration. The interconnected nature of risk factors that lead to the unaccompanied migration of adolescent girls for work in cities requires a comprehensive approach to prevention efforts,³ including a combination of interventions to achieve greater impact. Evidence-based and theory-informed interventions that can simultaneously address household financial stability and family context as risk factors hold promise. For instance, family economic empowerment interventions that comprise of financial literacy training, income-generating activities for the family, or child savings accounts might alleviate household financial instability. These economic empowerment interventions can be combined with family strengthening interventions to improve family dynamics and address gender-specific norms that might undermine adolescent girls' developmental trajectories.

Furthermore, strategies to improve the retention of adolescent girls in school can be developed in collaboration with schools and families. Preventing unaccompanied migration of adolescent girls for labour is achievable but requires a coordinated and sustained multisectorial commitment. Hence, we call on national and local leaders, policy makers, researchers, and community stakeholders to work together to develop and implement evidence-informed and theory-informed programming for vulnerable adolescent girls.

We declare no competing interests.

*Ozge Sensoy Bahar, Alice Boateng, Abdallah Ibrahim,
Mary M McKay, Fred M Ssewamala
ozge.sensoybahar@wustl.edu

Brown School (OSB, FMS) and Provost Office (MMK),
Washington University in St Louis, St Louis, MO 63130,
USA; Department of Social Work (AB) and School of Public
Health (AI), University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

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