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Parental perceptions of child labour and human rights: A comparative study of rural and urban Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Considering the inherently hazardous nature of some artisanal fishing and farm work in Ghana, there is sometimes a thin line between what is considered child work and child labour. I drew on literature exploring cultural relativism and human rights and the concept of the margin of appreciation in considering whether child labour violates human rights. I aimed to establish parental perceptions of child labour and human rights in rural and urban Ghana amongst 60 government officials, NGO representatives, and both parents whose children were/were not involved in child labour. The average age of participants was 31 years. Semistructured interviews were conducted with parents (10), stakeholders (10), focus groups (30); and participant observation techniques (10) utilised to gather the needed data and purposively sampled across rural areas (Ankaase, Anwiankwanta and Kensere), and urban areas (Jamestown, Korle Gonno and Chorkor) in Ghana. Interviews were recorded, transcribed utilising a framework approach as the main data analysis method. The paper finds that children are engaged in work to teach them work ethics as most parents consider work socialisation as beneficial for children and society. The paper also finds that knowledge of human rights makes parents more committed to children's welfare. Overall, the paper finds that sensitivity to the economic and cultural context is important in understanding the issue of child labour and, more generally, in applying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and working out the parenting policies and practices that are in the best interests of the child.

1. Introduction

In view of the inherently hazardous nature of some artisanal fishing and farm work in Ghana, there is sometimes a thin line between what is child work and child labour. In practice, it may be difficult to distinguish between “child work” and “child labour” (UNICEF, 2003). The distinction differs from nation to nation and among sectors within nations. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) draws a distinction between child labour and child work in line with the child's age, intensity of work and the nature of industry in which the child is engaged (Das & Mukherjee, 2011). In defining child labour, ILO has instituted a 14 h per week cut-off point for light work for 10 years upwards (ILO/IPEC/SIMPOC, 2002). Child labour constitutes all tasks performed by children that are hazardous to their health and development. Hence, “child labour” as defined by ILO comprises all children between 5–9 years of age engaged in economic activities and older children between 10–14 years who engage in economic activities for more than 14 h per week. On the other hand, ILO defines child work as all productive activities carried out by children lasting up to 1-hour duration per day. A more generic idea of child work can either be performed in the family enterprise or common market; remunerated or non-remunerated; part-time or full-time (Fyfe, 1989). Child work may be carried out on a casual or regular basis as well as in the formal or

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informal sector. Child work does not include domestic work performed by children since these are non-productive activities. This generic definition admits that many children engage in legitimate work, remunerated or non-remunerated, that is suitable for their age and stage of maturity. What this means is that child work performed by children aged 10–14 is not hazardous in nature and does not exceed 14 h per week. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has renewed its commitment to eradicating all forms of child labour by 2025 (ILO, 2017). This is because the international community views both child labour and child work as serious problems. However, many scholars are not quite sure whether child labour is always an abuse particularly when it is put in the same category of other forms of physical abuse in the world today (Sharp, 1996). School enrolment is a key explanatory element of child labour being viewed as children's rights violation. Nevertheless, there is fluidity in the interaction between child labour and school enrolment to a certain degree as some children combine work with schooling (Adonteng-Kissi, 2018).

“Work socialisation” is considered a normal part of life in the Ghanaian context where small families depend on all members to contribute labour for family upkeep. Children are engaged in carrying out household chores, fishing, maintaining livestock and other activities. This accepted practice has been in existence for generations and children aged 5–17 years old form an essential part of the labour force. Many Ghanaians see this as contributing positively to the overall development of children as they acquire essential skills: they learn to work, cooperate with others, become contributing citizens, and help build communities and societies. The development of the child is grounded on interactions with others, and is moulded particularly by the child's parents. This paper examines how parents in rural and urban Ghana understand the relationship between child labour and human rights. Examining parents' perceptions of child labour and human rights is an important topic of study, since parents play a crucial role in the development of the child, and parents largely determine whether a given child will be engaged in work, and what kind of work that child will perform (Bowlby, 2008).

The justification for comparison between rural and urban areas was underpinned by the fact that both areas provide interesting contexts for exploring human rights and child labour in terms of parental perceptions. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana introduced special provisions intended to guarantee the rights of children as a unique group. This included an expansive set of rights designed to foster children's welfare and development. These constitutional provisions impose obligations on Parliament to legislate to safeguard the welfare and development of children. The legal regime on the protection of children was consolidated in 1998 through the passage of the Children's Act (Act 560) 1998 (Twum-Danso, 2009). Ghana reached another major milestone in the protection of children's rights on 5 December 2005, when legislation was passed to outlaw human trafficking within, to, from, and through Ghana (“Human Trafficking Act 694, 2005”). Despite the passage of new laws and policies to curb child labour, parents still engage their children in work. The demands on children to support family income in both rural and urban Ghana are such that a projected 21.8% of 5–17 year-olds are engaged in economic activities (GSS, 2014). Children involved in economic activities comprise 22.7% of boys and 20.8% of girls in rural and urban Ghana and the percentage of urban children in child labour was 12.4% compared to 30.2% of children in rural areas (GSS, 2014). Hence, it is critical to answer the research question below:

1.1. Do parents in rural and urban communities in Ghana view child labour as a violation of human rights?

This research question is critical in directing the analysis of the study owing to the need to develop a scientific understanding of “parental perceptions of child labour and human rights” and formulate policies and programmes to prevent child abuse. The study reveals the following: Children are engaged in work as part of socialisation. In the rural areas, most of the parents who engage children in hazardous work are parents who are deeply rooted in their culture. In the urban areas on the other hand, most of the parents who put children in hazardous work are those parents who are extremely poor. Additionally, most of the children engaged in child labour in the rural areas, do so on family farms. In contrast, most children involved in child labour in the urban areas do so as hired labourers engaged in artisanal fishing. Furthermore, most children in the rural areas combine schooling and work. However, most children engaged in child labour in the urban areas are not in school. There are limits to the nature and amount of work that children should be expected to perform since some tasks by children are clearly hazardous to their health. The general population has appreciable level of knowledge of human rights in both areas under study because of the proliferation of the electronic and print media. There are differences between the local and international (western) understandings of the relationship between human rights and child labour. Furthermore, participants suggest that parental perceptions of child labour and human rights should be considered from a cultural and economic point of view.

The paper is presented in 7 sections, and sets out to explore parental perceptions of human rights and child labour. In the first section, the aim and research question driving the paper are introduced. Section 2 discusses cultural relativism and human rights, and the concept of the margin of appreciation. Section 3 presents the concept of cultural politics of childhood, which provides a conceptual framework for the paper. Section 4 presents the methods and research design of the study, detailing what was done, how it was done, and why it was done and describes the study context. Section 5 presents the main findings that emerged from the study. Section 6 discusses the findings of the study. This paper is concluded in Section 7. Here, the research is assessed for what it has revealed about parental perceptions of human rights and child labour.

2. Cultural relativism and human rights

Cultural relativism is the “recognition that societies differ in their cultural attitudes towards social phenomena and therefore no universal criteria can be applied to compare one cultural view with another” (James & James, 2012, p. 35). In addition, cultural relativism means that our understandings of rights evolve; they are vibrant and dynamic rather than fixed for all time (Pityana, 2002). Some scholars of cultural relativism are against accounts of human rights that they believe are built on Western ideas

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