

**Tensions and Controversies Regarding Child Labor in Small-Scale Gold Mining in
Ghana**

Osei-Tutu Jonah

Department of Education and Lifelong Learning

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Email: otjinfo@gmail.com

Dr. Tatek Abebe (Corresponding author)

Department of Education and Lifelong Learning

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

N-7491 Trondheim

NORWAY

Tel 004773596247

Email: tatek.abebe@ntnu.no

Abstract

The recent resurgence in small-scale mining in Ghana has coincided with falling enrolments in schools, leading to public concerns about the participation of children and young people in mining work. The engagement of children and young people in gold mining is also perceived to diminish efforts to improve education, inviting abolitionist actions from the government. This has created tension between government and its functionaries on one hand and young workers and their families on the other. Drawing on qualitative research, this article explores controversies around young people's involvement in small-scale mining and governments' efforts to curtail it in Amansie West District, Ghana. We discuss the tensions between securing individual/household livelihoods and societal interest in reducing child labor. The study findings underscore not only the importance of work in the lives of young workers and their households but also its positive implications for educational pursuits as well as for future livelihood prospects. Whereas the abolitionist framework emphasizes children's right to education, it fails to acknowledge that the income generated through work makes schooling possible for most children. We conclude that policies rooted in global ideologies of work-free childhoods are at odds with prevailing socio-cultural and economic realities.

Keywords: Child labor, education, small-scale mining, abolition, work-free childhood, poverty, Ghana

1. Introduction

Ghana has various natural resources, most notably gold. Gold mining offers important income generating opportunities for Ghana's rural populations, and is source of national revenue. According to a recent study, nearly one-third of Ghana's gold is mined in artisanal and small-scale mines, and exported at a trade value well above US\$1 billion per year (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Small-scale gold mines operate informally with simple machinery, small investment, and a large workforce including the labor of young people (ibid). In the Amansie West District of Ghana where fieldwork for this study was carried out, the majority of the people engaged in small-scale gold mining are illiterate or semi-literate (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014). Some miners introduce their school aged children to mining, while other children and young people join the mining activities independently.

Ghana adopted free and compulsory basic education as well as Education For All (EFA) in 1961 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013, p.116), and governments have paid much attention to increasing children's enrolment in schools and sustaining attendance and academic performance. Ghana also continues to make efforts to promote and protect the rights and welfare of children. Fulfilling Article 25 (subsection "a") of the 1992 constitution that "basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all," Ghana introduced the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) in 2005. This policy, which gave birth to the Capitation Grant, was meant to abolish school fees. Yet, Ghana's success story in school enrolment following the introduction of the FCUBE, Capitation Grant, and school feeding programs during the past decade may have been countered by high drop-out rates (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014). Low rates of transition to higher level of education, especially to the junior high school (JHS) and senior high school (SHS), is bemoaned as requiring attention.

Over the past two decades, concerns over falling standards of education have come to the forefront of public discussion. This has coincided with the intensification of small-scale gold mining activities across the country. With growing child labor in Ghana, children's participation in mining activities has been described as "alarming." While some point to the low quality of trained teachers, others think student absenteeism is the main issue (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014). Small-scale gold mining is seen as keeping children out of classrooms—especially in the Amansie West District where such activities are widespread.

Notwithstanding the significant role small-scale gold mining activities plays for household livelihoods, it is believed to have an adverse effect on children's education and the Ghanaian government believes its efforts to improve education and its international reputation are futile if children continue to engage in gold mining (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014). This situation has created tension between young miners and their families on the one hand and, on the other, NGOs and government functionaries—such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Ghana Education Service, District assemblies in mining areas, and the Department of social welfare.

On 17th September 2014, the then Ashanti Regional Minister (Hon. Samuel Sarpong), said "the growing drift of school children from classrooms to undertake small-scale mining in the Amansie West District ... is deeply disturbing" (Ghana News Agency, 2014)¹. This has called for abolitionist policies. Yet more often than not economic activities in contexts of poverty and material deprivation include those that outsiders—local government institutions and international NGOs—may consider "hazardous," "alarming," and "worrying." Little is

¹<http://www.ghananewsagency.org/human-interest/children-abandon-classrooms-to-engage-in-mining--79888>

known about why children are involved in small-scale gold mining activities and what the implications of abolitionism might be for them.

This article explores how national policies linked to the abolition of child labor in gold mining generate tensions and controversies in Amansie West District, Ghana. We discuss how ideals of work-free childhood are received in local communities and in whose interest the state's abolitionist approach serves. Whereas we support children's work, we stress that condemnations of child labor are tied to ideologies of childhood that are increasingly driven by global and local welfare and educational institutions. We argue that the definition of a "child" as "any human being below 18 years of age" not only misses out cultural understandings of children's responsibilities but also infantilizes young people's capacities. Moreover, abolition of children's mining work based on arbitrary age may be neither feasible nor favorable in view of the critical role of the work in their lives, including to attending school. We suggest a need for context-specific approaches to global concerns regarding the well-being of young miners and their households.

In this article the terms "children" and "young workers" are used interchangeably because, although all the participants are between 14 and 17 years of age and are legally defined as "children," during fieldwork they pointed out that they are neither "child workers" nor mere dependents on their households. Instead, they like to be regarded as "young persons" who contribute to their families and communities. As this article demonstrates, the conflation of young people's involvement in small-scale mining as "child labor" that requires abolition reflects the tension between global definitions childhood on the one hand and, on the other, local cultural constructions of children as well as children's own accounts on their realities.

The article is structured as follows. First a review of recent debates on the intersection between childhood, work, and school is presented. Second, we discuss how children's labor is regulated by international legislations that have been implemented in Ghana. Then, a brief presentation of the methodological approaches is offered, followed by an exploration of the reasons for children's mining work. Stakeholders' (government workers, teachers, parents) perspectives on the abolition of children's mining work and the effects of abolition on young miners' livelihoods are analyzed. The final section engages with policy implications of the voices of children and reflects on how uncritical importation of international laws and agreements create controversy and challenge in the rural Ghanaian context.

2. Childhood, Work, and Education

Global perspectives on children's work and education are underpinned by the assumption that school is the best avenue for their future (Bourdillon, 2015) and that work is an obstacle to this, which should be avoided in childhood. Economic gain is seen as belonging to adults—not children, who are seen as future adults (Abebe & Bessell, 2011).

Global actors including ILO and the World Bank tend to condemn the idea of “work and school,” arguing that “for those who combine work and school, their educational achievement will suffer” (ILO, 2006, p. 5). ILO suggests that “there is a strong tendency for children who combine work and school to drop out of school to go into fulltime employment” (ILO, as cited in Maconachie & Hilson, 2016, p.139). The World Bank describes the working conditions of African children arguing that although “rural school children tend to combine school and work, wage labour. . .is more difficult to combine with school” (Andvig, Canagarajah, & Kielland, as cited in Maconachie & Hilson, 2016, p.139). These views

suggest that the consensus by global actors about what children should do during childhood is “school first and work second.” Yet, such view may not necessary capture the lived experiences of young workers and preclude the notion that work and schooling can be a means for both the development of children and access or further formal education.

There is a limited but growing body of research about the ways in which work serves the interest of, at least, certain categories of working children, contributing to their development and well-being (Admassie, 2003; Ampomah & Gyan, 2014; Spittler and Bourdillon 2012; Okyere, 2014; Bourdillon, 2015; Maconachie & Hilson, 2016). In particular, geographers have drawn attention to the core economic gains of child work, which translates into other benefits including securing autonomy and strengthening their position in the family (Robson 2004, Abebe 2016, Abebe and Waters 2017). They argue that children learn skills and lessons that are rarely available through formal schooling (Bourdillon, 2015)—skills that become instrumental in their future lives. In addition, although certain forms of work hinder schooling, there is growing evidence on not only how children reconcile work and school but also how this can be beneficiary (e.g., Emerson & Souza, 2007; Maconachie & Hilson, 2016, Bourdillon, Levison, Myers, & Spittler and Bourdillon 2012; White, 2010; Okyere, 2012; 2014). Yet, these benefits challenge global policy and associated abolitionist tendencies that draw on ideologies of work-free childhood (Abebe & Bessell 2011).

In rural Ghana, work is an essential part of children’s upbringing. It is a belief that a good child is one who contributes. Boys and girls are expected to perform tasks relative to their age and gender, and children who do not assume those responsibilities are considered lazy, spoiled, or a burden. Yet, national policy is increasingly rooted in a view of children’s work as “child labor” and “inappropriate” because those works are money-driven, which is

considered an adult arena (Abebe & Bessell, 2011). In addition, children's acquisition of knowledge through formal schooling—not work—is seen as their primary responsibility and contribution to society (Bourdillon, 2015).

One key concern is the definition of a “child” based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)—that increasingly shape Ghanaian laws. As this article demonstrates, the global definition of childhood based on biological age of below 18 years is not only culturally insensitive but also homogenizes and infantilizes young people's diverse experiences and capacities. In addition, international labor standards that are meant to control or reduce children's participation in productive labor may worsen their plight—for example, children may start working in concealed environments where working conditions are worse and where pay is lower (O'Neill 2013). Recent years saw working children's movements who demand the right to work and to receive pay appropriate to their labor. This, Liebel (2013) asserts, is the right of individual children to “decide whether, where, how and for how long they would like to work” (p.225), which has the tendency “to broaden children's scope for decision-making and to strengthen their social roles as acting subjects” (p.226).

Abebe and Bessell (2011) call for grounding children's work in local and regional political and economical contexts as children's labor is inextricably tied to “poverty, debt, corruption, war, geopolitical conflicts, epidemics, unfair trade, structural adjustment programs (SAPs), inappropriate policies and ineffective legislation” (Abebe & Bessell, 2011, p.773). As Abebe (2016) argues, local political economy is entwined with and alters along with relations of production exterior to the local context, “thereby influencing the dynamics of labour relations, including children's labour and the value it generates” (p.8). It is therefore necessary to analyze the material realities that shape children's work and the structural

processes that generate the material conditions and transform the livelihood strategies of families and communities (ibid). This article draws insights from the above perspectives on the significance of work in children's lives and how global legislations and ideologies of childhood that prioritize schooling is encountered by mining communities in Ghana.

3. Regulation of Children's Labor in Ghana

Ghana was the first country to ratify the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990. Since then Ghana has been making efforts to ensure that its policies and legislations aligned with international standards, and several organizations, both locally and internationally, have advocated for abolition of child labor in mining. The argument is focused on the understanding that certain forms of work are harmful or exploitative to children (Bourdillon, 2015). Ghana ratified ILO conventions on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ILO Convention 182) in 2000, as well as the Minimum Age Convention (ILO Convention 138) in 2011.

Ghanaian government's approach to artisanal and small-scale gold mining oscillates between laissez faire—and even direct involvement—to aggressive efforts to shut down the operations (Human Rights Watch, 2015). However, children's work in small-scale mining falls under the category of "the worst form of child labor". The worst forms of child labor include hazardous work, specifically mining activities such as work underground, work with dangerous machinery and tools, transport of heavy loads, and work that exposes children to hazardous substances (ILO, 1999). Ghanaian governments' ban on child labor in small-scale gold mining is also because the activity has potential health hazards in which sickness, accidents and deaths are relatively common.

In order to prevent child labor in mining, national legislations have been developed that support enforcement of international laws and agreements. These international conventions concerning children were considered in the drafting of the Children's Act of 1998 (Articles 87 to 92) and set the minimum age for employment at 15 years, while allowing light work at 13 years. Conforming to the ILO convention, light work is “work that is not harmful to the health or development of a child and does not affect the child's attendance or ability to benefit from school” (Ghana Children's Act, 1998, p.28). The Act prohibits persons below 18 years from engaging in hazardous labor including “going to sea; *mining* and quarrying; portering of heavy loads; manufacturing industries where chemicals are produced or used” (Children's Act, 1998, p. 28, *emphasis added*).

Ghana's Children's Act is also explicit in its application on children's engagements in both the informal and the formal sectors of the economy. The Children's Act guarantees the right to education, and education is compulsory between the ages of four and 15. In order to apply these legislations, coupled with the desire to develop a good reputation internationally, the Ghanaian government takes a tough stance on children's and young people's involvement in small-scale gold mining.

However, measures to curtail child labor in mining do not distinguish between children who are below 15 years of age that need to attend compulsory schooling on the one hand and, on the other hand, those young people between 15-18 years of age who take part in mining. Ghana's legislative instruments on education such as provisions in the constitution, Children's Act and the Education Act (2008) conform to Article 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that uses a universal definition of childhood

below 18 years of age. The 1992 Constitution grants every child the right to education.

Article 25 (1) of the constitution states that “All persons shall have the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities and with a view to achieving the full realization of that right—(a) basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all.” Article 8(1) of the Children’s Act (1998) stipulates that “No person shall deprive a child access to education.”

These national and international laws have been consolidated by recent global development initiatives, chiefly the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Whereas MDG 2 sought to achieve universal primary education SDG 4 focuses on quality education: it seeks to ensure that every young person completes free primary and secondary education by 2030. These initiatives foster legislations that target child labor.

Ghana instituted a program on the elimination of child labor in the year 2000 and the government has taken a number of steps to prevent children from working. A “National Plan of Action” and a legal framework were developed to fight child labor (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014c, p. 1). One of the outcomes of the action plan was the establishment of “The Ghana Child Labour Monitoring Systems,” aiming to “regularly check workplaces in order to ensure that children are not working there and that young workers are adequately protected” (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014c, p. 1). Similarly, “The Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines for Child Labour Elimination in Ghana” provides procedures for dealing with “the worst forms of child labour” (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014b, p. 1).

It is important to indicate that conditions in Ghana and other African countries are similar, particularly in the application of the UNCRC. Article 19:2 of the UNCRC aims to ensure “the

establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child" (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 p.6). Yet such programs are non-existent or ineffective. Ghana's report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012) acknowledges that although basic education is supposed to be free to all children, some parents feel they cannot afford to send their children to school. Young Ghanaians are also largely dependent on familial assets and livelihoods in much the same way as they help to improve them. This is probably why it is difficult, if not impossible, to effectively implement international standards into the local context.

4. Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to develop in-depth insights into children's small-scale mining work with 29 participants. The young miners aged between 14-17 (14 years n=4; 15 years n=4; 16 years N=4; and 17 years n=1) and their parents/guardians were the principal informants, although other stakeholders also provided background and contextual information as well. Multiple participatory methods were used to collect data, including observation, in depth interviews, focus groups discussion, as well as child-focused methods such as essay writing and recall chart. The fieldwork was conducted from June – September 2015 in the Amansie West District, in three schools in three different communities. Involving schools for recruitment of participants was necessary because the focus of the research was not only about small-scale mining but also to understand the balance young people make between mining work and schooling. This strategy was also useful as it provided leads to young workers who have dropped out of schools.

Non-probability purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to limit the control and biases of researchers and gatekeepers in the selection of participants. These sampling approaches ensured that relevant participants who could respond to the issues of interest were recruited. Purposive sampling was employed to select the first young participant in each of the three schools, after which snowballing was used to recruit other young participants, parents, and other local stakeholders. The final sample had 29 participants, made up of 13 young workers, three teachers, four parents and nine other local stakeholders (community leaders and district assembly workers).

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted—eight with young workers, four with parents, three with teachers, and three with local government workers. Non-participant observation was used with a focus on the young workers to obtain first-hand information on socio-economic conditions of participants, nature of work and working environment of young workers as well as their interactions within the family, schools and communities. Four focus-group discussions were organized, each with four parents (FGD n=2) and four local government workers (FGD n=2). Additionally, 10 young workers participated in essay writing and recall method/chart. The recall method was used to explore the working days and hours of the young workers and how they combine it with schooling. The data obtained through these tools were analyzed based on selected themes. The research was granted ethical clearance from the Norwegian Directorate for Data Services (NSD), and issues of informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality were considered.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Reasons for Children's Labor in Mining Work

Studies in Africa have pointed at poverty as the predominant reason for child labor (e.g., Bass, 2004, Bourdillon et al., 2010; Okyere, 2013). This was confirmed here too—financial hardship within the household is the main reason for children's work in gold mining. The account of young workers and parents/guardians who pointed to the “poverty factor” was supported by a local community leader:

It is mainly because of the hardship in the homes, which makes it difficult for the parents to look after the children. ...and pushes the children to work to add up to the parents' efforts (focus group discussion).

The views of research participants confirm findings from most research that child work is inspired by economic hardships (see Admassie, 2003; Bourdillon et al., 2010; Okyere, 2014). This is unsurprising considering the general poverty indicators in Ghana where 44.9% and 27.1% of the population falls below the upper and lower/extreme poverty line of GHC1,314.00 and GHC792.05 respectively per annum in 2012/2013 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014a). Similarly, 28.6% of the population reportedly lives below \$1.25 a day, while 48.3% of the population lives under \$2 a day as of 2015 (UNDP, 2015). The economic plight of working children and their households is therefore not in isolation from the national trend. Numerous other factors compound the existing general poverty trend. First, jobs are unreliable and income irregular for members of many households. This research showed that the parents/guardians of the young workers, most of whom are single, are only ‘semi-employed’ with intermittent earnings. Many of these parents/guardians are struggling to provide basic necessities.

With worsening national unemployment figures (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013), many households in the study area are engaged in small-scale gold mining, others are largely reliant on subsistence farming or petty trading, and sometimes a combination of these. This is supported by several parents' accounts;

I usually work in the mining in addition to my farming. ...when I work in the mining, I don't get enough money (In depth interview with guardian).

I have worked there before (in the small-scale mining), but now I sell food. As you can see I am not sure of what I will even get at the end of the day (Mother/Guardian –In depth interview with parents).

An additional concern is the size of the households of young participants. Young workers' households have an average of four to six members, making it harder to make ends meet.

Sometimes he needs football boots, school uniform and other things in school but because I am burdened with the responsibility of taking care of five children all by myself, he has to work to support my efforts (Mother, from in-depth interview)

Increasing household size through births or as an outcome of family dispersal (where other households/members within the extended family join) without corresponding increase in household earnings comes with its own implications for children and other adult members. Having dependents in school puts extra strain on already inadequate income. Costs associated with formal education is a substantial drain on the already limited resources of the households. Most parents/guardians of the young workers in this study consider the size of their households burdensome in the context of their income.

Another factor compounding the financial difficulties in the households is parental divorce or migration, leading to added responsibilities for children. In most cases, the young workers live with a single parent (mostly the mother) or grandparent. This is evidenced in the account of one young worker whose “father is in the North [Northern Ghana] and he hardly sends us money.” A grandmother reported that; “the boy’s parents are in the city”—grandparents and other adult members of the family may provide care and support as an outcome of parental migration. In most cases, parental support is inadequate or irregular, and children's work in the mines is partly caused by the family's inability to provide for children's basic needs.

Significantly, there were cases where children indicate a sense of responsibility to work or give back to parents when possible. This was evident in a young worker’s response in the course of the interview;

Looking at my age, it is not all the things I need that I expect my parents to provide. So when I go (to work), the little money I get I use it to buy some of the things that I need (A 16 year young participant).

This quote points to how children assume adult responsibilities even before they are legally recognized to do so. Even though this young worker is a 'child' by definition (under 18), he does not see himself as such, and he is eager to take on adult-like roles and be self-reliant. These conceptualizations defy international standardizations from the rights perspective—children’s work is indivisibly tied to the social and socio-cultural contexts (Abebe & Bessell, 2011). Many young workers in Ghana do not recognize themselves in the dominant definitions of children and childhood, and are at variance with global paternalistic conceptions of childhood.

5.2 Benefits of Small-Scale Gold Mining

Participants in this study listed benefits of their involvement in small-scale gold mining, predominantly the financial rewards. Young workers could earn between about GHC5.00 to GHC50.00 (about \$1.5 to \$13.00) from a day's work depending on their fortune. As one young miner stated, "on a good day I can get around GHC40.00 (\$10.3) and in the worse case we can manage to get around GHC10.00 (\$2.5) each" (Young participant, in depth interview). Another young worker indicated; "I usually get around GHC20.00 (\$5.2) in a day. The highest amount I got in a day was GHC50.00 (\$13)." Local government workers recognize this, and explained that; "Individually, it has helped most of the people involved to improve their economy. They (children) get money from the work" (focus-group discussion). In a country where a reported 44.9% and 27.1% falls below the respective upper and lower poverty lines (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014a), these earning could mean and do a lot for young workers and their households.

The financial boost translates into several other benefits for young workers and their families—it is invested in many areas of their lives. Firstly, the money from the work helps young workers to either support their parents or provide for their own education needs. Emphasizing how the earnings benefit their education, young workers noted that their ability to settle school charges largely depends on the money from their mining work.

It is that money I use to feed myself, especially in the morning in school and afternoon... It also helps me to pay my PTA dues, computer fees, extra class's fees, examination fees and other things necessary for my education. My uniform to school and other dresses I wear outside school are from the money I get from there (mining work) (Young worker, in depth interview).

This quotation captures how money from children's mining work can *support* their education—for some, the income is the only reason why they—or their siblings—are still in school. As acknowledged by Ghana's report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, although basic education is claimed to be free, there are numerous additional costs (Government of Ghana, 2012). Many young workers use their mining money to settle these extra expenses of their education. Similarly, some young workers take care of themselves with the income. One young worker said, “The money from the work is what I use for school.” The main reason for young workers’ retention and progress in school is the mining work. This affirms other researchers’ findings that work makes school possible for some working children (e.g., Ampomah & Gyan, 2014; Bourdillon et al., 2010; Okyere, 2012, 2014).

Some young participants save part of their mining earnings to support their parents in furtherance of their education to senior high school or enter into an apprenticeship. This is evident in the following case;

I am saving some money so that when I pass my B.E.C.E (basic education certificate examination) I can use that money to support my parents to take me to SHS. ...I have now saved about GHC700.00 (In depth interview with young participants)

In effect, the earnings from mining work enable young workers to invest in their future. This initiative by working children conforms to what Abebe termed as "will agency," where children demonstrate their determination and desire to succeed and achieve workable livelihoods for themselves (Abebe, 2013, p. 80).

It is worthy to note that the accounts of how earnings from the small-scale mining work support education were not isolated—teachers of young participants and local government workers backed the claims of the benefits of work to education:

They use the money to pay for extra classes, buy books, uniform, sandals, etc. Most of them look after themselves and no child wants to come to school looking dirty, so it helps them to get their basic needs in school... and make them interested in coming to school (In depth interviews with a teacher).

A local government worker also noted that; "Some use the money to pay their school fees, especially those in SHS. ...I know one guy like that" (focus-group discussion). There is acknowledgement by stakeholders about the several ways in which mining makes education possible for young workers. In effect, by taking care of some of their needs, working children make the scarce resources available for other household's needs. Just as reported by André and Godin (2014) in Congo, small-scale mining secures local livelihoods in Ghana.

Findings further show that benefits transcend beyond economic value to include social recognition, pride, and respect. A parent noted that;

I will say yes, because of the work he doesn't usually lack school materials even when we (the parents) don't get for him. ...we see him as a responsible child (focus-group discussion).

And a young miner said:

Because I take care of myself and sometimes send them (parents) money for my younger siblings, they respect me as giving them a helping hand. ...I try to appear neat in school. And sometimes when I buy food, I share it with my friends who

don't have money, so they give me respect (In depth interview with young participant).

The above quotations reveal the psycho-social benefits of children's mining work and how they value the work and the pride and respect it draws to them. Mining draws attention to and solidifies their position as participants in society by virtue of their contributions through work. However, this is not to discount some of the negative consequences of mining on the well-being of young people. Young miners reported that the heavy lifting and arduous labor in mining causes pain in the back and arms. Studies also indicate that children suffer from respiratory disease because of the dust produced from crushing ore (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Yet, participants in this study pointed out that the immediate problems of poverty and sustaining themselves on daily basis outweigh the long-term health challenges they face.

5.3 Perspectives on Abolition of Children's Mining Work

Children expressed disapproval about attempts to abolish their work in small-scale gold mining. They articulated this especially in the light of their socio-economic circumstances. One young person said; “we have no option. If they stop us from working, what do we do then?”

To young miners, abolitionist moves may seem to promise immediate benefits, at least to society, but the ramifications could be dire in the long run. They emphasized this in view of the present unstable economic conditions within their families and which to a large extent necessitated their participation in the small-scale gold mining. Indeed, most young miners wish to stop the work one day, but it is not just about stopping. This was reiterated by almost all the young workers in this research: “I wish I can stop, but how do I move on? Maybe I can

stop one day to come” (young participant from individual interview). Indicatively, young workers see their mining work as a necessary evil and temporary solution.

Parents and guardians concurred with the views articulated by the young workers. A parent noted that: “but for us in this poor condition stopping them will not help the children and the family.” Other parents indicated that even though they are not happy about the situation, they cannot reverse the conditions that necessitate the children’s labor.

However, local government workers do not support children's mining work. They hold the view that placing legal restrictions on who can work there is best for children, their households, and society. Some expressed support for the prevention of children from working in small-scale mining.

I am fully in support of it (abolition). I won't deviate from what the law says. ...the children have no basis to work there. It exposes the children to dangers and they don't go to school. So it cannot be justified under any circumstance (In depth interview, local government worker).

Employees of government who carry out the directives strongly oppose children working regardless of their appreciation of local realities, which are at odd with such approaches. They derive their position on the basis of legislations without reference to the prevailing local reality of poverty. To them, abolishing children’s mining work is the best way to serve the interest of young workers and society as a whole. The following section discusses the views of government officials and children themselves on some of the short term and long term implications of abolition of mining work.

5.4 Views on Abolishing Children's Mining Work

The firm stance taken by local government workers on preventing children's mining work is largely based on the argument offered globally. They express a conviction that abolishing children's small-scale mining engagements will ensure that they remain in school, protect them from harm, and ensure their optimal growth and development. They explained their position as follows;

Preventing children from working in the small-scale mining, that is what the law says... They are the future of this district and we have to safeguard them. It is for their good, it will protect them so that they can grow well. So we have to do it (In depth interview).

Government employees emphasize their conviction that it is important “to keep children in school so that they develop well and become useful citizens” (local government worker). It is anticipated that preventing young persons from working in the mines will translate into increased enrolment or school attendance and good citizens. Regardless of the importance of mining work in the lives of some young workers, they argue that abolitionist actions are in the interest of young workers and of society.

Abolitionists contend that the consequences of abolitionism are only positive. Abolishing children's mining work does not, to them, carry negative implications since these children are not seen as contributors in their present state. The implications only become visible in the future—their lack of education is presumed to lead to an inability to contribute to the district and Ghanaian society in general.

Contrary to the local government's views, the young workers and their parents/guardians believe that preventing children's mining work carries immediate adverse implications:

I will not be able to pay my fees in school, buy books and appear good-looking in school. I will not be happy in school. ...I will be seen as lacking and people may laugh at me and I may drop out of school (young worker from in depth interview).

From the accounts of young participants, preventing them from working in small-scale mining would worsen their plight in view of the fact they are mostly from already impoverished households—the worse case outcome being withdrawal from school.

Parents/guardians of working children expressed similar frustrations;

It will be very difficult for me in particular because all the pressure will be on me. I may not be able to get (money) for him and his siblings. ...some of them may have to stop school (parent of a young worker from in depth interview).

This quotation reveals the frustrations of some parents about the idea of preventing children from working. They are already struggling to take care of other children even with the young worker's mining participation. Adding the young worker's to their burden of care would compound the situation for them and demand redistribution of the already inadequate household income. In the end, even their ability to keep the other children in school may be compromised and lead to the withdrawal of not only the young workers but their sibling(s) as well.

Some teachers attest to the concerns of the young workers inquiring that, “who takes care of the young workers in that case?” (a teacher in FGD). Another teacher of young workers explained that;

The implications can be good or bad. Good in the sense that it can make them be punctual in school and they will also get time to study. But will you provide for them? ...it may be difficult for most of them to continue school.

It is worthy to note that there are no reliable social support services for children in the district and the country at large. As in many African countries, welfare structures to support families in difficult situations are not available in Ghana. Systemic differences in support services make it imperative to design situation-specific approaches in dealing with children's work—the belief that approaches as they exist in developed economies apply elsewhere is presumptuous and undesirable to the local people. The obvious dissimilarities in the prevailing socio-economic conditions and welfare systems between the global north (where child labor legislations emanate) and the global south (where they are targeted for implementation) are partly responsible for the animosities that confront efforts assumed to work across board.

Children's work engagements in areas such as mining—deemed dangerous or harmful—were successfully abolished in societies in the global north where there are structures to take care of inadequacies. However, in Ghana where structures to absorb economic strains are not in place, the implications could be dire. Therefore, the repercussions of abolitionism with regards to children's mining work may not yield the perceived results, and tensions and controversies are eminent. There is a need for flexibility in the handling of children's mining work participation.

6. Implications for policy

This article presented findings from a study of children who are involved in small-scale gold mining in Ghana. The majority of young workers (90 percent) sampled in this research attend school and balance the need to earn an income and educational pursuits, while those out of school workers hope to return after raising some money. This contradicts ILO's survey that found that of 400 child miners, 35 percent were not attending school (cited in Human Rights Watch, 2015). The difference can be explained by the fact that the young people who took part in our research are above the compulsory school age. Yet, similar to other research about children's remunerative work, work is very important in the lives of young miners (see also Ampomah & Gyan, 2014; Bourdillon et al., 2010; Liebel, 2004; Okyere, 2014). Findings from this study also indicate that there is a disconnect between local realities and perspectives grounded in international and national laws on children's mining work. Local attempts seeking to abolish some forms of children's work categorized as harmful are based on the desire to appease international organizations that champion those perspectives. They are not necessarily based on prevailing socio-economic situations and are unlikely to serve working children as claimed.

The mismatch between global aspirations and the complexity of local realities and people sets the stage for the resentment that confronts abolition. The global concerns regarding children's mining work in light of ratified laws make young workers the cheap prey of governments in the blind quest for global appraisal, who however fail to recognize their portion of blame for the conditions that necessitate their work. The work-school incompatibility argument put forward by proponents of abolition is problematic as evidence from this study not only suggests otherwise, but also presents a case where the work becomes the only route to access education. Although there are concerns about children's participation in small-scale gold

mining (including health hazards and exploitation), the work makes education possible in most cases or, at least, attractive to them.

Whereas policy-makers and stakeholders worry about the consequences of children's work, which to them are negative and extend beyond childhood, young workers themselves see these outcomes as positive. The work makes school possible and is an avenue for young miners to exercise their agency, justifying their worth and making a case for the recognition and consolidation of their position as partakers in familial and communal struggles to deal with the challenges of impoverishment.

Maconachie and Hilson (2016) argue that international conventions rooted in western conceptualizations do not match up with prevailing complex realities and/or competing aspirations and visions of local people. Western policies often show poor contextual understanding of the subtle familial economic balance of the household and how it functions in rural African communities (ibid p.136). Empirical evidence presented in this article suggests caution as to the amenability of international conventions to the particularities of local economies, highlighting that mere acceptance of these international codes and agreements could lead to counter-productive outcomes (Hinson, 2012). Inasmuch some powerless and vulnerable young workers are subjected to unfavorable working conditions, it is a big leap to label all cases of mining work by children in disadvantaged communities as worst forms of labor and demand universal abolition.

Abolitionism is a perspective that is grounded in the view that the solution for child labor is legislation. Limited consideration is given to the positive effects of work to children's well-being and development, as well as to the structural reasons why children work. The approach

implies a refusal to acknowledge the diversity of childhood experiences, and the learning that takes place in laboring (Abebe & Waters, 2017). Whereas the abolitionist framework stresses children's right to education, it fails to acknowledge the fact that for most children work makes schooling possible. We argue that setting up laws to prevent children from all work is easy. Finding ways to prevent abuse and exploitation of children in their places of work—laws that ensure physical and moral protection, provide opportunities for education and training, dignify and respect young workers—is not straightforward. There is the need to amend Ghanaian legislation on children's work from abolitionist to a regulatory framework that permits children to engage in non-harmful mining work and to define harmful work at the local level with the participation of the children themselves (see Orkin 2010).

This study further revealed that contrary to the claim that preventing children from remunerative work would make them better students, young workers' own accounts indicate that abolition could lead to withdrawal from school. The cost-benefit analysis of children's mining work reveals that implications of abolition could be fatal rather than desirable. The immediate abolition of children's mining work, at least in the study area, may not be feasible or favorable in view of the significant role of the work to critical areas of their lives.

It is crucial to address the negative effects linked to involvement of young people in small-scale gold mining. In particular, material exploitation and health consequences of mining work require serious attention. These challenges need to be tackled through improving working conditions that take into account the health and wellbeing of young people. In this regard, the provision of health care along with programs that mitigate exploitation are important short-term policy steps. In the long-term, it is necessary to facilitate alternative

employment opportunities that improves young miners' possibilities to generate life-sustaining resources for themselves and their families.

To consider the benefits of work to children as well as the reasons for their involvement in work demands reconsideration of legislation from abolitionist to a flexible regulatory approach that permits non-harmful work. Without considering the concerns of young workers, attempts at abolition do not serve their best interests. There is a need for social structures that provide some basic support for disadvantaged and impoverished households. Beyond scrapping tuition fees, it is also important that government and other stakeholders ensure the provision of basic school materials for impoverished students. These efforts could lighten the burden on children and their households and would encourage them to remain in and concentrate on schooling if the demands for work are curtailed.

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