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Reconsidering Child Labour as a Psycho-Social Dynamic and Form of Child Rights Violation

Insights from Ghanaian Marine Small-Scale Fisheries

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Abstract

The issue of child labour is widely researched and debated, and is well addressed in different laws, policies and forums of governments; yet child labour remains intractable in both developed and developing countries. This intractability is often explained differently, such that international child rights conventions often attribute child labour to a lack of protection for children against harmful work, while econometric studies typically blame household poverty as the factor driving families to expose their children to work that harms their sound growth and development and right to education. There are also socio-cultural debates in which child labour is correlated with normative practices that are unable to separate harmful from non-harmful child work. Focusing on Ghana's small-scale fisheries, this article draws on the socio-cultural debates as it observes stronger ties between child labour and normative constructions

of childhood. The paper concludes with reflections on both debates and research and policy considerations.

Keywords

child labour – child work – child rights – childhood – psycho-social dynamic – small-scale fisheries – Ghana

1 Introduction

The issue of child labour is widely researched and debated, and also addressed in different laws, policies and forums of governments; yet child labour remains a persistent threat to the sound growth and development of many children in both developed and developing countries. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported increased cases of child labour as well as observed stalled progress towards the elimination of child labour worldwide since 2016 (ILO-UNICEF, 2021). This report estimated that around 160 million children are engaged in child labour, a figure that comprises 63 million girls and 97 million boys, and suggests that almost one in every ten children worldwide is a child labourer (*ibid*). Close to 79 million of the reported 160 million child labourers, are further engaged in 'hazardous work' which directly poses endanger to their health, safety and moral development (*ibid*).

Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana, reports higher cases of child labour, especially among children between the ages of 5 and 17, with more than two-thirds of these cases observed in the agricultural sector (Abdullah *et al.*, 2022) and marine small-scale fisheries (Adeborna and Johnson, 2015; Adonteng-Kissi, 2018a). Gonsamo and colleagues (2021) observed that while child labour has curved down in Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean in both percentage and absolute numbers within the last four years, the curve of Sub-Saharan Africa has rather been rising since 2012. As such, 'there are now more children in child labour in Sub-Saharan Africa than [there are] in the rest of the world combined' (Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021: 1). Ibrahim and others (2018) indicated that the exact figures for the global distribution of child labour are often difficult to obtain but 96 per cent of these labourers are often reported in Africa, Asia and Latin America combined.

The intractability of child labour is, however, often explained differently. For example, child human rights advocates often attribute the prevalence of child

labour to poor legal protection for children against works which harm their sound growth and development and access to education (Edmonds, 2009; Lubaale, 2015; Hoque, 2021). There are also econometric studies in which child labour is associated positively with the wealth and poverty dynamics of households (Abebe and Bessell, 2011; Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018). This perspective often blames household poverty as a major factor driving families to expose their children to harmful work (Hoque, 2021; Okali *et al.*, 2022). Socio-cultural studies also explore child labour from social and cultural constructions which are unable to separate harmful from non-harmful child work (Abebe and Bessell, 2011; Abdullah *et al.*, 2022). Within this perspective is a widely held view that exposure to work at an early age 'can be, and [is] often, beneficial for children' (Maconachie *et al.*, 2022: 259).

While the above three research traditions hold larger structural factors, such as poverty, labour laws and culture directly responsible for the intractability of child labour around the world, they also commonly overlook individual perceptions, attitudes and decisions involved in child labour practices. Socio-cultural studies indeed emphasise normative cultural practices, highlighting how certain customs and norms of communities tend to support child labour (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018; Hoque, 2021). Socio-cultural studies still lack equivalent analyses of individual-level factors, especially the agencies of individuals to appropriate childhood customs and social norms to exploit child work towards a gainful end. This paper addresses such a gap by demonstrating how the decisions to engage children in child labour are embedded in and hence explained by, perceptions and attitudes towards children.

The paper focuses on child labour issues in Ghanaian artisanal fisheries where child labour is reported to be endemic (Kwadzo and Annan, 2022; Republic of Ghana, 2023). Child labour indeed remains an intractable issue in Ghana. Thirteen per cent of children between the ages of 5 and 14, which represents 927,591, are working, while 79.2 per cent of these working children are engaged in the agricultural sector, which comprises farming and fishing (Republic of Ghana, 2023). Okali and co-authors (2022) corroborated that there is 'no evidence that the number of children working on cocoa farms who are in child labour is decreasing' (162). Kwadzo and Annan (2022) also indicated that 21.8 per cent of children between the ages of 5 and 17 in Ghana are engaged in child labour with more than 14.2 per cent involved in hazardous work. Efforts to eliminate child labour have indeed increased since the Ghana National Commission on Children was established to help tackle the issue in 1979 (Republic of Ghana, 2017). Dowuona-Hammond and colleagues (2020), however, observed significant gaps concerning measures aimed at addressing the root causes of child labour, including the availability of effective sanctions

against exploiters as well as attending to the needs of children at risk of child labour. Also, while 89.9 per cent of 5–14-year-old children attend school, 13.3 per cent of this figure are forced to combine work with schooling (Republic of Ghana, 2023). These cases threaten Ghana's ability to achieve target 8.7 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals which enjoins all governments to eradicate forced labour and end child labour in all its forms by 2025.

This paper therefore seeks to explain how child labour is a psycho-social dynamic, in that child labour practices involve conscious and unconscious decisions to appropriate socio-cultural constructions of childhood towards gainful ends. The paper is a qualitative research, involving triangulation of empirical data obtained from fieldwork in marine small-scale fishery communities along the coasts of the Western, Central, Greater Accra and Volta Regions of Ghana. Structurally, the next section presents a literature review, clarifying the concept of child labour and offering critical details to the different theoretical explanations of child labour. The third section explores child rights protection, from the perspective of international human rights law and in the Ghanaian law and policy context. The fourth section presents our qualitative methodology and demonstrates the nature of the empirical fieldwork. We present the empirical results in the fifth section and follow it up with a conclusion and outline for policy response and future research in the sixth.

2 Conceptual and Analytical Issues

2.1 *Child Labour and Child Work – The Thin Lines in Between*

The issue of child labour is widely researched and debated, although child labour remains a contested concept. It is work done by children, which rather exposes them to harm, including depriving them of sound growth and development (Abdullah *et al.*, 2022). It differs from child work which is harmless and empowers children to grow responsibly (Pierik and Houwerzijl, 2006). Child work is often light in weight, dignified and performed within a small period of hours and follows efforts to improve the abilities of the child performing it (Lee *et al.*, 2022). Child work does not interfere with the education, leisure and happiness activities of children, unlike child labour which does (Karikari, 2016; Bellwood-Howard and Abubakari, 2020). Child labour is conceptualised in terms of child work which immediately harms and/or the circumstance under which it is performed is likely to detrimentally undermine the sound growth and development of the child performing it (Edmonds, 2009; Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021). Despite these seemingly straightforward distinctions, the intractability of child labour has been explained differently, producing human rights-based

perspectives, as well as econometric and socio-cultural lines of research reports (Abebe and Bessell, 2011; Hoque, 2021).

The child human rights-based perspective regards child labour as a willful violation of the rights and freedom of children from harmful work (Atuguba, 2005; Lubaale, 2015; Radfar *et al.*, 2018). This perspective relates particularly with Article 182 of the International Labour Organisation which treats child labour as a work that jeopardises the physical, mental and social wellbeing, growth and development of children (Edmonds, 2009; Hoque, 2021). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) even goes further to offer lower and upper age limits for child labour. It treats child labour not only as works that are harmful to the sound growth and development of children but also includes any work performed by persons below the age of 18 (Edmonds, 2009).

This rights-based perspective would have examined labour laws for the level of tolerance or intolerance for child labour in a country. It raises concerns, however, about downplaying the economic value of children's work (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018; Maconachie *et al.*, 2022). For example, political economy studies of child labour often explain child labour concerning household wealth and poverty dynamics (Pierik and Houwerzijl, 2006; Abebe and Bessell, 2011). This perspective tends to blame household poverty as the factor driving families to engage their children in child labour (Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021; Abdullah *et al.*, 2022). Kwadzo and Annan (2022) illustrated that while 'child labour cannot be a substitute for child work, the use of children in agricultural work' in Ghana is often considered to be 'part of their socioeconomic development' (*ibid*: 124). The econometric analyses of child labour focus more on the importance of monetary gain associated with child labour (Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Pierik and Houwerzijl, 2006).

However, what constitutes child labour often varies 'depending on the culture of a country or community' (Kwadzo and Annan, 2022: 124). In other words, there are sociocultural motivations for exposing children to work (Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021). Gonsamo *et al.* (2021) related in the context of Africa that children's work is sometimes considered to be, 'a useful component of their everyday socialisation, sources of livelihood, schooling and social relationships (1). This also means that socio-cultural perspectives focus on normative cultural practices of communities. This may help to enable understanding of how certain customs and norms could motivate adult individuals to engage children in work, which may harm their sound growth and development or keep them away from schools and hence inhibit a child's right to education.

The focus on larger structural issues across these three perspectives also means that they commonly fall short of exploring individual perceptions, attitudes and decisions involved in child labour practices. This paper thus elaborates

on these current debates by arguing that child labour practice is not accidental; it entails conscious and unconscious decisions, informed by perceptions and attitudes held individually about children, to exploit the labour of children towards a gainful end. The paper draws especially on the socio-cultural perspective as socio-cultural studies often link child labour with normative constructions of childhood and yet lack a significant focus on individual-level factors, such as perceptions and attitudes. For example, Gonsamo *et al.* (2021) observed in the context of Africa that childhood is a multidimensional concept; it takes on normative values of communities simultaneously with values and provisions of laws of the secular state. In particular, typical African cultures do not necessarily regard childhood as a period of 'free[dom] from responsibility' (*ibid.*: 2). Thus, 'children continue to make economic contributions to households and national economy through their work while also attending schools' (*ibid.*: 2).

Radfar *et al.* (2018), however, found some cultural beliefs to encourage child labour. In particular, some norms, especially in developing countries, such as Ghana often (mis)-construe work as having 'a constructive effect on character building and increases skill development in children' (*ibid.*: 20). This implies the issue of child labour arises from normative practices which encourage child work but are unable to separate harmful from non-harmful child work. These norms create a thin line between what constitutes child work and what qualifies as child labour (Abdullah *et al.*: 2022). Gonsamo *et al.* (2021) pointedly stated in the context of Africa that, 'it is most challenging to draw a strict boundary between children's work and child labour, as children's participation in economic activities' is often alleged to be useful for their sound growth and well-being (1). This also implicitly reinforces the argument we make in this paper that child labour also has a psycho-social dynamic. Gonsamo and his colleagues imply child labour entails conscious and unconscious decisions of adult individuals, be it parents, employers and guardians, to involve children in child works which have the likelihood of exposing the children performing it to physical, mental, moral and emotional harm and/or deny them education (Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021). In particular, individuals who engage children in harmful work often have power over such children and deploy this privilege in ways that are likely to benefit them more than child labourers themselves. Radfar *et al.* (2018) reinforced that child labour is a willful violation of a child's autonomy in that most child labourers are often given no chance to consent while those who consent often lack a full understanding of circumstances surrounding the work they are asked to consent to. In that respect, child labour solicitors, such as parents, guardians and non-parent employers, exploit the still-developing reasoning capacities of children to violate their human rights, including the right to sound growth and development, and education.

2.2 *Child Labour as Child Rights Violation*

Child rights, just like child labour, are indeed widely debated. Lubaale (2015) suggested that child rights are sensitive to community cultures and hence reflective of different values of communities and countries. Child rights are claims and/or entitlements reserved in cultural systems and state laws for children fully to enjoy life (Lubaale, 2015; Karikari, 2016). Lubaale (2015) described child rights as embedded in value systems of groups and laws of countries that promote “respect” for children and protect their dignity as human beings. Harms and threats to these values constitute violations of child human rights, as such practices undermine the ability of children to enjoy life in full just like any other human being (*ibid*). The way child labour constitutes a violation of children’s rights is especially entailed in its deprivation of children from enjoying their childhood and endangering their sound growth and development (Edmonds, 2009; Hoque, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2022).

Ibrahim and his colleagues (2018) found child labour to correlate positively with increases in the illiteracy of working children, which corroborates Kwadzo and Annan’s (2022) observation that children who work are less likely to go to school and if they do, they are more susceptible to school dropout due to lack of concentration in the classroom. Ibrahim *et al.* (2018) further reported that child labour violates child rights by exposing children to emotional turbulences, including mood and anxiety disorders, stunted growth and serious illnesses, such as musculoskeletal pain, tuberculosis and eyestrain. A study in India had child labourers reporting lower body mass index, shorter stature and delayed genital development, especially among working boys (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018). Chinyoka and Naidu (2014) studied the psycho-social effects of child labour on children who work and go to school concurrently in Zimbabwe and observed that child labourers may contribute to household income. Nonetheless, ‘child labour does more harm than good to the cognitive development’ of children (*ibid.*: 56). This conclusion developed from the circumstances surrounding child labour in the country, which included working under conditions that poorly stimulate ‘physical, cognitive, personality and intellectual development’ (*ibid.*: 56).

The detrimental effects of child labour inspire international and inter-governmental bodies to devise and promote laws and policies that protect children against harmful work. Foremost amongst these includes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (1989), especially Article 9, which implores signatory countries to provide in legislation, policy and administration, special protections for children against all forms of violence and abuse, including child labour (Edmonds, 2009; Hoque, 2021). The Convention further requires state parties to submit five-yearly reports on the status of

children's rights to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. The International Labour Organization's Convention 182 likewise urges state parties to prohibit and eliminate all worst forms of child labour, including trafficking and bonded and servitude works (Karikari, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2022; Maconachie *et al.*, 2022). Article 15 of the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child also requires children to be protected from harmful labour. This protection includes all forms of exploitative economic activities as well as any work with a likelihood to be hazardous and hence interfere with the physical, mental, spiritual, moral and/or social development of children. It encourages member countries to provide in law and practice (a) minimum age for entry into employment, (b) regulation of hours and conditions of employment, (c) penalties and sanctions to ensure compliance and (d) dissemination of information on hazardous nature of child labour across all sectors of society. These treaties have inspired countries, such as Ghana, to implement nationally unique child-friendly laws and policies in the hope of protecting children against child labour.

3 Child Labour and Child Rights in Ghana

3.1 *Child Rights Protection and Safeguards*

Ghana has been a state party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), which it signed on 29 January 1990 and subsequently became the first country in the world to ratify it on 5 February 1990 (UNICEF, n.d.; Benson *et al.*, 2021). It is also a party to the African Union's 1990 Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Atuguba, 2005; Karikari, 2016). Ghana has mainstreamed these international human rights laws to its 1992 Constitution which is the fundamental law of the country. This has ensured that policies and legal instruments regarding children conform to international treaties on children's rights and freedom from exploitation. For example, article 12 of the 1992 Constitution provides for the protection of the rights of every person against abuse, including children and vulnerable persons, with special assurances that their right to life, dignity, liberty and respect is inviolable. Article 16 even goes further to mention directly slavery, servitude and forced labour as prohibited whilst article 28 (2) ensures that every 'child has the right to be protected from engaging in work that constitutes a threat to his health, education or development.' The Children's Act 1998 (Act 560), which operationalises the fundamental laws of the Constitution, directly prohibits child torture as well as activities that result in cruel and degrading treatment of children in section 13 (1). The prohibition makes no exception to cultural differences and hence

prohibits all cultural practices that dehumanise and/or undermine the physical, mental, moral and social well-being of children. As such, children going to sea to fish, which is often (mis)-construed as part of child upbringing norms in fisherfolk communities in Ghana (Kwadzo and Annan, 2022), is considered to be hazardous work and a prohibited act in section 9 (3a) of the Children's Act.

The Children's Act (Act 560) 1998 as amended (Act 937) 2016 has been particularly designed such that it consolidates all laws pertaining to children (Atuguba, 2005; Karikari, 2016; Benson *et al.*, 2021). The Act (section 1) purposely defines a child and hence subscribes childhood to persons below the age of 18 (18), which also corresponds with definitions given in terms of who is a child in Article 2 of the AU Charter and Article 1 of the UN Convention. It abhors child labour by stating in sections 87 (1) and (2) that the labour of a child shall not be solicited for exploitation, which includes work likely to deprive children of their health, education and/or development. While the state is expected to enforce these provisions (Benson *et al.*, 2021; Sarfo-Kantankah and Agbaglo, 2022), the tone of the texts of this law shows parents and guardians are accorded the greatest responsibility to safeguard their children against harmful work. For example, section 6 (3) of the Act states that it is the responsibility of parents, 'whether imposed by law or otherwise to protect their children from neglect, discrimination, violence, abuse, exposure to physical and moral hazards and oppression.' Parents are not only required to protect their children from harmful work but they have also been prohibited from being the source of harm to their children, as stipulated in section 6 (1) of the Act in this manner: 'no parent shall deprive their children their welfare and wellbeing irrespective of the circumstances.' These encouragements are important; however, they seem to be pre-emptive strategies which could be exploited to absolve governments of responsibility decisively to deal with increased reports of child labour linked to parents in the country.

The administration of Ghana's child-friendly laws has nonetheless been entrusted to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, which also carries out such a mandate in collaboration with other state and private institutions, such as the law courts and civil society groups (Adeborna and Johnson, 2015; Karikari, 2016). The ministry regards childhood as a period meant for individuals who are 'still largely dependent' on adult persons for their needs (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2015). This constructed definition of childhood may seem too general and therefore differs from the chronological age specifications of childhood typically offered by the CRC. Golo (2005), for example, suggested that although a child in Ghana is legally defined as a person under the age of 18, this legal positioning does not necessarily determine how a person is regarded in the cultural and social

practices of communities. In concrete terms, different cultures and groups have specific ways of perceiving and describing childhood, which also explain how they engage children in works that are likely to harm them (*ibid*).

The child-friendly legislative, policy and administrative frameworks of Ghana, however, helped achieve some moderate progress in eliminating child labour, although the country continues to record large cases of child labour. Karikari (2016), for instance, indicated that working children doubled from approximately 1.2 million in 2000 to over 2.7 million by the year ending 2013. The Ghana Statistical Service (2021) also reported that nearly 80 per cent and 78 per cent of close to 230,000 children aged 5–14 years are actively participating in agricultural and fishery activities. Karikari (2016) even found Ghana to be a major source, transit and destination country for the trafficking of children for child labour. This implies Ghana engages in child labour domestically and is also complicit in the exportation of children to engage in child labour in other countries while providing safe havens for others to traffic children into the country for onward distribution to other countries to engage in child labour.

3.2 *Child Labour Practice and Rights Violations*

The way the majority of Ghana's child labour trends are noted in the open access economy, including canoed-based fisheries, subsistence crop farming and hawking in township commercial markets (Karikari, 2016; Golo and Eshun, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2022) also seems to result from the different other aspects of the Children's Act (Act 560) 1998 as amended (Act 937) 2016. For example, the Act allows for 15-year-old children to work (section 89), but it prohibits engaging children in night work, which section 88 (2) describes as work performed between the hours of 8.00 p.m. and 6.00 a.m. It further allows for 13-year-old children to engage in light work, which section 90 (2) defines as work that is unlikely to harm the health and/or the general development of the child performing it. In other words, 'efforts to address child labour are framed by a complex, multi-layered body of international human rights instruments, nomenclature, definitions, national legislation, and regulations' (Okali *et al.*, 2022: 162). These frameworks set 'the kinds and conditions of work that are and are not acceptable for children of specific ages'; however, they also introduce competitive 'technical terms that work against clarity of understanding and communication' and the education of parents about child labour (*ibid.*: 162). The complex legal definitions especially 'run up against local norms and expectations around childhood, and associated social institutions including fostering and apprenticeship' (*ibid.*: 162).

The activities of an open-access economy often take place outside the direct supervision and authority of the formal state laws but under the influence of

local customs and customary laws. In other words, the way parents are able to appreciate these differences in the formal state would implicate how they refrain and/or continue to exploit children's labour towards gainful ends. This difficulty has resulted in reliance on child labour by open access economies, especially artisanal fisheries and cocoa farming (Lubaale, 2015; Adonteng-Kissi, 2018a; Lambon-Quayefio, 2021). The cocoa sector contributes close to 7 per cent to the gross domestic product (GDP) of Ghana, which various reports show is inclusive of children's labour as Okali and co-authors (2022) illustrated in this manner:

Nowhere is the need to address child labour more pressing than in the West African states of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire where persistent claims of the widespread use of child labour pose a significant threat to the cocoa sector (157).

The report that smallholder cocoa production is reliant on child labour is often refuted, especially by governments and politicians who want to avoid accountability for failures to enforce laws against child labour (Okyere, 2017; Okali *et al.*, 2022). Parents who tend to involve their children equally refute reports of exploiting their children's labour towards gainful ends (Okali *et al.*, 2022). Parents often regard the involvement of children in their farming as part of their socialisation and cultural upbringing (Republic of Ghana, 2023). This refutation especially comes from the fact that smallholder cocoa farms are often family-owned businesses and hence parents wish to pass on the legacies of cocoa farming to their offspring. In doing so, they see no ill in the way children who participate in farming could have little chance of attending and completing a meaningful cycle of school.

The case of marine small-scale fisheries particularly shows children are typically exploited across all three value chains, namely, pre-fish harvesting, fish harvesting and post-harvest processing. The exploitation of children's work towards the gainful end in the pre-harvesting phase is particularly observed in boat building and repairs, as well as bait and net preparations and mending ahead of an expedition to the sea to catch fish (Aryeetey, 2010; Kwadzo and Annan, 2022). The harvesting cases revolve around children's involvement in gear launching, canoe paddling, draining water from flooded canoes, casting and pulling nets with catch fish and diving deep into waters to repair tangled and broken nets constitute some of the fish harvesting child labour practices (Adeborna and Johnson, 2015). The post-harvest phase includes participation in sorting, picking, cleaning, smoking, carting, hawking and selling in fish markets (Lambon-Quayefio, 2021; Kwadzo and Annan, 2022). Indeed, some of the

pre-harvest and post-harvest activities, such as boat-mending and cleaning of catch fish respectively may not harm a child's growth and sound development (Kwadzo and Annan, 2022). They could, however, deny the child performing it the opportunity to attend and complete a meaningful cycle of schooling, which constitutes a violation of the child's right to education (Dowuona-Hammond *et al.*, 2020).

4 Methodological Approach

This paper explores the psycho-social component of child labour, as embodied in, and manifested through, the perceptions and attitudes of those who decide to exploit children's labour towards gainful ends in coastal small-scale fishing communities in the Volta, Greater Accra, Central and Western Regions of Ghana. The methodology is qualitative and involves empirical fieldwork conducted with fish workers at the coastline fisher communities in the aforementioned regions. One fishing community was purposefully selected for data collection in each region. The sampling procedure was purposeful but based on a prior theoretical understanding of the research problem. This involved an extensive and critical review of current studies and debates on child labour issues in coastal fisheries in Ghana and random visits to communities that have been cited widely in these existing studies. The random reconnaissance visits involved interactions with community members, including fish workers, community leaders and child labourers themselves. The prior visits further showed child labour practices have been widespread in the townships of Chorkor in the Greater Accra Region; Adina in the Volta Region; Otum and Apam in the Central Region, and Axim in the Western Region. These communities were selected for the eventual study. The convenient sampling technique was employed to select the individual participants, while availability and willingness to partake in the study eventually determined the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The fieldwork was conducted in May and June 2021 and August 2024. The techniques of data collection were semi-structured, in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). One "adult" and one "children" FGD was conducted in each study site. These research instruments and techniques were designed to generate qualitative data on perceptions and attitudes but also behavioural practices concerning children's participation in their fishing activities. The participants ranged between 6 for the children group and 8 for the adult group, resulting in a sample of 24 children and 32 adults. The children's FGD was especially organised following the consent

of the parents who participated in the adult FGDs, and hence the children who eventually participated in the study had their parents approving their inclusion. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were organised for community leaders and civil society actors who are actively involved in combating child labour in small-scale fisheries in the study sites. A total of 16 one-on-one-based, semi-structured interviews, including chiefs, queen mothers, assembly members, chief fishermen, queen fishmongers, also locally known as *Konkohemaa* and leaders of civil society groups, were purposively selected for the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These included community chiefs, assemblymen who had been elected from local political elites and youth leaders. Both the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which were predominantly¹ conducted in the local language of the various studied communities, were tape-recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were then translated into the English language and analysed using the ATLAS.TI software to sort and categorise the insights in the data into the thematic headings reported in the section below.

5 Results and Findings

5.1 *Child Labour Perceptions and Attitudes in Marine Small-Scale Fisheries*

This section presents child labour perceptions and attitudes prevalent in Ghana's marine small-scale fisheries. In most cases, respondents often reiterated claims of socialisation and household poverty as the core drivers of child labour. They also added nuances, such that using one's children in fishing was believed to help retain earnings gained from fishing expeditions, a point well-reflected in the perceptions and attitudes highlighted in the example below:

Some fisherfolks use their children to support their work because they want their children to take over from them; others also do not have money to hire and pay, and still, others want to use their children, so that their income will not go anywhere. Moreover, when you use someone's son and there is a problem, you will be found wanting. Besides, no one

1 The participants sometimes alternated their viewpoints with the broken, unofficial English of pidgin.

will question you when your child is following you to sea throughout the week.²

The poverty dynamic in child labour studies can be sensed in the foregoing illustration, which is readily apparent in this experience of a 12-year junior high school male student who is likely to drop out of school due to exploitation of his labour towards a gainful end: 'I go to school but not every day. My friend has even dropped school and now helping his uncle to go to sea to do fishing. His parents do not have money.'³ These foregoing cases nonetheless highlight an implicit attitude of entitlement on the part of some parents and guardians to the labour of their children. It shows some parents and fishermen believe they are entitled to the labour of their children and hence cannot be reproached when they engage their children in work that is likely to harm their right to life and wellbeing. It should be noted, however, that not all fishing activities that children participate in could be seen as harmful to a child's sound growth and development. Nonetheless, some of these works could keep them away from school and hence constitute a violation of a child's right to education. The above case, moreover, implicitly underscores children as properties of parents, instead of being considered as full human beings with their distinctive rights. Other instances, such as the following, even provided concrete cases to show the extent of this attitude: 'I know some of the children from here who have been taken to Yeji⁴ with the consent of their parents who take money from the fishermen from Yeji.'⁵ This illustration may reiterate the poverty dynamic in child labour studies once more, but it also associates positively with perceptions in the following illustration:

Assuming you have a different profession that you will want to pass on that legacy to your children, you will ask your children to accompany you to your workplace so that they can understudy you. When someone does that, I see nothing wrong with it.⁶

It may seem laudable for parents to want their children to succeed them and hence encourage them to learn their trade. The case above reflects the socialisation dynamic widely reported in child labour studies and hence highlights the thin line between child labour and child work as work meant to empower

2 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Fishermen, 25 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

3 FGD, children, 26 May 2021, Adina, Volta Region.

4 This is an inland fishing community located in the Bono East Region of Ghana.

5 Key Informant Interview (KII) with Assembly member, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

6 KII with District Assembly Administration Officer, 27th May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

children to become responsible adult persons. The notion that no harm is incurred when parents engage their children in the onerous work of fishing overlooks the possibility of such children missing out on their education and dropping out of school. It also pays little attention to health risks to children as a result of their prolonged exposure at sea.

The widespread nature of such entitlement attitudes was illustrated by another interviewee:

Initially, you have to help your parents from childhood and even learn how to swim but now it is termed as child labour and it is worrying us a bit because it means children are not able to help you.⁷

The above quotation seems to imply that because previous generations engaged their children in fishing, the current generation is likewise entitled to involve their children in fishing expeditions. This attitude may be (mis)-construed as a contention between tradition and modernity; it nonetheless largely typifies a lack of proper education regarding the effect of child labour on the sound growth and development of children which should be frowned upon and disliked. Such views seemed more endemic in the studied communities as further echoed in this excerpt:

The one who gave birth to the child is the one using the child for such work. How then do you stop the father from using the child to do work knowing very well that, that job feeds the child? If it is my child, no one has the power to prevent me.⁸

This case means the issue of child labour in the marine small-scale fisheries sector has attained a banal status and hence routinised, such that it can become extremely difficult to argue against it in the presence of fisherfolks. It is rather accepted as a norm instead of an exception. And thus, 'even chiefs' who are revered as cultural leaders cannot intervene to stop child labour.⁹ In terms of the chief evoking their authority to impose a ban on the practice, another respondent emphatically stated that 'it will not work' because 'parents seem to have more authority over their children than chiefs.'¹⁰ The following school drop-out child fisher demonstrates how some parents easily encourage their children to drop out of school and work in fishery businesses:

7 FGD first-year junior high school male student, 25 May 2021, Axim, Western Region.

8 FGD with Youths, 25 May 2021, Axim, Western Region.

9 KII with a Chief, 27 May 2021: Adina, Volta Region.

10 *Ibid.*

Initially, I was going to school but stopped. My mother asked me to take off my school uniform and go to the shore to help the fishermen and get something [money] for the family. Now I am going to the sea with a fisherman.¹¹

These experiences are widespread in our data, including this reflection of a 16-year-old junior high school female student: ‘my mother likes me when I do not go to school and help her to sell her fish in the market.’¹² The following 13-year junior high school male student shared similarly that, ‘my father stopped me from going to school and follow him to the sea to fish. He will say that fishermen are richer than people who go to school because some people go to university and come back home without work.’¹³ This trend seems to create linear practices whereby fishermen will exploit the labour of the male child while fish processors on the other hand do so with the female child. The difficulty seems to be even more complicated as chief fishermen themselves, who have been entrusted with powers to regulate and regularise everyday fishery activities, also sometimes appear to show pro-child labour attitudes, as underscored in this manner as follows:

All chief fishermen along the coast have their boats and have been looking for people to work for them. Failure to get enough workers, they resort to using underage children. This makes it more difficult to implement measures put in place by chiefs.¹⁴

The illustration above may partly imply that the participation of chief fishermen in child labour is contrived by circumstances, and which only occurs in instances when they are unable to secure adult employees. It still highlights some degree of tolerance of child labour among those who have been entrusted with the authority to discourage the practice. Their circumstantial participation may even be taken by others to embolden themselves and involve children in fishery activities.

While these implicit entitlement attitudes are widespread in the empirical data, some communities seem to involve children in child labour more than others in the marine small-scale fisheries. Widely reported cases include

11 FGD, first-year junior high school male student, 25 May 2021, Axim, Western Region.

12 FGD, children 1 June 2021, Apam, Central Region.

13 FGD, children, 1 June Apam, Central Region.

14 KII with a Chief, 27 May 2021: Adina, Volta Region.

Chorkor, which is actually located in the cosmopolitan city of the Greater Accra Region. Fisherfolks in this community are particularly reported to –

use their children during fishing and there is nothing anyone can do about it. They sometimes bring some of the children from Chorkor to work in Apam here in Central Region and we cannot complain because they will tell us they are not our children.¹⁵

Thus, child labour tendencies are ‘very rampant in Chorkor [Greater Accra Region], followed by Dago in the Central Region. The children there are too little and if you see 1,000 boats, you are likely to find 1,000 children in them.’¹⁶ In a similar vein, a fishmonger argued that child labour is:

not too much rife in this Apam area [Central Region], compared to Chorkor where children as young as 5 and 6 years are engaged in fishing. They use their children during fishing and there is nothing anyone can do about it. They explain that it is child work and not child labour.¹⁷

Even though a civil society activist supported the view that child labour is less rife in the Central Region, compared to the Greater Accra Region,¹⁸ the above illustration seems to indicate fisherfolks know and can separate child labour as a distinct form of child abuse from child work that is somewhat beneficial for the child performing it. It shows adult individuals who engage children in harmful work for gainful ends easily tout their practices as child work, which seems to be an implicit admission of the wrong being perpetuated. They seem to tout child work rather than pre-empt commentaries that may question their child labour practices (e.g., see next section).

5.2 *Child Labour Decisions and Practices in Small-Scale Fisheries*

This section explores the conscious and unconscious decisions involved in child labour practices in the marine small-scale fishery communities we studied. It traces these trends from pre-fishing activities that include boat making and repairs through actual fish harvesting activities which include going to the sea to catch fish to post-harvest activities that involve processing harvested fish for sale. The overall insight here shows the decision to engage children in these

15 FGD with Fishmongers, 25 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

16 FGD with Male Youth Group, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

17 FGD with Fishmongers, 25 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

18 KII with Civil Society Actor 26 May 2021: Takoradi (Western Region).

works is in most cases framed and carried out as intended to benefit the child, although these are often based on the interests and determination of the adult individuals involved. These decisions in most cases overlook the risk posed to the rights of the child, as readily articulated in this manner: 'Some of the children, as soon as they can walk and talk, they are sent away to fish.'¹⁹ This case may seem more of an exaggeration; it is nonetheless corroborated by another participant's view as follows:

Child labour is very rampant in this community. Children as young as 8 and 9 years follow fishermen to the sea, with the only excuse that their parents, as the children tell us, put them in the canoe and send them for fishing on claims that they, the children, do not like schooling.²⁰

This case implies parents are more likely to justify their decision to engage their wards in child labour, by using claims of a child's disinterest in schooling. They are less likely, on the other hand, properly to ascertain the dangers involved and/or investigate and mitigate the reasons for such a disinterest. When asked whether they have participated in fishing more recently, a viewpoint in the children's FGD showed up as such: 'I have been going to sea and my father introduced me to fishing. It has been less than a year since I started going to the sea.'²¹ A youth leader corroborated likewise that 'the moment a child is 8 or 9 years we start including them in going to sea so that by the age 18, he knows how to go to the sea by himself.'²² The above illustration typifies a concrete case of a conscious decision to engage the child from an early age, in the hope of preparing them to take over from their parents. These types of engagement would surely deny children the right to education and as well pose threats to their lives. It is associated with the mounting threats of child labour in marine small-scale fisheries as another participant admitted:

The practice of sending children to the sea is very bad and dangerous to the lives of children. The fishermen always come to report cases of accidents in the sea, and I always ask, what if these accidents – canoe gets capsized – happen with a child who cannot swim like the fishermen?²³

19 KII with District Assembly Officer, 27 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

20 FGD with Female Community Members, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

21 FGD with children, 26 May 2021, Apam, Central Region.

22 KII with Youth Leader 25 May: Axim, Western Region.

23 FGD with Female Community Members, 26th May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

The excerpt above alludes to the types of work child labourers are exposed to in fishing expeditions. In most cases, such works often include having 'their waists tied with ropes and dropped into the sea to disturb the waters for the fishes to run into the net.'²⁴ This practice is life-threatening as there are possibilities that the rope could become loosened and lead to the drowning of the child. Furthermore, the child may also encounter wild creatures under the sea, and yet the decision to engage children in these arduous works is often described as intended to 'help' the child to become a better fisherman and eventually take over from the parent.²⁵ This type of child labour decision surfaces more concretely in the following response to a question about the nature of child work in the sea: 'they help in fetching water out of the boat in cases where the boat becomes flooded, while we are fishing'²⁶ and hence help the child to –

learn on the job and gain experience so that by the time they attain 9 or 10 years, they might have learnt much on the job, and by 12 years, they might have perfected their skills in fishing and become their own bosses.²⁷

While child labourers are exploited to perform these tedious works such as 'scooping water out of the boat while fishing',²⁸ these works are oftentimes explained as, 'not really any tough work on the sea.'²⁹ Both male and female children are exposed to these types of child labour practices, although customary practices of artisanal fishing communities generally prohibit females from entering the sea³⁰ and as such, female child labourers are 'mostly engaged at the shores of the sea.'³¹ Rather, 'girls do not come around here because of the nature of the sea',³² except the 'stubborn ones' who are mostly engaged as 'head porters', carrying harvested fishes to selling stations.³³

The behaviours of child labourers can yet attract severe punishment, which in most cases threatens their right to life, dignity and bodily integrity as underscored in this respect: 'children stealing from both the canoes and the saucepans we use for purchasing our fish'³⁴ as well those who show inability

24 *Ibid.*

25 FGD with Male Youth Group, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 FGD with Fishmongers, 25 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

29 *Ibid.*

30 FGD with Female Community Members, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

31 FGD with Fishermen, 25th May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

32 *Ibid.*

33 KII with Senior Fisherman Representative, 27 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

34 FGD with Female Youth Group, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

to perform assigned tasks ‘can be beaten’ and ‘not allowed to go home; they are kept and sent them back to sea another day.’³⁵ In concrete terms, some fishermen –

really scorn children when they go to deep seas. They are not whipped in our presence here at the shore but when they go for fishing. Some of the guys [child labour explorers] are really wicked and engage children in hard labour.³⁶

These practices identify with child cruelty and torture and can hence constitute a wilful violation of a child’s human right to care, health and even life as some of the beatings may lead to permanent injuries and deaths.

The indiscriminate way these practices are often carried out, is such that child labour exploiters engage the services of their own children as well as children of family relatives, which is typically non-paid, unlike the paid service of children of other people as a participant indicated: ‘some of the children are from this community and most them are the children of fishermen or their relatives and siblings.’³⁷ This means decisions to engage in child labour are sufficiently those of adult family members, who expose their own as well as other people’s ‘children as young as 7 and 14 years’³⁸ but also ‘sometimes 5 years’³⁹ to child labour activities in fisheries. The identity of a child labourer can thus be immediately helpful to identify the identity of the adult individual leading children into the sea, or rather ‘most of children here are sons of fishermen or their relatives or migrant fishermen.’⁴⁰

It is also worth noting that few child labourers can sometimes retain their right to education, although these rights are mostly terminated at the basic education level as illustrated in this excerpt:

Though we send children to sea for fishing, they also attend schools so they can have knowledge both in fishing and education at the same time. In this way, they are able to take over from their fathers in the fishing business. But there are some children who will not want to go to school no matter how hard their parents try. With such children, in order not to waste their time roaming, their parents give them to the fishermen.⁴¹

35 FGD with Female Community Members, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

36 KII with Chief and Elders, 1 June 2021: Apam, Central Region.

37 FGD with Female Community Members, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

38 KII with Female Youth Group Leader, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

39 KII with a Chief, 27 May, Adina, Volta Region.

40 KII with Male Youth leader’s Representative, 27 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

41 *Ibid.*

And yet, ‘the portion of the income that belongs to the child will either be given to him to be given to the mother or it will be handed over to the mother herself to be used in catering for the child.’⁴² This case considers the child labourer to be too immature to know how to spend his/her money and yet mature enough to be taken to sea for a fishing expedition. It also means child labour could be deliberately enabled by parents who seek to improve household income. Such parents may show negligence of a child’s education and in the process create a condition in which the child becomes uninterested in schooling. This lack of interest can then be used to justify reasons to expose the child to fishing, a point that is well put in the following way:

The young ones are not willing to go to school because, when they get to the seashore, by the time the day ends, they will not earn anything less than GH¢ 200.00.⁴³ This also explains why mothers do not force their children to go to school. These children only attend school on Tuesdays because it is a fishing holiday in this community.⁴⁴

In a similar vein, ‘the children that go to sea are mostly the stubborn ones. They are mostly truant. You see them in their uniforms at inappropriate places. When that happens, the fishermen poach them for fishing.’⁴⁵ The idea of “poaching” the distressed child for distressing work, such as fishing, overlooks not just the mental state of a distressed child but also how the exposure to the sea could worsen and exacerbate the distressed state of the child. This also implies that child labour exploiters could be heedless to the sound growth and development of children, compared to the gains they are more likely to make from “poaching” children to engage in fishing.

6 Conclusion and Outline for Research and Policy

The intractability of child labour around the world is often differently explained, such that there are international child rights conventions perspectives which attribute child labour to lack of effective enforcement of laws that protect children against exploitative work (e.g., Edmonds, 2009; Lubaale, 2015; Hoque, 2021). There are also econometric studies which typically blame

42 KII with Male Youth leader’s Representative, 27 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

43 Almost US\$ 25.00 (Bank of Ghana rate on 29.12.2022).

44 KII with Assembly member, 26 May 2021: Apam, Central Region.

45 FGD with Senior Fisherwoman: Axim, Western Region.

household poverty for driving parents to engage their children in harmful work (e.g., Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018; Kwadzo and Annan, 2022). Yet, another perspective – socio-cultural – relates child labour with cultural practices which support child work but are unable to separate harmful from non-harmful child work (e.g., Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Abebe and Bessell, 2011; Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021). These perspectives have enabled analyses of larger structural issues, such as law, poverty and culture to the exclusion of individual-level psycho-social factors such as perceptions, attitudes and decisions involved in child labour practices. This paper addressed this gap but drew especially on socio-cultural debates. This is because, while sociocultural studies often link child labour with normative constructions of childhood, there is also a lack of focus on agencies of individuals to exploit the labour of children towards a gainful end.

The findings showed that perceptions and attitudes of individual adults engaged in coastal fishing play a significant role, just like poverty, weak laws and cultural norms in the prevalence of child labour in the marine small-scale fisheries sector in Ghana. The decision to involve children in fishery activities that could harm their rights appears to be more wilful, arising from a sense of entitlement to the labour of children among some adult individuals in the studied fisher communities. These implicit attitudes are linked with beliefs (i.e., perceptions) that seem to suggest children are the “properties” of parents and hence their work can be exploited towards a gainful end without expectations of reproach. This insight alternates with sociocultural studies’ exclusive focus on the normative construction of childhood and how individual adults often instrumentalise and appropriate cultural norms of children for personal gains. The insight points out child labour as having a psycho-social dynamic, in that the decisions involved in child labour practices are embedded in, and hence explained by, perceptions and attitudes held individually by adults about children.

It can be concluded that child labour is not just an issue of merely larger structural factors, such as cultural (mis-)representation of children, weak legislative enforcement and poverty dynamics of households. It can also be an issue of individual perceptions and attitudes towards children and childhood. This conclusion has several implications. For example, it moderates tendencies of current studies to blame poor legislative protection of children against exploitative work, household poverty and cultural norms entirely for the intractability of child labour around the world (e.g., Edmonds, 2009; Bellwood-Howard and Abubakari, 2020; Maconachie *et al.*, 2022; Okali *et al.*, 2022). The evidence showed perceptions and attitudes play significant roles in child labour practices and hence shift policy responses on child labour to also pay special attention to individual-level factors. This calls for public education targeted

at attitudinal change, including promoting critical appreciation of children as full human beings with their own distinctive, inviolable rights to life and wellbeing.

In the particular case of Ghana, current anti-child labour policies should be shifted to include a focus on the perceptions and attitudes of individual adults in the sectors where child labour practices are endemic. This should promote understanding about the general effects of child labour on the sound growth and development of children. The claims of poverty and socialisation, as widely reported in various studies as major drivers of child labour (Gonsamo *et al.*, 2021; Abdullah *et al.*, 2022; Kwadzo and Annan, 2022) indeed resurfaced in the Ghana evidence. However, the original insights of this paper show individual perceptions and attitudes cannot be neatly attributed to household poverty and/or poor enforcement of legislation against child labour. They are psycho-social factors and this therefore means that special attention should be focused on moderating individual-level factors.

The insights of the paper were indeed obtained from a small sample size of qualitative research in an African country – Ghana. The insights, however, encourage future studies to expand the evidence and its interpretations to undertake large-scale studies which could involve the use of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The psycho-social dynamics reported in this paper, including beliefs that suggest that some parents may think they have the right to exploit children's work for material gain without expectations of reproach, may be comprehensively captured with quantitative techniques while contexts in which these attitudes arise can be ascertained more thoroughly through a combination of qualitative data. These studies could be aimed at finding neat ways in which artisanal fishers could socialise their children to take over from them in their old age without compromising the conditions of well-being of such children.

Future studies should establish clearly which type of child work in the coastal fisheries sector is clearly distinct from child labour and hence constitutes a different form of socialisation in the small-scale fisheries. In other words, the distinction between child work and child labour ought to be considered a complex one. This means some of the evidence reported in this paper could constitute efforts to preserve and protect child rights to enjoy culture through socialisation. It thus means future studies should address the question of which child works of marine small-scale fish workers potentially promote child rights to culture, including the transmission of cultural heritage and customary norms, from one generation to the next. Findings from such studies could show where legal enforcement can be applied to ensure fishing communities retain their right to culture, but such rights are expressed in ways that

enhance rather than undermine the right of the child to sound growth and development as well as education when they are involved in fishery activities.

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