

Girls' migration, poverty and development: challenging stereotypes Evidence from Cote-d'Ivoire and Mali

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ABSTRACT

Neglected for a long time, female migration now receives a good amount of attention in social sciences research. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly relevant, as African women form part of nearly half of all international migration (PNUD, 2006), and a larger share of internal movement. Yet, some types of female mobility remain undocumented and poorly known. As such, we will focus here on the migration of very young rural women who leave their village to go and work as domestics in the city. The phenomenon is huge, as demonstrated by the over-representation of adolescent girls in many African capital cities, and also if we consider its numerical weight and its impact on rural population where it has been studied.

Most of the attention to this type of child and youth labour migration emerges from development agencies, who approach the phenomenon by reference to Labour Law or to Children's rights, and interpret it either in terms of the vulnerability of the migrant girls and young women and the risks they face, or as a hindrance to the development of girls' schooling. Social scientists have rather studied it by reference to different forms of family solidarity, and in particular the ancient practice of child circulation. Still, the ways in which this type of female migration is viewed are most often partial and even partisan, as it results in reducing the practice to some specific dimension and purpose, instead of highlighting its complexity, the diversity of the actors involved, and the multiple logics at stake. The issue of girls' labour migration in Africa reveals a multiplicity of links between youth mobility, gender relations and rural development. With regard to both the causes of such a massive rural emigration of girls, as well as to the consequences of their experience of work in town, these links interface on demographic, economic, social and cultural levels.

In this paper, we propose to examine some strongly-held ideas that tend to prevail in the research and policy discourses on female young migrant domestic workers, in connection with the questions of poverty and development for rural populations. Three main ideas will be discussed: i) "girls' labour migration is an outcome of poverty"; ii) "girls' migration for domestic labour obstructs the development of schooling"; iii) "young domestic workers ('little maids') are a vulnerable and exploited group per se". We will discuss these propositions by considering different levels (global, community/family and individual), and by looking at the different actors' viewpoints. In particular, we will consider the way in which migrant girls themselves view and value their situation. Practices and representations will be analysed with a strong focus on gender.

The paper will be based on the interrelationship between two disciplines (sociology and demography) and two fieldworks (Côte-d'Ivoire and Mali). We'll use data resulting from two surveys: first, qualitative data collected in Abidjan and in three villages in North-Eastern Côte-d'Ivoire as part of a sociological survey (1999-2001) on child domestic service; and second, quantitative (biographical survey, 2009-10) and qualitative (2002) data collected within a follow-up survey conducted by INED since the late 1980s in south-eastern Mali.

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