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## Drivers of independent migration among adolescents from selected West African countries



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### ABSTRACT

Independent migration among adolescents is an issue of public concern in West Africa. Thus, drawing on the neoclassical economics, new economics of labour and social networks perspectives, this study explored the reasons for independent migration among adolescents. Employing a qualitative research design, 41 adolescents participated in the study. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted to gather data, which were analyzed thematically. The findings of the study indicated that the adolescents migrated due to diverse reasons (poverty and hardship; social support and networks; peer-pressure and escapade; and maltreatment and abuse). Also, it was found that generally, poverty and hardships drove adolescents to migrate from their countries of origin with the aim of finding and starting work in Ghana, which was perceived as an important source of economic opportunities. Furthermore, evidence showed that while some adolescents had positive experiences in Ghana, others were confronted with challenges, a push factor to their return and integration decisions respectively. Based on the findings of the study, conclusions were drawn.

### 1. Introduction

Independent migration among adolescents is an issue of public concern given that globally, about 35 million migrants were under the age of 20, which represents around 15 percent of the total migrant population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). The proportion of young migrants is higher in developing countries than in developed countries, and the proportion of young female migrants is higher in developed countries than developing countries (UNDESA, 2016). As children are on the move all over the world, their presence deserves notice and policy attention in all destination countries (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). Independent migrant children are children below 18 years old, who choose to move from home and reside in destination countries without a parent or adult guardian (Yaqub, 2009). Although there is evidence that the number of children migrating is high and growing, there are no reliable estimates on child migration globally, regionally and even within national contexts (Whitehead & Hashim, 2005). Several years after this observation, mainstream data shaping migration-development debates, mostly fail to identify independent adolescent migrants. Children and adolescents are used interchangeably as a child is a person 19 years or younger as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013).

Official data collection efforts on adolescent migrants is nearly

absent although there is data on youth migration (Yaqub, 2009). This blurs life stage issues between childhood and adulthood, and fails to reflect age-specific legal and social distinctions inherent in migration (Yaqub, 2009). Though adolescence is understood differently in different societies, the World Health Organization (2003) suggests that the period of adolescence is between ages 10 and 19 years and commences at the onset of puberty. This age range falls within WHO's definition of young people, which refers to individuals between ages 10 and 24 and is roughly equivalent to the word teens (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). Adolescents are by no means a uniform population with similar needs that swing evenly at the same age (Dako-Gyeke, Boateng, Addom, Gyimah, & Agyemang, 2019; MacDonald, 2003). During adolescence, issues of emotional separation from parents arise and even though this sense of separation is a crucial step in the establishment of personal values, the transition to self-sufficiency forces a range of adjustments on many adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). In addition, peer pressure is regarded the hallmark of adolescent experience because friends influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviors in ways that matter across multiple domains of well-being (Allen et al., 2015).

Although the changes that transpire during adolescence offer opportunities for positive growth experiences, they are equally associated with susceptibilities (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Machado, Galano, de Menezes Succi, Vieira, & Turato, 2016). In this context, while international migration could have a positive impact on adolescents, it could as

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well confront them with challenges (UNDESA, 2016). Given that there is youth bulge in many developing countries in Africa, the scarcity of literature on independent adolescent migration is a concern because young migrants comprise the largest group of the total migrant population on the African continent (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). Developing countries, including many African countries tend to host a greater number of migrants under 20, of which about 68 percent are adolescents aged between 10 and 19 years ((UNICEF, 2011). Many of the adolescents choose or are forced to migrate in order to escape poverty, violence, conflict, inequality, discrimination, or are displaced as a result of the effects of war or climate change (UNDESA, 2016).

Over 50% of non-Ghanaian residents are nationals from Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries (International Organization for Migration, IOM, 2009). The major origin countries of international migrants (about half) in Ghana are Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina-Faso, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire (Anarfi, n.d; UN DESA, 2015). The return to an active multi-party democratic structure and a new Constitution in 1992 led to a period of political stability that has continued through to the present day and has resulted in Ghana attracting a growing number of migrants (Eberhardt & Teal, 2010). Between 1992 and 2016, Ghana has completed six successful democratic multi-party elections, which have resulted in peaceful transitions of power from one political party to another. This is unparalleled in contemporary Africa, and has contributed to the perception amongst many immigrants that Ghana is a peaceful and stable country (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016).

Intraregional migration dominates for several reasons, such as the visa-free movement among ECOWAS members, the relatively small sizes of many countries in the sub region and the strong networks among the many ethnic groups that are scattered across the sub region (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). Notably, intraregional migration within ECOWAS is mostly due to labour mobility, with seasonal, temporary and permanent migrant workers moving mainly from countries like Niger and Mali to Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2015). Although, many children migrate in West Africa, due to lack of accurate data, the precise number of children on the move is unknown (Carrion, De Gaspari, & Zanella, 2018). Intra-regional movements of children are generally under-reported since the focus on children is scarce in available data, which are not, in general, age-disaggregated, and these children often choose invisibility when travelling, thereby exposing them to exploitation and abuse (Carrion et al., 2018; UNICEF & International Organization for Migration, 2017; Reale, 2013).

The 2010 population and housing census report indicated that Ghanaian population that was 15 years and above who were economically active, included non-Ghanaians (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012), and this group comprises adolescents from 15 to 18 years. Also, the census report did not provide details on foreigners who were minors in terms of their nationalities, gender, activities engaged in, among others. This could make understanding their role in the dynamics of international migration challenging and unclear. Furthermore, there is a dearth of detailed empirical studies that focus on the routes, practices and experiences of child migrants (Anyidoho & Ainsworth, 2009), which has resulted in poor quality design, implementation, and monitoring of public policies that protect the rights of children in the context of migration (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). Even in instances that independent migrant children were studied, the situation was often presented as a negative phenomenon and the state of the children were described as pathological (Hashim & Thorsen, 2011; Patel, Flisher, Nikapota, & Malhotra, 2008). Nonetheless, some studies on the experiences of independent child migrants suggested that migration had positive outcomes for the children, particularly in terms of economic gains where they were able to send remittances to their families in their countries of origin (Anarfi & Kwankye, 2009; Anyidoho & Ainsworth, 2009).

While agency and vulnerability have been principal organizing concepts in analyzing independent child migration, studying these in isolation from the opportunity structures that define it, offers an incomplete picture of its occurrence (Orgocka, 2012). Many children migrate independently due to a myriad of reasons and benefits, such as enhanced economic or learning opportunities, desire for new experiences, or the formation of new social relationships (Capaldi, 2017). Also, some adolescents are environmental migrants because of the sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, which compel them to leave their wanted homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently (International Organization for Migration, 2008). In addition, independent child migration could be a positive expression of the children's desire for a better life and the realization of their rights since many children who migrate usually flee from impoverished or dysfunctional families, as well as authoritative regimes (Capaldi, 2017). However, as individuals migrate to increase their personal or family welfare, they are likely to return to their countries of origin if they are unable to achieve their aspirations in their destination countries (Borjas, 1989; Schiele, 2020).

Return is part of the migration cycle because the willingness to return relates to the reasons for emigration, as well as subsequent experiences of migrants in host countries (Kjave & Šūpule, 2019). Some of the obstacles that discourage adolescents from returning to their countries of origin are unavailability of employment opportunities, dearth of opportunity to utilize the skills and education attained abroad, limited educational opportunities, as well as marginalization (Cortés, 2011). Migration and return migration may involve different transitional stages and some return migrants may have remained part of their community of origin while temporarily residing in host countries (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014). Even though agentic capacities emerge and interact across a spectrum of contextual influences that may undermine or promote migration among children, their own motives and aspirations for wishing to migrate is less documented (Capaldi, 2017; Orgocka, 2012). In Ghana, research has focused largely on independent adolescent migrants who move internally although, there is evidence of adolescents from other countries independently migrating into Ghana.

Given the limited literature on this aspect of migration, this research explored reasons for migration among independent adolescent migrants in Ghana. These are persons 19 years or younger who move from home and live at destination countries without a parent or adult guardian. Such information is useful as there is limited data on independent adolescent migrants in Ghana, particularly from the West African Sub-Region. Also, qualitative data on independent adolescent migrants is rare. Thus, this explorative study contributes to filling this gap by offering information on adolescents included in this study. Identifying and understanding reasons that underpin adolescents' independent movement from their countries of origin is imperative. In order to enhance understanding of independent adolescent migration, it is important to consider issues related to adolescence, agency, benefits, and vulnerability (Capaldi, 2017). This would help stakeholders and professionals who work with migrant adolescents, especially social workers to review their activities as many of the adolescents may be escaping challenges and restraints in their countries of origin.

### 1.1. Theoretical arguments

In view of the fact that different theories have been proposed to explain international migration, the neoclassical economics, new economics of labour and social networks perspectives guided this study. At present, the main theory that explains the causes of migration is the neoclassical theory with its assumption that migration is stirred mostly by rational economic considerations of relative benefits and costs, generally financial, but also psychological (Todaro & Smith, 2006). The theory argues that employment opportunities and wage differentials between receiving and sending countries, as well as the expectations of

migrants to acquire higher earnings in destination areas, are the main influences of migration (Todaro, 1969; Todaro & Smith, 2006). Accordingly, emphasis is placed on job opportunities available to migrants at the initial stage and expected income differentials (Borjas, 2008; Harris & Todaro, 1970). Assuming that many people migrate for economic reasons, at the initial stage of migration, they usually have some information about opportunities in the intended destination countries (Makina, 2012).

Generally, advocates of the neoclassical economics theory associate migration with structural requirements of modern industrial economies and consider movement as an individual decision for income maximization (De Haas, 2007; Massey et al., 1993). Furthermore, the theory suggests that individuals choose to migrate to countries where they would be most productive based on their skills, but before they could earn higher wages, they must undertake certain investments. In addition, the neoclassical economic theory assumes that immigrants would not return to their countries of origin if they benefit from investments like education, wages and prestige in host countries (Constant & Massey, 2002). From the perspective of the theory, international migration is influenced by geographic differences in the supply of and demand for labor, as well as the resulting wage differences, which cause people to migrate (De Haas, 2007; Massey et al., 1993). Migrants contribute to the labor-receiving countries' economy by fostering production, and in the case of remittances-receiving countries, they are likely to reduce their income inequality and wage differentials (Prakash, 2009). Furthermore, since the theory perceives a migrant as a rational being who wishes to increase his or her income, return migration is regarded as a failure of the planned migration, since the aim of getting a higher income has not been achieved (Kļave & Šūpule, 2019; Todaro, 1969).

It is important to note that apart from the macro level, actors at other levels could influence people's decision to migrate (Stark & Bloom, 1985; Dako-Gyeke, 2015). The new economics of labor migration (NELM) theory, which was developed to refute some key assumptions of the neo-classical theory, argued that migration decisions are not made by isolated individual actors, but by bigger units of people who are related, mostly families, households or culturally defined units (Stark & Bloom, 1985). The main argument of NELM is that the decision to migrate is collective and involves households and families with the aim of not only maximizing income, but also considering it a risk management strategy to reduce market and labour failures (Dako-Gyeke, 2015; Stark, 1984; Stark & Levhari, 1982; Taylor, 1999). Even though risks to household income are usually minimized in developed countries through government programmes or private insurance markets, these institutional interventions are absent, imperfect or not accessible by the poor in developing countries, and as a result, they diversify risks through migration (Massey et al., 1993). While adolescents may travel alone to destination countries, the decision to migrate could have been taken at the family level as a means of diversifying income risks or shocks.

The NELM theory further suggests that remittances act as a mutually beneficial arrangement between the migrant (independent adolescent migrant in this context) and his or her family (Lucas & Stark, 1985). In this regard, migrants usually return to their countries of origin after achieving targets, such as savings, education, experience, knowledge, contacts, insurance, household needs, acquisition of investment capital and skills (Cassarino, 2004; Stark, 1991). These targets could be achieved by migrants through the assistance of people in their networks. According to the social network theory, most often, migration plans, choice of destination countries and return intentions are influenced by social networks (Dako-Gyeke, 2016; Fawcett, 1989; Haug, 2008). Migration network is a set of interpersonal ties that links migrants with relatives, friends or fellow countrymen at home who convey information, provide financial backups, and facilitate employment opportunities and accommodation in various supportive ways (Arango, 2000; Haug, 2008). Social networks play a fundamental role in

migration decisions in view of the fact that the social structure of families, especially in many African countries like kinship patterns, could determine the availability, expectations, motives, and incentives (Harbison, 1981). Social networks also reduce costs and risks associated with migration and increase the expected net returns (Massey et al., 1993).

The more social relations a person (independent adolescent migrant in this context) has at the potential destination, as well as the more information these relationships offer, the more vital is the decision to migrate as network connections serve as social capital that could facilitate access to employment in destination countries (Coombs, 1978; Massey et al., 1993). More importantly, migration sustains itself on social networks given that it enables migrants to cross borders, legally or illegally (Böcker, 1994; International Organisation for Migration, 2003; Haug, 2008). Although the neoclassical economics, new economics labour migration and social networks perspectives operate at different levels, they complement each other and provide a better understanding, particularly regarding why adolescents migrate independently. Moreover, in Africa, especially West Africa where inter-regional migration is common, social network could serve as both a push and pull factor for many adolescents who migrate independently to Ghana.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study design

A qualitative research approach was utilized to explore reasons for independent migration among adolescents. This research design allowed the researchers to understand the phenomenon from participants' perspective (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & Lacey, 2016). Furthermore, this design allows researchers to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of an individual, as well as a population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, the qualitative research design enabled the researchers to engage a small number of participants extensively in order to develop patterns and connections of meaning with the aim of gaining individual values rather than findings for generalization (Hammersley, 2013). Thus, the qualitative research paradigm permitted the researchers to obtain information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of independent adolescent migrants.

### 2.2. Participants and setting

The study sample consisted of 41 independent adolescent migrants (16 females and 25 males) who migrated from four countries in West Africa. This sample size was appropriate as Creswell (2012) argued that considering sample size in qualitative research, it is normal to study few individuals or cases. Also, Dworkin (2012) noted that a sample size of five to fifty participants is enough to achieve data saturation. Moreover, Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003) opined that within qualitative research, the sample size is normally small mainly because phenomena need to occur once in order to be a part of the analytical map. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select the independent adolescent migrants.

Purposive sampling is appropriate when identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are, especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The snowball technique was used because some of the adolescents were hard to reach. Using this method, some participants provided the researchers with names of at least one or more potential participants (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The researchers therefore relied on the first few participants to help locate their friends who satisfied the inclusion criteria. The criteria for inclusion were adolescents (a) between ages 10 and 17 years, (b) who migrated independently from an African country, and (c) who had stayed in Ghana for at least six months.

The researchers contacted the heads of various migrant organizations who served as gate keepers. These gate keepers are members of various groups who work to promote the interest of adolescents with whom they share the same national affiliation. In this study, recruitment of independent adolescent migrants continued until saturation was reached when repetition of responses was detected. The study was conducted in selected communities in Accra, the capital city of the Greater Accra Region and the administrative capital of Ghana. Accra has an estimated population of 1,848,614 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). The city is recognised as the centre for manufacturing, transportation, tourism, administrative activities of government and marketing. Infrastructure and economic activities make Accra an attractive place for unemployed people from rural (Van Den Berg, 2007) and other areas.

### 2.3. Data collection procedures

Data for the study were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual in-depth interviews (IDIs). Out of the 41 participants, 11 of them were individually interviewed while the remaining 30 were engaged in three FGDs consisting of between nine and eleven members in each group. As noted by Fusch and Ness, 2015, the number of people in a group should range between six and twelve participants to ensure the group is diverse and favourable enough for participants to freely express themselves. The FGD was useful as the researchers drew on diverse experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018). Also, the technique emphasizes interaction among participants and could be analyzed to understand how participants co-construct their views by sharing and contesting knowledge (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). In-depth interviews were conducted for participants who preferred to be interviewed privately. It is an effective method for obtaining detailed information from individual participants about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

The three FGDs were made up of the following: FGD 1 (10 boys from Niger); FGD 2 (11 boys from Nigeria); and FGD 3 (9 girls from Togo). The FGD participants were grouped based on their language of choice and countries of origin. The IDIs consisted of 11 adolescents (males and females) from Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Togo. Both the FGDs and IDIs were conducted in English, French, Hausa and Twi (Twi is a dominant Ghanaian language), depending on the choice of participants. The official language of Ghana is English, but French and Hausa are two other major languages (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2017). The researchers are competent in the languages with the exception of French, which they employed the services of an interpreter. A set of open-ended guiding questions were developed by the researchers and used for both the IDIs and FGDs. The open-ended questions allowed participants to express themselves freely and enabled the researchers and participants to discuss emerging issues in much detail. Each FGD session lasted between 90 and 120 min, while IDIs lasted between 45 and 60 min.

### 2.4. Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Social Sciences at the University of Ghana. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the benefits and possible risks of the study, and were notified of their right to withdraw their participation at any point of the study. Informed consent and assent were obtained. Since the adolescents were autonomous, the researchers sought consent from their group leaders. Also, heads of migrant organizations who were identified by the adolescents and were above 18 years were considered to provide consent for the children before they were interviewed. Written consent for participation and assent were obtained from heads of migrant organizations and the adolescents respectively.

Information was provided in clear simple terms, explained the study procedure, as well as level of participation required from the adolescents. Both the adolescents and heads of migrant organizations were assured of confidentiality and privacy as all the study tools used did not have identifying information. The consent forms were sent to heads of migrant organizations through the adolescents and those who had questions, concerns or both contacted the researchers for clarification before the forms were completed and submitted. Participation in the study was voluntary. Before the FGDs and IDIs began, a short pre-interview demographic questionnaire was completed for each participant. Upon completion of the interviews, participants were given snacks, money for lunch and reimbursement for travel. These items were approved by the IRB.

### 2.5. Analysis of data

Following the data collection, the audio recorder was replayed several times for the purpose of transcribing the data. Individual interviews and FGDs that were conducted in French, Hausa and Twi were translated into English and some quotations were edited grammatically, ensuring preservation of the content. All identifying information relating to participants were concealed and transcripts were saved with no personal identifiers. The meanings of participants' perspectives were interpreted through reading and rereading of interview and focus group transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were then broken down into categories and interpreted with the purpose of understanding the coded data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sargeant, 2012).

The emerging themes and concepts that were repeated in the data were identified. The researchers then extracted from the text, themes that considered statements of importance and meaning existent in most of the data. In order to ensure credibility of the findings, the transcriptions were augmented with field notes taken by the researchers during data collection. Furthermore, themes that were independently developed were interpreted and agreement was reached through discussions with academic colleagues who had professional and/or academic knowledge in the field.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Demographic characteristics of participants

The sample consisted of 13 girls and 28 boys aged between 13 and 17 years. Table 1 provides information on the socio-demographic characteristics of independent adolescent migrants who participated in the study. The subsequent section is organized under the following themes: (a) reasons for migration and (b) return intentions, as indicated in Table 2.

### 3.2. Reasons for migration

The reasons why the adolescents migrated independently to Ghana were explored. It was found that they migrated for the following reasons: poverty and hardship; social support and networks; peer-pressure and escapade; and maltreatment and abuse.

#### 3.2.1. Poverty and hardships

Many of the adolescents included in this study indicated that due to financial challenges and hardships, they were compelled to move to Ghana to search for jobs in order to earn income. Most often, adolescent labor migration is considered in opposition to schooling, because the former often causes one to drop out of school. While some of the adolescents took personal decisions to migrate independently, others were encouraged by their families to do so. This adolescent had to migrate due to a sudden change in her environment that compelled her to drop out of school:

**Table 1**  
Demographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristics	Population (n = 41)
<i>Gender</i>	
Females	13
Males	28
<i>Age (years)</i>	
14	4
15	9
16	12
17	16
<i>Country of Origin</i>	
Mali	4
Nigeria	15
Niger	12
Togo	10
<i>Highest Educational Attainment</i>	
Primary	25
Junior High School	6
No Formal Education	10
<i>Occupation</i>	
Apprentice dressmaker	2
Sells sachet water	5
Sells food	8
Head porter	3
Shoe repairer	12
Pedicure	10
Unemployed	1
<i>Religion</i>	
Christians	10
Muslim	31
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Single	41
<i>Number of Children</i>	
None	41
<i>Place of Residence</i>	
Ablekuma	2
Madina	20
Accra Central	2
Teiman	9
Circle	8
<i>Duration of Stay in Ghana</i>	
Less than one year, but more than six months	12
1	12
2	13
3	2
6	1
7	1

**Table 2**  
Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Focus Areas
Reasons for migration	Poverty and hardship Social support and networks Peer influence and escapade Maltreatment and abuse
Return intentions of adolescents	Reside in Ghana temporarily Reside in Ghana permanently

*I decided to migrate because life was difficult at home, even getting food to eat was a problem. My father was a farmer, but now he is old with no source of income. He could not afford to pay my fees so I dropped out of school. I helped people on their farms and saved some money, which I used to pay for my transportation to Ghana. Now, I sell sachet water and I hope to save some money and if possible, continue with my education in Ghana.*

(Female, 15 years, Nigeria).

Another participant indicated that he came to Ghana to work and earn money to perform marriage rites. This indicates an individual decision that was taken by the adolescent for income maximization as proposed by the neoclassical economics theory:

*In my religion, marriage is expensive. I am in Ghana to work and earn money in order to go back to my country and marry. My family is poor so it would not be possible to receive any financial assistance towards my marriage, although support would come in other forms. I have started saving some money and I am excited about it because one is culturally expected to marry, poverty notwithstanding. I work as a head porter at Cow Lane (a business hub in Accra). The work is difficult, but the money is good.*

(Male, 17 years, Mali).

Some of the adolescents were compelled by their parents to migrate. As argued by NELM, the decision to migrate is collective and involves households and families with the aim of earning income to support the family. This portrays the connection between adolescents' migration decision and their household economy:

*Some of my friends in my village had migrated to Ghana to work so my parents asked me to do same. I was scared travelling alone, but my father urged me to be brave since I am a male, citing some females who migrated alone to encourage me. I have eight siblings and I am the eldest so there was pressure on me to help take care of my siblings in view of the poverty of my parents. My parents borrowed money for my travel. I work as a shoe repairer and I am working hard to send money home to settle the money they borrowed, and also take care of my younger siblings.*

(Male, 16 years, Togo).

Extended family members also played a role in adolescents' migration decisions:

*The reason why I migrated was that my parents are dead and I was responsible for the upkeep of my younger siblings with support from my uncle. After sometime, my uncle said he could no longer afford to take care of us. He and other extended family members advised me to travel and work so I could send money to my siblings back home. I cut nails, it is not always that business is good, but every day, at least I get money for food. I hope to save enough to sponsor my siblings to join me in Ghana.*

(Male, Niger, 17 years).

Poverty was a key factor in the adolescents' migration decision. While a number of them decided on their own to migrate, others were compelled to do so by their families so they could support family members in their countries of origin.

3.2.2. Social support and networks

It was found that some independent adolescent migrants included in this study migrated because they had friends and family members who resided in Ghana. These social contacts provided information that aided their decisions to migrate, as a participant highlighted:

*My friends who had already migrated sent information that life was good in Ghana so we should join them. Those who came to Nigeria for a visit, had nice clothes and mobile phones. A friend sent me money for my travel, but it was not enough so I had to wait for some time. He informed me that he was repairing shoes in Ghana. Before I travelled, I learnt how to repair shoes. On arrival, he met me at the transport station. Our daily work involves going to neighbourhoods to repair shoes.*

(Male, 14 years, Nigeria).

For some adolescents, they were influenced by family members to migrate to a particular destination country. Social networks play a vital role in migration decisions as the social structure of families in many African countries could determine the availability, expectations, motives and incentives:

*My older sister migrated to Ghana some years ago so she encouraged me to join her. When I arrived in Accra, she had moved to another Region in Ghana so I had to find ways and means to survive. Initially, life was difficult, I was going to people's homes to wash clothes. Later, I met a Togolese woman who had lived in Ghana for many years, she helped me to secure a place for night food-selling business. Currently, I am an apprentice dressmaker. I go for my apprenticeship during the day and I sell food at night. Another family member has also moved from Togo to Ghana to assist in the business.*

(Female, 16 years, Togo).

This participant explained how a family member eased his fears about migration:

*I always wanted to travel to Ghana to look for a better job, but I was scared because I had never travelled outside of my village. My cousin who migrated to Ghana told me that the journey to Ghana was easy and he provided information on how to get to Ghana. That eased my fears so I started working on people's farms and herded cattle to save money for my travel to Ghana, which I did successfully. When I arrived, my cousin took me to a Mosque which serves as our sleeping place at night, we work during the day cutting nails. I am sure I would get a better job soon.*

(Male, 17 years, Niger).

Unquestionably, support from family members and friends played a crucial role in the adolescents' migration decisions. Through social networks some adolescents learnt about opportunities and conditions in Ghana, which influenced their desire and knack to migrate.

### 3.2.3. Peer influence and escapade

Given that friends are very important for adolescents, peer influence was identified as a factor that influenced some adolescents to migrate to Ghana. Many of them reported that they migrated to explore opportunities as they received convincing information from friends. In this regard, migration seem to have become part of a collective practice among adolescents as they were influenced by peers to desire for new discoveries in Ghana. Accordingly, a participant narrated:

*Growing up in Nigeria, we heard good things about Ghana and interacted with some Ghanaians who lived in Nigeria. When my friends and I planned to travel to Ghana, some were unable to travel because they did not have money and others were scared. Initially, I was scared too, but I braved it and made the journey. My friends in Nigeria call me on phone all the time requesting that I send them money. Ghana is nice, but you have to work hard to survive.*

(Female, 16 years, Nigeria).

A participant described how he was convinced by friends about job opportunities in Ghana. In addition, learning dominant languages spoken in Ghana was valued by some adolescents as a means of interacting with people:

*I travelled to Ghana because my friends told me there were many jobs here compared to Togo. I was therefore eager to travel and when I got here, I found a job after sometime. Initially, life was challenging because of the language barrier, but after a while life was better as I forced myself to learn few words in Twi (a dominant Ghanaian language). Now, I am able to communicate with more people, especially my customers. I hope to learn other languages spoken in Ghana and I am sure that would help my business.*

(Male, 15 years, Mali).

For some participants, although they were influenced by friends to migrate, they were disappointed when they arrived in Ghana:

*My friend told me there is a lot of money in Ghana so I decided to migrate. Since I got here, life has been very difficult for me because I do not speak English or any Ghanaian language. Although I found work as a head porter in Accra Central, I have regretted migrating because getting a*

*place to sleep is a challenge, we sleep in front of shops when they close. Sometimes business goes down so I switch jobs by selling water on the streets, for which the profit is minimal. During such times, I borrow money from my friends for my upkeep and pay back when business picks up.*

(Male, 15 years, Mali).

While some of the participants were influenced by their peers to migrate, upon arrival, they had mixed feelings. Some found their decision to migrate rewarding, but others had regrets as they encountered challenges.

### 3.2.4. Maltreatment and abuse

According to some participants, they were forced to migrate to Ghana due to maltreatment and abuse from family members. This indicates that some adolescents are on the move to escape violence and exploitation. A participant described how she was maltreated in her country of origin:

*I lived with my uncle when I was in Togo. He and his wife were always insulting and calling me bad names. They did not allow me to attend school as I had to do house chores the whole day, even when unwell. Anytime I made a mistake, they beat me and did not give me food. I had to wear torn clothes and was treated like a servant. I did not have friends and always felt sad so I decided to run away for safety and I ended up in Ghana.*

(Female, 16 years, Togo).

Another participant who was engaged in child labor explained:

*I lived with my old grandmother who engaged me in petty sales activities. Any day that I was unable to sell all the items, she became angry and punished me by asking me to fetch water from a very long distance, even if she did not need it. I always had neck pain from carrying items for sale, as well as the water. When I informed her of the pains, she ignored me so I decided to run away to Ghana. I sell food and life is good in Ghana. I have made many friends in Ghana, especially at my church and they are nice people.*

(Female, 15 years, Nigeria).

This participant revealed how she was accused of stealing money:

*I lived with my aunty who promised my parents she would enrol me in a better school in the city, which she did. After few months, she complained about my poor performance and insisted I dropped out of school. I started working at her chop bar (local restaurant), after promising to pay me monthly wages. For the many months I worked, she paid me for only two months. She always accused me of stealing her money and beat me. I could not endure the accusations any longer so I absconded to Ghana. My parents are not aware I am here.*

(Female, 17 years, Nigeria).

Maltreatment and abuse were reasons why some female participants migrated to Ghana. As indicated by the participants, the perpetrators were both close and distant family members.

### 3.3. Return intentions of adolescents

The return intentions of independent adolescent migrants are crucial because they migrated due to diverse reasons. While migration could have a positive impact on some adolescents, for others, it confronts them with challenges. Thus, adolescents included in this study had intentions either to reside in Ghana temporarily or permanently. The NELM theory suggests that migrants typically return to their countries of origin after achieving targets, such as savings, as well as the acquisition of skills. Commenting on his plans to return, a participant who had ties to his country of origin, revealed:

*I have plans for returning to Nigeria to settle there permanently because my parents are there and I want to be close to them. Once I get enough*

money, I will go back to marry and settle down with my family. I have improved on my skills in shoe repairs so I am sure I would get a lot of customers when I return. I miss my family and friends back home. Getting along with people in Ghana is not easy because as soon as they get to know you are a Nigerian, they become suspicious of you.

(Male, 17 years, Nigeria).

Other adolescents became dissatisfied after their arrival as they were unable to find a sustainable economic opportunity. These group of adolescents regretted leaving their home countries and therefore had plans of returning home. Echoing his disappointment in migrating to Ghana, a participant explained:

I cannot wait to return to my country, life in Ghana is very difficult. I came here because my friends told me it was easy to get a job and earn income, that is not true. I have regretted travelling to Ghana, since I arrived, I have faced many challenges. I do not have a job so I rely on friends for survival. I cannot go back empty-handed, my family and friends would be disappointed in me. I hope to find a job soon in order to save some money and return to Niger.

(Male, 16 years, Niger).

Some independent adolescent migrants voiced their satisfaction with their economic condition and therefore had plans to remain in Ghana. The neoclassical economic theory suggests that immigrants would not return to their countries of origin if they benefit from investments, such as wages in host countries. This adolescent who had intentions of residing in Ghana permanently asserted that life was good:

I do not intend going back to Mali because life in Ghana is better than Mali. Now, I speak some Ghanaian languages and this has been very useful as I am able to communicate better. If I get money, I have plans of visiting my parents and siblings at home, but I will return to Ghana. I came here to look for a job, which I have found. There are no jobs in Mali so it would be better to stay here. If I return, I would be unemployed and a burden on my poor parents and siblings.

(Male, 16 years, Mali).

In addition, some adolescents had established ties with Ghana and therefore desired to stay in the country for a foreseeable future:

I am not even thinking about returning to Togo because Ghana is my home. From the time I got here, I have met a lot of Togolese in Ghana and there are opportunities here. I have my peace of mind as I have a job and a place to lay my head. Since moving to Ghana, I have learned how to be independent and I have freedom to do things, which I would not have been able to do in Togo. I wish my siblings will migrate to Ghana, as well.

(Female, 17 years, Togo).

Although their plans may change with time, it is vital to explore the return intentions of independent adolescent migrants, especially the reasons why they intend to reside in Ghana temporary or permanently. Given that these are adolescents who are living independent lives, understanding their living conditions is essential as these could influence their decision to return or integrate in their destination country.

#### 4. Discussion of findings

This study explored the drivers of independent migration among adolescents from selected West African countries who resided in Ghana. Our findings indicated that the adolescents migrated from Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. These countries are among major West African origin countries of international migrants in Ghana (Anarfi, n.d; UN DESA, 2015). West Africa has been a region of free movement as many ethnic communities reside in the region (Olsen, 2011). Presently, ECOWAS supports regional integration through the free movement protocol, which allows citizens of ECOWAS countries to move between ECOWAS states visa free, if they have ECOWAS state issued documents (Carrion et al., 2018; Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial

Cooperation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 2016). It is important to emphasize that ECOWAS documentation status of adolescents included in this study was not explored. Most often, migrants feel uncomfortable discussing their immigration status for fear of being reported to immigration authorities and eventually being deported.

The adolescents were between 14 and 17 years and many of them were males. Compared to developed countries, the proportion of young migrants is higher in developing countries with majority of them being males (Global Migration Group, 2014). With regard to the reasons why they migrated, it was found that they did so for different reasons (poverty and hardship; social support and networks; peer-pressure and escapade; and maltreatment and abuse). These drivers of migration are related because although poverty and hardship could influence an adolescent to take an individual decision or be influenced by his or her family to migrate, the process could be facilitated or hampered by social networks. This suggests a connection among the neoclassical economics, new economics of labour and social networks perspectives. As noted by O'Connell and Farrow, 2007, many children migrate independently for a range of motives, such as improved learning or economic opportunities and a desire for new experiences. The changes that occur during adolescence provide opportunities for positive growth experiences, as well as challenges (Machado, Galano, de Menezes Succi, Vieira, & Turato, 2016; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). While some adolescents took individual decisions to migrate, others were compelled by family and friends to do so.

Even though the acceptance of adolescents' agency to migrate opposes the construction of childhood, both agentic abilities and contextual factors influence migration during adolescence. For many of the independent adolescent included in this study, poverty and hardships were the drivers of their decisions as they chose or were compelled to migrate in search of employment opportunities to enhance their personal and family economic conditions. In some instances, adolescents were obliged to migrate due to environmental drivers, such as the sudden loss of family income, which negatively affected their living conditions. Werz and Hoffman (2016) opine that a high level of vulnerability coupled with demographic pressure would result in the influx of environmental migrants from vulnerable regions in sub-Saharan Africa. Migration plays a vital role in reducing poverty, mainly through remittances (Siddiqui, 2012). As proposed by the neoclassical economic theory, employment opportunities and wage differentials between receiving and sending countries influence migration (Todaro, 1969). Thus, many adolescents migrate due to lack of employment opportunities in their countries of origin and the awareness of opportunities in other countries (Save the Children, 2008).

A major challenge is that during their journeys, as well as their stay in destination countries, independent adolescent migrants are likely to be vulnerable as they could be exposed to humiliating and confusing situations that may leave deep scars that could adversely affect their development and wellbeing. However, international migration could have positive impacts on young people by exposing them to new opportunities like a path to participate in higher education, better jobs, chance to gain professional experience or to pursue personal development, building self-confidence, and allowing them to acquire skills and competencies (UNDESA, 2016). The finding that many of the adolescents included in this study migrated in order to escape poverty and find work in Ghana is interesting because largely, unemployment rate is high (13.69%) among youth in Ghana (Plecher, 2020). Youth unemployment and joblessness are major socio-economic and political problems, which drive many youths in Ghana to migrate across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, although there are risks associated with their journeys (Baah-Boateng, 2016; Dako-Gyeke, 2015). Many African countries with the exception of Rwanda, Benin and Guinea, have youth unemployment rates that are twice that of adult unemployment rates (African Development Bank Group, 2015; Dekker & Hollander, 2017).

Other factors could motivate adolescents to migrate to African

countries with high youth unemployment rates similar to their countries' of origin, to search for job opportunities. As found in this study, some adolescents migrated because they were influenced by their social support and networks in destination countries. Social networks influence migration decisions as the social structure of families could determine the availability and incentives for migration (Harbison, 1981). Findings from extant studies indicate that social networks play important role in the migration process (Dako-Gyeke, 2015; Fawcett, 1989; Haug, 2008; Massey et al., 1993). Many people, including adolescents who migrate, particularly for economic reasons, at the initial stage of migration, usually receive support, including information from their networks about opportunities in potential host countries (Makina, 2012). Usually, useful feedback mechanisms are created within networks in the form of information, resources and assistance that reduce the costs and risks of migration, thereby facilitating the migration process (van Meeteren & Pereira, 2016).

Evidence suggests that relatives and friends in destination countries help reduce challenges that prospective migrants are likely to encounter by providing information on job opportunities and other support that would aid their integration into new environments (Mendoza et al., 2013). Even though family relationships and ties influence migration related decisions and actions (Kagan et al., 2011; Winters, De Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2001), for many adolescents, the role of friends cannot be over emphasized as peer pressure is regarded as the seal of adolescence (Allen et al., 2015). Generally, child migrants follow set patterns and emulate paths established by their peers (Iverson, 2002). Additionally, peer networks permit information sharing and resources that are crucial for coping, resilience and adapting to new environments (Thompson et al., 2013). Such information would be useful for adolescents who may be forced to migrate in order to escape maltreatment and abuse.

In this study, maltreatment and abuse forced some female adolescents to migrate. Similarly, in their study on street girls and boys in Bangladesh, Conticini and Hulme (2007) found that many of the girls reported domestic violence the year prior to their migration. These girls migrated to free themselves from abuse. Other studies have reported that children migrated in order to escape sexual abuse or other forms of violence (Beauchemin, 1999; Iverson, 2002). However, given the risks that are associated with independent migration among adolescents, girls who migrate to escape abuse may still be at risk in destination countries. This suggests the need for adequate preparation and information on the destination country before embarking on international migration. Nonetheless, adjusting to a new environment could be challenging no matter the amount of information received or preparations made by adolescents before leaving their countries of origin.

In this study, some adolescents who had information about better job opportunities in Ghana were disappointed on arrival and therefore had intentions to return to their countries of origin. However, many of the adolescents who had positive experiences, indicated their intentions of residing in Ghana permanently. Thus, migration experience could end up representing either an opportunity or a risk for young people (UNDESA, 2016), which could lead to their decision to return to their countries of origin or not. For instance, the neoclassical theory suggests that if migrants' expectations of higher earnings in destination countries do not become a reality, it would result in a decision to return to their countries of origin (Cassarino, 2004; Constant & Massey, 2002). Nevertheless, given that return could be viewed as a failed migration experience, some migrants who are unable to achieve their goals of earning higher incomes would be unwilling to return home, but rather endure humiliating conditions in host countries or travel to other countries to explore opportunities there in order to avoid marginalization in their countries of origin (Dako-Gyeke, 2016).

While some adolescent migrants' expectations may not be met while in Ghana, they may not return to their countries of origin since their return could add pressure to their families' vulnerable conditions. Interestingly, adolescents who may have achieved their targets and wish to return to their countries of origin, may be discouraged from

doing so due to challenges, such as lack of employment opportunities. It is very uncommon that the economies of countries of origin would develop so fast that it would offer a better standard of living than host countries (Markowitz & Stefansson 2004; Piotrowski & Tong, 2010; Sussman, 2010). If conditions do not improve in countries of origin, many adolescent migrants who return, may do so temporarily with the aim of re-emigrating in the future. Most often, the desire to return relates to the reasons for emigration, experiences in host countries (Klave & Šūpule, 2019), and more importantly, experiences during the journey as many of the adolescents travelled alone.

In view of the fact that return migration within Africa, especially West Africa, mostly involves labor migrants who could not realize their dreams in terms of securing better jobs and opportunities abroad, as well as those who may have met their targets, but are experiencing re-integration challenges, it is important for governments to initiate policies that address the socioeconomic and psychosocial needs of adolescent return migrants. This is crucial due to the absence of children's perspective within migration laws and policies, as well as the lack of a migrant perspective within childhood policies (UNICEF, 2011). In consequence, specific actions need to be taken by governments to respond to the needs of returned adolescents. Such actions should consider macro-level factors at both origin and destination countries, such as economic, institutional, and cultural factors in order to fully understand the mechanisms at work in the decision-making process of staying or returning (Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2018). Identifying and addressing the root causes of migration would help ensure their rights and protect this vulnerable population.

#### 4.1. Strengths and weaknesses of the study

This study is useful because independent migration among adolescents is an issue of concern in West Africa. While migration could have positive benefits for adolescent migrants, the process could also confront them with challenges. Accordingly, allowing independent adolescent migrants to share their experiences helped to highlight the plight of this vulnerable group, and also contributed to reduce the evidence gap. This notwithstanding, a limitation of this study is that the participants excluded adolescent migrants from other West African countries aside Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. Thus, findings from this study may not be transferred to other countries. While it might be possible to apply the findings to similar situations provided there is a certain degree of similarity among the contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), additional studies that draw on participants from other countries are needed in order to fully understand the phenomenon of independent adolescent migration in Africa.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, adolescent independent migrants included in this study, migrated due to diverse reasons in search for better life opportunities. Poverty and hardship; social support and networks; peer-pressure and escapade; as well as maltreatment and abuse were the drivers of migration among the adolescents. Evidence showed that they migrated mainly with the aim of finding and starting work as they perceived Ghana as a source of economic prospects. Thus, the adolescents were engaged in economic activities in order to enhance their economic lives and that of their families. As noted by Innovations, Environment, Development (IED, 2005; Olsen, 2011), migration in West Africa is sturdily influenced by poverty due to economic and socio-political crises, and continues to be linked with the search for wealth. Migration and poverty have therefore become critical development issues in the contemporary world, especially in Africa (Ouchou, 2002).

Furthermore, while some adolescents had positive experiences in Ghana, others were confronted with difficulties, which influenced their return and integration decisions, respectively. It is therefore important

to understand that migration is driven by diverse factors and precipitate varied consequences. The neoclassical theory suggests that if migrants' expectations of higher earnings in their countries of destination do not become a reality, it would result in a decision to return to their countries of origin (Cassarino, 2004; Constant & Massey, 2002). Given the youth bulge in many developing countries in Africa, including Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo, and the youths' preference to be invisible when undertaking their journeys, there is an urgent need to recognize and manage migration among adolescents, particularly the associated risks. This would help countries in the West African Sub-Region to harness the benefits of adolescent migration to support their socio-economic development.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary material

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