



Women’s Operational Vulnerability and Risk in Ghanaian Business Systems: A Case Study of “Kayayei” in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract. The ‘Kayayei’ business presents several risks to the young women although there are some economic benefits. Over the years, there have been some studies in this area, but to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies has examined extensively the vulnerability (emotional and physical) of these porters. This study, therefore, assesses women’s vulnerability and risk in Kayayei business in Accra Central District. Specifically, this study examines the extent of harassment by patrons on the female head porters and the effect it has on their productivity. It further investigates the reproductive health challenges faced by these female head porters. Using a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with fourteen purposively selected head porters. This study found that the Kayayei become victims of verbal and sexual harassment and exploitation by their patrons and the general public and face some reproductive health challenges due to the very nature of their jobs.

Keywords: Vulnerability · Internal migration · Porter · Porterage · Job quality · Ghana

1 Introduction/Background

Ghana, like most developing countries, faces many developmental challenges. Among the list of problems is the issue of migration that manifests itself in several forms. While professionals usually seek greener pastures by migrating to developed countries, unskilled youths from rural areas and the hinterlands move from the underdeveloped areas predominantly farming communities to the cities to do menial jobs [2]. Specifically, many migrate from the northern part of Ghana to the south. This pattern of internal migration has particularly been influenced by the stark differences in the levels of poverty between the Northern and the Southern regions of the country, as well as their respective capacities to respond to new economic opportunities. A majority of these low skilled migrants end up working in the informal sector in occupations requiring very little or no education and skills such as porters, petty traders and seasonal laborers [3].

Porters (aka Kayayei) are individuals who carry goods for shoppers or traders in and around commercial areas for a negotiated fee. They provide a useful service to their patrons who are usually traders, travelers, business owners, food sellers and home managers who shop in bulk [4]. Kayayei is a noun that is used to represent female head porters in Ghana. The term Kayayie is made up of two words; ‘kaya’, a Hausa word meaning load or goods and ‘yei’, a Ga word meaning females [5]. Although there are no records of Kayayie in Southern Ghana, it is estimated that, there are about 160,000 in Accra [6]. The history of the Kayayie in Ghana can be blamed on the withdrawal of government subsidies on health care, social services and agricultural input in Northern Ghana as early as in the 1980s. It resulted in an increase in the cost of agricultural production and general cost of living and consequently, led to increased migration from northern regions of the country to urban centres perceived to offer better opportunities that will help enhance their livelihood [5]. Porterage has been an ancient traditional mode of transporting goods in the world [7]. Traditionally, porterage in Ghana is a means of transporting goods in the absence of modern means of transport. For instance, congestion in and around markets in Ghana caused by unplanned buildings and structures, human traffic, and motorised traffic make it difficult for the effective use of trucks and vehicles hence the services of porters “are used to offset the difficulty of vehicles accessing the center of the markets to load or discharge goods” [4, p. 1].

Porterage activity is a means to economic prosperity for these unskilled women. According to Opare [8], women porters in southern Ghana use the activity as a means to accumulate capital to engage in other economic ventures such as skills training, marriage or trading. However, there exist several risks in the continuous carrying of the goods from one place to the other and the risk and vulnerability of their living environment. For instance, the daily graphic in January 2007 in a report described the plight of the female head porters in the two major cities in Ghana. The report described how many porters sleep and wash down in the open, defecate in open gutters, cook, engage in sexual activities and deliver their babies at major lorry parks. These can pose as a threat to the health of the general public as a result of the activities of these Kayayei [10]. Since they mostly migrate from rural areas to urban areas, and practically do not know anyone, they usually have no place of abode and sleep in kiosks and corners of the market. This directly exposes them to armed robbers and rapists [9] which also leads them having sexually transmitted infections and the consequential complications.

Also, the Kayayei are exploited in many ways by their leaders and supervisors and this sometimes make them so vulnerable and lures them into having force relationship with other males as a surviving strategy. These head porters are seen as one of the marginalised group in society, so they become subjects of multiple abuses including their rights, freedoms and access to basic life necessities [9]. Additionally, Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah [4, p. 3] observe that it is ‘common that kayayei are exploited by their patrons and hassled by police and city authorities. Also, patrons harass the porters so much that Opare [8, p. 44] characterized it as “an exploitation of women by women”. For instance, some patrons insult and ridicule them while some family members and people who act as chaperons take advantage and exploit them. As an example, some chaperons are unable to account for monies saved with them by these porters [8].

Despite the urgency of this topic, there is a significant gap in studies conducted on the risk female porters' face in Ghana. Among the few available studies, the focus has been on the reasons for migration [8] and an analysis of porters as street children [1]. Hence, it is then prudent for more studies to be carried out focusing on firsthand account of the associated risks and its subsequent impact on the socio-economic growth of Ghana as a country. Our study fills the lacuna in this field by elaborating on women vulnerabilities and risks in the Kayayei business and how these risks transcend to a national economic hindrance towards the full realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

2 Methodology

The aim of this study is to investigate the risks associated with females who are into the Kayayei business in Ghana. To achieve this purpose, the following objectives were set:

- i. To examine the extent of harassment faced by the Kayayei from patrons
- ii. To examine the effect of harassment on their work productivity
- iii. To investigate the reproductive health challenges faced by the Kayayei

To achieve these objectives, this study adopted the qualitative research approach which according to Bryman (2004) looks at the relationship between theories and research findings by focusing on generation of theories to establish its consistency and deviations. Responses were collected with the use of semi-structured interview which allowed the interviewer to deduce fundamental relationships that exists between variables (Saunders et al. 2009). Employing the purposive sampling technique, 14 participants were interviewed for this study. These respondents were recruited from Accra central business market. Employing the snowballing technique, an initial contact was established with a kayayo who also referred the interviewer to others with similar experiences. Due to their level of education and language barriers, the interviewer had to explain the study variables to respondents in its basic form and sometimes to the extent of getting interpreters. Averagely, interviews span between 30 to 45 min with each respondent. The ethical protocols of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered. These respondents were not coerced but encouraged and even provided with lunch for their time in responding to the interview. Due to the manageable sample size, data collected was manually analyzed thematically. Inductively, themes were developed after the data were audio recorded and transcribed.

3 Findings and Discussion

This subsection presents demographic information about the respondents, the nature of harassment, the effect on their productivity and reproductive health challenges faced by these head porters.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Female Head Porters

The demographic information about the respondents included information on their ages, their current marital status, number of children, level of formal education, their religious affiliation, their hometown, their ethnicity, the type of house they dwell, whether they have any family relation in Accra and where they sleep after work (Fig. 1).

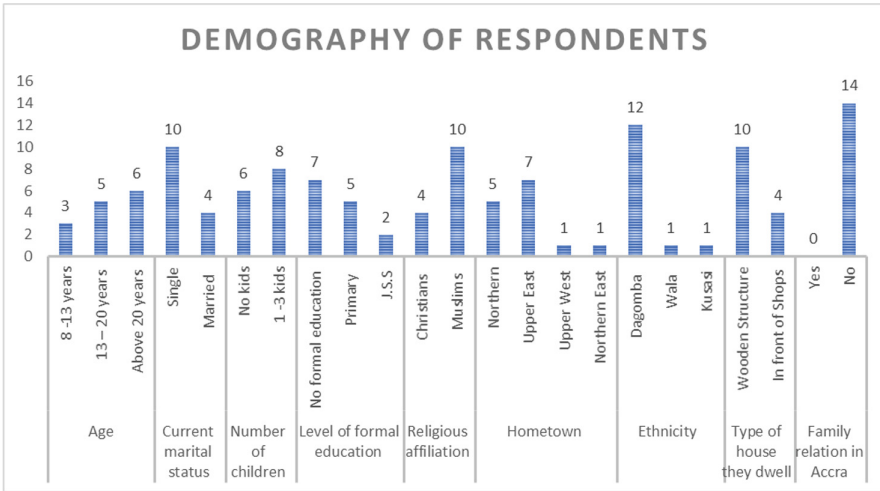


Fig. 1. Respondents demographic details

As shown in the figure above, the respondents were relatively young. The ages of these porters ranged from 8 years to 45 years. Majority of the participants of the study were identified to be Muslims and only four of the Kayayei were Christians. Also, the percentage of the respondents who were single exceeded those who are married. Most of the porters have little or no formal education. However, those who have formal education were either primary school graduates or have reached junior high school level. Although not married, many have between one and three children. The Kayayei originated mainly from the Northern sector in Ghana namely, Northern region, Savannah region, North - East region, Upper East region and the Upper West regions of Ghana, a finding similar to Boakye-Yiadom & MacKay’s [2] study which found kayayei to have migrated predominantly from the northern regions of the country. The living places of the Kayayei as described by the respondents are rooms in the slums and some wooden structures that are shared by numerous Kayayei. The porters inferred that they either sleep in the open in front of people’s stores or in the slums in the city as they have no relatives in Accra.

3.2 Objective 1: Harassment Faced by Female Head Porters

The literature on Kayayei indicated some instances, whereby the patrons of the Kayayei in some ways harass the Kayayei to get their advances honoured. The Kayayei due to

their desire to make ends meet become victims to their patrons at times. For our study, we asked the respondents if they experience any form of harassment. A majority of the respondents admit to being harassed by their patrons. While, physical pain is at times inflicted on these Kayayei by the patrons, sexual abuse and actions such as abusive comments and insults that emotionally disorient the Kayayei were also acknowledged. Below are comments by respondents on how they are being abused due to the nature of their trade as kayayei:

There are patrons who will insult you for charging a certain amount. As for the harassment, we encounter that on a daily basis (Interviewee 1)

Physically, some of the patrons molest these kayayei over negotiation of prices.

“When I quote my price, some do pay, some do not pay. Sometimes if we quote the prices, it can turn into a fight between me and the patron” (Interviewee 2)

Also, there are instances where some of the male patrons want to have sexual affair with these female porters and according to a respondent, she has encountered several issues of such nature.

On countless occasions, some clients have tried to forcefully harass me sexually when I carry the load to their destination (interviewee 3).

The harassments are not limited to patrons, because the Kayayei also face harassments from the general public making their vulnerability widespread. Here are some comments that reflect the various forms of harassments:

Sometimes as we go about our duties, people push us away with their elbows and abuse us in the process. It's a very difficult situation and there is nothing we can do. Sometimes you get insulted in the process. It's a pathetic situation. For instance, I have seen times where some of my colleagues fall with the language on their head in an attempt to safeguard the clients' load as a result of a push which consequentially led to injury” (Interview 4).

In the course of their work, they endure emotional torture due to the very nature of their jobs. Some kayayei are subjected to emotional abuses and many forms of emotionally abusive comments and behaviours that affect them negatively.

This work that we do, sometimes you meet people who look at you in a way that makes it look like you are a nobody. Some people just see and then proceed to disrespect you out of nothing. It usually comes in the form insults and disrespect. Sometimes too when you get a direction wrong, they insult you as well. (Interviewee 5).

3.3 Objective 2: The Effect of Harassment on Productivity

The respondents posited that these harassments by their patrons and the general public affect their rates of productivity in many respects. Some of the Kayayei leave the profession and return to their places of origin. For instance, according to a respondent:

Oh yes, it affects us a lot. You know that if you were to be in your hometown, you won't be subjected to some of these issues. It's a painful thing. But there is very little you can do in that regard, so we tend to brush it off and focus on our work [Interviewee 9].

Unfortunately, it appears there is no room for redress for these kayayei as expressed by one of them.

Oh usually, we do not do anything. We have no place to lodge our grievances. We are not known, so it makes it difficult for us to take any action. Because if we make an attempt to say something, they will say it's a Kayayei matter, and since we are a nobody, we do not get the assistance we want. [Interviewee 10].

It is worth mentioning that there are no written laws and legal frameworks in existence that protect the Kayayei other than the general laws of the country that binds everyone in the borders of the country. That said, the respondents noted some strategies devised to limit the incidence of harassment by their patrons. These strategies include forming a resistant group that are used to oppress any form of harassment that are inflicted on any of their members. Sometimes, they boycott the meetings with their patrons as an attempt to register their disdain to the patrons for the harassment and abuses that have been meted out to them. Also, there exists informal conventions that have been accepted by the members of the Kayayei as to their area of operation. These conventions guide the Kayayei as to how to conduct themselves in the area of work and within their group. The rules ensure that there is harmony between themselves and their supervisors and that they live and work peacefully with one another in a professional manner.

3.4 Objective 3: The Reproductive Health Challenges Faced by the Head Porters

It appears the freedom to control reproduction does not really exist. It was revealed that the Kayayei become vulnerable to their male counterparts (truck pushers) and as a result only live to satisfy and admit their abuse. Many therefore become pregnant at an early age unwillingly. Those who get the opportunity to determine when they conceive also narrated that the very nature of the job puts pressure on them to have children early before they start experiencing the negative impact of carrying heavy loads on their reproductive health. While they engage in the trade during pregnancy, many experience health challenges. For instance, miscarriages are rampant among these girls as they hardly also go for antenatal care. Some of the Kayayei said during pregnancy, their ability to carry loads are reduced, hence their earnings. It therefore affects their ability to have healthy meals that would help protect the unborn baby. This lack of good meals and medication coupled with the carrying of the loads therefore result in reproductive

issues during pregnancy. Those who are lucky to have the babies without miscarrying sometimes have challenged ones. Below is how an interviewee puts it:

Some of us give birth to children with some physical deformities or psychological challenges” (Interviewee, 9).

Others were of the view that it had no effect on their reproductive health. Their main concerns were in relation to health conditions they generally face due to the heavy load. An account by another was that:

Yes, it does affect us, but am not too sure about my reproductive health, but it has affected other parts of my body. The last time, I carried a heavy load and I felt so much pain in my chest and joints to the extent that I vomited blood (Interviewee 11).

It was refreshing to note that the economic gain they make from this occupation in the south is much more than they would have ever gotten if they were in their hometowns. According to some of the kayayei, the daily income made is saved on their mobile wallets, a safer and better mode than the ‘susu’ which hitherto was the only form of safekeeping their proceeds.

4 Discussion

The business of kayayei is the result of an increasing disparity in the distribution of the national resources among the regions in the country which leads to the northern movement of young and growing girls into the Kayayei business in the southern parts of the country. Based on the regional location of the female porters, it is also identified that all respondents originated from the northern regions of the country paralleling Whitehead and Hashim’s [3] finding. The economic hardship within the regions and the villages in the Northern regions where the Kayayei come from, and the quest to find better living conditions in the cities are the reasons why these females are engaged as kayayei, a finding concurring with Streifel’s [6]. The study identified a similar finding with Streifel’s, [6] research when we found that the no/low level of academic qualification of these porters and the lower requirement to embark in the portage business are the reasons for the increasing number of female head porters. Objective 1 was achieved as our study found several instances of harassment of the Kayayei by their patrons, chaperons and the general public, a finding similar to Awumbila and Ardayio-Schandorf’s [9] report of several abuses on these girls hence seen as a marginalised group in the Ghanaian society. It is worth noting that although Opare [8] found that they are usually harassed by women, we found otherwise as they were abused by patrons of both genders (i.e. male patrons who sexually abuse them and female patrons who insult and fight them over fees charged), street boys who impregnate them against their wishes and the general public who push and disregard them because of their occupation. Regarding Objective 2, the porters noted the harassments affect their productivity since their jobs are not formalized, they have no formal protection from the authorities against the harassment they face. They however have conditioned their minds to work irrespective of the abuses.

We found that regarding their reproductive health, some believed their occupation has no impact, however, majority thought otherwise. The negative impact is not surprising because Streifel [6] indicates that the nature of one's profession may have negative consequences on the person's reproductive health and the Kayayei business is not an exception. On a positive note however, we find that abuses from the chaperons who hitherto acted as their bankers are no more, a result contrary to Opare [8]. After about two decades, we see positive change as they have embraced mobile technology to their advantage thereby limiting/prohibiting the inability of their chaperons to account for monies deposited in their care.

5 Conclusion

The study adds knowledge to the existing literature on the phenomenon and bridges the gaps on the issues of risk and vulnerability of Kayayei. In line with the findings, the Ghanaian government and other relevant stakeholders must adopt and implement relevant policies which will reduce the rate of internal migration of female porters from the Northern regions of the country. The development gap should be bridged between the northern and southern sectors by channeling resources so as to reduce the inequality. Again, policies to protect and shape the portage business could also be created based on the findings of the study. With less than a decade to the deadline of meeting the SDG's goals, we suggest that since education is an important divider between 'good' and 'bad' jobs predicting earnings, autonomy, security and many job characteristics, these girls should be encouraged to take advantage of the free Senior High School (SHS) policy and get educated. Theoretically, the study extends the debate on the need for the improvement of employees' job quality. In fact, more emphasis should be put on adult education of the 'women child' as late education is better than no education. Furthermore, for a high labour intensive job like this kayayei business, measures must be put in place to enhance employees' wellbeing by redesigning this portage profession.

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