

GHANA TUC/WIEGO WOMEN IN INFORMAL ECONOMY LAW PROJECT

A REPORT ON KAYAYEI IN GHANA



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1. INTRODUCTION

*Kaya-yei*¹ is a combination of Hausa and Ga languages meaning female head porters. *Kayayei* are predominantly girls and young women aged between 8 and 45 years, mostly from the three northern regions of Ghana and neighbouring Burkina Faso. They have limited or no education and originate from poor socio-economic background. Indeed the three northern regions of Ghana have the highest poverty incidence in the country. While majority of *kayayei* are school dropouts who migrant to southern Ghana in search of greener pastures, others have escaped from outmoded socio-cultural practices such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation and widowhood rights among others. Peer pressure has also lured some into the *kayayei* activity.

There is no accurate statistics on *kayayei* in Ghana. Various non-governmental organisations supporting *kayayei* (like the *Gubkatimali* based in Tamale) have estimated the population of *kayayei* traders in Accra and Kumasi to be over 50,000. Others like the Ghana *Kayayei* Association give a conservative estimate of about 6,000 *kayayei* in Accra.

Kayayei mainly carry loads on their heads to or from markets to lorry stations. They also assist market traders in stocking their shelves, packing and tiding up vending sites among other duties as may be required. Local restaurants (popularly known as *chop bars*) engage the services of *kayayei*s in tiding up, preparing meals and serving customers. As *kayayei* develop working relationship with customers, they are sometimes brought into private homes to perform domestic chores. Whereas some transform into domestic workers, others engage in domestic work in addition to the head portage. Fridays and Saturdays remain the peak period for *kayayei* in urban centres, particularly in Accra and Kumasi. Markets days in some localities also provide boost for patronage of the services of *kayayei*.

Like many informal sector work, '*kayayei*' is not accounted for and thus invisible within the Ghanaian labour market. Indeed *kayayei* themselves do not regard their economic activity permanent. They often pursue the activity on short term basis to meet financial obligations. Married *kayayei* often leave their family (except for children below 2 years) behind to pursue the occupation and return once they have made adequate savings. Young *kayayei* on the other hand engage in the activity to make savings for skills

¹ *Kaya* in Hausa (a common language in Northern Ghana) means load while *yei* means women in Ga (language of natives of Accra).

training or start-up capital for businesses. Yet many are those who engage in the occupation on seasonal basis to supplement family income.

The activities of *kayayei* have been viewed inhumane. Perhaps this view is underscored by the working and living conditions of *kayayei* in the major cities. Most *kayayei* do not have decent place of abode. They sleep in lorry stations and market sheds after work which exposes them to both environmental and human dangers. Such has earned them sympathy from non-governmental organizations, some of which have made attempts to provide alternative livelihood to *kayayei*.

This report is gathered from primary data through interviews with *kayayei* and organizations supporting them. Secondary data was also reviewed to provide insight into the working conditions of *kayayei* in Ghana.

2. LAWS IMPACTING ON OPERATIONS OF KAYAYEI

Except for where specific categories of workers are mentioned in relation to some provisions, the Labour Act 2003 (Act 651) and Workmen Compensation Act (1984) generally provide for workers/employers and employees respectively in Ghana. A worker is interpreted by Section 175 of the Labour Act as a “*person employed under contract of employment whether on a continuous, part-time, temporary or casual basis*”. Like many self employed persons therefore, the Act does not provide for *Kayayei*.

The National Pensions Act (Act 766) provides for voluntary enrolment of self-employed workers on the social security schemes. Self-employed persons can voluntarily join the mandatory first two tiers as well as the voluntary third tier. However, practically, the voluntary third tier is more compatible with the earning patterns of *kayayei*.

Local authorities’ bye-laws do not have specific provisions barring the activities of *kayayei*. However, as street people, *kayayei* may be affected by development initiatives of local authorities. *Kayayei* assemble at public places in the markets and lorry parks in wait of customers. They sleep at lorry stations, market stalls and on pavements obstructing the public, the use of these facilities. As gathered by the study, *kayayei* who dwell at the Tema station in Accra central face harassment and extortion from the station’s caretakers (popularly known as station masters).

3. WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF KAYEYEI

3.1. Wages:

The participants involved in this study mentioned that their incomes are subject to demand. On busy days (Fridays), they earn between GH¢70 and GH¢100 (US\$47 -57); between GH¢50 and GH¢60 (US\$33-40) on Saturdays days but may earn as low as GH¢5 or nothing on lean days. Charges per load depend on the weight, distance and the generosity of the customer. Some kayayei involved in the study also render services to market traders earning them additional income of between GH¢1 and GH¢5 per day. They pay council tax (referred to as ticket) of GH¢0.20 per day.

3.2. Working hours and Rest period

Participants stated a twelve hour daily routine from 6am to 6pm, from Mondays to Saturdays. They mentioned that rest periods are dependent on demand for their services. Fridays and Saturdays were noted busy market days but the rest of the days can be very lean, during which they can have sufficient rest.

3.3. Living conditions and environmental hazards:

The living conditions of kayayei in Ghana have often drawn public sympathy. Media reports have centred on their exposure not only to bad weather and insanitary conditions but harassment from some unscrupulous persons who may also be living on the streets. Extortion and sexual abuse are among the problems faced by kayayei living on the streets.

At a focused group discussion with 36 kayayei in Accra, participants stated they live at the Tema station, a lorry station in Accra central (some, with their children). Pointing to their belongingness, they stated that they cannot afford to rent rooms/houses. They sleep in the open in plastic covers as protection against rain and mosquitoes. As a result, they indicated they suffer frequent headaches, malaria, cough, high fever and bodily pains. Back pain was also noted a common illness which was attributed to the heavy loads they carry on daily basis. The participants stated that they were aware of the hazardous nature of their work and living conditions and so do often take long breaks (and return to their families in the northern regions) up to 6 months when they have accumulated enough savings. They stated that some workers do not return to the trade whereas others do so seasonally, whenever they are in need of money.

The living conditions of mothers who had babies in their care were no different from their counterparts. The study learnt that children of school going age are sent to a nearby school. Babies and toddlers (in accordance with a traditional practice) are however carried at the back of their mothers during working hours.

3.4. Social security:

As self-employed persons, kayayei can join the national pension scheme. More appropriately, the third voluntary tier offers flexible contribution pattern that suit the income patterns of kayayei. The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) which insures against medical care is also opened to all Ghanaians and people resident in Ghana on subscription basis.

At a focused group discussion, participants stated they cannot afford to register with the NHIS and often resorted to self medication, when they fall ill. In 2010, Zain, a telecommunication company assisted 400 kayayei in Accra to register with the NHIS as part of their social responsibility programmes. Similarly, the Joy fm, a radio station in April 2012 registered 1,000 less privileged people with the NHIS, of which many of were believed to be kayayei in Accra.

For savings purposes, some kayayei involved in the study had registered with susu collectors (microfinance scheme) and make daily contribution of between GH¢5 and GH¢7 (US\$3-5). The third voluntary pension scheme is based on the susu concept but affords more security with regards to pension. Unlike the traditional susu which mainly serve as savings (though its proceeds can be used to meet other life contingencies), the third tier ensures retirement income.

4. ORGANISING KAYAYEI IN GHANA

As noted, the activities of Kayayei are often regarded a social problem rather than work. Perhaps this explains the attention they have received from NGOs supporting the under-privileged rather than trade unions or associations. Non-government organizations have recruited kayayei notably to enroll them into skill training.

The intervention from NGOs have aimed at providing alternative livelihood to kayayei and to repatriate them to the northern regions; but the degree of success has been minimal. Most kayayei return to the south to continue the activity.

5. CONCLUSION

The services provided by kayayei are in no doubt important to shoppers and market traders particularly in the urban centres. Kayayei in turn make a living from the earnings made by providing the services and contribute to the economy by way of tax payment (ticket as referred). Yet, they are largely not accounted for by labour market surveys like many other informal sector workers.

The involvement of girl children makes the activity a social problem, particularly against efforts by government and non-government organisations to step up girl child education. Again it brings into focus failures of government to bridge the gap between the northern and southern parts of Ghana. Evidently, extreme poverty has pushed many of these children and young women into the activity.

However, if given the needed attention, the activity can be a source of employment for many young people in search of non-existing jobs. The demeaning nature of the economic activity as regarded by most Ghanaians stems from the poor working conditions. The health and safety issues of carrying heavy loads on the head cannot be understated; the result of which is the frequent headaches and back aches reported by kayayei involved in the study. But such are the challenges of faced by many other informal sector activity, which when given the needed support would provide decent jobs for many Ghanaians.