

(In)visible young female migrant workers: “little domestics” in West Africa

Comparative perspectives on girls and young women’s work

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Introduction

- In the big cities in West Africa today, many young and adolescent girls perform all sorts of domestic work and 'informal' trade activities
- Most of them are young migrants aged 9-20 years
- Since the late 1990's attention has been paid to these practices by NGOs & International bodies / growing media coverage / social scientists
- Yet, NOT a new phenomenon but significant changes have taken place over the past 30 years (mainly due to economic recession + SAPs)
- June 2004 : new recognition of domestic work as part of the general "child labour" issue (ILO / UNICEF)

Outline of the presentation

- **Main objectives:**

- to demonstrate the extent of child domestic service
- to show the diversity of its current dynamics

- **4 sections:**

1. How many young female domestic workers are there?
2. Diverse forms of placement and employment statuses
3. Employment paths of young female workers
4. Parental strategies to make girls' migration safer

Sources and materials

Findings presented here :

mainly refer to the situation in Abidjan and Côte-d'Ivoire
+ comparative perspectives from West Africa

Data based on :

- 12 months fieldwork by the author in Abidjan and Côte-d'Ivoire (1999 / 2000 / 2001)
- reports, studies, media & secondary data on child domestic workers (and trafficking) in other West African countries
- brief exploratory studies by the author in Bamako and Dakar (2000 and 2009)

1st Section:

How many “little domestics” are there?

- It is impossible to give an exact figure on this practice.
- Yet, 3 key elements are certain:
 - i) the number of child and young domestic workers is very high
 - ii) although some boys are concerned, child domestic service is primarily a female domain
 - iii) “Little domestics” are mainly migrants; in West Africa, the majority of them are internal or transborder migrants.

It is no longer a ‘regional’ or ‘ethnic speciality’, but a widespread and complex practice.

Male:female ratio in the age groups 5-24 years in Abidjan

YEAR	5-9 yrs	10-14 yrs	15-19 yrs	20-24 yrs
1955	100.4	110.6	107.9	125.3
1975	90.7	76.3	86.8	141
1978	-	69.1	71.6	-
1988	94	76	71.5	97
1998	95.9	79.1	71.6	98.9

Sources:

Abidjan Census, 1955

General population census in Côte-d'Ivoire, 1975

Multi-round demographic Survey. City of Abidjan (E.P.R.), 1978

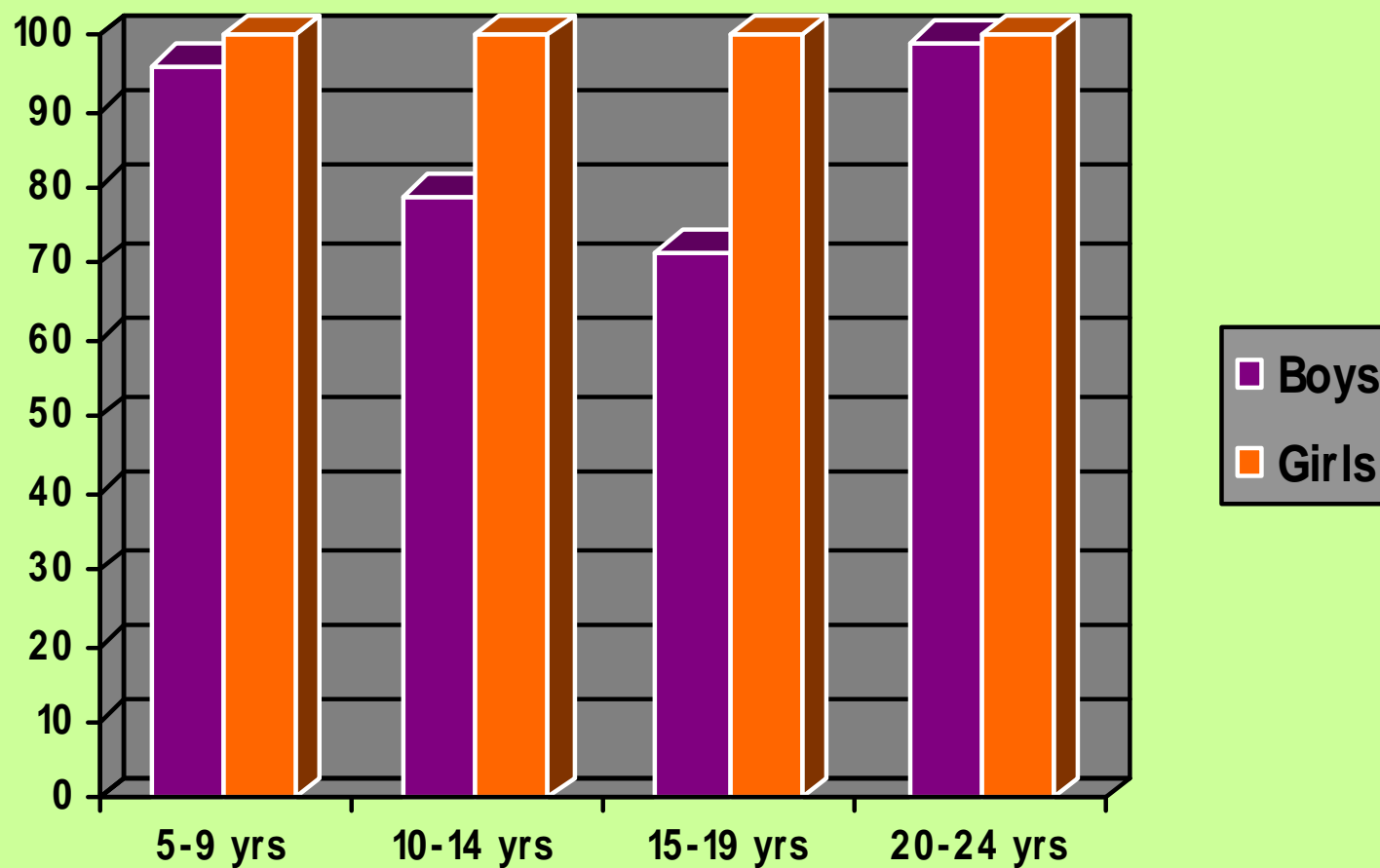
General Population and Habitat Census in Côte-d'Ivoire, 1988

General Population and Habitat Census in Côte-d'Ivoire, 1998.

An “overpopulation” of girls in Abidjan

Rate of males in 1998

Source: *General Population and Housing Census in Ivory Coast – 1998*



“Domestic Labour”: a useful but overlooked census category

Division of "young people" by activity, according to gender and age
in 1978 and 1992, Abidjan

	5-14 yrs		15-19 yrs	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1978				
Paid work	0	2	20	12
Other work	2	3	18	6
In school	67	47	44	22
Not working	31	48	18	60
	100%	100%	100%	100%
1992				
Paid work	0,5	3	4	15
Other work	2	2	22	13
In school	77	61	54	26
Domestic work	0,5	14	1,5	38
Not working	20	20	18,5	8
	100%	100%	100%	100%

2nd Section:

Diversity in forms of placement and employment statuses

- Child or Young domestic workers is not a homogeneous category
- Needs to broaden the notion of *domestic tasks* beyond the domestic sphere
- A typology based on the nature of the tasks has important limitations

“Child domestics workers”

3 criteria :

- Children who work daily, full time within or outside the household selling goods in the streets or markets (in Abidjan and other cities, most of them live-in)
- for someone else than their natural mother or father
- their age: a sociological and generational definition of childhood in Africa, according to Martin Verlet (1996).

In my research, the “adjustment generation”

= people under 20

3 types of young domestic workers in Abidjan and West Africa today:

1. The “little niece”

In exchange for the girl's work, her 'auntie' in Abidjan is presumed to take well care of her and ensure her learning of appropriate and useful skills.

In addition to transferring some wealth to the girl's parents from time to time, the 'auntie' should provide a trousseau for the girl, or some means to start in her “adult life” (some money to begin a small trade, a sewing machine, etc.).

(No specific age groups, girls from 5-6 to 20)

2. The “rented child”

An ‘auntie’ brings the girl to the city but instead of having the girl working in her household as a “little niece”, she places the girl in a non-related family.

Every month she picks up the girl’s salary, but she is still supposed to ensure that the girl is taken well care of, and when the girl returns to her village, the auntie should provide her with a trousseau.

(Mostly young girls aged 7-8 to 13-14 years)

3. The “waged little maid”

The girl finds employment herself or through placement agencies.

She has no relation at all with the household where she works.

She receives her salary herself, paid in cash, on a monthly basis.

(Mostly girls aged 13-15 years or more)

(Very important turn-over)

Common characteristics of all “little domestics” - yet great variety of situations

a unique working relationship in that they have to be available
all the time

- 3 common issues among *all* young female domestic workers:
 - i) A huge workload: 11-16 hours per day
 - ii) Out-of-school children
 - iii) A constant reference to an idyllic ‘family model’, whatever the status of employment.
- Yet, a continuum of situations which proves the heterogeneity of little domestics’ working and living conditions.

3rd Section: Employment paths of young female domestic workers

Not linear working trajectories:

during their migratory life, most little domestics do experience a succession of employment positions, in relation to their age and changing bargaining abilities.

Cf. the detailed case study of Assana's story (Abidjan):

from the age of 7 to 18, she went through the different employment statuses of young female domestic worker:

"little niece", "rented child", then "little niece" again and then "rented child" again before freeing herself and becoming a "waged little maid" from the age of 17.

4th Section:

Safety mechanisms put in place by parents

- Deteriorating conditions – Rural parents come to the evidence:
 - “Increased distance” (fieldwork in North-East CI)
 - The decreased content of the “suitcase”
 - Mistreatment, unwanted pregnancies and AIDS.
- Strategies developed by parents and girls to make migration for domestic work safer
 - Increased departure age
 - Tightened family links with ‘guardians’ at city destination
 - Keeping the girls in the village

To conclude ?

- A complex phenomenon made of diverse practices and various dimensions and dynamics
- Extreme conditions to be opposed
- BUT child domestic service is not mainly a case of trafficking, nor of “little slaves”: this sensationalistic image is a simplification.
- Further in-depth and comparative research – qualitative and quantitative = a necessity.
- A possible route is to explore adult trajectories of ex-young migrant domestic workers
>> to analyse the reasons for varying paths.

**Thank
you**

Field study and research material

- 3 periods of fieldwork
 - 12 months : Feb-April 1999; Jan-May 2000; Jan-May 2001.
 - Principally in Abidjan (> 10 months)
 - In the N-E region : Bondoukou + 3 villages
 - Yamoussoukro + 3 villages in the Centre of Côte-d'Ivoire

- A qualitative survey: in-depth interviews; direct observation

A total of 173 interviews with:

- 30 employers and 'guardians' from various social backgrounds
- 38 CDW and 13 former CDW
- 27 intermediaries of placement/recruitment

(staff of placement agencies (16); "placement-aunties" (8); and 3 non-professional intermediaries)

- 5 parents of CDW
- 42 persons (non-) directly involved in the phenomenon:
managers & members of NGOs, associations and government departments related to childhood; International Organisations staff; journalists.