

The life struggles and successes of the migrant construction worker in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

Globally, the construction sector employs several millions of migrants and is a major entry point for rural-urban migrants into the urban labour force. Its role in sustaining livelihoods both at origin and destination is critical in the development process. This paper provides an empirical assessment of the livelihood struggles of the construction worker in Accra by examining the nature of the job, challenges and fulfilment of expectations. It draws mainly on qualitative data from individual interviews of migrants in the destinations and their families in the origin. The findings show that the construction sector is a better paying sector than many others, but can be classified as precarious work due to the multiple dangers and insecurities associated with it. Segregation between skill-based and non-skilled work defines the fortunes of workers, as those with skills have higher incomes and prospects for social mobility. Very few women work in this sector due to the socialisation effects of the patriarchal systems in Ghana. The casualization of labour due to neoliberal policies and the informalisation of the private housing sector mean lower welfare benefits to workers and insecurity in old age due to non-payment of social security deductions. Migrants serve as an important conduit for redistributing wealth from richer spaces to poorer spaces, and should therefore be supported in achieving their developmental objectives.

Key words: construction worker; migration; casualization; Ghana; livelihoods

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Introduction

Research around the world has shown that the construction sector employs several millions of migrants (Vaid, 1999; Swider, 2011; Zeityn et al. 2014). Globally, the sector employs about 28 per cent of rural-urban migrants (de Haas, 2006; Jones and Thorat, 2011). A major reason why many rural-urban migrants tend to work in the construction sector is the fact that it is relatively easier to get employment in this sector due to its informal nature (Swider, 2011; Zeityn et al. 2014). Despite the fact that the construction sector provides rural-urban migrants a strategic point of entry into the urban labour market, attempts to examine the livelihoods of migrant construction workers in Africa have been very few. The literature on migrants in the construction sector is skewed in favour of Asia (Zeityn et al. 2014). Even so, most of the studies undertaken on migrant construction workers have only provided insights into the precarious nature of construction work (see de Haas, 2006; ILO, 2001 and 2007; Swider, 2011). There is very little understanding of the aspirations, lived experiences and wellbeing of rural-urban migrants in the construction sector.

This paper examines the livelihoods of migrant construction workers in Accra, Ghana. An assessment of migration for construction work is relevant because construction is one of the precarious occupations that poor rural-urban migrants in Ghana engage in (GSS 2012; Awumbila et al, 2014). The sector provides opportunities for poor rural-urban migrants because there is an increase in the level of business investment in the real estate sector by both Ghanaians and foreigners, and this has resulted in a high demand for construction workers. Additionally, the construction sector is a major driver of economic growth in Ghana. It is the third largest sector of the Ghanaian economy and the leading component of the industrial sector, with a GDP share of 10.5% (GSS 2013). The sector employs 317,525 people, accounting for about 3.1 per cent of the total number of employed people aged 15 and over. Similar to other parts of the world, construction work in Ghana is dominated by males, with few females venturing into the sector. The share of the construction sector in GDP has slightly increased to 11.8 per cent in 2013 from 11.5 per cent in 2012. Consistently, construction has remained the largest share of the industrial sector (ISSER, 2014; Anaman and Osei-Amponsah, 2007). The main products contributing to the construction sector are houses, dwellings and the construction of roads, highways and bridges. Most construction workers are located in the urban areas where the production and construction of houses and other infrastructural facilities are high. A large part of the workforce (both skilled and unskilled) at all scales of the sector is often drawn from migrants from rural Ghana, some other West African countries, notably Togo and Niger, and other parts of the world, in particular China. Migrants in the informal sector of the construction industry are engaged often at the lower end of the sector as masons, carpenters, electricians, and labourers (ISSER 2014). While evidence suggests that the construction sector employs large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled migrants who are exposed to a wide range of unhealthy and hazardous working conditions (GSS 2012), research on migrants in this sector is woefully inadequate.

This article details the life conditions of the construction worker, and the challenges, which lead to particular livelihood outcomes. The paper will contribute to our understanding of how specific

policies and conditions in the construction sector facilitate poverty alleviation or entrench poverty among migrants. The findings from this study will inform the formulation and implementation of a range of policies in Ghana which will help improve the well-being of migrants working in the construction sector.

The Literature on the Migrant Construction Worker

The study adopts the definition provided by the ILO convention on safety and health in construction (ILO 1988) which defines construction work broadly to include the following:

(i) building, including excavation and the construction, structural alteration, renovation, repair, maintenance (including cleaning and painting) and demolition of all types of buildings or structures; (ii) civil engineering, including excavation and the construction, structural alteration, repair, maintenance and demolition of, for example, airports, docks, harbours, inland waterways, dams, river and avalanche and sea defence works, roads and highways, railways, bridges, tunnels, viaducts and works related to the provision of services such as communications, drainage, sewerage, water and energy supplies; (iii) The erection and dismantling of prefabricated buildings and structures, as well as the manufacturing of prefabricated elements on the construction site.

Studies conducted in developing countries have observed the low educational status of migrant construction workers (see Vaid, 1999; Anand, 2000; Lu and Fox, 2001). Many of them have had no schooling. In the absence of formal education, construction workers find it convenient to attain their skills through traditional apprenticeships (Yuson, 2001). Hours they are supposed to spend on training are invested in work to improve their income. Additionally, migrant construction workers are landless, poor and vulnerable (Wells 2007), so they settle for low-paid jobs to earn an income to improve their own wellbeing and that of their households.

There is an increasing casualization of labour in this industry attributable to the introduction of neoliberal policies. These policies have made it difficult to retain positions in the formal sector. Increased competition, declining workloads and restrictive employment regulations in and around the Sub-Saharan region (Wells, 2007; Wells and Wall, 2003) account for this situation. Currently, employers have outsourced the supply of labour to intermediaries who have the onus of recruiting labour. Yet, this recruitment process has enhanced the precariousness of the industry, which is not limited to the sub-region but pertains to other developing countries. For example, data from the national household survey in Brazil shows that the proportion of 'unregistered' and self-employed workers in the construction workforce rose from 57% in 1981 to 75% in 1999 (ILO, 2001). In India, the growth of casualization in the construction industry became much more worrying in the 10 years between 1983 and 1993. In 1983, the percentage of men and women who were working on a casual basis in urban construction were 58 per cent and 89 per cent respectively. In the 1990s 74 per cent of construction workers in Malaysia were employed on a casual basis (Abdul- Aziz, 2001), while countries such as Egypt, Mexico, the Philippines and Korea recorded 90 per cent, 66

per cent, 78 per cent and 85 per cent of workers employed on a casual basis respectively (Yuson, 2001; Connolly, 2001; Cho, 2004).

Some studies on the processes of recruitment into the construction sector were undertaken in the last few decades, mostly in the Asian context. These studies indicate that for many construction workers in developing countries, terms of employment have always been poor, while others have seen a significant deterioration in the past 30 years since the construction industry adopted “flexible” labour practices (Swider, 2011; Wells, 2007). Construction work is mostly temporary and insecure, which excludes volumes of workers from social security schemes (Otoo et al 2009; Tiwary et al. 2011). The use of sub-contractors for recruiting labour for the sector has had adverse consequences on occupational safety and health, and also undermines trade union agreements and training provisions (Tiwary et al. 2011). The inability of the industry to upgrade its workers has also had serious repercussions on the quality of production and construction, e.g., buildings that collapse due to poor construction and inadequate inspection.

The literature (see Swider, 2011; Mosse, 2005 and Firman, 1991) identifies different modes of employment in the construction industry; they are normally informal and function along similar lines in various developing countries. Swider (2011) identified three modes of employment among Chinese migrant workers in informal employment in the construction industry: *mediated, embedded and individualized*. Mediated employment operates under the contract labour system whereby the labour contractors hire workers under a yearlong verbal contract from a rural community with the help of one member of a family in that community. This mode of recruitment is mainly based on family and/or village relations. Vaid (1999), in a similar study in rural India, explained that recruitment is basically based on cast, family or village ties. The labour contractor covers the cost of migration and provides information and access to employment. These sub-contractors are often responsible for ensuring that the migrant construction worker is loyal, disciplined and hardworking in order to complete contracts on time and within budget. This system of recruitment creates a problem of debt bondage and bonded labour, which also characterizes internal migration patterns and recruitment practices (Zeitlyn et al. 2014).

Second, embedded employment is a process depending mainly on diverse social networks from both rural and urban labour markets. Workers are hired on informal per-job basis and employment conditions are determined by reciprocity and trust of the networks. In the individualized employment, urban workers find jobs through spot markets. Swider (2011) distinguishes between three types of spot markets: first is unorganized markets (or sometimes referred to as ‘street labour’) operating in unofficially designated public spaces where workers gather and wait for potential employers. Second is an organized market where market bosses determine who can participate and fees are collected for connecting workers for work. Third is direct hiring, where workers go directly to job sites looking for work.

In one study in India, three modes of recruitment were found, including individuals working as day labourers in cities; groups with contacts with labour contractors; and recruitment by sub-contractors who were labourers themselves (Mosse et al. 2005). Firman (1991) also explains a

similar process of recruitment among construction labourers in Indonesia and Mexico. The process is done from a source, which is the village of the recruitment agents. The agents serve as patrons to migrant workers by supporting them in health, financial and family matters. The potential migrant worker can only access this job if he/she is part of that group. These labour sub-contractors lessen the direct and indirect costs of labour to construction firms by maintaining a flexible labour force.

Research methods

The data was extracted from a larger study on migrants working in the construction and domestic work sectors in the Greater Accra region of Ghana. A combination of qualitative methods were used to collect data from migrant domestic workers and construction workers in Accra and members of their households left behind in two dominant migrant sending regions, namely the Volta and Northern regions of Ghana.

In-depth interviews were conducted with *one adult* each in 20 selected migrant sending households in the area of origin, where the migrant was engaged in construction work in Accra. In the migrant sending regions, data from a quantitative survey conducted in 2013 was used to identify and select households who had at least one member working in the construction sector in Accra. In each selected household, one adult representative completed a semi-structured questionnaire about the migration of the household member to Accra and the benefits of such movements to the household. Representatives of 10 non-migrant households were also interviewed in the area of origin to understand their views on migration. At the destination (in Accra), 10 construction workers who had migrated from the selected households at the place of origin were interviewed. The contacts of these migrants were obtained from their families left behind at the origin. Key informant interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders.

The life of the construction worker

Migration of construction workers from the Northern (henceforth NR in the rest of the paper) and Volta regions (henceforth VR in the rest of the paper) to Accra can be explained in terms of underdevelopment in the source regions. While a few construction labourers migrated to Accra before starting work in this sector, most of the migrants, irrespective of region of origin, were already practicing craftsmen in masonry, carpentry, and steel bending. As shown in the statement below by Hetu, a 45 year- old mason from Wurushe (NR), the difference in availability of jobs and remuneration between Accra and the origin areas is a major attraction to these skilled workers: *“My business collapsed due to shortage of money. Since I had masonry skills, I decided to migrate to Accra where there are many jobs available to make money and return home to invest in my business”*. Similarly, the migrant construction workers from the Volta region mentioned poor salaries and unavailability of jobs as major reasons for migrating from their home region. For instance, Lorma, a 22 year old carpenter from Peki, complained that *“There are jobs but they are not too many. Sometimes too when we work, we are not paid.”* A few of the labourers in the

construction sector were doing different jobs at the origin but moved to Accra due to economic challenges at the origin and started working in the construction sector. For instance, Gbevo, a 28-year-old former kente weaver from Mepe in the Volta region reported that he migrated to Accra to work as labourer because people were no longer buying his products as a result of poverty in the area.

At the destination in Accra, three forms of work are discernible for construction workers. The first is getting employed with a formal construction firm with formal wages. The second is working for a fellow craftsperson who has a job to execute. The third is becoming a small contractor and also employing others on contracted jobs. Migrants normally arrive to the first two forms of work. They work with companies who pay them specific wages for eight hours a day. Alternatively they work for their peers/seniors who are popular and known by clients. Interestingly, the daily wages are higher for the work granted by their peers but limited to the duration of the contracted work, while the company wages are lower but may last longer since these companies are often engaged in mega contracts. For instance, while their peers pay them 40 GHC a day, the contractors pay 30 GHC. Both types of work suffer from temporal stoppages due to cash flow disruptions. Also, the level of job security is very low due to the non-existence of formal contracts. All the interviewees who have ever worked with big companies say their contracts were verbal (even with a contractor putting up two huge buildings on the university of Ghana campus). Swider (2011) notes that terms of employment have become poorer since the industry adopted “flexible” labour practices.

Recruitment in the above three forms of construction work is quite the same since the formal big contractors fail to abide by the labour rules. Migrants go round seeking jobs wherever they perceive they can find any. Where there is an opening, a verbal offer is made on conditions favourable to the employer. The migrant workers are interested mainly in their incomes. In the case of Gbevo (VR) who worked with a contractor executing two major contracts lasting several years, only a verbal contract was reached for a daily wage, which was 10 GHC lower than the market rate. Remuneration correlates with certainty of work in all the cases. A small-scale contractor explained that when he has a bigger contract for which he grants the owners a good rate, then the workers have to sacrifice a part of their salary since they will be working for a relatively longer time.

Workers are only paid for days worked, which indicate the extent of casualization in the industry. No sick pay is given except when a worker gets sick at work and cannot continue for the rest of the hours for that day. But such a worker does not get paid if he/she does not work on subsequent days. Similarly, working for peers who have won contracts come with the same conditions, but for relatively better pay. Some solidarity among the job givers and takers propels a sense of sincerity shown for co-worker welfare. However, workers are free to leave anytime without any legal encumbrances – ‘easy go, easy come’. This confirms the assertion of Tiwary et al. (2011) that construction work is mostly temporary and insecure, which excludes many of workers from social security schemes.

The working conditions on construction sites vary according to whether we are dealing with a formal big contract or informal small contract. Big contractors abide by some safety rules such as

fencing sites, providing helmets and using more labour saving tools. But even these contractors fail to provide masks, gloves and education on the dangers of most operations, as detailed by Gbevo in his experience with Wilkado Construction Company. The small-scale contractors work without most of the safety gear. Depending on the nature of the construction involved, workers can be exposed to dangerous manoeuvres and circumstances such as poor scaffolds for buildings with two or more storeys. However, most of the contracts obtained by their peers are simple one- storey buildings. Workers have to provide their own tools and safety gear if they choose to use them. All our interviewees resort to the ‘divine protection of God’ rather than consciously providing these safety measures.

In the formal construction sector the workday begins from 7am or 8am to 3pm or 4pm from Monday to Saturday. When there is overtime they close at 5:30pm. With regard to the informal construction jobs, according to Hetu “*We don’t work on Sundays. For each day we begin between 7:30 and 8:00am and close at either 4:00 or 5:00pm. We don’t have a specific time*”. The six-day work regime is used across all categories of construction work, but with high levels of flexibility for the non-formalised sector where the rule is fulfilling one’s contract rather than the time used. Lawri, a 40 year old mason from Mepe (VR), describes his workday as ‘*when we start work around 7:30am, we go on break when its 12pm. During the break, we go to buy something to eat from the roadside and resume work by 1:30pm. We then close around 4:30pm and get home by 6:00*’. A mason in Accra is expected to lay 100 blocks a day or plaster two walls a day. A good worker is capable of achieving this task in 5 hours (also called ‘finish and go’) and hence can decide to report early or late to work without any problems with the peer employer. However, the formal contractors stick to the work time regime, even though increasingly a few contractors are opting for task-based daily workloads because workers drag tasks for longer periods to ensure more days of work and earnings.

None of our interviewees who ever worked with formal contractors was ever registered with the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT). Lorma, a 22 year female carpenter from the VR, asserted that ‘*the company pays SSNIT contributions for some permanent workers, but they never registered me nor paid any contributions. This is one of the reasons why I left the Company.*’ In the other forms of work too, the migrants have not taken advantage of the self- employment registration option provided by the national pension scheme. Two of the small-scale contractors however admitted registering their work gangs/groups with the National Health Insurance Scheme, which pays hospital bills for its clients. This they found convenient and necessary to avoid huge bills when an accident occurs on the site. It also prevents their workers from being impoverished by hospital bills. These experiences support the assertion that construction work excludes volumes of workers from social security schemes (Otoo et al. 2009).

The living conditions of the construction workers vary according to where a contract is located, distance from place of origin, how long the migrant has been in Accra and seasonality of employment. All the interviewees from the NR, which is 10-12 hours’ drive from the capital, tend to acquire permanent places of residence over time. Those from the VR tend to stay with relatives, or in uncompleted buildings and work camps. Due to the proximity of the VR, which is 2-4 hours’

drive from the capital, many migrants prefer building their own houses back home, where their families reside and where they spend weekends and fallow periods, rather than investing in Accra. Interestingly, the labourers from the VR tend to live their lives in Accra because their earnings are too meagre to enable them afford the double spatial habitation style of their skilled counterparts who are masons and carpenters.

The intention to stay in Accra permanently or acquire assets in Accra is higher among the migrants from the NR than those from the VR. Two of the NR migrants had acquired land and built their own houses, while two others had constructed wooden kiosks. The work camps put up by contractors in the case of Wilkado Construction Company are wooden structures with access to water and electricity. The workers live there at no cost. Even workers who no longer worked with the company but ran their own contracts elsewhere still lived there. For instance, Momo (VR), together with his team of five migrants, lived in an uncompleted house at East Legon. The owner of the project they worked for permitted them to use the house. Generally, migrant construction workers consider themselves 'hustlers' and therefore see the living space as a survivalist strategy to save money and return home. Proximity to place of work is critical as it saves them considerable amounts of money in transport costs. Hence, the poor living conditions are accepted as temporary and necessary spaces for greater prosperity in the future.

Income, savings and acquisition of assets

The construction sector is relatively well paid compared to other low paid jobs usually taken by migrants such as domestic work, formal cleaning and shop attendant jobs. For instance, on a monthly basis, shop attendants of small businesses receive between 200-350 GHC, mechanic assistants approximately 300 GHC, formal sector cleaners around 500 GHC, and hotel sector cleaners/workers about 300 GHC. The income of a skilled construction worker with a formal contractor, if the former works for the whole month, is 750-1000 GHC, while that of an unskilled labourer is 600-750 GHC. However, since many construction workers work for their peers/small-scale contractors, their incomes are highly variable due to the fallow periods between jobs. The daily wage for skilled masons is between 40 and 50 GHC, while for labourers it is 35 to 40 GHC. With the formal contractors, these figures are reduced by 10 GHC. In a very good month with all days worked, the mason can make 1000-1250 GHC while the labourer makes 800-1000 GHC. The small-scale contractor also earns the same amount as a skilled worker in addition to profits after s/he has paid wages and other expenses. The margin of profit depends on the quality of his supervision over his/her friends (i.e., his ability to extract as much labour power per hour as possible from his peers) and the level of ignorance of the client or his/her generosity. On average, the skilled workers earn 600 GHC a month while their labourers earn 525 GHC, given a 15-day per month work period which all our interviewees agreed was the norm for the majority of construction workers.

Small-scale contractors usually negotiate with their peers and keep 5 GHC of the negotiated amount, for themselves, depending on their relationship with the peer and also the duration of the contract. The longer the duration, the lower the daily wage reduced by the factor of 5 GHC. This

does not mean an automatic gain to the small-scale contractor, because the contract sums for bigger jobs tend to be reduced to enable competitiveness. Winning a contract needs manoeuvring, discounts, promise to do other ancillary tasks such as levelling of sites for free etc.

The earnings of construction workers therefore obey the logic of boom and bust. There are times the jobs chase them, and there are other times when they cannot find any jobs. The ability to save in good times against bad times is critical for the livelihoods of these workers. This ability is higher for the skilled masons and carpenters compared to the labourers. Also, the VR migrants tend to have higher disposable incomes compared to the NR migrants because they had less expenditure. The VR workers tend to stay in free uncompleted houses at or close to the construction sites, thereby avoiding commuting to work. The NR migrants have a lower disposable income because they tend to have permanent residences with high rent, to commute daily to work by public transport, which alone takes up to 15% of their daily wage.

Almost all the migrant construction workers interviewed also stated that they send both cash and non-cash remittances to families back home. The sums sent vary between 1000 GHC to 3000 GHC per annum. This variation is a reflection of the migrants' perception of the possibility of their return, their earnings, seasonality of jobs, the number of dependants in origin, and degree of integration at their destination. For instance, Gbeyo (VR) states that *'I am able to send them about GH100 or GH120 a month. It depends on what problems they are facing and the type of work I am doing. If it pays well, they will receive more.'* Migrants seem to take a keen interest in supporting the businesses of their spouses and those caring for their children. Hence remittances are used for investments that produce income to meet shortfalls in migrant remittances. Gbeyo supports his wife's business, so when he has no money to send home, the wife has adequate income to run the home for at least three weeks.

Cash remittances can be categorised into constant upkeep flows, emergency flows, and sporadic flows. Constant flows are remitted weekly, fortnightly, or monthly for meeting anticipated upkeep expenses. Emergency flows are only made upon demand, such as when electricity bills have to be paid to avoid disconnection, or hospital bills, or other unforeseen expenses. Migrant construction workers make sporadic remittance flows when they are lucky to work continually and earn substantial income.

However, not all migrants send remittances or keep in contact with their families. Sahm (NR, wife of a migrant) explains that *'some go and do not remember their roots. Others remit and visit the family'*. This is based on her knowledge of other migrants in the community. The reasons for this occurrence include unemployment at destination, the feeling of liberation from problems at home, poor incomes, bad company, a new girlfriend or spouse, and conflicts with family back home (focus groups in both NR and VR).

Our findings confirm that households that receive these remittances tend to use the proceeds primarily for recurrent consumption and for investment in children's education, health care, improvement of household, food and security, and water and sanitation (de Haas 2006;Kyei, 2013).

It is important to emphasize the additional role of remittances, which is to establish people back home in businesses and help them acquire skills to enable them live independent lives contribute to family upkeep. Migrants therefore foresee the dangers of being sole providers, which necessitates the spreading of risks.

Savings and acquisition of assets are synonymous in the minds of migrants. Traditionally savings in rural Africa have always been in livestock, farmlands and tree crops. The modern migrant saves in land and houses, which are the most popular livelihood objectives and the highest priority of all the migrants interviewed. Only two of the interviewees had bank accounts but did not have substantial savings because of the boom and bust nature of the job. Rather, all potential savings are invested in physical necessities as Eitu (Male migrant, a mason from NR) says '*When I came here I have been able to build a two-bed-room mud house for my family.*' It is important in the African context not to separate savings from investments as the two categories are blurred. Acquisition of assets is an important indicator of the success of the migrant and therefore the main livelihood objective. The most important asset is a piece of land and a house in Accra, which is very expensive but pays off even if the migrant decides to return home. Two of the NR migrants were able to invest in house and land in the city while the VR migrants invested back home. Lawri from Mepe bought land immediately after making his first windfall income in Accra and subsequently put up a sandcrate blockhouse. Also, the NR migrants built houses, even if they are mud ones, for their families and still aspired to build with sandcrate blocks in the future. Other livelihood comfort assets such as TVs, fridges, bicycles, motorcycles and others are within the reach of the skilled workers. A long-term migrant from the NR (8 years) prefers to purchase these items only for use in Accra, which has become his home, while the origin is the home for his family. The concept of home is changing while the sense of attachment to the original home is waning. There is no guarantee for economic prosperity, as several debilitating conditions can hinder the success of migrants in sending remittances and saving for a better future (Kalpana and Kiran 2013). The findings show that the interpretation of the usefulness of remittances is often flawed by the ideological and personal biases of researchers, hence, the need to listen to the lived experiences, aspirations and achievements of migrants themselves with regard their livelihood objectives and initial life conditions.

Challenges faced by migrants in the construction sector

The construction migrant worker faces a multitude of problems in the destination. These challenges cut across different life experiences, with varying magnitudes reflecting the vulnerabilities of the migrant. The migrant's most important challenge is finding a job, sustaining employment and income, and ensuring welfare for his/family back home. It is difficult finding a job in a big city with many people who have similar skills and compete favourably. Some migrants take on additional jobs when they cannot find any construction work. Eitu, for instance, had to diversify from steel bending into dog training and eventually became a scrub metal dealer because of the irregularity of jobs. As a result of irregularity of contracts, many of the migrants from the VR often return home during periods of fallow to make do with the few jobs there. Periods of fallow are a drain on the savings of migrants and a threat to remittances. Where returned migrants

involved in a pre-existing contract facilitate the migration process, the problem of finding a job is obviated. Beyond the challenges of finding work, migrants have to deal with the poor conditions of the job, including low wages, unclear contracts. Many of the interviewees felt that they were being exploited. Formal sector construction workers received lower salaries without pension savings. Also, they were paid based on daily rather than a fixed monthly income as is typical of most formal arrangements. The lack of written contracts enables employers change terms of the verbal contract in their favour. Employers are therefore able to transfer their risks to the workers. Exploitation is highest for new migrants, especially the labourers and the inexperienced. But as they mature in the urban environment and begin to take up their own jobs they avert some of the mechanisms of exploitation except for instances of non-payment by customers. Lawri from Mepe has become a successful small-scale contractor, which is typical of the process of social mobility occurring among hardworking successful migrants. These tradesmen are normally called 'masters'. Hassim from NR states that *'I want to acquire more skills gradually till I become the boss. I want to become a contractor someday. So my wish is to further my education as I work.'* The aspiration of all workers, especially the skilled ones, is to rise through the ranks to the level of contractor.

The fear of losing a job always lingers in the minds of workers, thereby imposing a situation of generalised insecurity and feelings of instability among the workforce. Labourers are not able to negotiate or bargain with employers, unlike the masons or skilled workers who have some latitude in co-defining work conditions, especially with individual customers (but not big contractors who already have fixed codes of work). We can therefore classify this work as precarious, in line with its definition by ITUC (2011) as 'an employment which is poorly paid, insecure, unprotected, and cannot support a living'.

Construction workers face two major enemies in carrying out their tasks – the city authorities and land guards. While the city authorities legitimately demand building permits for the construction sites, the land guards illegitimately extort money and make claims on the land. Obtaining a permit before constructing a house is a real challenge in the city of Accra due to bureaucracy, extortion and corrupt practices. Hence many developers do not apply for permits, which leaves the workers at the mercy of the Municipal Work Taskforce who go round to stop such projects. Both Gbeyo and Gbevo confirm the nuisance caused by city authorities as they confiscate their tools, resulting in higher costs; stop the work, thus causing temporary unemployment and reducing their incomes. According to Gbevo, the main construction companies do not have problems with city authorities, as they ensure that approval is obtained before work begins. However, the private individuals who are unable to obtain permits, and who constitute the majority of clients of construction workers, create problems for the stability of employment and earnings. But usually, the payment of a bribe clears the way for the work to continue within a few days.

The land guards are a dangerous group of young unemployed men who invade every new construction site demanding various sums of money as fees for their protective services. Also, they contest ownership of most lands, which results in deadly conflicts. This is captured in the following statement by Gbeyo:

“Land Guards on motorbikes with cutlasses, guns and other weapons come to attack us. We have to be smart to do as they say when they come to tell us to stop working’. ...Usually land guards come and disturb us at the construction sites. Land guards once seriously chased us away. They packed everything from the site including our wheelbarrows, clothing, shoes and personal belongings”.

All the migrants bemoaned the high cost of living in Accra, arguing that it reduces their incomes and therefore the benefits of migrating. The three major expenditure items are house rents, transport fees, and food. Their accommodation is poor, as they live in slum communities and uncompleted buildings with poor access to basic amenities. These slums are often demolished by the city authorities, resulting in the loss of property and savings. Gbeyo laments in the following words: *“Renting a room in Accra is expensive and the cost of living in Accra is high; everything thing is expensive in Accra. Sometimes what you spend on food, comparing it to the village is too high. Also, you will take a car to work every time. That is why when we travel to work in Accra, we prefer to stay around the site”.* The migrants therefore have to devise strategies to cut down on their cost of living by staying in uncompleted buildings or on the site once the building reaches an advanced state. Similarly, Eitu, instead of renting a room, buys space and erects wooden kiosks, just as many migrants from the north do, to reduce the cost of living. While the VR migrants are able to avoid the cost of transport and rent in many instances, the NR migrants pay for these by renting dealing kiosks and rooms until they build their own houses in Accra. Also, those who don't stay at the construction sites must then commute daily to the site at high cost. These findings rhyme with those of Mosse *et al.* (2005), Betancourt *et al.* (2013) and Picherit (2012), who assert that construction work is often conducted in very poor conditions and very dangerous, with workers having poor access to adequate housing and other basic amenities, including social protection.

Distance to destination constituted a major psychological challenge to the families. The NR migrant families lamented the most about missing their partners and fathers. Some even wished that the migrant abandoned the economic project and returned home to make the family 'complete'. Marital problems emerge with the absence of these migrants, as over time both partners are accused of being unfaithful. Even though migrants from the VR visited home much more frequently, they had more reports of marital problems than their counterparts in the NR (focus groups in both places). Sama expresses her psychological woes in the statement:

“We really miss him. It's been several years since he came back to visit...we are even hoping he has not married another wife over there. If he comes home often, we will be happy; but now besides the little money he sends down, there is nothing good about his travel”.

Migrants may get overwhelmed by their new circumstance and environment and carve out new lives for themselves, thereby relegating their families to a secondary status. Sama (NR, wife of migrant) and her children live in very poor conditions and yet do not get the emotional support of their husband and father. Ironically, the husband has been able to build a house in Accra, which is

a major achievement, but sees little of his family and does not send enough money for their sustenance.

Lawri shares similar sentiments in response the question 'are you happy in Accra' by stating that

'I am not happy because leaving my children in the village worries me. It is better to live with the children to guide and teach them and also supervise their studies and schoolwork. I stand to benefit from that in the future, but now I don't have a choice. I have to leave them because of the nature of the work'.

The feeling of not performing one's parental duties is a source of worry as it can shape what and who the children become. Due to the proximity of the VR to the capital Accra, most of the migrant skilled workers moved between the two places in response to the availability of jobs in Accra. Four of the interviewees explained that they spent the waiting time between jobs back home instead of staying on in an expensive city. Hence contact with family is more frequent for these workers than for those of the NR. As a result, many are not interested in renting permanent accommodation in Accra, preferring uncompleted houses.

Fulfilment of expectations and wellbeing

There is a general feeling of a sense of gradual fulfilment of expectations of migrant construction workers amidst the life struggles in urban Ghana. The principal objective of migrants is to find work, earn good incomes and take good care of their families (focus groups in both regions). A combination of satisfaction and dissatisfaction provides a balance for assessing the migrants' fulfilment of expectations and livelihood objectives. They gauge their achievements in comparison with what is/was possible back home. However, expectations are jointly created by the migrant and his/her family and should be assessed with criteria of both parties. Sahm of NR, states that

'my husband is now working in Accra. At least, many of the building contracts he gets are in Accra. It is better than when he was solely working in Tamale. The motorbike for instance was bought only two years ago. My husband has bought land too. Soon, we will start building a blockhouse with cement. I will say our assets has increased'.

Sahm details the material gain of migrating, which for their family is improving over the years. The possession of a motorbike not only enables very important practical trips to be made, but also increases one's social standing. Similarly, a sandcrete block house is an important objective of many Ghanaians, with the purchase of a plot of land being the first. All the migrants aimed at constructing new houses with sandcrete blocks instead of mud. Even those who had mud houses due to migration were highly grateful.

Taking care of the family in terms of sending children to good school and feeding them, paying medical bills, and providing the little things that make life pleasurable is a critical assessment criterion. Although many construction workers complained of not earning enough, they were still

happy about remitting home and meeting their family obligations. Hetu of NR confirms that his life has improved tremendously. He says *'I am happy in Accra, because I have improved financially.... my family were here to visit me... I send money home upon request to pay school fees of my siblings too'*. Hetu attributes all these to the availability of jobs and better remuneration than in origin – Tamale. Also, Eitu (NR) has been able to build a two-bed-room mud house for his family, which he considers as an important milestone in his family's life. Hassim (NR) and his younger brothers managed to complete their father's building, thereby bringing joy and pride to the old man. Fulfilling parents' dreams and making them proud is an important social goal in Africa.

Gbeyo (VR) provides a comparative perspective in his statement,

'I wouldn't say traveling to Accra has improved my situation 100%. The benefits we gain from traveling to Accra are: we live on the site till the day you finished your work and you are ready to leave. You don't spend money on transportation. You are not meeting a relative to give out money. For instance "Boys Boys" or co-workers that say, "Charley (informal way of calling a friend) take this or give me some", there is nothing like that there (in Accra). In Mepe (VR) people will ask for money every time from you. So anytime we travel to work outside, the earnings are intact.'

The two worlds are completely different- Mepe is a rural area with communitarian values of sharing, while Accra is cosmopolitan with capitalist individualistic wealth accumulation strategies/values.

Some construction migrant workers meet new expectations completely outside their original life objectives. The initial intentions of the interviewed migrants was to find jobs, earn enough to better the lives of their families back home and return to invest in businesses or the construction industry. For instance, both Isaka and Hetu (both of NR) have their residential units in Accra, and therefore do not plan to return home. Hetu says that he can sell off his house when he decides to return, which will generate a good returns Unlike the VR migrant workers who still have a strong feeling towards home and therefore align their life objectives with what they are able to do back home, those of the NR live double lives with double objectives. For the NR migrants, there is gradually a falling interest in returning home and building their livelihoods, which is contrary to their initial plans.

With regard to the most prominent objective among all migrants, that is, migrating out of poverty, they all complained that it has been a slow process with the end still far in sight. Gbeyo says

'the problems I want to solve are still unresolved. For instance, my goal is to build a house, but I still haven't been able to build it'.

All the others tell of how Accra is an expensive place while jobs are not regular. Also, the obligations of migrants are overwhelming, as they have to meet their nuclear and extended family needs in addition to their own upkeep in the city. They all agree that there is an improvement in

their standard of living due to better income in Accra than the origin. Since many migrant construction workers are landless, poor and vulnerable (Wells 2007), their current conditions are considered an improvement even if we describe their work as low-paid jobs. Migration should not just be seen as a ‘survival strategy’ (Awumbila et al. 2014), but can be an accumulating one depending on a range of idiosyncratic attributes and the urban political economy.

Conclusions

The data presented here shows that consistent with findings elsewhere (Jones and Thorat, 2011; Zeitlyn et al. 2014; Awumbila et al, 2014), the construction sector provides rural-urban migrants a strategic entry point into the urban labour market. As in many African countries, there is an overconcentration of investments in large cities in Ghana, with less attention to rural areas and smaller towns (Songsore, 2009; Awumbila et al., 2014). This regional imbalance defines the landscape of migration routes, potential attraction areas and losing regions. Agriculture, which is the main source of income and employment in rural regions, is in a crisis due to liberalization of agricultural commodity imports, a degrading environment, climate change, and poor modernization. This has reduced the economic viability of rural Ghana. In line with the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) perspectives (Stark and Taylor, 1989), migration is an important avenue for families to diversify their income earning portfolios through spatial tapping of resources and employment opportunities from other regions. Migration is an important strategy for achieving sustainable livelihoods (Scoones 1998; Bryceson 2002; Betancourt *et al.* 2013; DFID 2002).

Generally, construction workers live under very trying conditions. Their living conditions vary according to where a contract is located, distance from place of origin, how long the migrant has been in Accra and seasonality of employment. The poor living conditions and the hazardous nature of their work expose them to multiple risks that erodes the gains of participating in urban labour markets. However, the intention to stay or return home is critical in defining the conditions of their living environment. Migrants from the Northern Region tend to make the destination their home and therefore enjoy a higher standard of living than those of the Volta Region who intend to return home and settle there. The decision making process is influenced by the distance from the origin, as longer distances are expensive to traverse, hence leading to permanent settlement by migrants, while shorter distance encourages more return migrants. The hard life of the construction worker is typical of most jobs in neo-liberal employment relations characterised by casualization, lower remuneration, longer working hours and poor social protection (Betancourt *et al.* 2013; Picherit (2012; Otoo et al. 2009).

The challenges facing the construction migrant worker reflect the level of vulnerability of the migrant. The migrant’s most important challenge is finding a job, sustaining employment and income, and ensuring welfare for the family back home. Less skilful workers tend to occupy a lower position and therefore earn low wages, and they need to compete with numerous other migrants who flood the unskilled labour markets. The work hazards faced by the construction

worker go beyond issues of safety to those of attack by thugs and city authorities, which typify conflict environments. ITUC's (2011) description of precarious employment leaves out the critical component of conflict situations in which migrants find themselves in executing jobs for their clients. Beyond facing these life-threatening conditions, construction workers have no future in old age except in accumulated assets, through which they can earn income when they retire. The enforcement of social security contributions by employers for both 'permanent casuals' and casual workers should be a national concern, while self-employed workers should be encouraged to make voluntary contributions.

Despite being a precarious job, the urban construction sector pays relatively well compared to other low paying jobs in the emerging urban economy. Hence the possibility for savings and remittances is quite high among skilled construction workers. A majority of the migrants send remittances, save in assets and keep in contact with their families. Remittances received by household members are often used primarily for current consumption as well as for investments in children's education, health care, improvement in the household, food and security, and water and sanitation, just as reported in the literature (de Haas 2006; Kyei, 2013; Jarawura 2013). Contrary to the theory of brain drain, this study shows how migration of skilled construction workers can improve both the lives of the individual and their families and that of the origin. The livelihood objectives of the migrants are highly compatible with national development objectives, as they struggle to increase national income, redistribute wealth from the centre to the periphery. The emerging labour markets serve a useful purpose in facilitating participation by the migrants, which is critical to their migrating out of poverty. The gradual improvement in the standards of living of migrant construction workers reflects the general improvement in the Ghanaian economy over the past three decades. The study argues that policies meant to prevent migration from less developed to more developed areas should be curtailed. Rather, policies that improve the conditions of life of origin areas and enable returns on investments of the migrants and their families are critical. Migrants serve as an important conduit for redistributing wealth from richer spaces to poorer ones, and should therefore be facilitated in their life struggles.

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