

THE STREET IS ONLY A STEPPING STONE: STREET VENDORS' ACCOUNT OF GOALS, STRATEGIES AND OBSTACLES.

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Abstract

The economic hardships experienced by many young people in Africa and in Ghana have resulted in the creation of several strategies in search of better livelihoods. In Ghana as in many other places, many people move from rural areas to urban areas end up on the streets as street vendors (Kwankye, Anarfi, Tagoe, & Castaldo, 2007; W. Mitullah, 2003; W. V. Mitullah, 2005). Using qualitative methods, this study seeks to explore vendors' reason for (migrating and) vending. In doing so, the study gives an account of survival and goal strategies of vendors and the obstacles they face. The results show that, most people on the street see vending as a way to acquire money quickly. It also revealed that the strategies that migrants adopt often end up becoming obstacles in the achievement of their goals.

Keywords: street vendors, hawking, migration, goals, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Economic hardships have resulted in the migration of many young people in many developing countries, including Ghana. A number of studies have documented the not-too-recent movement of young people from rural areas to urban areas in search of better livelihoods. A study by Asiedu & Agyei-Mensah revealed that most of the respondents were from the Ashanti, Eastern and Central regions of Ghana (Asiedu & Agyei-Mensah, 2008).

Another feature one would find in Ghana is retail trade (Yankson, 2006), and especially street vending, which are done by both migrants and non-migrants.

Migration is a widespread coping strategy for economically poor households as by diversifying their livelihood options, they reduce their risks and vulnerability (Ansell, 2000; Punch, 2009; Yaqub, 2007).

Adolescent transition into adulthood has often been used to explain behaviors of young people in achieving better livelihoods. (Nurmi, 1991, 1993)

This study seeks to explore vendors' ultimate reason for migrating/vending. In doing so, the study gives an account of goals strategies and obstacles. The study set out to attempt to answer a number of questions. Firstly, what are the goals of street vendors? By that, it sought to explore what brought them to the streets, their views on vending and where they intend to go after "leaving the streets". Secondly, what are the strategies used by street vendors in terms of survival on the street and towards attaining what they want to attain later. Lastly, what do street vendors believe are the solutions to the "street problem"?

DATA/METHODS

The “Vendors with no fixed location in Ghana Study” conducted in May to June of 2009 in six different towns (Accra, Tema, Adoagyiri, Akuse, Atinpoku and Kasoa) in the southern part of Ghana to explore the sexual and reproductive health issues of street hawkers.

It was a mixed method study using quantitative methods, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. In the quantitative study, a total of 400 street vendors were interviewed. There were a total of four focus group discussions in each of the six localities, comprising of males and females separately, above and below age 20, and 60 indepth interviews. The indepth interviews are done using recorders, and the interviews were later transcribed analyzed. Due to the mobility of the street vendors, all the respondents in the study were conveniently sampled. The Accra interviews were conducted on the Circle to Kanshie road, and on Graphic road.

Using thematic analysis, this paper explores the accounts given in indepth interviews by vendors on the Circle to Kaneshie road. It involved 17 vendors (nine males and eight females) aged 16 to 30 that had been hawking on the streets for a period of between 2 weeks and 8 years.

Participation in this study was voluntary and participants signed consent forms before their interviews.

RESULTS

The themes emerging concerning their goals include the things that brought the street hawkers to the streets or their ultimate goals for being on the streets and their strategies and obstacles towards the achievement of their goals. Some other themes emerging were their views of work on the streets, their obstacles towards their survival on the streets and their own recommendations to the “street problem”.

GOALS

What brought them?

For a lot of the respondents, both those who had migrated and those who hadn't, street vending seemed to be the only job that was available to do. There were no other options. Street vending doesn't require one to learn a trade to be able to start, and depending on what one wants to sell, it required very little capital to start, on a large option of streets. Street vending is also a quick way to make earnings and bettering themselves. It offers prospects for acquiring and financial and social capital necessary for their present and future life (Anyidoho & Ainsworth, 2009; Hashim, 2006). Again, for many of the young people on the streets, it appeared they had been swayed by the money involved in street vending. One respondent reports:

"... some of us when we go to our hometown we dress a lot to the under aged think that Accra is very easy. I know so many people who have stopped school for shoe shine in Accra because they want quick money". (Joseph, 22, 2 years)

Concerning children of school-going age that are often found on the street, another respondent said:

"This business is attracting children of school going age. Even though some claim they come to sell in order to get money for school fees, they are always here with us during even school session". (Patric, 21, 6 months).

VIEWS ON STREET HAWKING

There were varying opinions concerning respondents' views on street hawking. Some of the respondents mentioned many health problems that were related to street vending. There was the constant fatigue and tiredness that came with spending hours in the sun, and the catarrh and sore throat that came with the smoke from cars. Other respondents mentioned rather economic issues like

not being able to save. For many, the street was all about survival; getting enough to see you through the day. As one respondent recounts:

"I make enough for my daily use. I cannot say anything in particular about other vendors but with my experience, I think they do get enough for their daily uses as well". (Rose, 20, 5 years)

There were however others that believed with hard work and savings, eventually, it is possible to excel on the streets.

"It is if you are focused on it....Some of the boys here have cars which they have given to drivers to work for them". (Kwaku, 25, 6 years)

WHERE THEY'RE GOING

Many of the respondents had either learnt a trade already or had started and had to end their training due to lack of resources, and so selling on the streets was either a way to get by or to try to save money to learn a trade. For some of the respondents, being on the street was an attempt to save money to go back to school or to learn a skill or profession. It was obvious though that none of the respondents wanted to do street vending for a living. For those that wanted to remain in trade, they aspired for 'better' trading conditions like getting shops or places at the markets or doing wholesale trade. But for many of the respondents, going back to school or learning a skill to earn them a better income was what they desired.

"I do not intend to continue to sell things on the street. What I want to do is to learn how to drive". (Patric, 21, 6 months)

"As I said, I have learnt sewing so should the opportunity be given again, I think I will like to work as a seamstress". (Sarah, 21, 4 years and 1 month)

“I want to continue my education right now to improve my life or learn to be an auto mechanic”. (Peter, 18, 2 years)

“If I could get the resources, I would want to go back and continue my training in TV repairing or any mechanical job. (Kofi, 24, 3 years)

“It’s not very profitable. You get your profit but it’s not so much. I’d like to learn a profession”. (David, 21, 4 years)

All the respondents had mentioned things they wanted to do someday. In some studies (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2009) researchers distinguish between goals and “wishes” by exploring what respondents are doing to achieve the things they say they want to achieve, and only consider as goals, those things that respondents are making efforts to achieve.

Though one can argue that by being on the streets, the vendors could be said to be working towards their goals, very few of the respondents are able to save towards the future that they want. Very few of the respondents were working (e.g. saving) towards something, e.g. learning a trade or skill or going back to school. Street vending only allowed many of the vendors to save enough for their daily expenses and not allowed for savings.

“I make enough for my daily use (Rose, 20, 5years).

Again, many of the respondents seemed to expect opportunities to come their way, many of them looking up to the government for changes in their career. Some of the vendors also believed that it is the responsibility of the government to provide these opportunities.

STRATEGIES

Street survival

Most of the strategies on surviving on the street were on what females were doing. A few of the respondents mentioned armed robbery on the part of the males. According to the respondents, many of the girls engage in transactional sex either to make up for losses incurred or to supplement their profits. Others believed that some of them were just not willing to work hard for their money because they know they can get money at night. One respondent recounts:

"Yes, some people do that. Some friends of mine have ever told me that if they are not able to finish selling their sugar cane, the boys "pay for it" I don't do that although somebody offered that to me once, that is, to pay for my left over sugar cane and sleep with me". (Ama, 16, 2 weeks)

Another respondent reported:

"...if you look at our female colleagues, if they don't make any sales, in the night, they engage in transactional sex for money. Some of the guys also rob or are armed robbers". (Peter, 18, 2 years)

Some of the girls also use abortion as a survival strategy on the street. According to the abortion literature, many young women abort their pregnancies because they cannot afford to take care of the children or because they are not willing to be mothers, etc. However, according to the respondents, pregnancies also hinder the respondents from being able to supplement their sales through sexual transactions, and that is another reason for abortion on the streets.

"Some of the girls are prostitutes. Many of them abort pregnancies when they occur. They can't continue with the street work or the prostitution if pregnant". (David, 21, 4 years)

WHERE THEY'RE GOING

As mentioned earlier, many want to learn a trade, continue with a trade they were learning, go back to school, etc., but few were working towards these things. It appears the street is initially supposed to be a strategy to attain the things that individuals aim for but ends up being a survival mechanism. It appears that in addition to the fact that selling of the streets eventually becomes a survival mechanism, it also becomes addictive and difficult for a lot of people to move from the streets. A study by Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah (2008) did not show a shift from street vending to other livelihoods but rather showed "a progression amongst trades over time, in terms of the types of goods which the vendors trade in.

According to one of the respondents: "Selling on the street is addictive. Money can sway your intentions" (James, 26, 4 months). This is consistent with findings by De-Graft Aikins and Ofori-Atta (2007) that found that coping strategies facilitate adaptation but not transformation of everyday circumstances. According to one of the vendors,

OBSTACLES

In exploring the obstacles faced by street vendors, this study distinguished between the problems they face with trying to survive on the streets and the obstacles towards attainment of the futures that they want.

With regards to the obstacles to survival on the street, prominent in the discussion were health-related issues and health hazards. Many of the respondents mentioned that the sun gets too hot and easily made them sick. Again standing and running for hours made them tired weak all the time and more susceptible to illnesses. Again, the smoke from cars gave them coughs and catarrh all the time.

“My major problem is the sun. It makes trading very uncomfortable and one gets tired and dehydrated easily”. (Olivia, 25, 5 months)

Another problem was that many passengers go away with their money. Many passengers insist on getting their change before paying for the item, but speed off when they are given the change, so that the vendor loses more than the cost of the item they tried to sell.

“Yes, I have on several occasions lost my money to passengers when the cars begin to move”. (Sarah, 21, 4 years and 1 month)

Again, many of the hawkers have to run after cars during sales. Sometimes, the hawkers have to run across the road if a customer calls. Others walk between the lanes while the cars are moving in order to reach more vehicles/customers on both sides of the road. Many street vendors have been knocked down, in several cases, the drivers speeding off.

“People get knocked down all the time. It happened 2 months ago and people died. It’s risky here... It’s very bad. Some get knocked down when running away from them. Even the “abaaye” people get knocked down themselves”. (David, 21, 4 years)

(abaaye – Accra Metropolitan Assembly task force)

A few of the respondents complain about the nature of their goods. Many of the hawkers believed that the goods they sell will not be bought at the market and had to be sold on the streets. Again some of the items go bad. While hawkers that do not sell food items are not affected by this problem, hawkers that sell perishable goods, for instance, peeled pawpaw and other fruits, have to sell all their goods by close of the day.

“You cannot sell sugar cane in the market, you have to move about. This is because if you are not able to sell all you will have to dispose it off so it’s important you sell everything within a day”. (Ama, 16, 2 weeks)

Another problem that the hawkers had was the Accra Metropolitan Assembly’s (AMA) efforts to rid the streets of hawkers by relocating them to markets, which often included assault, arrest and having their goods confiscated. Many of the respondents did not see this as right, as some claimed to pay daily dues of 10 or 20 pesewas to the AMA and so felt they had earned the right to sell there. Others complained that the stores given out by the AMA for sellers to use are either too expensive or all sold to few rich people that can afford it, who in turn sell or rent it to others at even higher costs.

“I don’t have the required capital to sell at the market. It will cost about 3000 Cedis to set me up in another business activity that will take me off the street. The charges at the market are very high. Most of the time we don’t have money to pay for the stores, let alone buy goods to sell”. (Kojo, 27, 3 years 8 months)

Another respondent said:

“Not everybody can go there to sell. The cost of a store there is high. Also, not all the things we sell at the street can be sold at the hawkers’ market”. (Boateng, 27, 3 years 8 months)

Difficulty in saving

As mentioned earlier on, many of the respondents only made enough to survive on. The problem was compounded by the fact that many of the respondents have to send money to their households back at home that depend on them. This is consistent with other literature that many households depend on migrant remittances for survival (Acosta, Fajnzylber, & Lopez, 2007; Guzmán, Morrison, & Sjöblom,

2008; Osaki, 2003; Quartey, 2006). These count as few of the factors that make it hard for hawkers to achieve the things that they want to achieve. According to a respondent:

“For instance I want to be an electrician, but I need money to learn that profession, and it’s so difficult to save, with this business”. (David, 21, 4 years)

SOLUTION

Some of the respondent gave suggestions to what they thought were the problems they experienced as street vendors. Some mentioned that the hawkers markets were too expensive and should be provided at places and prices determined by the hawkers. This is not a plausible suggestion since it takes planning to decide which places are convenient to set as hawkers’ markets. Many also believed that creating hawkers’ markets was not a good suggestion because, besides the fact that the shops will simply not be affordable to some vendors no matter what, vendors that can afford the shops will still find a way to sell the shops or rent them out and continue to sell on the streets. Again, total evacuation is next to impossible because people will just move back or not move from the streets at all. Finally, there will always be a growing number of street vendors simply because it is a quick way of making enough to go by. But it is not feasible for there to be a growing number of hawkers’ markets to accommodate new hawkers.

Again, some respondents argued that the government had promised them better livelihoods during elections and so while some felt that the government hadn’t lived to their expectations, others simply felt that it was the responsibility of the government to find solutions to their problems. Some of the respondents believed that it is the responsibility of the government to, offer placement for those that already had some training or offer training to street hawkers and support people with the education the

hope to acquire. Also, believed the training should be at times that are convenient for them so that they can still stay on the streets to sell and acquire the training that they need.

“I’d like to do screen printing but if I have to learn it, the time must be flexible enough so that I can still come here to sell. (Kwaku, 25, 6 years)

CONCLUSION

Many young people are experiencing unemployment and poverty, and that has driven a lot of them to the streets to sell to make ends-meet. Perhaps these young people see their dreams being fulfilled through the streets. But when they meet the realities that await them, the street unfortunately becomes an addictive survival mechanism for these young people. Soon, many young people notice that, though they earn enough to take care of their basic expenses, the street is hardly a place to achieve the things that they hoped to achieve.

This study tries to three questions. Firstly, what are the goals of street vendors? Secondly, what are the strategies used by street vendors in terms of survival on the street and towards attaining what they want to attain later. Lastly, what do street vendors believe are the solutions to the “street problem”? Data for the study was from indepth interviews from the “Vendors with no fixed location in Ghana” study. Results of the study showed that street vending seemed to be the only job that was available to do and relatively easier to start because it required little capital, even for the many respondents that had already learnt a skill or other. Though some believed that it is possible to eventually excel on the streets, others believed that the street was only about survival and not a place for savings. Taking steps (like saving) towards their own futures was almost impossible for many of the respondents and many hoped for the government to provide opportunities.

Though a lot of street hawkers have hopes in the government to provide better livelihood for them, it appears the government's strategies to solving street hawking has always been a cycle of, literally, chasing them off the streets, and having them come back to the streets, or providing hawkers markets that are obviously not adequate for the number of street hawkers that are already on the streets or that join the streets ever so often.

On the surface, it appears the street is a quick way to earn money, so it is easy to believe it is a place to acquire savings for education or other trades. But a deeper analysis of expenses, life on the streets and the strategies that backfire, show that the streets may not necessarily be the first step to achieving dreams. Perhaps the government can help, but by providing more plausible solution to the problem. Solutions can be in the form of expanding free education to reach higher level to keep more young people in school and hopefully off the streets. Perhaps, the rural areas of the country can also be developed to be able to absorb the unemployed population to prevent them from moving to Accra in search of better livelihoods.

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