

Working Paper  
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**'If Only I Get Enough Money for a Bicycle!'**  
**A Study of Childhoods, Migration and Adolescent Aspirations**  
**Against a Backdrop of Exploitation and Trafficking in Burkina Faso**

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## C O N T E N T S

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Perceptions of Children and Youth's Work and Migration</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Media and the Construction of a National Discourse</i>	9
<b>Adult Views shaped by Everyday Practices and Rural Livelihoods</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Rural Children's Education Outside the Household</i>	13
<b>Adolescents' Own Perception of What They Do and What They Ought to Do</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>Deciding When to Migrate</i>	17
<i>Experiences in Town</i>	10
<i>Negotiating the Implications of Being Migrants</i>	20
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>26</b>

## Abstract

This paper focuses on adolescent children's independent migration to rural towns and urban areas in search of work. International and national agencies tend to see this migration through the lens of crisis, whether as a result of parental ignorance or youngsters' unruliness. Here, the author explores, on the one hand, how these perceptions correspond with the common perceptions of childhood and youth in rural areas, and on the other, how rural adolescents describe their mobility. In the intersection between different notions of childhood and youth that give rise to conflicting ideas about adolescents' work and migration, the author draws attention to the adolescents' own rationales, choices and strategies to pursue their quest for money and meet intergenerational expectations.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the different notions of childhood that underpin dominant views on children's upbringing and edification. Advocacy and programmes to eliminate child labour both at the national and international level often equate children's work and migration with the worst forms of child labour (defined in the ILO Convention No. 182, adopted June 1999<sup>1</sup>) or with trafficking (addressed in the UN Palermo Protocol, adopted November 2000<sup>2</sup>) but rarely put to the test universal ideas of childhood by situating them in concrete empirical contexts.

While the protection of children from exploitation and harmful work is extremely important, the ILO Convention No. 182 nevertheless raises definitional questions regarding *when* work is harmful and *when* it is slavery or similar to slavery. In a study aiming to investigate how the traditional forms of child relocation functioned in West Africa in the early 2000s and their effect on children, Riisøen, Hatløy and Bjerkan (2004) looked at apprenticeship and the working conditions under which adolescents in the age group 15-22 years were trained. They paid much attention to the lack of security in small workshops and described in detail the shortcomings in safety measures at a garage in Ouagadougou. Despite the fact that none of the boys had been involved in any major accidents during work, the authors concluded that,

[the] excess demand for apprenticeship positions [...] puts the employers in a powerful position, enabling them to take advantage of the child's willingness to learn a profession – and eventually

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp2.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://untreaty.un.org/English/TreatyEvent2003/Texts/treaty2E.pdf#search=%22un%20palermo%20proto%20col%22>.

gain access to the adult labour market – without having to provide safe and healthy working and living conditions. Likewise, apprenticeship may lead to economic exploitation of the apprentice, as the latter execute tasks that the master would otherwise have to pay salaries for. Consequently, the apprentices may fall victim to many types of exploitation, and yet consider themselves lucky compared to friends and acquaintances.

(Riisøen, Hatløy and Bjerkan 2004: 23)

This example underscores the dilemma of distinguishing between the need for protective regulation and youngsters' own view on their opportunities. First, we need to ask whether these boys are in fact doing harmful work considering that they learn skills that may help them greatly in the future. Second, and before judging whether apprentices are being exploited through having the most dangerous work assigned to them, we need to examine the working conditions for adult employees and the employers themselves to assess whether the problem is a much broader one of security and health measures at work spaces generally. A final question relates to slavery and practices similar to slavery. In Burkina Faso and in West Africa more generally, apprentices do not receive a salary but pay for their apprenticeship, unless they are related to the owner (Guichaoua 2006, Hashim 2005). When they do not receive a wage for their work but are free to leave, are they then working under slavery-like conditions?

In the West African context, girls and sometimes boys from the age of seven or eight years may be recruited by a distant relative or someone from their village to work in the house of the relative or of someone else whom the relative knows (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985, Jacquemin 2002, Jonckers 1997, Kielland and Tovo 2006, Pilon 2003). Many fingers have been pointed at the girls, and few at the boys, in relation to child trafficking and exploitation, because these children often work long hours for a nominal wage, if any wage at all (Dottridge 2002, Fitzgibbon 2003, Riisøen, Hatløy and Bjerkan 2004). Again, we need to raise questions about the invisibility of boy domestic workers even if they are a minority, and about the conditions under which young domestic workers live and work generally. Is their situation different from that of apprentices? If so, in what way does their situation differ? Do domestic workers learn any skills that may help them later on? And how do *they* perceive their own situation?

In much of the child protection work, apprenticeships are encouraged because they are inscribed in a particular logic of education despite the fact that little attention is paid to the actual curriculum. Other common occupations for child workers are not seen as possible sites of learning and of enhancing children's future opportunities. However, the belief that children and

youth outside the formal education system are ready candidates for being trafficked and exploited (victims without agency), or the idea that they might easily develop into petty criminals, child soldiers or rebels (politically disruptive agents), does not take into consideration the complexity of social and economic circumstances that structure youngsters' opportunities to participate in formal or informal education and training. This paper aims to counter such superficial representations by examining the notions of childhood at different levels in Burkina Faso that give rise to differing views on education and learning. Contrary to the usual focus on adults' views, the paper brings to the foreground an invisible group of children and young youth, namely independent migrants aged 14-18 years, and explores their incentives to travel to find work in rural towns or in the capital as well as their own perception of the opportunities and constraints they experience as migrants.

As we shall see the common perceptions among urban-based policy-makers and civil servants, adults in rural areas and adolescent migrants intersect with each other and with gender in interesting ways. One point relates to formal or informal education. In Burkina Faso, as elsewhere in the global South, low enrolment and retention rates in the formal education system are commonly blamed on parental ignorance and poverty. However, findings emerging from interviews and observations over a period of sixteen months reveal that frequent absence among teachers, excessive corporal punishment in rural schools and lack of opportunities at the labour market for school leavers are important reasons for parents and children to choose alternative forms of learning. The stories told by the adolescent migrants and their parents show that adolescents do not abide passively with adults' strategies for survival or profit-maximisation but make their own decisions about migration and work. Importantly, this study shows that adolescents' independent migration is not a result of dysfunctional family structures and it provides evidence of the aspirations that motivate youngsters to look for work and urban experiences.

The ethnographic material derives from two periods of fieldwork: a four-month study in early 2005 focusing on children's independent migration and a twelve-month study in 2001-02 focusing on, amongst others, intra-household dynamics and indirect ways of negotiating in rural households.<sup>3</sup> The 2005 study was multi-sited and involved tracing child migrants and their parents: beginning with a small number of children from one village and snowballing the sample by meeting their

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<sup>3</sup> The author deeply appreciates the research grants awarded by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty at the University of Sussex and the Danish Research Agency.

friends, asking the help of adult migrants from the region of origin and systematically combing the streets for young Bisa-speaking vendors. With the children's permission, interviews were conducted with their parents or guardians back in the village. In addition to semi-structured recorded interviews with sixty independent child migrants who were under 18 years of age at the time of their first migration and forty-five parents, repeated informal interviews and observations were made with a smaller number of migrants, allowing us a fuller picture of adolescents' migrant life.

In the following sections, adult perceptions of childhood and appropriate types of work for children and youth among policy-makers and civil servants at the national level and among rural parents in southeastern Burkina Faso are discussed. Then, a string of ethnographic vignettes demonstrates how adolescent migrants describe their motivations for migrating in the first place and what they gain from living and working in town. Their parents' responses to their wish to migrate are also included in order to illuminate how decisions are negotiated and acted out. Finally, the kinds of aspirations that adolescent migrants have for particular identities and life styles are examined, not only at home but also at the migration destination.

### **Perceptions of Children and Youth's Work and Migration**

Children's work and migration have only recently become a concern at the policy-level in Burkina Faso, and the authorities have formulated several projects and legislative measures in this realm since the millennium. As late as in 1996, a study by ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) on the exploitative and hazardous conditions under which Burkinabè children worked, especially in agriculture, mining, domestic work and the informal sector, was met with widespread reservations. As a result, the Council of Ministers twice refused to ratify the ILO Convention No. 182 and it was not ratified in Burkina Faso until May 2001 (Groves 2003: 1-2). Nevertheless, the government accepted technical and economic assistance from IPEC in 1999 (Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Jeunesse<sup>4</sup>) to address the 'problem', whose existence they doubted. Around the same time, UNICEF and ILO increased their advocacy for abolishing the trafficking of children, and Burkina Faso was one of the participating countries in a regional workshop for West- and Central Africa in early 2000, the objective of which was to develop strategies to stop this trafficking (MASSN 2002:5). These campaigns brought into play discourses on human rights and morality by stressing slavery and child sex work.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Work, Employment and Youth, <http://www.emploi.gov.bf>, accessed 14 December 2004.

As an outcome of the parallel processes politicians and civil servants in Burkina Faso discussed children's work, the worst forms of child labour and child trafficking simultaneously in 2001, and the notion of childhood they incorporated into national programmes and policies drew heavily on ILO and UNICEF definitions. This notion stressed children's rights to protection at the heart of the family up to the age of 18 years, their rights to formal education, making working children an anomaly. A critical assessment of whether this notion of childhood was appropriate in all Burkinabè contexts was completely absent. The fact that children worked was attributed to poverty and to poor parents' ignorance about their children's best interests.

Such a wholesale adoption of a globalised notion of childhood, or of any other social category, is problematic. Apart from failing to acknowledge that the conceptualisation of childhood and of acceptable forms of work for children at different ages might vary over class and space, the treatment of all children as one category fails to distinguish between the different needs, capabilities and preferences of young children and of almost-adults (White 2002). In Burkina Faso, it seemed, taking on board the globalised notion of childhood was instrumental at policy-level in condemning adolescents' migration and attracting funding for projects aimed to 'protect' and repatriate rural children and youth on the move, while ignoring the endemic poverty, the lack of future opportunities and the normality of migration for dispersed families in rural areas.

Former reservations about the exploitation of working children evaporated as international NGOs like Anti-Slavery International, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes and World Association for Orphans-Afrique worked with Burkinabè NGOs to publish case studies and surveys about children working under harsh conditions. A review of these project reports reveal that they focused almost exclusively on the mining sector (boys and girls) and on the domestic sector (girls) (e.g. Delap, Ouedraogo and Sogoba 2004, Groves 2003, Riisøen, Hatløy and Bjerkan 2004, Terre des Hommes 2003). Little attention has been paid to the agricultural sector within and outside the country (de Lange 2005) and to the informal sector, although the reports suggest that children frequently find work in these sectors. Unfortunately, an open discussion on acceptable forms of work and suitable working conditions for children at different stages in their development has never arisen from these studies either at the political level or in advocacy.

While the 1999 IPEC-funded project had as its objectives to stop the employment of young children,<sup>5</sup> to improve the working conditions for children and to strengthen the capacities of key actors so they could address child labour problems (Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Jeunesse), later projects shifted their focus away from children's need to be protected as workers. Instead, the issue of trafficking within the country and across borders became the burning topic. In November 2001, the National Assembly ratified the UN Palermo Protocol and thus committed to address the trafficking of human beings. An early operational definition of child trafficking appropriate to the Burkinabè context was formulated by the 'Ministère de l'Action Sociale et de la Solidarité Nationale' (MASSN)<sup>6</sup>:

The operational criteria [...] that identify trafficking in Burkina Faso [...] relate to: a child aged between 0 and 18 years; the *possible* existence of an intermediary; the child as the object in a transaction; the movement of the child; and the intention to exploit the child.

(MASSN 2002: 6, my translation and emphasis)

This definition raises some fundamental problems. Firstly, the fact that an intermediary does not need to be implicated in a trafficking situation means that without clear definitions of what constitutes 'a transaction in which a child is the object' and 'exploitation', parents and guardians risk being accused of selling their children or of being irresponsible parents. Moreover, kin or other adults who help a child to find a job at the destination or employers who provide work may be accused of being traffickers even if the child is between 14 and 18 years and legally takes up work. Secondly, the treatment of all children below 18 years of age as one category presumes that parents are always involved in the decision-making and that children lack agency even in adolescence to assert their own preferences regarding their whereabouts.

### *Media and the Construction of a National Discourse*

While cultural and social factors may produce differences across localities in Burkina Faso, the media intensify such variations through reports on individual projects and workshops by government institutions and national NGOs without critically examining the information. Since the end of 2004, the Burkinabè newspapers have reported on a number of issues under the broad heading 'child trafficking'. The most common themes included the estimated numbers of working children and victims of trafficking, the number of intercepted children either in Côte d'Ivoire or

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<sup>5</sup> The legal minimum age for employment is 14 years in Burkina Faso (Code du travail au Burkina Faso, article 87 du 22.12.1992, Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Jeunesse).

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity.

within Burkina Faso, girls working as domestic workers, boys working in small-scale mines, street children and pupils in Qur'anic schools. Pieces about girls' domestic work usually referred to a study by Terre des Hommes (2003) that set out to discuss whether girls travelling from the Sourou province to Ouagadougou to look for work were subject to trafficking or whether they were independent migrants. But rather than picking up on this discussion, the journalists or the civil servants interviewed limited themselves to cite the statistics given in the study with the effect that in the dominant national discourse girl domestic workers seemed to come from the Sourou province only. Similarly, much attention was paid to the boys from the provinces in the 'Centre-Nord' who seek work in the artisan gold mines in that area. However, as the newspaper quotes below indicate, the discourse on child trafficking has slowly changed over the course of time:

Thousands of children, girls as well as boys, are victims of this inhuman practice. These children are used either in the plantations or as domestic workers in the cities or even reduced to prostitutes and totally outside social protection.

(L'Hebdomadaire N° 285, 24-30 September 2004, my translation)

Due to their poverty and their responsibility for a large number of children, a very common practice among Qur'anic masters -- though condemned by Islam -- is to encourage their students to beg for food. Others give the children to traffickers who in turn place them in families that need a small boy to trade iced water or other cold drinks or at plantations in Côte d'Ivoire.

(L'Hebdomadaire N° 296, 10-16 December 2004, my translation)

The police intercepted 13-year-old Hamado and 15-year-old Larba at Kaya. [...] 'The reason why I left was that there wasn't any work at Maané', said Hamado when trying to justify his action, though he did not doubt that he had escaped one of the worst forms of child labour, which could have cost him his life.

(Sidwaya, 18 May 2005, my translation)

They are in bars, restaurants, gold mines, fields, plantations, cotton farms, rice paddies, in the house of certain families. They are children in the age group 6 to 15 years, victims of 'trade in human beings' and economic exploitation. [...] The phenomenon is worrying because the youngsters, and in particular the young girls, are no longer afraid of travelling into town in their search of material commodities. [...] The identification of traffickers is a major difficulty. But it is a fact that some parents are the traffickers' accomplices as are the Qur'anic masters who draw with them a considerable number of children.

(Le Faso.Net, 17 November 2005, my translation)

An interesting element in the reporting is the change from seeing children as passive victims being sent off to exploitation to seeing them as agents, albeit ignorant agents who do not know what they are getting themselves into and therefore need protection from ignorant parents, ruthless Qur'anic masters and merciless employers. Another element is the way in which children have increasingly been foregrounded. In the early days of reporting on trafficking, the newspapers described measures implemented by government agencies and rarely defined the age brackets of children included in these projects whereas later articles emphasised the experiences of young children by explicitly noting their age and including the voices of children below 15 years through quotes from interviews. In part, this reflects the sluggish shift in the conceptualisation of trafficking at the level of intervention after the adoption in May 2003 of a penal code, No. 038-2003/AN, introducing imprisonment for the trade in children under 16 years (Le Faso.Net, 17 November 2005). Finally, the children's voices emerging in Burkinabè newspapers are used for the particular purpose of documenting that these children's needs are not met by their parents and therefore they are subjected to various dangers.

The crux of the dominant national discourse is that it equates children's work and migration with the worst forms of child labour and with trafficking. Independent child migrants are rarely permitted space to explain in depth their motivations for migrating, nor are their parents' opinions on this matter heard. Hence, the proponents of the national discourse continuously refrain from addressing the more sensitive issues related to notions of childhood and the driving forces in children and youth's migration. This paper aims to present a more nuanced picture of independent child migration that includes the discourses of the rural population which hardly ever reach the Burkinabè newspapers or the desks of the civil servants and activists involved in the anti-trafficking programmes.

### **Adult Views Shaped by Everyday Practices and Rural Livelihoods**

In the rural areas of southeastern Burkina Faso, adult views on children's work and mobility are shaped by the practice of learning-by-doing and by the prevalent livelihood practices which, apart from agriculture and small-scale trade of farming products and everyday necessities, includes migration as a key source. Children learn the necessary practical and social skills of rural livelihoods through participation while they are gradually integrated into the social and economic worlds of their parents and grandparents. From the author's ethnography of rural household dynamics in 2001-02, it emerges that very young children were never compelled to work but they

were present in all spheres and were encouraged to take up small tasks by their parents, grandparents and older siblings (Thorsen 2005). Hence, when mothers and older sisters went to collect water or sold goods at the market, young girls often trotted along with downsized containers and trays that they proudly carried on their heads.

Older children of the age seven or eight years were given light tasks of minding younger siblings (mainly girls) and herding (mainly boys). These tasks were hardly ever carried out by this lone child as we typically see depicted in NGO fund- and awareness-raising campaigns but in the company of their friends and under the guidance of adults. At the age of twelve or thirteen years, children were increasingly integrated into all tasks and they were slowly obliged to take part in agricultural and domestic work except if they were at school. They worked in the household head's fields in the morning and in their mother's fields in the afternoon, unless they were given other tasks or permitted time to gather fruit and leaves for consumption and time to play or help their friends with the tasks they had been given. While children were important sources of labour, their parents and grandparents were also enormously concerned that the children became skilled at various economic and social activities. Encouragement to engage in economic activities was given by allocating them a small field, buying them a hen, or urging them to sell the fruits they gathered. Most boys and some girls had a rice field at the age of fourteen or fifteen years, and older boys usually also had a rain-fed millet field while older girls had a groundnut field.

The age at which children took up various tasks generally depended less on their chronological age than on their physical ability to do so, on the need for their labour and on the children's willingness to carry out the requested tasks or abscond from them. In fact, conflicts regularly arose between parents who disagreed on the tasks allocated to children and youth, be they biological or social mothers and fathers or parents in a broader sense, and between children and their parents. In the large rural households of southeastern Burkina Faso, mothers were often closer to their children than the father or the household head, especially if he was responsible for many children by several wives, widows and daughters-in-law, and they did not always have the same ideas about what was best for a child. While fathers were concerned about sending their biological and classificatory children down the right path by allocating land to them, giving advice, ensuring that the children were incorporated into the network of patrilateral and matrilineal kin and possibly sending them to school, mothers were also concerned about children's everyday behaviour and well-being. One mother, for example, got annoyed when her husband wanted to send out her 7-year-old daughter to herd goats and sheep, and as she could not speak up

against her husband, she enrolled her daughter in school. For older children seeking the advice of seniors, such divergences implied that they were sometimes supported in their endeavours to earn money by one parent but not by the other. On the one hand, this is because fathers and mothers were concerned about different responsibilities within the household and, on the other hand, because they viewed their children's abilities differently. Moreover, children frequently drew on the advice and support of other household members than their close parents or guardians and thus obtained information without their knowledge (ibid.).

In addition to the educational purpose of ensuring that children were capable of taking up key livelihood activities, allocating land to them or allowing them time to engage in other economic activities was a means to satisfy their desire for an independent income and to push over to them expenses for clothing and other necessities. This gradual process of bringing up children – or from the children's perspective, of growing up – is obviously based on a different set of ideas about the kinds of work that are acceptable for children at different ages, and also about children's participation in the economic sphere, than the ideas held by urban-based civil servants and activists. It does not mean that rural parents do not care about protecting their children but rather that they are *also* concerned about letting their children pursue some of their dreams. Hence, adults balance their own desires to have children around against adolescents' wishes to earn money and to see some of the world (Hashim 2004, Thorsen 2006).

### *Rural Children's Education Outside the Household*

Another contrast to the notion of childhood adopted by national agencies in Burkina Faso relates to formal and informal education. While civil servants and the urban middleclass insinuated that rural parents were oblivious of the virtues of formal school education<sup>7</sup>, they did not speak to the diversification of rural livelihoods that also stretched into children's education. In principle, primary school was free of charge in 2005 but a fee of 1,200 Fr per pupil was collected to provide school lunches for the children. Additional informal fees of a similar amount were collected for reasons and issues invented by schoolteachers, some of which benefited the school children while others did not. Although most rural parents, even in the poorest families, enrolled at least one child in primary school, they did not perceive state school education as a guarantee for securing their

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<sup>7</sup> The Burkinabè educational system is based on the French model: Primary school consists of six levels completed by the CEP (le Certificat d'Etudes Primaires) while secondary school has seven levels divided in two major parts. The first consists of four levels completed by the BEPC (le Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle) and the second of three levels completed by the BAC (le Baccalauréat).

children's future. Moreover, it is important to note that mothers and fathers sometimes prioritised differently in their children's upbringing and were able to spend their incomes in different ways due to the responsibilities linked with their social positions. As a result, they frequently took on the responsibility for the schooling of different children. While a classificatory father of many children might enrol one son of each woman in his household, mothers might enrol their other sons and in some cases also their daughters in school and bear the costs. Other children were sent through other forms of education such as Qur'anic schools and informal apprenticeships<sup>8</sup>.

Parents, and in particular fathers or male household heads, sent children to different types of Qur'anic schools. In villages housing a Qur'anic school, both boys and girls were enrolled in classes but only boys attended when schools were located elsewhere outside the village. Most rural boys went to rural Qur'anic schools where they worked on their master's farm in addition to learning the Qur'an, though some were sent to urban 'Franco-Arabe' schools where they lived with kin and were taught French, mathematics and the Qur'an at regular hours. Finally, some were sent to Islamic masters in town where their training would include begging and working for various employers to get food. Generally, parents judged whether a child would be able to withstand the suffering integrated into Islamic education before sending the child away.

Another strategy was to find an apprenticeship for a child, usually for a son. Despite the fact that some girls in rural towns entered apprenticeships, this was rarely an option for village girls. To the extent possible, rural parents drew on skilled kin who could take in an apprentice in their workshop, as the training would otherwise require a large fee to be paid to the patron. The most common professions were those of mechanics, tailors and carpenters. Furthermore, both boys and girls joined kin in large villages, rural towns and the capital where they learned to trade or grew garden vegetables through helping their relative. As elsewhere in West Africa (see for example, Bledsoe 1980, Goody 1982, Isiugo-Abanihe 1985), these fostering arrangements were either initiated by a parent who asked a relative to take on the responsibility for a child to increase the child's skills and future opportunities, or by a relative seeking a child to fill a labour gap or, more long-term, to become the child of a woman who had few surviving children.

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<sup>8</sup> None of the children interviewed had been enrolled at a Christian mission school. This is not because my sample consists primarily of Muslim families but because the mission schools are expensive private schools that cater to the children of civil servants and wealthy traders and thus are outside the reach of most village children.

Fostering arrangements stretched across rural locations but also across rural-urban lines, and depending on the locality, they offered a very different set of opportunities for the children involved. In a study of girl domestic workers in Abidjan, Jacquemin (2007) draws attention to the impact of changing economies on the demand for domestic workers, on the recruitment process and on remuneration offered. She demonstrates how women's increasing participation in the urban economy to make ends meet has escalated the recruitment of rural girls and has opened an opportunity for the capitalisation of fostering arrangements, as senior female kin hire out the girls they recruit within their extended family and often keep most of the profits. However, Jacquemin's study also shows that exploitative practices are not left unchallenged. Rural parents became more reluctant to accept fostering arrangements with distant relatives, and girls sought alternatives once they knew the urban setting in order to by-pass their 'aunties' and secure their wages when entering into employment relationships (Jacquemin 2007).

For rural children in southeastern Burkina Faso, most educational strategies outside farming imply that they leave home before the age of 18. Secondary formal education requires that they move into the nearest rural town at the age of thirteen or fourteen. They may attend Qur'anic school from the age of seven or eight but often start when they are a few years older, and depending on the reason why they join kin they may be seven years old or older. The discourse on children's work and migration that put the accent on parents' obligations towards their children to keep them from paid work and offer them formal education speaks neither to the way in which children are integrated into the social and economic worlds of their parents and grandparents, nor to the skills that children gradually learn at the bosom of the rural family, when living with urban kin and when looking for paid work as a form of education. This discourse ignores that childhood and acceptable forms of work for children at different ages might be conceptualised differently in rural contexts where work and leisure revolve around the household and where learning-by-doing is at the core of children's socialisation. Hence, there is a need to demystify the so-called ignorance of the rural population and ground their decision-making in the rural context.

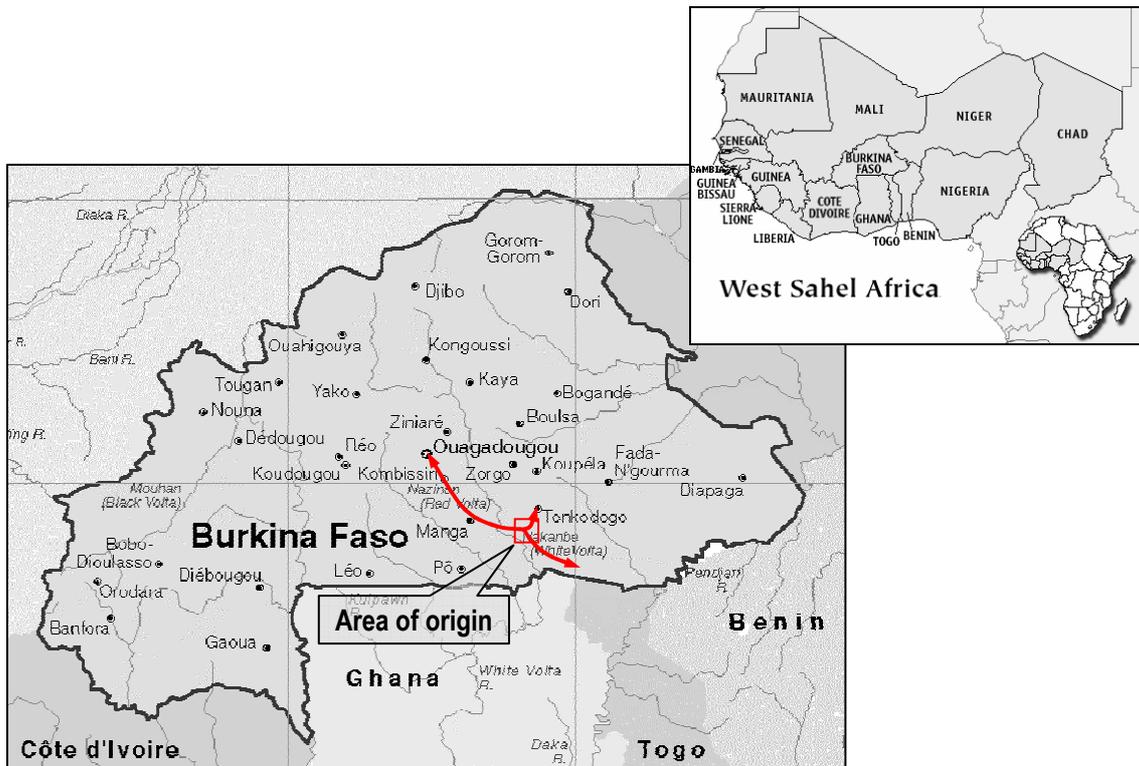
### **Adolescents' Own Perceptions of What They Do and What They Ought to Do**

In the preceding sections, adult notions of childhoods at work in Burkina Faso have been sketched without saying much about children and adolescents' views on the topic. None of the girls and boys interviewed complained about the work burden at home. This part of their

childhood was taken for granted. Some regretted their lack of school education because they had either never been enrolled at school or had had to leave prematurely but most had sympathy for their parents' economic circumstances or had, in fact, disliked school and had themselves deserted. Their desire to migrate was embedded in the stories told by former migrants about urban lifestyles in Ouagadougou, Accra or Abidjan, in the social status ascribed to migrants in the villages and in the wealth return migrants demonstrated during visits home. However, their aspirations went beyond the usual pull and push factors of bright city lights and higher incomes in urban areas: adolescents repeated the wish to support their parents or guardians in the village to get their benedictions and to ensure that they were not the laughing stock of the village. The significance of migration as a source of livelihood and social status implied youngsters' decisions rarely concerned whether to migrate but when to go. Decisions were based on their own sense of being old enough to leave home and on their parents' evaluation of their maturity (Thorsen 2006, forthcoming).

Recent theorising within anthropology and sociology stresses that social categories such as 'children', 'adolescents' and 'youth' are historically and culturally constructed. Durham (2000:1), among others, has pointed out that it is important to interrogate empirically what it means to be youth and who belong to this or these categories. Along this line, the meaning of, and belonging to, any social category becomes a matter of negotiation – between individuals and at a more abstract level. At the individual level, a key point is that evaluations of who is included in a category and what it means are not necessarily identical. They are made by several persons whose interpretations of the qualities ascribed to particular categories may differ, as may their view on the ability of the person in question to satisfy these qualities. Although individual preferences and capabilities may drive negotiations, they are obviously embedded in wider social and cultural practices. It is therefore imperative to scrutinise critically how young people's identities are shaped by others' perceptions of them; their resistance to or acknowledgement of such perceptions; and the concrete constraints they experience due to marginalisation and exclusion (Werbner 2002, de Boeck and Honwana 2005).

Figure 1. Common Destinations for Adolescent Migrants from the Southeast, 2005.



Through the ethnographic vignettes in the following sections, the accounts of sixty adolescent migrants – many boys and a few girls – are examined to get a window on their perceptions of childhood, work and migration. They had migrated from fourteen different villages in south-eastern Burkina Faso either to the capital or to the two main towns in their region (Figure 1) and tried very hard to eke out a living from employment in small food places or from itinerant work such as shoe-shining and petty-trade. Their activities were similar to those of young migrants from rural areas in other parts of Burkina Faso and their stories are informative about how young rural migrants define what it means to be youth in the different spaces they occupy.

### *Deciding When to Migrate*

Ibrahim explained that at the age of 14, he wanted to earn some money. 'Back home', he said, 'I had to ask my father to buy things for me and he couldn't buy all the things I'd like to have. Both my mother and father knew that I wanted to find work in town and they didn't mind.' Sixteen-year-old Xavier had had similar reasons: one of his cousins in Ouagadougou had shown off nice clothes during a visit, so afterwards Xavier asked his father's permission to migrate to find a job that could buy him new clothes. When he was ready to go his mother even gave him money for

the transport, though without his father's knowledge, since the mother risked being accused by his father of encouraging Xavier to be selfish if he remained in the city too long.

Not all parents or guardians agreed to their children's wish to find work away from home. The orphan Boureima, who grew up with his maternal kin, described his mother's brother's reaction when he first began to talk about migrating. 'He thought it was better if I stayed a little longer before going, so I helped him for a while and then left.' Several boys described how they had run off to Ouagadougou because they were convinced their parents would not permit them to go. They had usually paid the bus fare with money earned from cultivating their own fields of rice or cotton.

These boys did not feel as immature as their parents judged them to be and they wanted to prove themselves. Whether the decision about their migration was negotiated overtly or not, the parents had the upper hand in terms of removing it from issues that could be discussed further. The boys may have tried to seek permission in different ways or asked other kin to mediate the negotiation with the father or mother. But on failing to get their parents' sanction, they defied their authority and ran away as a last option, knowing well that it was unlikely to backfire (Thorsen 2006). As a contrast to the globalised notion of childhood that stresses children's rights to be protected at home up to the age of 18, it is clear from the boys' stories that staying at home that long was not in *their* interest. They had material desires beyond their parents' means. The way in which they negotiated their departure -- by referring to their want to earn money for their own upkeep or by running off -- demonstrates that at a certain age somewhere between the early teens and early twenties, they felt obliged to meet some of their own needs. They also wanted to have more autonomy and to earn more money than they could in the village.

Does this notion of childhood that eventually leads to migration in search of work and money also hold for girls? While the boys' stories showed that many left on their own account, adolescent girls were more constrained in their choices. Either they were about to marry, the common age of marriage being between 15 and 17 years, or their parents and especially their fathers were afraid that they would get pregnant unless they were under parental surveillance. Hence, adolescent girls were not permitted to migrate independently and unlike the boys they did not run off in secret. Not only were they anxious about unknown dangers in the city, they also risked being sent home by kin, being located by a search party and being accused of 'having married' or at least of having had lovers. Girls were however able to migrate with kin who requested their help from their

parents – what habitually is described as fostering in the literature on West Africa, and what has as mentioned frequently been condemned in recent advocacy as exposing children to trafficking and exploitation.

### *Experiences in Town*

Lébende, who had lived with an aunt in Côte d'Ivoire between the age of 14 and 18, explained that she worked there more than at home. 'In the village,' she said, 'there isn't much housework to be done. But I never worked more than my aunt's children. That's what I liked about her and also the many dishes she taught me to cook and the advice she gave me on all sorts of things.' Aïcha, who for three years had stayed with a cousin in a rural town during the dry season, also emphasised her new skills, describing in detail that she now knew how to cook urban meals, that is, to fry meat and use sauce ingredients such as oil, cabbage and Maggi stock that were rarely used in the village.

While Aïcha received a monthly wage, Lébende's aunt had given her some cooking utensils to bring with her once she married. Lamoussa, who had lived with her father's sister in Ghana from the age of 7 or 8, explained that she also didn't get a wage proper but always was given gifts such as clothes, shoes and whatever else she needed. 'I really liked being there', she exclaimed, 'and I helped my aunt in her restaurant. I served the customers, did the dishes and in the mornings I helped cooking.' Solange had lived with her mother's sister in Abidjan for some years after her father died. She said that in the beginning she had looked after her baby cousin but once the child had grown a little older, she bought cooking oil and sold that in smaller quantities and she also sold eggs. Lébende, Lamoussa and Solange were content with the gifts they had been given, but 17-year-old Fattouma who served food in her brother's restaurant complained that he had never given her money or clothes. Nonetheless, she would not go back to her village before she could bring back at least one good set of clothes. The root of this difference may be linked with the girls' age, inasmuch as young girls do not feel entitled to make the same set of claims as adolescents but expect to be treated as daughters whereas older girls anticipate some remuneration. However, the difference may also be linked with the migration process. Fattouma was the only girl who had migrated independently, the others had been recruited by their kin.

The adolescent boys were not as easy to please. The orphan Boureima, who had respected his uncle's wish that he remained in the village a little longer, had started his stay in Ouagadougou

with his mother's younger sister, for whom he sold iced water in the neighbourhood. 'I came to Ouaga to work', said Boureima, 'but my aunt didn't pay me. I didn't even ask for much, just that she would buy me some clothes, but she said she had no money for clothes, so I left her house.' Others explained they had looked for another job or had taken up shoe shining because employers had treated them badly or attempted to make out that their relationship was of a family-like quality to avoid paying for their work.

Eighteen-year-old Bakary worked on the streets as an itinerant shoe-shiner, earning 50 Fr<sup>9</sup> for each pair of shoes he shone. He probably spent 250-300 Fr per day on food, the equivalent of shining 5-6 pairs of shoes, and was able to save up 100-600 Fr each day. 'I'll save up to buy some clothes,' Bakary said, 'to be able to change my clothes, and when I'm ready to return to the village I'll try to have enough money to buy some clothes for my mother and my younger brothers.' The other boys present at the interview giggled, suggesting that something in this account was not quite right. After a little while, Bakary continued on behalf of all. 'Well, in fact, if only we get enough money for a bicycle, we'll go back to the village! And if we find a small job that allows us to save up a bit to bring back to the family, it'll be very good!'

Bakary also explained that the time in Ouagadougou had taught him and the other shoe-shiners a lot. 'For example, when we walk around in search of customers, we see lots of things that we've never seen in the village and we also get a better understanding of how life is. If you're hungry back home, you can make some tô (millet porridge), but here if you want to eat you need to get out your money, otherwise you'll stay hungry. In my opinion,' he said. 'This is why migrant life in the city is a way to mature: because you learn that without sweat you can't eat!' Clearly, the youngsters felt they learned a lot during their migration and that it changed them.

### *Negotiating the Implications of Being Migrants*

Most of the adolescent migrants aspired to look smart and when they first came to the capital, some got blinded by the bright city lights and the abundance of fashionable clothing and accessories. Living in the city provided them with the opportunity to follow radio- and TV programmes on a much more regular basis than they had ever been used to or to go to video clubs showing action-, vampire- and sometimes Nollywood movies, usually dubbed in French. Their ideas about which looks were smart changed, but their small incomes of 3-7,000 Fr per

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<sup>9</sup> In the West African economic zone, the exchange rates in 2005 were £ 1 = 951 Fr and € 1 = 656 Fr.

month – between one-tenth and one-fourth of the formal minimum wage<sup>10</sup> -- soon made them realise their limitations. Their ability to assert particular identities was circumscribed by their rural origins and poverty. Their relative newness on the urban scene as well as their lack of education apparent in their inability to communicate in the dominant vernacular, Moore, or in French, shaped the way others thought of them. Frequently, people with higher economic and social status addressed them in condescending ways, reprimanded them unduly or barred them access to public and commercial spaces. They rarely challenged this exclusion up front but amongst themselves the experience of being patronised or improperly treated was turned into amusing tales of how the culprits would be punished by God or of the conspicuous ways that they had cheated an unsympathetic employer. Tales that made the others laugh and portrayed them as brave, clever and rebellious. Lacking power in the city made them pursue what they felt were important attributes of successful youth back home.

Throughout their childhoods, the youngsters had admired older migrants who returned from the city or from the neighbouring countries in flamboyant clothes and shoes, smart hair styles, wrist watches, and brought with them radios, a bicycle and various small gifts for their elders (Hahn 2004). Now they imitated what they had seen and sometimes got carried away with it. Three young shoe-shiners who went home to the village for a funeral after less than a year in Ouagadougou spent almost all their money on clothing to go with their new status as urbanites, despite the fact that they had barely been able to make any savings from their itinerant work. And Bakary and some of his younger brothers started a mock bargain about a wrist watch to check out the price but ended up much to their surprise with a watch each, laughing at the fortunate price but also regretting having spent the 750 Fr.

While elders saw this kind of conspicuous consumption as a typical trait of impetuous youth, they were keen for their sons and daughters to understand the principles in intergenerational relationships and thus the bundles of responsibilities and privileges that were inscribed in being successful migrants back in the bosom of the family. They tried to invoke a different set of priorities in the youngsters by giving them an appropriate reception, sacrificing a cock and asking about their endeavours and by repeating advice about finding proper jobs and saving up. They also wielded a symbolic whip by treating male youngsters who had returned empty-handed as

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<sup>10</sup> In 2005, the formal minimum wage in Burkina Faso - for adults and children alike – was 28.811 Fr (approx. £ 30) per month according to the 'Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Jeunesse' but the ministry acknowledged that children and youth were often paid less. [Http://www.emploi.gov.bf](http://www.emploi.gov.bf), accessed 9 May 2005.

children. Girls were not treated in the same way since elders were well aware of their limited earning capacities and the advice given to girls rarely broached job opportunities but the significance of respecting the kin with whom they lived and carrying out the tasks required of them.

Peers were however easier to impress; they looked at the returnees' clothes with envy and repeatedly asked questions about life in the capital. The newly won popularity pleased the young return migrants and they talked about how nice it was that their friends came along whenever they asked them. For the boys, it was costly to maintain the status of 'big men' among their peers since they had to treat their friends to snacks and sweet drinks in the market, and for the girls, the status ascribed to their migration diminished as their stories dried out and they forgot the new languages they had started to learn. Frequently the wonderful time and a number of friendships fizzled out after some time when the youngster had exhausted his or her economic and social means to re-negotiate the migrant status.

## **Conclusion**

Important issues emerge from comparing the different notions of childhood that operate in Burkina Faso that ought to complicate and dim the backdrop of exploitation and trafficking that international and national advocacy and policy-making has evoked and that is mirrored in Burkinabè newspaper representations. Firstly, adolescents' descriptions of their incentives to migrate, the decision-making preceding their first journey, their actual experiences as migrants and their strategies to better themselves contradicts the assumption that children are passive victims of their parents' ignorance and poverty. It is clear that intergenerational relationships are arenas in which both children and adults exercise agency. Parents evaluate their children's maturity on a yardstick of the responsibilities the children are able to take on, of their wish for shielding them from hardship, and of their desire to have the children around, while adolescents try to assert their identities as young adults (Thorsen 2006).

Parental choices regarding children's formal or quasi-formal education demonstrate their concern for ameliorating the future for their children, their risk management in sending children down different paths and their economic and political constraints. Educational diversification aims both to take advantage of potential resources and to reduce competition among the children but it also reflects the inability of some families to send all children through formal education and of pushing

for rural schools to be up to standards. However, these choices are made within a context where children's gradual integration into the social and economic spheres of their families is just as important. From an adult perspective, adolescents' wage work reaches beyond economic needs; it has an educational aspect -- teaching them to work hard, respect seniors with higher social status and think ahead. From an adolescent perspective, wage work enables them to emphasise the characteristics they feel are central to being youth and which they think will convince the people close to them of their new status.

Secondly, there is no evidence of a moral break-down in extended families resulting in fostering arrangements being a threat to children's well-being. Where in the first place boys were able to run away without repercussions if they wanted to prove themselves, adolescent girls were likely to be sent home by relatives in the city or to have their respectability undermined by scurrilous rumours about their sexual life. Hence, adolescent girls saw fostering arrangements as positive even though they worked harder than at home. For most of them, this was their only avenue to migrate before marrying and to learn new skills. Adolescent boys had more choices but they too were in contact with urban-based kin and sometimes lived and worked with relatives. Moreover, kin were often crucial intermediaries in finding work. They were equally sources of support in the case of illness or other unforeseen difficulties.

Thirdly, by bringing to the foreground adolescents' migration experiences and the opportunities and constraints they faced, the intersection of gender with the different notions of childhood was brought to the light. Comparing adolescent girls' situation to that of boys demonstrates that their opportunities as migrants were very different. Since girls were rarely paid on a regular basis, they could not easily save up money. Instead, they emphasised the status and skills they gained such as clothes, things for their trousseau and, in particular, urban cooking skills -- things that would help them find a good husband, and preferably one who appreciated their urban skills, that is, a migrant. Thereby they reiterated adult notions of rural girlhood, namely that adolescent girls are ready to marry and that they in fact do not think about much else. The transition from 'childhood' happens much earlier for girls than for boys because marriage means a shift from girlhood to womanhood, and soon after, motherhood. Girls, or young women, thus have to shoulder a different set of responsibilities than boys of a similar age who are busy negotiating more autonomy and looking for money. But adolescent boys too are under pressure to abide by adult notions of age-appropriate behaviour. The high frequency of migration from rural communities means that the adolescent boys are not easily admired for their newly attained knowledge and

status because most of their seniors are former migrants, often to destinations further away and for longer periods of time. Convincing parents and other seniors that they belong to the category of young adults require adolescent boys to demonstrate that they have taken on board some of the adult views on the kind of behaviour befitting rural life and livelihoods, that is, of saving money and spending it wisely.

The migration experience itself is nevertheless a valuable asset vis-à-vis juniors and age mates and my concluding remark focuses on adolescents' aspirations to particular identities and life styles different to the poverty back home – an issue that is somewhat neglected in advocacy and policy-making. Here it is important to remember that adolescents do not only see themselves in relation to adults. Just as important perhaps are the ideas and reflections shared by friends of a similar age about the repertoire of social positions that are worthwhile pursuing. Before they migrate for the first time, their imaginations are somewhat abstract. Later, their identity-constructions and preferences are shaped by the contrast between their experiences in the city (of having been marginalised as ignorant peasants) and their accumulation and use of their impressions from the city in how they assert themselves back home (as well versed in urban youth styles).

While, on the one hand, adolescent migrants are acutely aware of their marginalised position in the urban space, they imitate and re-interpret the public attitudes, styles and practices of the elites to make an impression on others. Unable to live these ideas in the city, they transpose them to the village and act them out there, only to find out that flashy looks and extravagance are discounted by their seniors and only impress their peers briefly. Many of the boys' stories revealed that they learn the lesson and while they talked about the gifts they ought to bring home, their first concrete goal was in fact to buy a bicycle. A bicycle links their different objectives and symbolises the friction faced by adolescents between processes of individuation and individual desires and demands on them to understand their role in intergenerational relationships and the importance of contributing to needs other than their own. For adolescent boys with meagre incomes and savings of 100-500 Fr per day, this is an attainable goal. A cheap Ghanaian bicycle costs 25-30,000 Fr, while the better-quality blue Peugeot bicycles that bestow more status on the owner cost 45-50,000 Fr. The less successful, or those who have stayed in the city for a shorter period of time, make do with a second-hand bicycle. Apart from giving the boys a new mobility – an important point for adolescents who otherwise have been used to walk 15-20 kilometres to get to the nearest town – a bicycle earns them merit with both their family and friends. Not only does

it demonstrate their income-earning skills, it also highlights their ability to save up and it is a commodity that can be lent out, creating social debts to be returned later. The purchase of a bicycle thus satisfies a range of the youngsters' desires because it affords them more autonomy and also status in different arenas. Few migrant girls can pursue material desires, a fact that might indeed explain their focus on womanly skills and marriage trousseau.

### **Policy Recommendations**

This paper has demonstrated the need to situate the way in which childhood is conceptualised in its appropriate context to understand the choices that both parents and adolescents make. If the vulnerabilities that rural children and young youth experience at home and as migrants are to be addressed, it is crucial to engage in a discussion of acceptable forms of work for children of different ages and suitable working conditions.

- To meet the long-term goal of basic literacy and numeracy among the rural population, the shortcomings of the formal educational system need to be addressed. However, regulations of quasi-formal types of education such as Qur'anic schools and apprenticeships could also introduce these goals as part of their curriculum.
- To meet more immediate goals of enhancing the opportunities of the current generation of adolescent boys and girls, their employment situation needs to be addressed. It is not enough to send them through apprenticeships within three-four occupations; their future job opportunities need to be secured either through job creation or through increasing their abilities to set up individual workshops.
- It is key that gender inequalities are addressed by providing remunerated employment opportunities to adolescent girls while at the same time protecting their respectability and securing their family's approval.
- If basic literacy and numeracy is to be offered to this group of children and youth, classes need to be sufficiently flexible for them to earn a living on the side, as they need money for food and often also accommodation. Furthermore, their work hours need to be regulated to allow space to follow education.

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