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Teenage Labor Migration and Antitrafficking Policy in West Africa

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Abstract

Within the antitrafficking community, even legal child or youth work is often pathologized, seen as a “worst form of child labor” or, where movement is involved, as trafficking. Major policy responses thus focus on attempting to protect the young by preventing their movement or policing their work. Using a case study of adolescent labor migrants in Benin who work in artisanal gravel quarries in Nigeria, I provide evidence that suggests that the dominant discourse regarding this kind of labor is inaccurate and that policies based on it may be failing. This is in large part because the labor migration depicted as “trafficking” by the antitrafficking community is not experienced as such by young migrants.

Keywords: child trafficking; teenage labor migration; mining; Benin; Nigeria

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Child trafficking emerged as the premier international child protection issue in the 1990s (International Labour Organization-International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour [ILO-IPEC] 2002; O'Connell Davidson 2011; Riisøen et al. 2004). Since then, it has predominantly been understood as a question of innocent and unsuspecting minors kidnapped and enslaved by criminal gangs, their vulnerability compounded by grinding poverty or corrupt traditional practices. Dominant policy responses have thus tended toward the draconian—by paralleling efforts to “end child labor” through targeting the work that is equated with trafficking or the migration that leads to it (Huijsmans and Baker 2012). This article critically assesses this issue by deconstructing what has been understood as a paradigmatic case of child trafficking—the labor migration of teenage boys from Benin to the artisanal gravel quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria.¹ Using data gathered between 2010 and 2012 from interviews and participant observation with these boys, their employers, and their communities, this article argues that these boys' migrant labor is not equivalent to trafficking, is not experienced as such, and instead represents a reasoned response to a very narrow set of social and economic

life options. The article argues further that attempts to outlaw such labor practices are destined to fail.

The Dominant Paradigm

In the past 15 years, child trafficking has exploded as an international issue. The dominant discourse around it has constructed both the migration to worksites and the work itself as inherently problematic, resulting from a variety of pathological causes (Anderson and Andrijasevic 2008; Hashim 2003; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Huijsmans and Baker 2012; Morganti 2011; Whitehead, Hashim, and Iversen 2007). The dominant paradigm can be seen in many official publications.

One particularly influential UNICEF report states:

The trafficking of children is one of the gravest violations of human rights in the world today. Children and their families are ensnared by the empty promises of the trafficking networks—promises of a better life, of an escape route from poverty—and every year, hundreds of thousands of children are smuggled across borders and sold as mere commodities. Their survival and development are threatened, and their rights to education, to health, to grow up within a family, to protection from exploitation and abuse are denied. (UNICEF 2003, 6)

The ILO echoes this perspective:

Sometimes it is the children themselves or their families who take the initiative to migrate and who approach recruiters. Generally they have no idea of the fate that awaits them. Even if they are aware that hardships lie ahead, they rarely understand the nature nor the duration of the suffering they will face. ... In the worst cases, it can [result in a] child's disappearance or death, or can permanently damage his/her physical and mental health. (ILO-IPEC 2002, x–xi)

Within this discursive framework are a number of binaries—consent/coercion, normal/abusive, legitimate/exploitative—which ignore important ambiguities, contingencies, and the structural contexts within which migration and trafficking take place and are experienced by those involved in labor migration.

This lack of nuance is reflected also in the international legal framework that has developed around child trafficking and in the mainstream policy efforts that seek to prevent it. According to this framework, three major factors differentiate child from adult trafficking. These are that (1) coercion or deception is not necessary for an exploitative act to constitute child trafficking, (2) that a minor's consent to engage in exploitative labor is irrelevant and legally impossible, and (3) that exploitation is both broader and more specific than is the case with adults (ILO, UNICEF, and UNGIFT 2009). With adults, the term "exploitation" is often left undefined. The 2000 Palermo Protocol, for example, defines exploitation tautologically, as "the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation," and exploitation also includes "forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs" (United Nations [UN] 2000). With respect to children, exploitation is defined in two major ILO protocols: the Minimum Age Convention (ILO 1973) and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (ILO 1999). According to these conventions, exploitation is defined as work deemed by the competent authorities to "harm the health, safety, or morals of young persons." The criteria prohibit virtually all types of labor, including mining, quarrying, fishing, factory work, and commercial agriculture.

As a result of this definition, policy efforts to fight trafficking (and child labor more generally) often operate by outlawing all child participation in economic sectors. This means that a young man aged 17 who has consented to difficult but relatively well-paid work in a quarry finds his work criminalized alongside the work of a five year-old child forced into domestic service. This can have grave consequences for the young people who either have little choice but to

engage in this kind of labor or who experience their work in those sectors as nonexploitative (Bourdillon et al. 2011; Dottridge 2007; Huijsmans and Baker 2012).

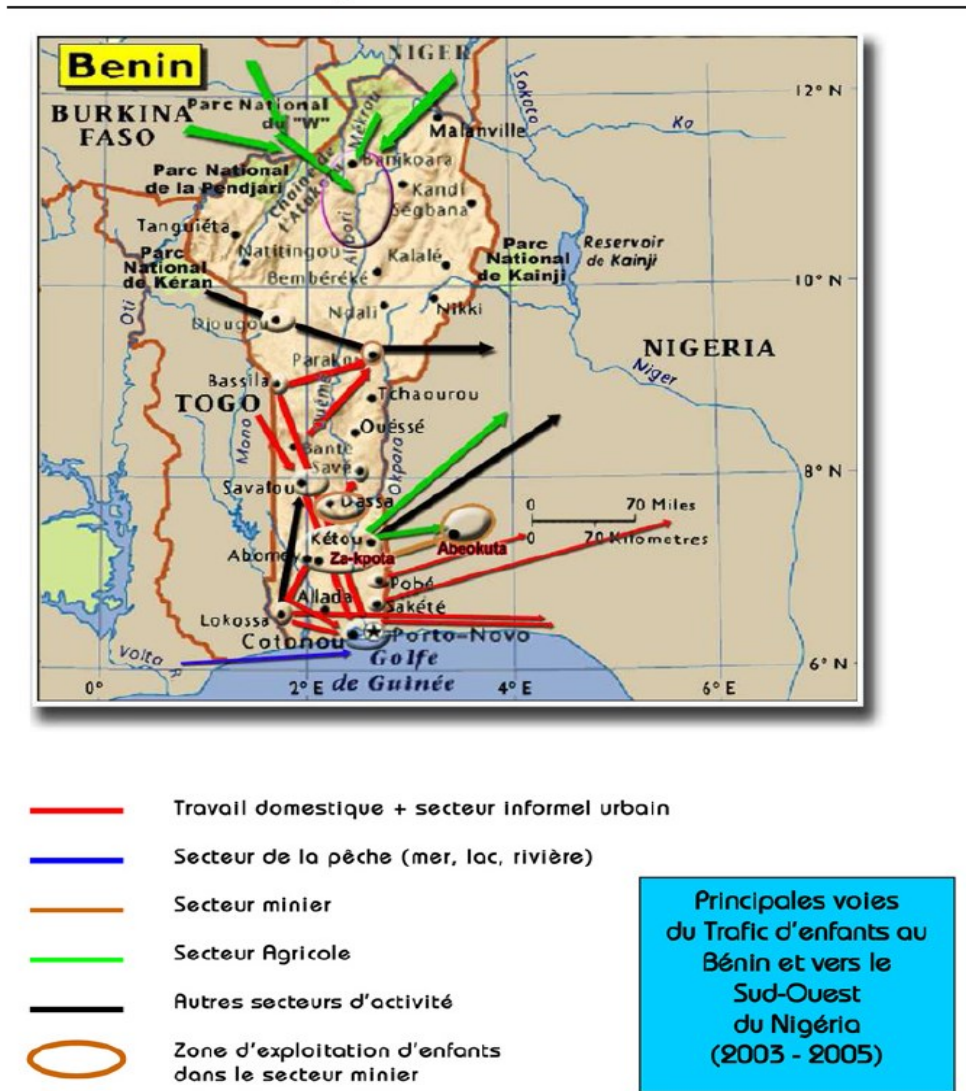
Research Methods

To investigate the validity of the dominant discursive and policy paradigm around child trafficking, I conducted field research in Benin and Nigeria. The cases were selected for a number of reasons. The first of these was practical: I had previously worked in Benin for an antitrafficking nongovernmental organization (NGO), and this meant that I was well-placed to enjoy an empirical “head-start” when investigating the problems plaguing the field. Second, Benin had long been identified as a global “hotbed” of trafficking in children, after the infamous discovery in 2001 of a smuggler ship carrying apparent child slaves from its shores to Gabon and in 2003 after the expulsion of apparent child slaves from the quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria (Alber 2011; Howard 2012b; Morganti 2011; U.S. Department of State 2005). Moreover, my previous experience and related research in Benin have demonstrated that Beninese discourse and policy closely resemble those operating at a global level (Alber 2011; Howard 2011; Morganti 2011). Indeed, discourse in Benin constructs children’s work and their migration as inherently and unambiguously exploitative and thus equivalent to trafficking. It sees payment for a minor’s labor as equivalent to exploitation and holds that children should be in school instead of at work. Little distinction is made in practice between young children and the teenagers who enter the labor market. Policy and enforcement efforts target almost all youth work and migration.

In researching these issues, I decided that the most sensible strategy would be to examine the country’s apparently classic example of trafficking—that of

teenage boys moving from the Zou region of Southern Benin to the artisanal gravel quarries of Abeokuta in Nigeria. (Figure 1 depicts broader migration patterns to and from Benin.) In concert with my research assistant (an NGO worker from the locality with many years of antitrafficking experience), I selected four case study villages, two from Za-Kpota *commune*² and two from Zogbodomey, and in these villages I purposively sampled current and former migrants to the quarries, individuals involved in the migrant labor network linking the region to the quarries, and village authorities.

FIGURE 1
Migrant Flows to and from Benin



SOURCE: Fenevrol and TdH (2005, 8).

Field research in Benin took place in two stages: three months in 2007 and six months in 2010. My principle research tools were semi-structured, open-ended interviews and focus group discussions. Focus groups were especially useful for gathering group-level data pertaining to community perceptions of migration, labor, and other socioeconomic issues. The interviews were designed to develop a deeper understanding of how young migrants understand and experience their life-worlds and to develop personal “migration histories” with a number of respondents. In addition to answering my specific questions, I allowed my interviewees to volunteer topics that they thought were relevant to my understanding of their lives. This strategy provided information that I might otherwise have missed.

I undertook a month of follow-up research in February 2012, this time in and around the quarries themselves, in Abeokuta, Nigeria. This was an immensely valuable experience, as it allowed me not only to triangulate what I had heard on the Beninese side of the border, but also to engage young labor migrants at their place of work and, thus, in the midst of apparent trafficking and exploitation. The research in Abeokuta involved (1) observing the living and working conditions of those in the quarries and (2) interviewing young migrant laborers and other key actors engaged in the quarry economy, including labor leaders, gravel purchasers, traders, and transporters. I interviewed thirty youths who were or had been involved in the migrant labor network linking the Zou to Abeokuta, in addition to members of their communities and key individuals who were involved in organizing their labor. The latter included those who facilitated their migration, parents, village elders, and employers. I also observed the various living and working conditions of young quarry workers: I engaged with them at work, and

observed their dwellings, their eating places, and their interactions with other people.

Though my research was comprehensive in the study sites and the data gathered by this approach was rich, my sample was not random. As such, it is not known how representative my findings are of larger patterns. Additionally, some researchers argue that young migrants may be inclined to depict their migration in largely positive terms (Lieblich, Zilber, and Tuval-Mashiach 2008), so it is possible that some of my respondents may have underplayed any negative aspects of their experiences, including the difficulty of the work or any harsh working conditions. This is arguably also true of the employers and labor-network organizers who rely on their work. However, given the wide scope of my ethnographic research and the fact that I was able to collect data from multiple vantage points (youths, parents, employers, etc.) in addition to my observations, I believe that my subjects' accounts have a high degree of validity.

Adolescent Labor Migration from Benin to Nigeria

The dominant antitrafficking discourse within and beyond Benin constructs the world of Abeokuta's quarries as a kind of hell experienced by "child slaves."¹ While claims of child slavery are almost never verified, there is no doubt that young people engaged in artisanal mine or quarry work are often exposed to significant health risks. These can be particularly serious, as a recent Human Rights Watch (2011) report documented with respect to gold mining in Mali.

In Benin and Nigeria, however, my research revealed a different picture—a complex world of social and economic relations, structured along highly

¹ See, for example, these two news reports: http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=356:abeokuta-child-slaves-working-nigeriasquarries&catid=67:art&Itemid=369 ; http://blaisap.typepad.fr/mon_weblog/2012/02/384-enfants-esclaves-sauvs-des-carrires-dabeokuta-au-nigeria.html

hierarchical lines, and held together by money and interpersonal reciprocity. This section of the article outlines that structure and then reflects on the importance of money as well as noneconomic factors in the decision-making that shapes teenage boys' labor migration. I then present four individual cases of migration experiences to illustrate the nuances in the migration process.

Abeokuta's quarries

Several key actors are involved Abeokuta's quarry economy. First, absentee Nigerian landlords own and rent out patches of land rich in the gravel that is ideal for use in the construction industry. Second, female Nigerian gravel dealers lease this land from those landlords and have contracts with them that date back two or three generations. These women represent the lynchpin in this economic system. They have come together to form a gravel dealers' union and contract with a third group—lorry owners and drivers, who operate under their own union—to have the extracted gravel transported to a fourth group: gravel purchasers in Lagos, Nigeria. Prices for gravel and for the services rendered by each of the links in this chain are predominantly set through negotiation between the unions representing the latter three groups.

The gravel dealers contract with a fifth group: Beninese "bosses" who provide the migrant labor used to extract the gravel. These bosses are men from the *Zou département* in Benin and come predominantly from *Za-Kpota* and *Zogbodomey communes*. All have previously worked six-year apprenticeships under their own bosses until being "liberated." Liberation means that they are given license by the hierarchy of the Beninese expatriate community—which provides and manages the labor-force in Abeokuta—to hire their own groups of

laborers. The laborers extract the gravel according to the directions of their bosses. It is the migrant teenage youths involved in this work who are officially identified as “trafficked.”

Each teenage laborer is hired on a two-year contract, and is expected to work six days a week for his *patron* (boss), who in return houses, clothes, and feeds the young worker and pays him 140,000 FCFA (about \$260, or an equivalent sum in material terms, e.g., a motorbike) upon completion of the contract. If the boy is a younger worker, it is possible that some of this money will have been advanced to his parents before he departed for work, since younger boys’ income is treated as family income much more commonly than that of older boys. The boys are free to work on their own account on their day off or when they have already loaded the lorry that is their day’s work for their boss. Though the work is hard, they work in groups of three, with the biggest and strongest pick-axing the ground, the second strongest shoveling the gravel, and the smallest sifting it through a filter. They rest when they need to, share the workload among them, and are often helped by the *patron* who is in many ways dependent on them. This dependence is not only intrinsic to the employer-employee relationship, however; it is also reflected in the fact that each *patron* relies on his reputation as a good employer to attract the laborers whose surplus he will ultimately extract; he has an interest in treating each of his charges sufficiently well that they will not tarnish his image when they return to Benin. Consequently, while no one would deny the inherent physical challenge of the work performed by these adolescents, it is an experience that over-taxes few of them and rarely is it any worse than the farm work they would otherwise be doing at home. As one interviewee, Jack, stated, “This is nothing compared to life on the farm.”

In line with this, these quarry-working adolescents and their communities strongly advocate what amounts to an “autonomy position” vis-à-vis their migration and work (Abramson 2003; Nussbaum 1998). Few deny that the work could be easier, that it could pay more, or that working conditions could be improved, but almost nobody I spoke to believed that youth labor migration should be criminalized—since for many it represents the best option of a very narrow set of economic options. When I asked people how they would like to see the problems in their lives and in this work addressed, the dominant response was, “Give us alternatives” and “Improve our contracts.” Crucially, since improving contracts often means raising wages, it should also be noted that these wages are themselves subject to serious structural pressure, being heavily contingent on the balance of class forces within (and beyond) the quarry economy. Only recently, and for the first time in history, did the *patrons* go on strike to renegotiate the earnings they take and from which they pay their workers.

Money as the major motivator

When examining the reasoning given by young males for their migration to work in these conditions, it is important to emphasize that money is almost universally identified as the major motivating factor. This is not to say that money is the only factor. Indeed, the need to acquire social status; to experience something beyond the village; and to be socialized into responsible, economically active adults are all undoubtedly significant.

This can be illustrated by my research participants’ use of the Fon word “*ya*” (poverty). Though poverty frequently featured as an answer to the question, “Why do young people leave home?” further discussion revealed that poverty in

this context means specifically a lack of the cash necessary to “evolve.”

Accordingly, when I asked people if poverty ever meant “starvation” and whether “poor” people remaining in the village “would go without food,” most individuals responded with an amused and resounding “no.” Pointedly, one man explained that “people don’t die of hunger here,” while another declared that “even when there are no fish to eat, people don’t starve ... people wouldn’t let you starve; it’s just that there’s no money.”

Such linguistic digging was not necessary with all my interviewees. As the migration histories described below show, the importance of accessing money or material opportunity is viewed as an inevitable part of life under capitalism in a place as peripheral and poor as Benin. A selection of responses from one focus group discussion illustrates these perceptions:

There is nothing in the village; there is no work. Parents are obliged to let their kids go and when kids decide themselves to leave, parents are obliged to accept. When they go, kids at least make some money, they at least send some back to us. We understand the NGOs’ message [that minors migrating for work is a bad thing], but we can’t eat their words can we?³

If I’m not in Nigeria, I’m in Savè [in Central Benin] working, because that at least gives me some money. I remember that one NGO came and said don’t leave home, promising to bring money for those who stayed; but they never did. Those who stayed had been tricked and were really sad, especially in comparison to those who did leave and who made some money.⁴

We don’t have the same view as the NGOs [that migrating for work in Abeokuta is bad]. We think it can be a good thing to leave, especially as it is a way to find money. We leave despite what they say.⁵

When I work in Nigeria, I earn some money and am able to put some aside to buy a motorbike, buy electricity for my house, or other such things. I can keep migrating back and forth like this every time I need to put together some funds. The only problem for me is that when relatives are sick, I have to send some of my wages back.⁶

These perspectives were common in my research communities in Benin and among the young males who were working in Nigeria's gravel pits. They have also been echoed in a few similar studies, conducted in artisanal quarry economies elsewhere in the region (e.g., Grätz, 2003, 2009; Hilson 2008; Okyere 2012), as well in studies with teenage labor migrants who engage in other types of work and are assumed to be trafficked (e.g., Castle and Diarra 2003; Huijsmans and Baker 2012; Morganti 2011).

During my fieldwork in 2012, I visited a school attended by youths from two of my case-study villages in Za-Kpota. When introducing myself and my research to a class of forty students, I asked why people there seemed to see migration to Abeokuta as a good thing. A sea of voices erupted with the Fon word, "Akwe"—money. It is worth reflecting, then, on why there is such a lack of monetary resources in the Zou region of Benin, compelling young people to migrate to Abeokuta to earn money. Although my interviewees stated that the economic links between the Zou and Abeokuta date back many decades, there is some evidence that these links have expanded and have become entrenched in response to the recent world decline in cotton prices. Cliff, a village head and a former cotton farmer, argued:

When cotton earned well [back in the mid-1990s], children and families all worked and earned good money. When it worked, no-one went to Nigeria because there was so much to do, people had disposable cash; children even had money and went to school. When the prices were high, people would come from Nigeria and even stay here.⁷

Likewise, another respondent claimed that if cotton earned as much now as it had in the past, all the young migrants currently in Abeokuta would be in Benin and in school. In making sense of this claim, we should recall that cotton is Benin's single major cash-crop and in the Zou it represents the only cash-providing work.

Relationships and transitions

Though earning money underpins all labor migration, we should not see such migration as a one-dimensional, strictly monetary phenomenon. In my interviews with youth who worked in quarries, other socially important dimensions emerged. One of these involved a desire to fulfill their social responsibility as providers for their families—as illustrated in the refrain of working to “put a roof on my father’s house.” But more individualized motives are also significant. These motives include attaining respect and status, or acquiring the material resources necessary to marry. In terms of social respect, it is significant that one of the major motifs I heard when reflecting with interviewees on the value of migration was that, if successful, it can offer the chance for an individual to become “considered.” To be considered (or known) in this part of Southern Benin means to be well thought of or respected as an important or successful person. It is an essential goal for many people, and successful migration is a principal means of achieving it. Numerous interviewees explained that returning from Abeokuta with material goods such as a motorbike, clothes, or a generator represented visible evidence of an individual’s successful migration and thus constituted a material path to their being considered by those around them upon their return.

Manhood and the subsequent life-stage of marriage are also linked to material success. My village interviews revealed that when and how one transitions from the status of “boy” to “man” is neither fixed nor universally attributed to biological age, but is instead contingent on the attainment of economic independence. In one group interview, for instance, an adolescent explained, with the agreement of his peers, that one is a man in his community when “he works and eats without the help of his parents.”⁸ His assessment was echoed by another young man, who declared that to be a man in his village is “to farm, to have a big harvest, and to be able to sell your crops.”⁹ As many youth lamented to me, however, this accomplishment and the subsequent transition to marriage is now more difficult than ever. Where being self-sufficient through successfully farming land had, historically, been the major indicator that one was a man—materially independent and thus able to support a wife and family—today the declining soil fertility, decreasing size of landholdings as a result of population growth, and increasing importance of the monetized economy meant that more and more teenage boys are finding their path to the material independence blocked. These youth thus need new strategies for self-articulation (Sommers 2012). Crucially, it is often independent labor migration that represents the preferred solution, as is increasingly the case across the region (De Lange 2007; Hashim and Thorsen 2011).

Selected migration stories

The following section presents a few typical cases of teenage migration experiences. The cases reflect the normative experiences of the boys who I encountered both in the villages in Benin and in the mining sites in Abeokuta. As

has been suggested above, money represents a central motivator for the boys in question, as do social responsibility and the social transitions to manhood and marriage. Given that antitrafficking discourse depicts their work experiences as essentially slavery, it is crucial to document the youths' own descriptions of their migration experiences and subsequent working conditions.

Jack

Jack was a 15-year-old boy from a village on the border between Za-Kpota *commune* and the *commune* of Bohicon. I interviewed him in Abeokuta at his place of work. He was open, friendly, and confident. Our encounter was very jovial.

Jack came to Abeokuta a year prior to our interview and needed to work in the quarries for another year to complete the standard two-year contract. In return for his labor, he was to receive a motorbike at the end of his two years, which was the price agreed upon by him, his parents, and his *patron*. On top of this, Jack also worked in his free time and "on his own account." He said that he was able to earn around 2000 Naira (about \$12) every week by working overtime. His relationship with his boss was also very good, and he claimed that he was not mistreated, never shouted at, and was well fed.

Jack was saving his money week by week and aiming to return to Benin to set himself up in a trade. When I asked him why he came to Nigeria, he was very clear that his goal was to earn money. Work in Nigeria was much better than it was at home, he believed, because in Nigeria he could earn a lot and also got to keep what he earned. Though the work was hard, earning money made it all worthwhile. Jack was also very clear that working on the family farm was much

more physically demanding than in the gravel pits, even though the former was legal while the latter was not. He was strongly opposed to any laws forbidding young people like him to migrate to Nigeria to work.

Zeze

Zeze was a 17-year-old young man from a village on the border between the *communes* of Za-Kpota and Bohicon. I interviewed him while he was working in Abeokuta. He first came to the Abeokutan quarries as a result of a family tragedy. He was in his village in Benin when his father fell seriously ill. After a long and drawn-out illness, his father eventually passed away. At that point, older male relatives suggested that Zeze come to work with them in Abeokuta, but Zeze's mother refused. She herself then fell ill, however, passing away shortly afterward. It was at this point that Zeze migrated with his relatives. He was 11 years old at the time.

At the time of the interview, Zeze was finishing the third of three consecutive two-year contracts. After the first two years, he had earned enough money to return and build himself a house. His earnings from the second two years had given him enough money to furnish the house. Now, with the money he would earn from this third contract, he was planning to buy a motorbike. For Zeze, work at the gravel pits was not a challenge. He grew up working in the fields, he said, which more than prepared one for the lesser rigors of life in Nigeria, even if the work was challenging.

Since he soon would complete the six years necessary for his "apprenticeship," Zeze would be "free" either to work entirely for himself or to hire other young laborers to work under him. His plan, however, was to return to

Benin and see whether he could start a business, though he added that if the business faltered, he would return to Abeokuta to earn money.

Money was, for Zeze, the single motivation for his continued presence in Nigeria. When I asked him why people came, “money” was his answer. He stated that if there were alternatives in Benin—if the state were to set up formal apprenticeships and give people jobs—he would stay and work there. But he had little belief that this would happen and was very disdainful when asked what he thought of the antitrafficking message that says young people such as him should not migrate for work. Such migration was crucial, he said, if one wanted to make something of one’s life.

Placide

Placide was a small, sickly young man of 16. Unlike the majority of the other interviewees, his experience of labor migration to Abeokuta was negative. He migrated when he was 14. He had been an apprentice mechanic for four months beforehand but when his boss asked for some money from his parents and they were unable to pay it, his apprenticeship ended. This was when a fellow villager suggested that he go with him to Nigeria.

Before long, the work overcame Placide and he fell ill. For six months, his *patron* took care of him. Since his condition never improved, however, the *patron* brought him home to his parents. Eventually, when healed, the same *patron* asked Placide to return to Nigeria to work with him, but Placide refused; he claimed that the man had lied about how difficult the working conditions actually were.

Placide’s father supported his refusal. He later worked in the fields with his father. It is arguable that Placide’s case represents an example of trafficking, both in the

formal legal sense and in the sense that is more commonly understood, given the apparent presence of deception on the part of the man who exploited his labor.

Trevor

In his mid-40s, Trevor was an influential figure in *Za-Kpota commune*, and ran a successful local business that employed many young interns, including a number sponsored by an NGO to stay at “home” instead of migrating for work. We first met in 2007, when he was introduced to me by a local government official as “a former trafficker” who had apparently repented and decided to mend his ways. He became one of the most significant participants in my research, meeting with me on myriad occasions and facilitating my access to a large group of “traffickers”/*patrons* involved in the migrant labor network linking the Zou *département* to the quarries of Abeokuta.

Trevor first migrated to Abeokuta himself when he was 11 or 12. He did so because he was poor and because he and his family had seen others from their community migrate and return with riches. He worked for five years in Abeokuta and returned with a bike, a radio and 25,000 FCFA (\$45)—not an insignificant haul for a 16 year-old in the 1980s. At 16, after a brief period at home, he returned to Abeokuta for a further six years, becoming a *patron* and also engaging in the production of *sodabi*, the region’s palm wine.

During his time as a *patron*, Trevor returned to *Za-Kpota* every two years and routinely brought more boys with him back to Nigeria. Parents and boys themselves would approach him on his visits to ask if he could find them work. Sometimes, when boys were young (between 10 and 14), an advance on the boys’ wages would be paid to the parents, who would negotiate the contract on the

child's behalf. In these cases, a boy's earnings would be considered like any other component of the family economy. Parents (particularly fathers) made decisions over the allocation of household labor power. It should be noted that, unlike the dominant antitrafficking discourse, the communities in Benin do not equate this relationship to a sale of their offspring.

By contrast, when the boys who Trevor "placed" were older (in their mid- to late teens), they would themselves often negotiate their own two-year contracts and would keep their wages upon its completion. This is absolutely in keeping with local developmental norms, which see teenage males progressively incorporated into adulthood and independence. Trevor was adamant that his relationships with all his workers were good and that he never mistreated any of them, even if he admitted that some other *patrons* certainly did. He emphasized this by introducing me to some of the men who sat around his shop—these men had become his friends after having themselves "graduated" from under him in Abeokuta.

In 2003, Trevor left Abeokuta and Nigeria, returning to Benin to start his business. He explained his decision as a result of the "crisis" that befell the Beninese expatriate labor community during that year and the violence and conflict that resulted. He said that at one point he was mugged, that the police had raided the quarries and made him pay a fine, and that quarry work was declining in profitability. He therefore cut his losses and exited the quarry economy.

Trevor maintained personal links with the quarry economy, nonetheless, and was one of the most ardent critics of the dominant antitrafficking campaign. In each of my many encounters with him, he described in depth the corruption of politicians and formal institutions that promised riches to encourage people to stay

home or to vote for them and yet never delivered anything. In one of our discussions, he picked up a piece of tape and shouted, “If I earn one of these here but five of them there, why the hell would I stay here?” He was also very clear that at times the work in Abeokuta could constitute exploitation: “especially if, as the boss, I sit in the shade with a beer while the boys work in the sun,” or “if I don’t pay what I’ve agreed.” In the majority of cases, however, this was not the situation, and the boys he worked with did not define their work as exploitative. In an ideal world, he said, working conditions could be improved across the board and alternatives to labor migration could be provided.

Conclusion

The qualitative findings presented above are not isolated to a few cases but are instead illustrative of broader findings—based on observations at the study sites; focus groups; and more than 100 interviews with young labor migrants, their parents, community members, and employers (see also Howard 2012a). The results are consistent with the findings of the few related studies of minors involved in labor migration and trafficking (Gozdziaik 2012; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Huijsmans and Baker 2012; Morganti 2011; Okyere 2012; Whitehead, Hashim, and Iversen 2007).

The central goal of this project was to interrogate the validity of the dominant child trafficking discourse and the utility of the policies to which it is related. The materials presented in this article bring that validity and utility into serious question. In this final section, I further expand on my findings, emphasizing the three major differences between the dominant trafficking discourse and the narratives offered by “trafficked” minors. These pertain to why adolescent males are trafficked or migrate for work, how those adolescents

experience that work, and what alternative policies they advocate with regard to their labor migration.

According to the dominant discourse, then, work such as that performed by teenagers in Abeokuta constitutes a “worst form of child labor,” akin to slavery and often involving horrific exploitation and abuse. It represents a classic example of “trafficking” and “unfree labor” in the commonly understood sense of the terms. By contrast, my data, obtained from precisely these “victims of trafficking,” present an altogether different image. Young migrants interviewed in this study reported that, while challenging and at times even overwhelming, their work was nothing like slavery. Rather, it was normal in their economic context, and was rarely more taxing than what they would have been doing had they remained on their family farms. Similarly, while the antitrafficking discourse often characterizes the monetization of a minor’s mobility as indicative of abuse/trafficking, these young men reported that it was their ability to earn money that made their mobility appealing in the first place. The “commodification” of childhood therefore only seems problematic for those whose understanding of the life-course is that the young should be excluded from the “cash nexus” (Zelizer 1994). In places such as Benin, where such luxuries are impossible, incorporation of the young as money-earning agents is materially and socially essential.

Such dissonance is paralleled in the two causal narratives that serve to explain why young people leave home for what they define as work and what the antitrafficking establishment identifies as trafficking. I argue that the discourse revolves around a pathological paradigm that equates work and migration with trafficking (Howard 2011). Within this paradigm, it is assumed that no well-informed, well-intentioned parent would choose to let a child migrate for work. It

is also assumed that children neither could nor would independently make such a choice. As such, “poverty,” “ignorance,” “trickery” and “the corruption of tradition” are all identified as the agency-denying causal factors explaining youth labor migration. The very essence of this discursive edifice rules out consideration of the mediating situational, sociocultural, or political-economic nuances that studies of migration clearly demonstrate as important in labor-migratory decision-making (De Haas 2010). Data collected from the young labor migrants in Benin and Abeokuta show just how reductive the mainstream antitrafficking paradigm is. Similar to other studies of young labor migrants (Castle and Diarra 2003; Gozdiak 2012; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Morganti 2011; Okyere 2012; Whitehead, Hashim, and Iversen 2007), I found that the boys or their parents make agentive, money-oriented, and socially grounded choices around labor migration. Those choices are not pathological—they are conditioned by the knowledge that money is necessary to any life project and that earnings are available outside one’s home village.

It follows that the kinds of policies that young migrants and their communities would like to see deployed in an effort to “protect” them or to improve their living conditions differ radically from the policies advocated by the dominant international antitrafficking movement and governments aligned with it. As discussed earlier, the mainstream antitrafficking strategy generally rests on an attempt to prevent minors from entering the world of work, therefore prohibiting all youth labor mobility. By contrast, when asked what policies they would like to see pursued, young migrant laborers and their community members responded, first, that they should be provided economic alternatives to labor migration. “Give us jobs”; “Promote development”; “Bring industry here”; “Pay us more for our

crops”; “Give us what you have”; and “Train us in skills” were refrains I frequently heard. The general point being that “if we want to progress, we need to migrate, so if you don’t want us to migrate, you need to bring here what we can access there.” The second major aspect was similarly widespread and is encapsulated in the phrase: “improve our working conditions.” Since very few see the kinds of work that young males engage in when they migrate as inherently problematic, and since all seem to accept the structural unavoidability of monetized social relations, it is extremely rare to find anyone who would like to see that work prohibited. At best, people desire improved labor relations. The alternatives most frequently heard were “Pay us more wages”; “Have us work fewer hours”; and “Let the government stop employers [from] exploiting us.”

The internationally dominant antitrafficking policy, however, avoids engaging with the structures that prevent this desired investment or that impede any regional economic growth. Young migrants and their communities, therefore, perceive themselves as having few other options but to navigate the obstacles that antitrafficking policy puts in their path, and to go about their business as they otherwise would were those obstacles not a reality. This is clearly illustrated by how many of my interviewees described their decision-making and their own lived resistance to the central tenets of formal, antitrafficking dictates, which is captured in the following statements:

NH: *Do you pretend to the NGOs and government, saying one thing to them [that you will not migrate] and doing another?*

There was a lot of laughter amongst those that understood my question.

Everybody said “yes, they do.”¹⁰

NH: *So you just pretend to the authorities then?*

Yes, of course. We say “sure, we won’t leave” in the hope that they’ll bring us something.¹¹

NH: *How do you go about getting around the authorities?*

They said the state has set up village [antitrafficking] committees all over the place, but these are corrupt: “We can easily turn them and take kids away no problem.” There are also many paths that you can take towards and across the border and the state has no idea about them all. The police sit there and guard the ones they know about and so we just take the others.¹²

A policy failure occurs when a policy does “not achieve its stated objectives” (Castles 2003, 207). These quotes and my wider research findings suggest that the prevailing antitrafficking policy in Benin is indeed failing in these terms. My data indicate that very few young labor migrants pay any heed to attempts to prevent their migration. In fact, antitrafficking efforts appear to constitute little more than an irritating obstacle for these young migrants and those facilitating their migration. It seems reasonable to conclude both that the dominant international and Beninese antitrafficking discourse is fundamentally flawed and that policies emerging from it are doomed to fail. Until antitrafficking activists and government officials engage more critically with their own assumptions and more deeply with realities on the ground, the discourse is unlikely to change.

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Notes

¹ The words “quarries” and “gravel pits” are used interchangeably here.

² *Commune* and *département* are French terms for political-administrative units in Benin.

³ Adult male, focus group 3, 4/16/2010.

⁴ 16-year-old male, focus group 3, 4/16/2010.

⁵ Adult woman, focus group 3, 4/16/2010.

⁶ 17-year-old male, focus group 3, 4/16/2010.

⁷ Interview with Cliff, Zelele village, 4/7/2010.

⁸ 16-year-old male, focus group 11, Tenga village, 5/14/2010.

⁹ Interview with Pietro, Zelele village, 5/10/2010.

¹⁰ Focus group 5, Zelele village, 4/26/2010.

¹¹ Interview with Artur, Sehere village, Zakpota, 4/12/2010.

¹² Focus group 2, 4/12/2010.