



Growing Up in the Mine: Unpacking Structural and Familial Drivers of Child Labor in Kenya's Small-Scale Mining Sector

George Ochieng Okello, Taji Isindu Shivachi & Michael Ntabo Mabururu

School of Arts, Social Sciences and Business

Rongo University, P.O. Box 103-40404

Rongo, Kenya

*Corresponding E-mail: geokello23@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the structural and familial dynamics that shape child labor in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) communities in Kenya, with a focus on Nyatike and Rongo Sub-Counties. While poverty, weak policy enforcement, and limited access to education are commonly cited macro-level causes of child labor, this study highlights how deeply embedded micro-level factors—such as family instability, intergenerational labor norms, and community expectations—contribute to children's participation in mining work. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research examines how interactions across the microsystem (e.g., family transitions like divorce or migration), exosystem (e.g., informal mining economies), and macrosystem (e.g., cultural norms on childhood and labor) collectively reinforce children's engagement in hazardous labor. The chronosystem further helps explain how the timing of familial disruptions and life transitions increases children's vulnerability at specific developmental stages. Using qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions with children, caregivers, community leaders, and local stakeholders, the study reveals that child labor in mining is often not viewed as a crisis but as a normalized survival strategy. Children are socialized into labor by caregivers and peers, and their work is frequently framed as a contribution to family welfare amid precarious livelihoods. Agency Theory is applied as a complementary lens to understand how children and families, within constrained environments, make calculated decisions that prioritize immediate survival over long-term aspirations like schooling. The findings call for holistic interventions that address not only economic deprivation but also the hidden relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions that sustain child labor. By foregrounding the everyday realities of mining communities, the study challenges dominant narratives of victimhood and instead highlights the complexity of children's labor trajectories.

Keywords: Child Labor, Artisanal Gold Mining, Family Transitions, Family Dynamics, Generational Transmission.

Introduction

Child labor remains one of the most pressing global development challenges, undermining children's rights and well-being while perpetuating cycles of poverty and social inequality. The United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) defines child labor as involving children in activities, both income-generating and otherwise, for extended periods, potentially endangering their physical, psychological, educational, social, and moral well-being (UNICEF, 2013). It encompasses economic and non-economic activities that interfere with schooling, expose children to harm, or exploit their vulnerability.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF (2020), approximately 160 million children, comprising 63 million girls and 97 million boys, were engaged in child labor globally. Alarming, around 70 million of these children were involved in hazardous work, including exposure to chemicals, heavy machinery, and physically demanding environments. (ILO & UNICEF, 2020). Even more concerning is the reversal of two decades of progress: between 2016 and 2020, the number of child labourers increased by 8.4 million children - 5.54% increase – after declining steadily from 2000 to 2016 (ILO & UNICEF, 2020).

Child labor disproportionately affects various regions worldwide, with Latin America, the Pacific, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa being particularly affected. While some regions have seen a decline in child labor rates, Africa continues to face challenges, with Sub-Saharan Africa exhibiting significantly higher prevalence rates compared to Northern Africa (ILO, 2020). Despite existing international legal frameworks—including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ILO Convention No. 138 (Minimum Age), and Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child



Labour)—child labor continues to persist, especially in contexts marked by poverty, informal economies, and weak enforcement mechanisms (Bass, 2004; Diallo et al., 2013).

In Kenya, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2019) estimates that 8.5% of children, approximately 1.3 million, are involved in Child labor, with particularly high rates in Arid and Semi-Arid (ASAL) counties (UNICEF, 2021). Paradoxically however, Migori County, which is neither arid nor semi-arid, has been identified as one of the counties with high prevalence of Child labor. This anomaly calls for a localized understanding of the drivers of child labor, particularly in regions like Nyatike and Rongo sub-counties, where artisanal gold mining thrives. Mining exposes children to hazardous conditions—such as inhaling mercury fumes, working in unregulated shafts, and engaging in long hours of physical labor (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Filip et al., 2018).

While macro-level drivers such as poverty, weak policy enforcement, and limited access to education are widely cited as contributing to child labor (Edmonds & Pavcnik, 2005; Basu, 1999), growing scholarly attention points to the nuanced micro-level dynamics embedded within families and communities, particularly in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) settings. In these environments, child labor is not simply a reactive measure to poverty or crisis, but rather a normalized and often intergenerational survival strategy (Bourdillon et al., 2010; Punch, 2003). Children frequently learn mining-related skills and routines from adult caregivers, with labor practices transmitted across generations as part of a shared livelihood system (de Mesquita & Souza, 2018).

Family transitions—such as divorce, parental death, separation, or labor migration—further compound this dynamic by reconfiguring household responsibilities and intensifying children's economic roles (Evans, 2010; Roby et al., 2016). These transitions can disrupt caregiving structures and erode the social safety nets that might otherwise protect children from exploitative labor (Banchirigah & Hilson, 2010). In ASGM communities, where labor regulation is minimal and economic precarity is widespread, children's participation in mining often becomes a rational adaptation to both familial instability and structural neglect (Esiri & Ejechi, 2021; Webbink et al., 2013).

This study focuses on how such familial disruptions shape child labor participation in gold mining communities in Nyatike and Rongo Sub-Counties, Kenya. It challenges reductionist portrayals of child labor as purely an economic response, instead positioning it within a broader continuum of structural vulnerability, cultural normalization, and strategic adaptation.

Anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), this study adopts a multi-layered analytical lens to examine how nested environmental systems influence children's labor trajectories. At the microsystem level, family instability directly affects children's emotional and material well-being. The exosystem—characterized by local labor markets and mining practices—intersects with the macrosystem of cultural expectations and poverty, reinforcing the acceptability and necessity of child labor. The chronosystem, which considers the timing and duration of life transitions, helps explain the differential susceptibility of children to labor engagement at key developmental stages (Bakker et al., 2009; Nsamenang, 2002).

This framework is particularly apt for understanding ASGM child labor as it captures both the embeddedness of children within social systems and the dynamic interplay of risk, necessity, and agency over time. While Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes contextual embeddedness, Agency Theory (Mitnick, 2013) remains a useful complement by recognizing children and families as rational actors who make strategic choices within constrained environments. In this sense, labor engagement can be seen not merely as exploitation, but as a survival-oriented response to intersecting vulnerabilities (Canagarajah & Coulombe, 1997; Bourdillon et al., 2010).

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to examine how family transitions act as a driver of child labor among children working in gold mines in Nyatike and Rongo Sub-Counties in Migori County, Kenya. The descriptive survey design was appropriate because it facilitates the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, enabling the researcher to capture the complexities of child labor dynamics at a specific point in time (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Kothari, 2004). Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 25.0 version software while qualitative data involved manual coding of the transcripts, with dominant themes being identified, and the constant comparative method was utilized to synthesize the data. Cross-sectional designs are also particularly useful in



assessing relationships between variables in natural settings without manipulating the study environment (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

The study was conducted in Nyatike and Rongo Sub-counties of Migori County, Kenya. Migori County is located in southwestern Kenya, and covers an area of approximately 2596.5 square kilometers. It has an estimated population of 1,116,436 (KNBS, 2019). Migori County is renowned for its significant involvement in gold mining activities, making it a focal point for research on the drivers of child labor in the mining sector. Nyatike and Rongo Sub-counties were selected for this study due to their significant involvement in gold mining activities. These two counties host numerous artisanal and small-scale gold mines, attracting a substantial number of miners, including children, who are engaged in various mining-related activities.

The targeted population for the study comprised all children aged between 10 and 15 years who were actively engaged in gold mining activities in Migori County. This age range was chosen in line with child protection and labor literature, which identifies children in this bracket as being at heightened risk of exploitation in informal labor sectors (ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

Two distinct sampling strategies were employed to recruit respondents: one for the child laborers and another for key informants. The multi-stage sampling approach was initially applied to identify the study sites in the two sub-counties. Within these sites, snowball sampling was adopted to access child laborers, given their hidden and mobile nature. Snowball sampling is widely recommended for reaching vulnerable or stigmatized populations that are difficult to access using conventional sampling methods (Noy, 2008; Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Key informants for the study were selected through purposive sampling, based on their knowledge, roles, or lived experiences relevant to child labor and family structures in the mining communities. They included assistant chiefs, labor officers, children’s officers, officers from non-governmental organizations in the study area, community elders, as well as parents. Care was taken to ensure diversity in terms of age, sex, occupation, ethnicity, and geographic origin to capture a wide range of perspectives. This triangulation of perspectives enhances the validity and richness of qualitative insights (Patton, 2002).

Data was collected using a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools. A structured questionnaire and focus group discussions (FGDs) were administered to the child respondents to collect both numerical and narrative data regarding their experiences, motivations, and family circumstances. For key informants, semi-structured interviews were used to gain in-depth perspectives on the structural and relational dimensions influencing child labor. The data collection instruments were developed from existing literature and validated by experts in child protection and social research. Test and retest methods were employed to ascertain the validity and reliability of the tools, and revisions were made to improve clarity and cultural appropriateness.

Prior to conducting the study, permission was obtained from the Kenya National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), facilitated by an introductory letter from Rongo Kenyatta University’s Directorate of Graduate Studies. In accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving minors (Alderson & Morrow, 2011), all child participants provided assent, and informed consent was obtained from their guardians or community caregivers. Prior to each FGD session, a comprehensive risk-benefit assessment was conducted to evaluate potential harms and benefits, particularly considering the psychological and social vulnerabilities of child participants. Measures were taken to mitigate harm, including offering psychological referrals where needed, ensuring confidentiality, and conducting data collection in child-friendly and non-threatening environments.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the study’s findings, beginning with an overview of the response rate. Table 1 summarizes the planned versus actual participation in data collection activities, detailing the number of focus group discussions and interviews conducted across the different categories of respondents. The table provides insight into the completeness of data collected and the distribution of study participants across methods.

Table 1: Distribution of study participants.

Target Population	Data Collection Tool/ Method	Number Planned	Number Conducted	Percentage
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Main Respondents		Focus Group Discussion	23	23	100
Total			23	23	100
Key Informants	Assistant Chiefs	Interviews	02	02	100
	Labour Office	Interviews	02	02	100
	Children’s Office	Interviews	02	02	100
	Officers from civil society organizations	Interviews	02	02	100
	Mine Operators (Employers)	Interviews	02	02	100
	Parents	In-Depth Interviews	23	18	78.26%
Total			33	28	84.84%

Source: Field data 2023

As shown in Table 1, the study achieved an overall response rate of 84.84%. All the 23 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) planned with main respondents—children working in gold mines—were successfully conducted, yielding a 100% completion rate. Each FGD consisted of between four and six participants, resulting in a total of 115 child participants.

For the key informants, all planned interviews with assistant chiefs, labor officers, children’s officers, civil society officers, and mine operators were completed as scheduled, reflecting a 100% response rate in these categories. This full participation from local officials and stakeholders underscores their interest in addressing the issue of child labor in the region.

However, among parents, only 18 out of 23 planned in-depth interviews were conducted, translating to a response rate of 78.26%. This shortfall may be attributed to factors such as scheduling conflicts, reluctance to participate in sensitive discussions, or logistical constraints in accessing some respondents. Despite this, the participation of 18 parents provided rich qualitative insights into family transitions influencing child labor.

This high level of participation among both children and key stakeholders underscores the relevance of the study and the willingness of the community to engage in discussions around child labor. The completeness of data from diverse actors—including government officials, community leaders, and mining employers—enhanced the triangulation of findings and added depth to the exploration of family transitions as a driver of child labor.

Family Socio-Economic Status and Child Labor

To unpack the structural and everyday contexts within which child labour is normalized, the study examined indicators of family socio-economic status. These indicators — including parental education, occupations, land tenure, and asset ownership — help reveal how labour is embedded in family survival strategies and intergenerational patterns, particularly during transitions such as widowhood, illness, or shifting caregiving roles. Rather than being driven solely by poverty, child labour emerges here as a normalized coping mechanism shaped by both economic fragility and culturally sanctioned expectations of children's contribution to the household. Participants socioeconomic data is presented in Table 2.



Table 2: Participants' socioeconomic indicators.

Socioeconomic Indicators		F	%
Parent's Level of Education	No formal education	17	14.78
	Completed Primary School	59	51.30
	Completed Secondary School	31	26.96
	Completed College Education	8	6.96
Total		115	100
Parent's Occupation	Farmhands	25	21.74
	One Parent Working in the Mines	37	32.17
	Both Parents Working in the Mines	44	38.26
	Others	9	7.83
Total		115	100
Siblings Occupation	Siblings Working as Farmhands	19	16.52
	Siblings Working in Mines	78	67.83
	Siblings in Formal Employment	14	12.17
	Others	4	3.48
Total		115	100
Land Ownership	Immigrant, living in rented house	11	9.57
	Native, living at parents' own home	81	70.43
	Native, but living in rented house	23	20.00
Total		115	100
Home Connectivity to Electricity	Connected to Kenya Power Company	6	5.22
	Using Solar Power	83	72.17
	Not connected to any electricity source	26	22.61
Total		115	100
Family Ownership of Items	Family has one motorbike	67	58.26
	Family has two or more motorbikes	33	28.70
	I own a motorbike	27	23.48
	I own a smartphone	103	89.57
	I own a radio	93	80.87
	Family has a television	42	36.52
	Family has a corrugated iron roof	107	93.04
	Family has a permanent house	03	2.61
	Family owns at least 5 cattle	47	40.87
	Family owns between 5 and 10 cattle	51	44.35
	Family owns more than 10 cattle	13	11.30
	Family owns less than 5 cattle or none	04	3.48

Table 2 presents a comprehensive overview of the socioeconomic indicators associated with the families of the child participants in this study. Regarding parents' level of education, a significant proportion of parents have attained only primary school education, with 51.3% having completed this level. Approximately 26.96% have completed secondary school, while 14.78% have no formal education. Only 6.96% of parents have attained college education.



In terms of parents' occupation, a majority of the children reported that both of their parents work in the mines (38.26%), followed by 32.17% with one parent working in the mines. A smaller proportion, 21.74%, reported that their parents work as farmhands. Only 7.83% of parents are involved in other types of work. The data on siblings' occupation reveals that the majority of siblings are involved in mining, with 67.83% working in the mines. A smaller portion of siblings, 16.52%, are employed as farmhands, while 12.17% are in formal employment. A few, 3.48%, are engaged in other types of work.

Concerning land ownership, the majority of participants (70.43%) are natives living in their parents' own homes, while 20% of participants live in rented houses despite being natives. Additionally, 9.57% of participants are immigrants and live in rented houses. Regarding home connectivity to electricity, the majority of families (72.17%) rely on solar power, while 22.61% do not have access to any electricity source. Only 5.22% of families are connected to the national grid via Kenya Power.

The family ownership of items paints a picture of household assets. A significant portion of families own at least one motorbike, with 58.26% reporting ownership of one, and 28.7% owning two or more. Additionally, 23.48% of children reported owning a motorbike themselves. In terms of electronic items, 89.57% of children own a smartphone, and 80.87% own a radio. Television ownership is reported by 36.52% of families. Most families (93.04%) have homes with corrugated iron roofs, but only a small proportion (2.61%) live in permanent houses. Regarding livestock, 40.87% of families own at least five cattle, with 44.35% owning between five and ten cattle. A smaller group (11.3%) owns more than ten cattle, while 3.48% of families own fewer than five cattle or none at all.

Structural vulnerabilities, familial labor norms, and the everyday economies of child labor. This study sought to illuminate the layered structural and familial conditions within which child labor—particularly in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM)—becomes a normalized and even expected part of children's lived experiences. The findings demonstrate that child labor is not solely a function of absolute poverty, but rather of transitional household vulnerabilities, intergenerational socialization, and the strategic deployment of children's labor to sustain household economies amidst structural precarity.

Consistent with regional and global evidence, a key predictor of children's engagement in labor is the educational attainment of their caregivers. In this study, more than half (51.3%) of respondents indicated that their parents had completed only primary school, and an additional 14.8% had parents with no formal education. These trends echo findings by Okpukpara (2006) and Webbink et al. (2013), which show that low parental education is significantly associated with an undervaluation of formal schooling and a higher likelihood of early school leaving or intermittent attendance—particularly when economic needs arise. Education is not merely a credential in such settings; it represents a set of aspirations and life trajectories. Where parents lack such trajectories themselves, they may be less inclined or equipped to support children through long-term schooling commitments, particularly when short-term economic needs dominate.

The theory of intergenerational transmission of labor norms (ILO, 2007) is pertinent here: children in mining communities learn from what they observe and internalize labor expectations early. One 14-year-old female participant explained: "I come to mining because I see my mother coming as she gets money. I also need money for my pocket" (Female, 14). Similarly, a 13-year-old male added: "I always learn what my mother does. This includes washing utensils, clothes, cooking and also coming to the gold mine to get money" (Male, 13).

These verbatim accounts illustrate the normalization of labor through observation, modeling, and participation in family survival strategies. Drawing from Bourdieu's theory of habitus, one could argue that children in these settings are socialized into laboring identities that are not imposed but internalized as part of the everyday moral economy of kinship obligation.

The occupational data further reveal the centrality of mining in household livelihoods. Over 70% of children reported that one or both of their parents worked in ASGM, with another 21.7% reporting that their parents were employed as farmhands—both informal and precarious livelihoods that expose families to income volatility and shocks. Such fragility intensifies during familial transitions such as widowhood, separation, illness, or economic downturns. One 15-year-old female participant, reflecting on her family's shift following illness, shared: "My mother who is a widow is sick and so I joined my eldest brother to the gold mine to look for money to buy food" (Female, 15).



This reflects not only a household coping mechanism, but also the reconfiguration of caregiving roles, where children become de facto economic actors. As Esiri and Ejechi (2021) argue, child labor in extractive economies is often activated by social rupture—when adult labor power is lost or compromised.

Indeed, 68% of respondents had siblings working in the mines, reinforcing the intergenerational and horizontal transfer of labor roles within kin networks. In line with the adaptive household strategy theory, families redistribute labor roles when faced with sudden or prolonged vulnerability. Children are not necessarily passive victims in this dynamic; they are strategically mobilized as economic actors, especially in contexts where child labor is socially tolerated or morally justified.

At first glance, many families of working children appear to possess assets typically associated with middle or lower-middle-class status: 93% lived in homes with iron sheet roofing, 58.3% had at least one motorbike, and 89.6% of children owned a smartphone. Over 40% of families owned at least five cattle. However, such indicators must be read critically.

For instance, while 72% of homes reported using solar power, solar connectivity is not necessarily indicative of prosperity. Off-grid solar systems in rural Kenya are often costlier to install and maintain than grid electricity, and may provide limited and intermittent power. Furthermore, only 5.2% of households were connected to the national power grid, revealing persistent infrastructural exclusion. Off-Grid Solar Market Trend Report 2022 show that solar power is both a sign of resilience and of marginalization—a workaround where public service provision fails.

Similarly, ownership of items like motorcycles and cattle may reflect productive assets, but these are rarely liquid and are often not sufficient buffers against economic shocks. A 45-year-old male farmhand explained: “I earn 250 Kenya shillings per day. This is hardly enough for me to survive on my own, but now I have to feed a wife and five children. In many cases, some children can decide to work in the mines to support their parents...” (Male, 45). This statement captures the disconnect between asset ownership and daily subsistence capacity. Even in livestock-owning households, cash flow shortages can push families to mobilize children's labor to meet routine needs.

A broader lens: are these socioeconomic dynamics specific to mining communities? A crucial analytical question is whether these socio-economic profiles are unique to children working in artisanal mining, or whether they reflect broader community patterns. National and regional data provide partial insight. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, only 22.7% of rural households in Migori County were connected to the national grid, and off-grid solar power was the predominant alternative (KNBS, 2020). Furthermore, motorbike ownership is widespread in western Kenya, especially among boda boda operators—a demographic overlapping with ASGM communities.

However, what distinguishes the children in this study is how structural vulnerabilities intersect with familial labor expectations to produce labor participation. Not all children in such households work in mines—what appears to matter is the convergence of familial instability, proximity to the mine economy, and normalized labor roles. Studies from Uganda (Human Rights Watch, 2015) and Burkina Faso (ILO, 2018) similarly find that while poverty is widespread in mining zones, only certain children are drawn into labor—those whose households are fractured, or where children's labor is needed to fill economic gaps.

Thus, the issue is not the presence of poverty or asset profiles alone, but how familial and structural transitions catalyze child labor in specific economic sectors like mining. In effect, the presence of household assets (e.g., cattle, solar power, and smartphones) can obscure underlying fragility, masking the temporary or chronic vulnerabilities that drive families to rely on children's labor.

Family Transition and Child Labor

To understand the relationship between family transitions and child labor, the study first sought to establish the prevalence of various family transitions among the participants. These transitions—such as parental death, divorce, illness, sudden unemployment, and migration—have been associated in literature with increased vulnerability among children, potentially influencing their involvement in labor. Table 3 presents the frequencies and proportions of participants who reported experiencing specific forms of family transitions within their households.

Table 3: Transitions that have occurred in study participants’ families

Form of Family Transition	YES		NO		TOTAL	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Parent suddenly became unemployed	2	1.74	113	98.26	115	100.00
Parents/caregivers died	37	32.17	78	67.83	115	100.00
Parents divorced/ separated	58	50.43	57	49.57	115	100.00
Parent became ill/disabled	8	6.96	107	93.04	115	100.00
A new sibling was born	18	15.65	97	84.35	115	100.00
Parents migrated/relocated	7	6.09	108	93.91	115	100.00

The data in Table 3 reveal that the most frequently reported family transition among the study participants was parental divorce or separation, cited by approximately half of the respondents (50.43%). This was closely followed by the death of a parent or caregiver, which was reported by 32.17% of participants. These findings suggest that a significant proportion of the children who are engaged in artisanal mining in the study area are experiencing major family disruptions that could potentially affect their well-being and socio-economic roles within the household.

Other forms of family transitions were less commonly reported. Only 6.96% of respondents indicated that a parent had become ill or disabled, and 6.09% reported that their parents had migrated or relocated. Additionally, 15.65% had recently experienced the birth of a new sibling, while just 1.74% of the children reported that a parent had suddenly become unemployed. These findings suggest that while certain transitions such as divorce and death are relatively prevalent, others—particularly sudden unemployment and parental migration—are rare among the study population.

Parental separation/divorce: catalyst or contextual factor? As indicated in Table 3, approximately half (50.43%) of the participants reported experiencing parental separation or divorce, making it the most frequently reported family transition among respondents. While this figure initially suggests a potential driver of child labor, closer scrutiny reveals a more nuanced picture—one in which parental separation may function less as a singular trigger and more as a contextual factor that interacts with broader socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Rather than directly causing child labor, it appears to create an enabling environment in which children’s engagement in economic and domestic work becomes normalized or even necessary.

Qualitative data point to the disruption of family economic stability as one of the most immediate effects of separation. As one local administrator noted, “Some women are left with children after divorce and they don’t have stable jobs. That’s why you’ll find the older children engaged in paid labour, even during school days” (Field interview, 2024). This aligns with findings by de Mesquita and de Farias Souza (2018), who argue that in many low-income settings, parental separation often results in diminished household income and increased reliance on children to support family survival. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory offers a helpful lens here: at the microsystem level, the child’s immediate environment—home, parent-child relationships, and household roles—undergoes significant upheaval. With fathers often exiting the household and mothers bearing the brunt of economic and caregiving duties, children are pulled into adult roles earlier than developmentally appropriate.

This redistribution of roles is evident in accounts such as that of a young girl who shared: “When my father left, my mother had to look for casual jobs. I remained behind to take care of my younger siblings and cook. Sometimes I miss school” (Field interview, 2024). Here, the absence of a parent doesn’t merely reduce income; it reorganizes daily life in ways that increase children’s domestic responsibilities, often at the expense of education. This dynamic also resonates with the mesosystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s framework, where interactions between home and school environments are disrupted, thereby weakening a child’s engagement with formal learning.

Yet separation does more than change family routines—it also alters patterns of supervision and control. As one chief observed, “Children from separated homes often have more freedom. Some of them just start doing whatever their friends are doing—including working in mines or boda boda business” (Field interview, 2024). This erosion of coordinated parental oversight mirrors what Mitnick’s (2013) Agency Theory refers to as “information asymmetry”—where the ‘agent’ (in this case, the child) operates with limited supervision or inconsistent messaging from parental



‘principals.’ When both parents are no longer aligned in their expectations or roles, children are left navigating labor choices with greater autonomy but also heightened vulnerability.

Studies across Sub-Saharan Africa affirm this trend. Anamuah-Mensah et al. (2021) found that Ghanaian children from divorced households were 2.5 times more likely to be engaged in labor than their peers from intact families. Similarly, Bourdillon et al. (2010) emphasize how family fragmentation—particularly in rural contexts—shifts economic and caregiving burdens to children, often in informal agricultural and commercial work. In the present study area, this is exacerbated by weak social protection mechanisms and the cultural normalization of child labor, making parental separation not the sole cause but a key factor that intensifies existing structural risks.

Thus, the data suggest that parental separation operates less as a singular “shock” and more as a structural shift—catalyzing a reorganization of roles, resources, and routines in ways that can normalize or facilitate child labor. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological layers help illustrate how changes at the household level ripple outward, affecting children’s engagement with school, peers, and community structures. While Agency Theory is more traditionally applied in corporate or institutional contexts, its application here offers valuable insights into how fractured parental arrangements reduce coordinated authority, increasing the likelihood that children will drift into labor under conditions of both necessity and diminished oversight.

In sum, the prevalence of parental separation/divorce must be interpreted not simply as a driver of child labor but as part of a wider ecosystem of familial instability, economic strain, and social normalization of child work. This perspective strengthens the paper’s evolving argument: that child labor in this context may be better understood as an embedded, normative experience rather than a short-term crisis response.

Child labor as normative, not crisis-induced. The findings in Table 3 offer a compelling insight into the lived realities of children in the study area, revealing that for a significant proportion of them, child labor is not necessarily triggered by acute family crises such as death, illness, or migration. While parental divorce or separation was reported by just over half of the respondents (50.43%), most other family transitions were relatively rare—only 32.17% had lost a parent or caregiver, 6.96% experienced parental illness or disability, 6.09% reported parental migration, and a mere 1.74% indicated that a parent had suddenly become unemployed. These figures challenge a widely held assumption that child labor is primarily a reactive phenomenon—an emergency response to household shocks—and instead suggest that in this context, child labor may be more deeply embedded in social norms, everyday expectations, and local constructions of childhood.

Several participants described scenarios in which children’s engagement in work was simply part of growing up, unconnected to any major disruption in the family structure. One caregiver noted, “Even if both parents are there, children must help in the shamba. That is how they learn responsibility.” This perspective reflects a cultural framing in which labor is not inherently exploitative but rather a rite of passage—an expectation rooted in intergenerational transfer of skills and familial contribution. This view aligns with the ethnographic insights of Punch (2001), who argues that in many rural African settings, the boundaries between child work and adult responsibility are blurred, and children’s contributions to household labor are often interpreted as integral to their socialization.

The apparent normalization of child labor in this context can be illuminated using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), particularly the macrosystem level, which encompasses the broader cultural values, norms, and ideologies that shape behavior. If the community collectively views child work as a legitimate, even necessary, part of childhood, then this perception becomes a guiding influence on how families, schools, and peers interact with children. The macrosystem here appears to endorse early labor participation not as a reaction to vulnerability but as an expectation—shaped by tradition, survival strategies, and the absence of strict regulatory oversight. This is reinforced by the mesosystem interactions between families and schools. As one teacher explained, “Sometimes we send children home for school fees or uniforms, and we find them working in the market the next day. It’s not always about poverty—it’s just how people manage.”

Even within households that appear structurally intact—where both parents are present and no recent transition has occurred—children still engage in labor. This challenges theories that associate child labor exclusively with dysfunction or breakdown in the microsystem. Agency Theory (Mitnick, 2013), although primarily situated in economic and institutional contexts, offers a relevant metaphor here. Within families, children are not passive



recipients of adult decisions but agents with their own forms of rationality, responding to incentives, expectations, and opportunities in their environment. In this case, the “principal-agent” relationship within the family does not break down due to crisis; rather, it functions as intended within a normative system that values child work as part of familial cooperation and survival.

What emerges from these findings is a more complex and context-specific understanding of child labor—one that transcends the traditional crisis framework. While vulnerability remains an important factor, it is insufficient on its own to explain the prevalence of child labor in the study area. Instead, what is evident is a pattern of cultural accommodation: child labor is embedded within daily life, informed by norms of productivity, collective responsibility, and even moral development. Children work not necessarily because their families have failed, but because working is seen as part of their role within the family.

This reality resonates with findings from Bourdillon et al. (2010), who caution against universalizing definitions of child labor that fail to account for local meanings and practices. They argue that interventions must be sensitive to the distinction between harmful labor and socially acceptable forms of work that contribute to children's growth and community belonging. Similarly, Nieuwenhuys (1996) emphasizes that in many non-Western societies, children's labor participation is not a sign of exploitation but of their integration into the social and economic fabric.

However, the normalization of child labor also raises important concerns. Even if not crisis-induced, this norm can perpetuate intergenerational cycles of limited education and poverty, particularly when labor interferes with school attendance or performance. One girl shared, “I help my mother sell vegetables in the morning before school. Sometimes I'm too tired in class.” Such testimonies suggest that normative labor, though culturally sanctioned, can still compromise children's rights and long-term wellbeing. Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem is helpful here, drawing attention to how these patterns evolve over time and how early labor participation, normalized in childhood, can shape trajectories into adulthood—sometimes constraining opportunities and reinforcing structural inequality.

Conclusions

This study highlights the intricate structural and familial dynamics that underlie child labor in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) communities. It demonstrates that child labor is not merely a response to poverty but is embedded in intergenerational labor norms, household vulnerabilities, and socio-cultural expectations. Children in these communities often learn labor practices from their caregivers, with mining becoming a normalized and essential part of family survival strategies. Parental education, family transitions such as separation, and the strategic mobilization of children's labor within precarious economic environments further shape their involvement in work. These findings challenge conventional views of child labor as solely a crisis response, positioning it instead as a normalized aspect of children's lives in such settings.

Recommendations

To address the persistent issue of child labor in ASGM communities, it is critical to design interventions that not only address the immediate economic needs of these households but also challenge the cultural normalization of child labor. Policies should prioritize improving access to quality education, particularly for children from families with low parental education, and support caregivers in acquiring stable livelihoods that reduce dependence on child labor. Community awareness programs are needed to shift cultural perceptions of childhood labor, emphasizing the long-term value of education over short-term economic contributions. Additionally, strengthening social safety nets, particularly for single-parent and economically vulnerable households, can reduce the need for children to enter the labor force. Collaborative efforts involving local governments, NGOs, and community leaders will be essential to transforming these entrenched labor practices.



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