

young,
homeless,
&
Vulnerable
The plight of the
Kayayo Girls of
Ghana.



"Who are these girls sleeping on the streets?"
I was in Ghana

for a second time in order to volunteer at a small school, but every time I went into town, I realized that there was a group of girls who urgently needed help...

WHO ARE THE KAYAYO GIRLS? The term "Kayayo Girl" is used in Ghana to refer to women and girls from as young as 12 (or even younger) to their mid twenties who work as porters in Ghana's urban centers, most notably in Accra and Kumasi.

Take a walk down a busy street in Kamasi and they are everywhere you look. See a young girl who is carrying four times her weight on her head?

That is most likely a Kayayo girl.

They carry the groceries and goods of other people in Ghana's busiest markets. They do the work that adults three times their weight do not want to do for barely any compensation.

The challenges that these girls face, however, runs far deeper than the difficulties of their job. The vast majority of Kayayo Girls are homeless or at best live in slums. Their homes are often hundreds of miles away in villages up north and they have no support system once they move to the cities. They are vulnerable to crime, including sexual exploitation. They are exposed to all kinds of health risks, from sexually transmitted diseases to exposure to malaria due to sleeping outdoors, in a country where healthcare resources are already spread extremely thin. Also, many of them end up mothering children while barely able to fend for themselves.

WHY DO THE GIRLS MOVE AWAY FROM HOME? These girls do not simply decide that they feel like moving South. The journey is very long and the lorry fare barely affordable. The reasons for moving are usually socioeconomic. In many regions of the North, villages have to carefully ration their food supplies to make sure that there is enough for all the members of the community to eat.

If one woman from a village chooses to move south and is able to send some money back home, there is social pressure for other girls to do the same. Other times, there simply is no other choice for the family whether they like the idea or not since there is simply not enough money at home to support the girl.

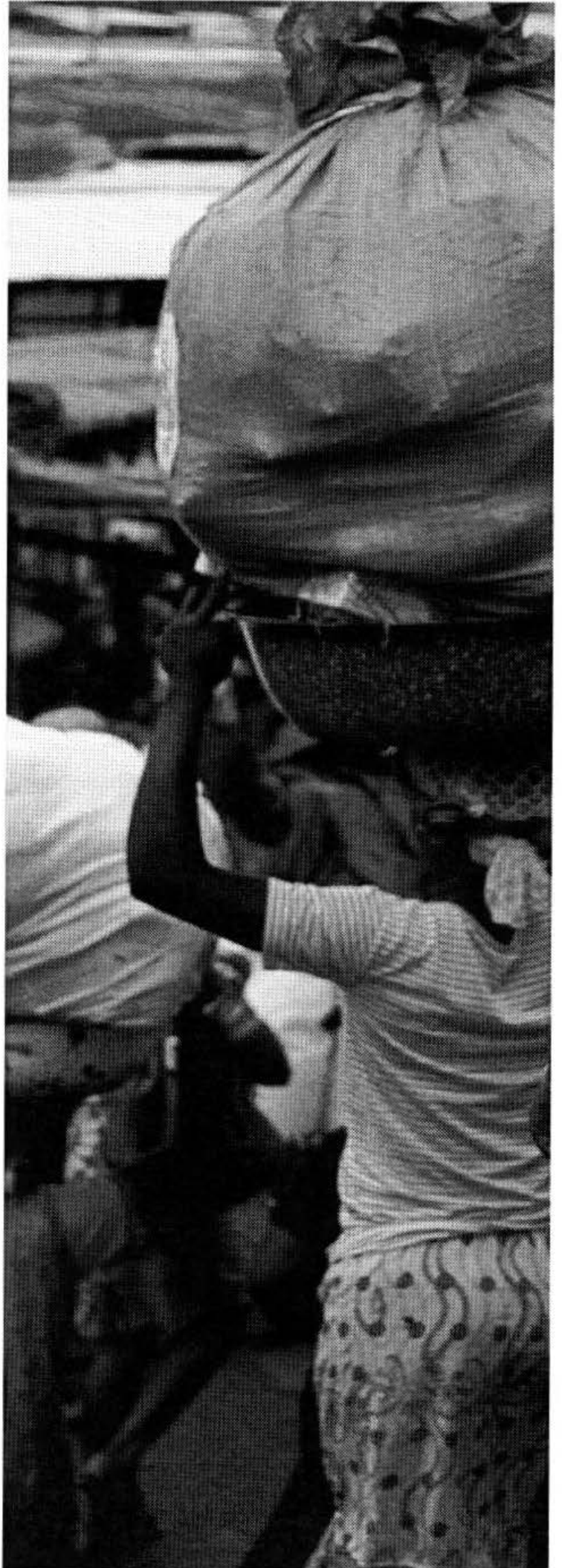
GHANA IS A DIFFICULT PLACE TO GROW UP IN if you don't have the right connections or resources.

Loans don't exist for school, housing programs are nonexistent. If a Kayayo girl wants to attend vocational training she must foot the bill for the supplies, teaching, and housing by herself. If it is hard enough to even feed oneself, then how can one hope to save enough money to go to school?

Even with all that, housing is nearly impossible to find in Ghana as housing contracts usually last for several years and are paid up front.

Those who were not fortunate enough to attend high school and master English will not be hired for 'prestigious' jobs such as being a waiter or secretary.

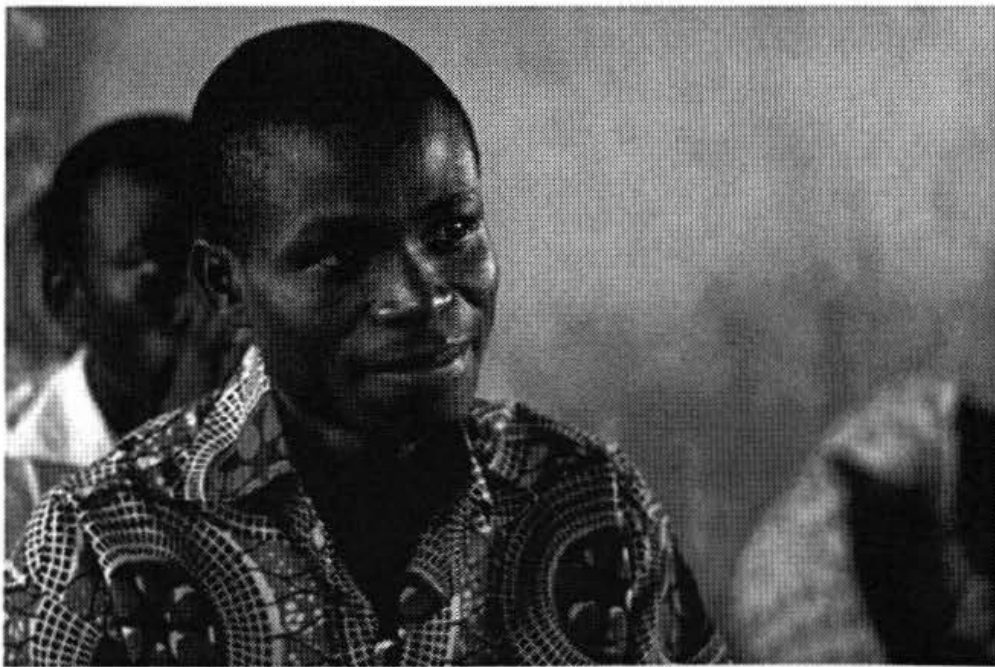
Also, there exists very little industry or manufacturing in Ghana. Most of the economy outside of farming and subsistence farming centers around the buying and selling of imported goods. Children usually inherit their parent's shop as it is very expensive to start a buy/sell business from scratch.



The reality is that there is simply not very much information collected about the Kayayo Girls. There are not many articles written about them, there are no scientific studies...the plight of these brave girls is often overlooked in favor of stories about more high profile issues in Africa such as AIDS, war, and famine.

However, I feel that it is important that we do not turn a blind eye and that we do what we can for these girls. Not because it is an easy problem to fix; providing more economic opportunities in Northern Ghana is the only way to get to the root of the problem, but because there are some very attainable ways that we can assist a young homeless woman in Ghana to become more empowered and to alleviate the threats of abuse and rape that she would otherwise live in fear of every night.

My good friend Edward Oduro has for two years already been working towards both assisting and empowering these young girls. His vision is to see both an unofficial union of sorts form between the multitude of Kayayo girls in the city of Kumasi so that they can better protect each other and set standards for wages and safety (For example, deciding what objects would be too heavy to lift). Edward and I are also currently working towards funding girls to attend apprenticeship training in creating artistic goods that they can sell and make a living off of.



Edward Oduro is a recent University graduate with a major in art. He completed national service at the Kumasi Cultural Center and now works in order to provide funds for helping the Kayayo Girls out of his own pocket. He is the founder of the Progressive Minds Foundation for the Empowerment of Kayayo girls.

PMF- Ghana

EMPOWERMENT
and
OPPORTUNITY

Progressive Minds Foundation

PMF-Ghana is a recently registered NGO in Kumasi Ghana aimed towards providing empowerment and opportunity for Kumasi's Kayayo Girls. Edward and I hope that PMF will not only help the girls attain vocational training, but will also be a springboard for the empowerment of the kayayo girls both as individuals and as a strong community.

Achievements:

-Providing empowerment and leadership opportunities to Kayayo Girls by organizing weekly meetings where the girls can discuss their concerns, ideas, and solutions.

-Funded the training of 8 Kayayo Girls to complete a batik cloth printing course at the Kumasi Cultural Center.

Goals:

-To purchase land where we can build a shelter for Kayayo Girls to safely spend the night.

-To send every one of our 64 current members to a vocational training of their choice.

-To provide a workshop where the girls can work on making their art to sell both in Ghana and internationally.

What you can do to get involved:

We are a very small organization that is just starting out, we are looking for people who are willing to donate their time and talents towards our cause, right now we are especially looking for help in web design, accounting, and legal advising.

Please contact progressive.minds.foundation@gmail.com if interested.

If you don't have much time, you can also help by sponsoring a specific Kayayo Girl's vocational training. Or make a small donation towards the construction of a Safe Sleeping Shelter by purchasing a bracelet or other hand made art products that will soon be available on our website www.pmfghana.org.



Photos and Notes from my personal experience:

It was easy to see that the girls were used to being up at daybreak as they were already going about their routine by the time the light of the day was turning a dim blue. Most of the girls waited patiently at the side of the road, hoping for vehicles to pull up that needed unloading. When a white van did pull up, four girls got up and ran after it, racing each other at the expense of safety to try and be the first to the potential customer. It was a suburban mother's nightmare for a few moments as they sprinted down the busy road.

They walk away dejected after realizing that there was no luggage or goods in van, it was simply a passenger lorry.

Traffic accidents are extremely common in Ghana due to poor driving and very little safety regulation. One of the things that PMF does is maintain funds to be used in case a girl requires hospitalization following injury.

While my interactions with all other children in Ghana had always resulted in exuberance and fun, these girls seemed to carry a feeling of shame with them, reflecting how they were often looked down upon by others in the market due to their poverty. They seemed to draw away from strangers. When Edward shows up, however, they immediately brighten up and open up to him. "I tell people that I have 64 daughters" Edward tells me, "I am always thinking of how I can help them."

Below: As the work day comes to an end, it becomes clear that these girls who had to grow up too soon are still girls, capable of fooling around, laughter, and friendship. They were young, kind, and promising and it was easy to see why Edward wanted them to have a better future.



PMF GHANA

Progressive Minds Foundation

EMPOWERMENT AND OPPORTUNITY for Ghana's homeless Kayayo girls.

Ghana's urban centers are home to many very vulnerable young girls called Kayayo Girls. These girls work as porters but make barely enough money to get by. Many of them are homeless and thus are very vulnerable to many dangers.

PMF Ghana is a newly registered NGO based in Kumasi Ghana which aims to:

Providing funding for homeless Kayayo Girls in Ghana to attend vocational training.

Providing a forum for discussion and collaboration amongst Ghana's community of homeless Kayayo girls

Raising funds to provide a safe sleeping shelter for the girls to spend the night away from the threat of rape and other crimes.

Ghana: Cultural information:

population: about 20 million

languages spoken: Official language is English.

Other languages spoken include

Akan (such as Twi), Ga, Ewe,

Mole-Dagbani and 70 others

Land area: 92,100 sq miles

Government: Constitutional Democracy

Gained Independence from UK in 1957.



Average life expectancy: about 60 years

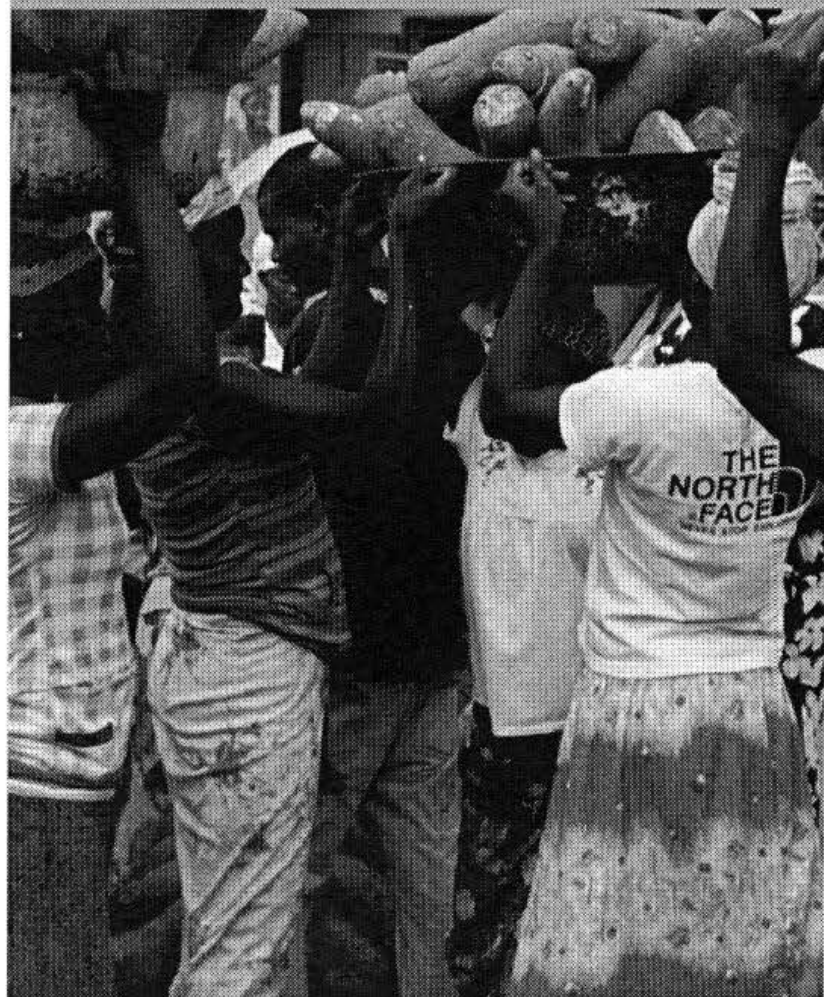
Infant Mortality rate: 47 deaths/1,000 live births

Maternal Mortality rate: 350 deaths/100,000 births

0.085 physicians/1,000 population

literacy rate: 57 %

Median age: 21



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Sources include :

<http://www.modernghana.com/news/359753/1/the-kayayo-girls-phenomenon-a-child-rights-approac.html>

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gh.html>

<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/ghana/090918/ghana%E2%80%99s-kayayo-girls-do-heavy-lifting>

My personal experience with these girls, and the testimony of Edward, Kayayo girls in Kumasi, Didi Shanta of the NGO AMURTEL, and many residents of Kumasi and Accra,

all photos by Bing Li. Content by Bing Li and Edward Oduro.