

# CHANGING CHILDHOODS, PLACES AND WORK: THE EVERYDAY POLITICS OF LEARNING-BY-DOING IN THE URBAN WEAVING ECONOMY IN ETHIOPIA

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## Abstract

The academic literature on children's work is increasingly moving towards a position in which children's involvement in paid work is appreciated as both potentially harmful and emancipatory (see for e.g., Bourdillon et al 2010, Aufseeser et al 2017). Such a nuanced position, however, stands in stark contrast with the policy reality in Ethiopia and to a lesser extent globally. In this thesis, I zoom in on the case of working children in the urban weaving economy drawing from 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork and school survey in Addis Ababa. The working children were from the Gamo ethnic group who are originally from south-western Ethiopia. Although Gamo children's involvement in weaving is widespread, little is known about the nature of their work. Yet state and non-state actors labelled child weaving as a hazardous occupation with children's presence in the sector mostly associated with human trafficking and poor educational performance. Without denying the hardships some young weavers may experience and the degrees of exploitation they may be subject to, the objective of this thesis is to problematize the policy practice of eliminating children's work from the sector and to complicate discussions on children's weaving work. I do so by broadening our understanding of children's involvement in weaving work, highlighting it as form of 'learning-by-doing'. As such, I recognize working children as active agents insofar as they engage in the co-production of value with adults whilst cultivating weaving skills.

This thesis puts forth an analytical framework referred to as *the everyday politics of learning-by-doing* which integrates local and global approaches to childhood. In so doing, the thesis aims to capture the intergenerational and gendered dynamics of work in particular geographies and to demonstrate changing childhoods in a development context. Such an analytical exercise brings political economy and sociocultural approaches into dialogue with each other, bounded together with the relational concept of 'place'. Children and other actors imbue young peoples' everyday places such as schools and workplaces with meaning, while these places are also targeted by larger development processes. By underscoring the physicality of places (Gieryn 2000, Low 2009), this study gives analytical focus to four spatial contexts (i.e., schools, home-based workplaces, new workplaces (factories), and villages) to understand how global and local processes serve as interacting factors in (re)shaping childhoods and children's work.

As demonstrated in the thesis, children's involvement in weaving is more of a sociological and cultural phenomenon than a social problem. Children's work is, in fact, understood as foundational for the reproduction of labour-power and the development of competency. In this regard, the lived experiences of several generations of Gamo weavers prove how engagement in weaving at a particular life-phase of childhood (early adolescence) is relevant to cultivating superior weaving skills. The process of becoming a weaver is, however, gendered, with widespread attitudes that differently view the involvement of male and female bodies in weaving. Girls' bodies are believed locally to be physically vulnerable and unsuitable for weaving. This has led to the reproduction of a gendered

division of labour, and thereby inequality in the way surplus value is shared among the different producers in the weaving economy.

This thesis also explains how broader development processes (i.e., universalization of schooling, anti-child labour programmes, and a neoliberal agenda of enterprise development) operate against the mundane social reproductive roles of Gamo children, (re)shaping their everyday lives and the role of weaving therein. Apart from analyzing the changing dynamics of children's productive roles, the dissertation also attends to working children's consumption cultures in their localities. It highlights how involvement in weaving activities has enabled Gamo children to become independent consumers whose consumption practices are shaped by the processes of globalization. Nonetheless, like their productive activities, working children's consumption cultures are also gendered, reinforcing particular forms of masculine and feminine identities, and thereby shaping peer relations.

As a whole, this thesis demonstrates that while excess involvement in weaving work at a young age can be detrimental, early involvement in this work is equally essential to acquire the skills necessary to become a master weaver. Importantly, in the increasingly uncertain economy of contemporary Ethiopia, possessing weaving skills in addition to educational qualifications gives children a broader base for their future livelihood. The thesis ultimately argues that the proposed elimination of children's involvement in weaving work will effectively eliminate children from the production of hand-woven textile. Especially, as alternative Technical and Vocational Education Trainings (TVET) are offered on a highly irregular basis and unsuccessful (producing less competent weavers); the Ethiopian weaving economy's future survival is threatened by the strong abolitionist sentiments towards child labour.