

# DEFYING THE ODDS, VULNERABLE BUT NOT WEAK: The Saga of the *Kayaye* in Covid-19 Times

By Nora K. Nonterah

## *Kayaye*<sub>1</sub>: Vulnerable does not Mean Weak!

Many think of them as ‘these young and vulnerable girls from the northern parts of Ghana’. But are they really vulnerable? Or are they merely said to be vulnerable because they are girls? Yes, they are both, vulnerable both as people of the poorer regions of this country and more so because they are girls. But weak they are not!

Women and girls have been considered and described by default as vulnerable in many cultures across the globe and rightly so, for the systems are stacked against them and worse still because the whole world has been a male chauvinist enterprise. They are considered to be those who need protection and care but that is not what they need. They need equal or comparable opportunity as their male counterparts. What I seek to do in this brief conversation, is to look at the situation of *Kayaye* through the prism of the Covid-19 experience, and to throw light on the true nature of the woman’s condition.

## *Who are the Kayaye of Ghana?*

*Kayaye* is a Ga (Ghanaian language) terminology used to describe porters in the big cities and towns in Ghana. These porters are normally young girls from the rural parts of the country. Most of them are from the northern part of the country who travel to the cities and big towns to be found in the southern part of the country for greener pastures. It began with Accra and Kumasi but today *Kayaye* are in Sunyani too. Worth noting is the fact that most of them are school dropouts, due largely to financial reasons and lack of good coaching/mentorship.

## *Kayaye and Covid-19*

Covid-19 exposed the country to the sad realities of these young girls when the government of Ghana enforced a scheduled lockdown in the cities of Accra and Kumasi, which exercise began from the last weeks of March 2020 into the proceeding month. Most of the girls had to flee by public transport back home in the northern part of the country. In the public discussion that ensued,

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<sup>1</sup> Also written as ‘Kayayo’, and ‘Kayayei’

two outstanding challenges were heard discussed among groups of people: 1. that the returning girls will constitute a burden to their families back home who had to provide for them – feeding and shelter and 2. that they were likely to endure stigmatization by community members since they were returning from the cities where the virus had started, making them potential carriers.

### ***Kayaye and Covid-19 Panic: The Truck Incident***

There was this event that vividly drew attention to the real sad situation of these girls – It was the last day of March 2020 and most of the news outlets – television, online news and social media were flooded with pictures of *Kayaye* who had been arrested on their way back home. Apparently these particular groups of girls were not quick to make the trip before the lockdown came into effect. What was clear from the news was that, these girls could not observe any social distancing since they were all cramped inside a truck meant for carrying goods and that they were also covered so that they would appear to be just ordinary cargo on the way to Northern Ghana. It was dehumanizing to say the least. I cannot find words capable of describing the ordeal they went through. Most of them were carrying babies, to boot and they were breastfeeding the babies and nursing them in such a condition. Surely, they knew it was better to go home than suffer under lock-down restrictions in the cities of Accra and Kumasi. In these cities, they have no shelter and have to sleep outside in shopfronts and any available open spaces, where the police will surely not spare them because lock-down meant ‘stay at home’. Another fear was how to feed. They work on a daily basis to be able to fend for themselves and their babies. They buy food on daily basis and when they have money enough to buy in stock, they cannot do so for want of a place to store their food.



The picture on the left is from Modern Ghana news. Accessed on 10/06/2022 at <https://www.modernghana.com/news/992681/ejisu-police-seize-walewale-bound-truck-with-30.html>



This picture on the left is from citineewsroom. Accessed on 10/06/2020 at <https://citrineewsroom.com/2020/04/gender-ministry-nadmo-to-offer-further-support-to-stranded-kayaye-ama/>

### ***Systemic and not Generic Vulnerability***

The plight of the *Kayaye* could serve as the prism through which to understand the struggles of young women (not necessarily excluding men) on the African continent. The girls are ready to work for their keep. They are generally hardworking but conditions outside their control have reduced them to their present state. Unemployment and lack of opportunities to self-employ or attain higher education in some parts of the continent leave them with no option but to be providers of cheap labour. The young girls who serve as porters offer services to the rich and average Ghanaian families in the city who shop in large quantities and need help to carry them out of the markets to either their waiting cars or to lorry/bus stations where they can board a vehicle. They receive a pittance for their work. There is no laid down systems guaranteeing minimum wages for their services, in fact there are no policies covering transactions between *Kayaye* and those who seek their services. They are virtually left at the mercy of their clients. They are torn between their need to receive the pittances to satisfy their immediate needs and the awareness of the unfairness in the payments they receive for their services – though they ardently crave for a fair wage.

The cost of living in the cities is so high that such wages are normally not enough to finance renting a room, let alone a decent one. The young girls thus become susceptible to the lures of men who pose as their saviors. They live without parental or any form of guidance. These situations lead them to activities that leave them with unwanted pregnancies, and other health related risks. Through such sexual activities they become parents too soon. Such persons who have to cater for children certainly are exposed to living in poverty and underdevelopment if no constructive response is given to the situation they find themselves in.

A young girl who willingly works and goes through difficult conditions to take care of an offspring cannot be considered weak. Rather, I see them manifesting strength, courage, and the willingness to survive.

### ***Response to Kayaye Plight during Covid-19***

I am aware of a number of organizations and individuals who are organizing programs and raising funds to help in bringing out these young girls from the *Kayaye* work – a life of extremely hard work with no form of economic independence on the horizon, even before the pandemic. What Covid-19 has done is that, it just exposed once again, and brought to light, yet again, a hidden reality of suffering, squalor and distress that young women from rural parts of Ghana, especially from the north go through. Following the ‘human-goods’ incident where the truck was conveying some of them back home, there was a loud outcry on social media by other young men and women who had the opportunity to have a voice (at least through social media).

The outcry was formulated mainly as questions to politicians who hitherto made promises to the *Kayaye*. After many years of political promises to liberate and ameliorate the situation of the *Kayaye*, and taking advantage of the dire situations of *Kayaye* for political campaign, there is no improvement of their situation. Covid-19 just exposed to us that their condition is probably getting worse.

As vocal as religious leaders have been on other social and injustice issues, one would have expected a call to political leaders for a possible constructive approach to the *Kayaye* situation. Instead, almost no religious leader (not even the prominent ones) had a thing to say about the *Kayaye* situation.

Suddenly, it is no longer a topic of interest or to be remembered.

Covid-19 did its part to expose the situation and it is left with human beings to acknowledge, condemn and demand constructive responses to their plight.

### ***Towards a Socio-cultural Ethics of Equal Gender Capabilities***

Human imaginations are powerful. What is necessary is for them to be guided by some positive considerations. Socially and culturally, women have been branded as vulnerable (meaning weak) and when this brand clouds our thoughts and guides our actions, society fails and has consistently

failed to see, acknowledge and make use of the possible influences that women have.<sup>2</sup> The courage, the energies, the talents, strength and resilience that characterizes the *Kayaye* are certainly not being acknowledged nor harnessed for the betterment of society. The representations of the *Kayaye* is based on their current state: no homes, no quality formal education, no good job, and mothering under unhealthy conditions. There is the failure to recognize the positive qualities of these girls, because it fits into the general conception that woman are vulnerable.

These skewed narrations must change. There is the need for ethical reflections on reconstructing the image of women. Human society has to rely on the *moral imagination* to recreate a conception of womanhood that is based on their capabilities and not on age-old assumptions, sentiments and baseless biases. That is, the “capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.”<sup>3</sup> Young women left in conditions that put them in disadvantaged spectrum of society – destitution, humiliation, pain, dissatisfaction and poverty. This should serve as a clarion call for a ‘re-think’ and consequently a new ethic of action which refuses to see women as ontologically vulnerable. Imagine our African culture, indeed our world, where women are part of decision making, have room for self-determination, equal right to quality education etc.

I prefer not to see the woman as vulnerable (meaning weak) as it is usually perceived. Rather, I assert that, it is the situations, conditions, misconceived narrations and systematic leadership failures that create openings for women to be perceived as vulnerable. This is exemplified in the *Kayaye* story of Ghana. Women, young or old are the most proactive respondents during calamities affecting their communities. They stay by the children to protect them, they do everything possible to feed the family, they nurse their children for any possible symptoms of a problem, and they send the children to seek health care where need be. With this tasking position of women in the social life, a position women do not grumble to assume, rather they would take pride in it. Is it not women’s role in society that saves lives and brings about general human good? Empowerment of women for their economic, intellectual, and infrastructural independence demands a careful thought-out response and approach in human society. Thus in a country/or continent with deep

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<sup>2</sup> Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix.

structural defects that leaves many young women unemployed and without adequate opportunities for their development, there is need for women empowerment.

Taking courage, and inspiration from the *Theotókos*, in which woman remains a central figure in the salvific plan of God for ‘male and female he created them,’<sup>4</sup> it could be asserted that God did not create a woman to be a passive agent or recipient of care and protection. Women as equally humans, should be viewed with capabilities to engage in critical intellectual discourses as well as in other adventures of development. Thus, the socio-cultural ethics of equal gender capabilities will focus on the unique and untapped strengths and capacities of the women. It calls for human society to actively and equally care for all its peoples, men and women alike. It will encourage a self-determining growth process for every young woman while creating platforms and opportunities necessary to meet their needs.

### ***Concluding Remarks: Celebrating Capabilities of Women***

Being raised by my mother who is the only career person in her paternal family and thus has had to take care of not only my siblings and I, but also her siblings, nieces and nephews in ways that are remarkable, offers me a point of departure and hope. Strength, courage, ability and capability is what I see in Mrs. Felicia Achumboro Nonterah. I propose that leaders (both religious and civil) should take a cue from the positive impacts of great capable women who were lucky to find themselves in conditions that favoured their growth, attaining of quality education and development to help all women, like the *Kayaye* to see the light of hope. There are many such examples from the northern part of Ghana where most *Kayaye* hail from. I celebrate, also, Madam Melanie Kasise founder of a creative arts group of women – The Sirigu Women’s Organization for Pottery and Art (SWOPA). Through this association, she motivates, encourages and brings out the best in young women in art and pottery; Mrs. Clara Beerli Kasser-Tee is a law lecturer and has constructively influenced discussions on various social topics in the country through the (social) media. She intelligently, with accompaniment of her humane personality – sense of a well-groomed woman from the grassroots, demonstrates that women have a lot to offer to societal development; Also, Madam Tangoba Abayage the Upper East Regional Minister is another woman of substance worth mentioning. She has been very vocal and comes with a new approach to

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, accessed June 20, 2020, Vatican.va, 2 and 3.

leadership – the leadership of inclusion in diversity. Just to mention but a few. As capable as these women have ably proven to be, so can these *Kayaye* and other young women in similar situations, when given the opportunities and allowed to self-determine. For if these were not given such golden opportunities, who knows if they would not have also added to the numbers of *Kayaye*.

It is the conditions and opportunities that a society creates for its women that matter and not the long-held bias rooted in a ‘kind’ of ontological vulnerability of women to be pitied. Women are capable and can stand on their feet when given fair opportunities of life.

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