

DAWN DISCUSSION PAPER #40

POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS

GHANA

**THE SOCIOECONOMIC COST OF COVID-19
AUSTERITY: THE CASE OF THE SCHOOL
FEEDING PROGRAMME**

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DRAFT for discussion

POLICY
TRANSFORMATIONS

REGION: AFRICA	POLICY AREA: ● CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION
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Using a feminist intersectional and interlinkages approach, this project closely examines policy changes that have taken place during the period of exceptionality produced by the pandemic, exploring how they may impact the future in four policy areas: macroeconomics; labour policies and workers’ rights; migration and human mobilities, care and social protection.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAADP – Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme

CAP – Coronavirus Alleviation Programme

DHIMS – District Health Information Management System

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organisation

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GLSS - Ghana Living Standards Survey

GSFP – Ghana School Feeding Programme

GSF – Ghana Stabilisation Fund

GSS – Ghana Statistical Service

IDRC – International Development Research Centre

ILO – International Labour Organization

JHS – Junior High School

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

MGCSP – Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

SSA - Sub-Saharan Africa

UNICEF - United Nations Children’s Fund

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased debates globally about social reproduction and women's roles in the family and society. They have also highlighted the need for states to play bigger roles balancing their priorities which should crucially include social reproduction. The family is both a centre of income and consumption and vulnerabilities that families suffer are shouldered by women. Economic and social reproduction crises resulting from the pandemic impose additional reproductive responsibilities on women.

Division of labour which imposes care work on women is rooted in structural inequality which disproportionately affect women, and this is worsened by socioeconomic inequalities. The family unit reflects the inequalities in society and state interventions that target the family and children directly or indirectly will affect women either negatively by reinforcing gender roles and gendered power relations, or positively by transforming them. Consequently, state interventions and programmes that lessen the burden of care and economic fallouts on women particularly due to their income and food supplementing effects are essential. Continuing with the feminist critique of structural inequalities and state's roles in social reproduction, we examined the implications of the discontinuation of the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) occasioned by pandemic- induced school closures. We argued that the discontinuation of the programme and its increased austerity after the reopening of schools, indicate the roll back of the state in sharing social responsibility with families. The implications for the shifts we identified in the programme implementation during the school closure, included increased reproductive burden on women, child labour, food insecurity and the weakening of the decentralised delivery model of the programme. We recommend a radical reform in the school feeding programme, that considers the concerns of parents, beneficiary children, school heads, teachers, and the communities. More importantly, mechanism for greater decentralisation of programme implementation devoid of political hijacking is essential for the GSFP to be transformative.

Keywords: Ghana, School Feeding Programme, feminist, women, children

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated measures, economic contraction, and coping strategies intersect with entrenched gender norms that affect women and girls' wellbeing. The pandemic has increased poverty, gender-based violence, food insecurity and unpaid-care work burden on women. Governments worldwide have provided some support either through the expansion of existing social protection schemes or the development of new ones. Social protection and assistance programmes are vital tools to enhance community resilience, mainly when used to address fallouts of crisis such as Covid-19 (Hamidou Taffa & Rehab 2021; Kpessa-Whyte, 2021). A well implemented social protection policy is essential in addressing gender inequalities, especially during economic shocks and pandemics (O'Donnell et al., 2021; Tsikata, 2021).

In Ghana, high and increasing sovereign debt pose challenges to implementing new and existing social protection programmes. Ghana's economy was choking on debt, and by March 2021, its total debt to GDP ratio stood at 70.2 per cent before the upsurge of the pandemic. Social protection financing and expenditure are linked to the level of development of countries. Although developing states commit budget to social protection programmes, it is heavily skewed to health-related issues. Only 2.4 per cent of GDP constituted expenditure on social protection programmes in lower-middle countries such as Ghana. In Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), only eleven per cent of social protection programmes target children, while in lower-middle-income countries, health and children programmes constitute 53.4 per cent and 27.7 per cent respectively (Durán-Valverde et al., 2020). This statistic is complicated by the health emergency, which requires an even more considerable investment in health rather than other programmes.

In Ghana, the programmes most hit by the pandemic are social and economic programmes that give some relief to families. Most families that rely on these programs work in the informal sector, accounting for 90.1 per cent of jobs in Ghana, and about ninety-four per cent of working women are in the informal sector (ILO, 2018). In addition, unpaid care work and women's burdens increased as lockdowns, and school closures were implemented in most countries to curb the spread of the virus (Tsikata, 2021).

The Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) is a government programme that facilitates the redistribution of care work between families and the state. The GSFP is an essential social programme given the high levels of child malnutrition and severe food insecurity in Ghana. UNICEF (2019) estimates that in Ghana one in every five children under five is stunted and one in every ten children is underweight. Nevertheless, the GSFP, which ensures micro and macronutrient for school children, was discontinued for nine months (starting from 16 March 2020) due to school closure and restarted in January 2021. The nine-month hiatus revealed vulnerabilities in households with beneficiary children, farmers, traders, and caterers, who are predominantly women, and other suppliers in the programme's supply chain. The FAO et al. (2021) states that rising food prices and economic hardship in 2020 have kept healthy food out of reach for many poor people. In 2020, severe food-insecure people in the country increased from its 2006 figure of 7.6 per cent to 8.6 per cent, while 6.1 per cent are undernourished (FAO, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to reflect on GSFP's ability to advance poverty reduction goals. The programme's change and implementation provide a lens to see the policy and political directions taken by the government within a pandemic context. This study uses the GSFP as a case to reflect on critical questions about transformative opportunities of the pandemic in social policy implementation. We unpacked the critical questions of politics, the effects of the programme's discontinuation on households, women, girls, and suppliers in the food chain. We found that political actors have instead used the health emergency to intensify austerity in the school feeding programme rather than serve as a portal for transformative social policies to serve social justice and equity.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a systematic review of literature on social protection programmes and the GSFP, with a sharp gaze on how its implementation strategies have changed within the pandemic context. The study relied on multiple sources of data, namely relevant media reports that have emerged during this period, national budget documents, newsletters of the programme and one critical informant interview with an official in the Ghana Education Service (GES) at the district level. In-depth interviews were conducted in 8 households comprising four female-headed households in Accra – the national capital and COVID-19 epicentre, and Wa – the capital of the poorest region in Ghana, Upper West. Due to restrictions on movement, the respondents were selected from the ongoing International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funded COVID-19 and African Food Systems Research Project being conducted by researchers at the University of Ghana and NETRIGHT, a women's rights group. The project is followed up on the selected number of food systems actors for one year to track their COVID-19 food system changes. The additional questions were admitted to households that reported that they have children who benefit from the GSFP. The findings were analysed within the broader macroeconomic conditions of COVID-19 in the country.

CONTEXT

Ghana has been struggling to balance the livelihoods and health of its citizens. Preventive measures such as lockdowns, small work orders, closure of borders, public places, schools, among others, have proven to have deleterious effects on households with women and girls shouldering heavier social reproductive burdens. Ghana recorded its first two cases of COVID-19 on 12 March 2020, nine months to a highly charged presidential and parliamentary elections. The election lived to its stake as the country recorded for the first time a hung parliament, but not a change of administration. The handling of the COVID-19 cases, implementation of programmes, and the type of information made public should be read in this political context. Many Ghanaians, including opposition party members described programmes as populist, untargeted, and lack transparency, while others critiqued the government for using the programmes to buy votes.

The country imposed its strictest COVID-19 measures in April 2020, scoring 86.11 on the COVID-19 Stringency Indexⁱ. The restrictions eased gradually after that, and in July 2021, the score dropped to 42.59. Although Ghana's economy has been steady and GDP has been growing for the past two decades, the economy remains informal, mainly with high unemployment and precarious labour conditions. About ninety per cent of working women are represented in the informal sector and are exposed to different forms of vulnerabilities (GSS, 2013). Before COVID-19, 76.6 per cent of the total percentage of women in employment were in vulnerable employment, and this figure is more than that of men (fifty-eight per cent) (World Bank, 2019)ⁱⁱ, and this has been worsened by COVID-19. In general, while official statistics indicate a steady reduction in money - metric poverty over time-, the decline is unevenly distributed with differentiation between women and men, rural and urban areas, northern and southern regions and among people represented in the lowest wealth quintiles (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020). With a Gini index of 43.5ⁱⁱⁱ, the gulf of inequality between the various social groups has increased over the period (Osei-Assibey, 2014; Oxfam, 2018). Only 25.3 per cent of Ghana's population is covered by some social protection programme (ILO, 2020)^{iv}. This figure comprises pensioners, the majority of whom are men, poor households receiving cash transfers majority of these are female-headed, and other social assistance programmes such as school feeding. The Ghanaian state is already accustomed to fiscal austerity by failing to invest in well-implemented social programmes. The existing structural conditions expose the vulnerabilities of women, rural dwellers, urban poor, and households in the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions^v of the country to the socioeconomic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately. In Ghana, the multi-layered existing inequalities are both structural and cyclical.

By examining the hypotheses proposed by DAWN's analytical framework "the pandemic as a portal: policy transformations disputing the new normal" (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021), we consider that the hypothesis that most closely applies to our case is that political transformations during the pandemic reflect a "business as usual" approach, as shown by the changes in GSFP. We hypothesise that although existing policies were repurposed and temporary new ones created as responses to the pandemic, the changes stemming from these programmes are not radical enough to be deemed transformative to deal with the massive

pre-existing and new forms of socioeconomic fallouts. We argue that the new shifts in the GSFP reflect older ways of doing things. We therefore do not expect it to bring impactful, equitable, and sustainable change. At best, the shifts in the GSFP are deepening the neoliberalisation of the economy.

GHANA SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME IN TIME OF A PANDEMIC

The GSFP was pre-designed for school children in selected public schools and skewed to schools in poorer regions and poor urban neighbourhoods. These schools have children from poorer households. The GSFP is rooted in the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) framed within the SDGs on hunger, poverty, malnutrition, and primary education (Government of Ghana, 2015). It has been anchored on its pillar three, which prioritised the reduction of food insecurity and hunger. The GSFP programme seeks to secure nutritional and food security for school children and increase school enrolment and retention. The programme provides one hot meal a day for primary school children. It started in 2005 with ten pilot schools with 64,775 beneficiaries. Currently, the GSFP feeds over three million school children in about 9,000 public schools. The government has widened the project's goals by linking farmers to school feeding caterers and enhancing the consumption of locally produced food items. Hence GSFP seeks to boost agricultural production, as stated on the programme's website:

Conceptually, the programme advocates procurement of 80% of foodstuffs from local sources believing that, feeding school children with locally prepared food, and helping rural communities to generate wealth through improved incomes from the ready and secured market [offered by GSFP] for their farm produce, will break the cycle of rural household and community poverty. As farmers find a ready market for their produce, they will be motivated to increase production and productivity.^{vi}

The GSFP is implemented within the National Social Protection Policy, which the government framed as people centred. The intervention framework seeks to alleviate poverty by providing livelihood support and empowerment for both the abject and chronically poor and other categories of the working poor, who are vulnerable.

AN UNHEALTHY SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME

Before COVID-19, Ghana was already experiencing structural inequality with various stressors such as high unemployment, high cost of living, labour precarity and other stresses on livelihoods. Government responses have remained grossly inadequate. The COVID-19 responses assume most households had alternative sources of income. The mitigating measures were temporary and unable to catch up with the many fallouts of the market economy. As governments are incapacitated to protect citizens adequately, the fallouts are pushed to the household to be shouldered by women at the frontlines of household social provisioning and reproductive work (Ossome, 2020), thereby intensifying reproductive crisis. Increasing food expenditure continues to put a strain on household budgets. COVID-19 has exacerbated these with school closures, livelihood destruction and the jettisoning and defunding of already underfunded social protection programmes.

The significance of the GSFP can be viewed from its objectives and the framework within which it was designed. Moreover, the implementation before COVID-19 provides a basis for critical analysis of beneficiary households after its temporary discontinuation.

The delivery of the GSFP is a vexed and contested one. The programme is decentralised and mostly handled at the district level, with the regional and national coordinators having an oversight role. The selection of GSFP caterers is often affected by political interference based on party lines and this makes the selection process susceptible to the centralisation of a localised programme in terms of food distribution and implementation practice. It is evident to many Ghanaians that the programme has been used to settle a class of ruling party supporters who cannot make it to critical positions in government^{vii}. Contracts to school feeding caterers are revoked upon change of government and new ones selected mainly to party members, executives, and their cronies. The programme is at the centre of internal rifts between those who get contracts and those who do not. At the national level, the programme coordinator is usually an affiliate of the ruling political party. The politicisation of the programme affects accountability, transparency and even the quality and quantity of meals served in schools. Politicisation has resulted in the dismissing of questions arising from its implementation because the implementers are the architects. The mismanagement of the programme is not new. However, between 2020 and 2021, the mismanagement of the programme has dominated media space for various reasons^{viii}.

The fallouts resulted in the supervisory minister from the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MGCSP) dismissing the programme's national coordinator and revoking the dismissal within 24 hours, describing the dismissal as an “administrative error”. The highly circulated dismissal letter was widely discussed in both traditional and social media spaces. In a recent stakeholders meeting held in the Upper East region, one of the poorest in Ghana, Municipal and District Directors of Education complained about the decline in the quality and quantity of food served to beneficiary school children. Complaints were about the meals not meeting four star-diet standards^{ix} However, they confessed that they were unable to complain openly for fear of victimisation since the programme is managed by the ruling party executives^x. At that forum, traditional leaders and Directors of Ghana Health Service reiterated the importance of quality and adequate meals for the wellbeing of school children. However, this has become elusive.

DISCONTINUATION AND DIVESTMENT OF THE GSFP

During the peak of the COVID-19 in 2020, the GSFP was discontinued. However, its implementation strategy was repurposed temporarily in several ways but targeted at different beneficiaries. For instance, food was distributed during the period, and this was done only in the two epicentres of the pandemic (Greater Accra and Kumasi). Part of the funding for the food distribution came from the Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP) under the GHc1.25billion (USD208,855,462.50) allocation from the Ghana Stabilisation Fund (GSF). The announcement to feed the vulnerable groups, which was not defined, came from a presidential address, and was not specifically targeted at any specific gender but instead treated as a universal measure for individuals in the two epicentres. However, female head porters, who expected to work precariously in urban areas were key beneficiaries. The 2021 national budget enumerates the different food distribution programmes as.

Table 1: COVID-19 Related Food Distribution Programmes

Policy	Beneficiaries	Implementing Agency
Provision of cooked meals	2,744,723 vulnerable persons (not gender disaggregated)	MGCSP
Provision of dry food	470, 000 families	Faith-Based organisations
Provision of hot meals	584, 000 (JHS students) 146,000 (staff of public and private schools)	MGCSP

Source: Government of Ghana Budget Statement and Economic Policy, 2021

The three categories of food distribution and feeding programmes were short-term and lasted for three weeks between April and May 2020. They targeted different beneficiaries although GSFP caterers were used to deliver the cooked food. The 2,744,723 beneficiaries were not targeted, although those in the two epicentres benefited from these responses. Moreover, the distribution did not specifically target children who would have been attended by GSFP and assumed that these children were a part of the vulnerable persons and families. This, however, raises questions about accountability and the sincerity of reaching people who needed food. While many Ghanaians doubt the figures, an opposition Member of Parliament faulted the politicisation of the programme and asked for probe^{xi}.

The feeding of JHS pupils and their teachers started on 24th August and ended on 18th September 2020 after their final examination. This group of beneficiaries were not part of the GSFP before COVID-19. It became necessary to feed them due to the need for social distancing and health concerns which necessitated the removal of food vendors from school premises. However, some officials of GES raised concerns about the centralisation of the programme which was directly implemented by the MGCSP. The quality and quantity of food did not change, although JHS students are older and need to be served portions in tandem with their age which averaged fourteen.

The feeding of JHS pupils revealed a need to expand the programme to the Junior High School levels. A Ghana Education Service official interviewed explained that... many children live alone in urban areas and work daily for food. During the lockdown, many did not get food to

eat. Some called the school, and teachers arranged food for them although their classes were not in session. Because of the hardship, some children returned to their villages. In the urban areas, rape and teenage pregnancy became rampant during the period. Can you imagine that one of the girls in my district was nearly raped just because of a ball of kenkey^{xii}? She was hungry, and the boy offered to buy food for her in return for sex. The rape could have been prevented were the school feeding programme still sending food to these poor children. Teachers often use their monies to feed some children while schools are closed (GES official, 14th July 2021).

The GES Official reported that when schools reopened nine months later, six pregnant girls and two nursing adolescent mothers at the Basic and Junior High Schools reported to school in her unit. She attributed it to the general hardship and poverty which the feeding programme could have helped attenuate. Studies have associated adolescent pregnancy in Ghana with the low economic status of the girls' households (Asare et al., 2019). Statistics from the Ghana Health Service District Health Information Management System (DHIMS) indicated that 109,888 teenage pregnancies were recorded in 2020 between ten and nineteen-years age group. During monitoring, the GES official observed that, due to the feeding programme for the JHS pupils, school attendance and class participation improved while absenteeism reduced. However, when schools reopened and the feeding programme resumed with only primary school children, the gains made during the short period were eroded – absenteeism increased, and class participation dropped.

The decision to feed social groups using the GSFP budget and other sources arbitrarily was made by the executive without any form of transparency and accountability. It is unclear why it was mainly the budget for GSFP which was repurposed to benefit other beneficiaries, leaving out the core group who are children.

The school closure and discontinuation of the GSFP produced the intensification of social reproduction and social provisioning burden on women. The experience of Emelia (pseudonym), one of our respondents, is illustrative. Emelia's husband was a driver in a private school. However, he lost his job when schools closed due to COVID-19. At the same time, their three minor children who were enrolled in a government school were home due to

school closure. As a result, Emelia had to feed the family of five alone through intensification of her trading activities. At the same time, her young children at home required her constant attention, increasing her reproductive work burden. Moreover, increasing food inflation in Ghana in 2020 compared to the previous year meant that Emelia spent more on food than previously. With little support from her husband, the economic condition pushed the household into extreme vulnerability.

SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME, COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES AND HUNGER CRISIS

Schools perform essential cross-sectoral functions. They help support children and households from food insecurity and malnutrition, especially for low income and female-headed households (UNICEF, 2021). The vignette below reflects the cross-sectoral functions of schools

Kofi (pseudonym) was a 9-year HIV positive boy living with his father and stepmother in Tema. Many times, he went to bed hungry. Before school closures, he relied on meals from the GSFP for sustenance. He was very regular in school and a brilliant child. He was healthy and cheerful. In 2020, when schools closed in March, his teachers made attempts to reach him. They also referred his condition to the authorities in charge of the HIV-AIDS programme in the district to get antiretroviral medication for him. However, by the time the officials got to him, he had died. He died in May, barely two months after school closure. The little boy died out of hunger and lack of medication. He was a healthy boy before COVID-19 since the school made sure he got his portion of the GSFP meal served to him and his antiretroviral medication. As AIDS patient, he needed to eat well to boost his immune system. The official of GES lamented, "to his parents, his death was a blessing, because it was one less mouth to feed. The system killed little Kofi" (Official, GES, Tema, July 14, 2021).

This discontinuation of the programme affected many beneficiary households negatively. For instance, UNICEF estimates that more than 1.6 million children in the country's poorest and most deprived districts lost access to school meals (UNICEF, 2021). Households had to increase their food expenditure to cater for the void the GSFP left. Since women tend to be single parents compared to men, this exposes them to great difficulties (UNICEF, 2021). Meanwhile, the general economic hardship affected the patronage of goods traded by women,

who relied on trading to feed their families. These households must skip meals or adjust in other ways. This background was reiterated by a mother of four and highlighted the importance of the programme for poor households and households living on insecure livelihoods,

I now buy more food at home, and that is if I make good sales that day. But there are many times the children come, and if I do not have money to give them for food, that is it. If the school had given them food, I would have been free a bit. Because of the absence of the food, I am now compelled to give them Gh¢5 (USD0.83 cents) each daily for school. When they were served food in school, I gave each of them Gh¢3 (USD0.50 cents). I was able to provide them with this amount even when sales were poor (Fati, Tomato Trader, 18th June 2021, Wa).

The school feeding programme advances the goals of first and foremost children's rights to nutritious food and education. For some respondents, its importance is not in the nutrition per se, but the 'food for thought' as indicated in the following statement,

School feeding programme helps the children to get food to eat in school which is helping them to concentrate and focus on their studies because one cannot learn on an empty stomach especially when they do not get food to eat before going to school (Dede, female, Trader, Wa 18th June 2021).

Some women gave credence to the programme since it serves as a nutritional supplement for what children eat at home in terms of dietary diversity compared with bland food cooked in poor households.

The school programme is essential. The children used to eat in school before the COVID-19 pandemic break, and it helped me because sometimes I do not make enough sales daily to provide adequate food for them, so they rely on the school feeding programme. However, when they return to school, they no longer get the food, so I give them money for food, and it is difficult for me, as a single mother taking care of four children (Akorkor, Onion trader, Accra, 21st June 2021).

Like Ghana, Kibrom, Mulubrhan, Tiberti & Kwaw (2021) note that the school feeding programme in Nigeria is an essential source of food and nutritional diversity for many school children from poor homes. However, the disruptions in the programme meant that the state

had abandoned its role in sharing in care work. Regarding the specificities, households in locked-down regions and those headed by women and the poor experienced extreme forms of disruptions to their food security. These findings highlight the importance of food rations in wellbeing and the need for more dignified and equitable alternatives in the crisis period.

SOCIAL PROVISIONING AND REPRODUCTIVE LABOUR BURDENS

The GSFP is the state's intervention in social provisioning, which falls squarely on women. In this vein, women reported some relief in food expenditure on household food when the programme was in full flight. However, there was an increase in household food expenditure when the GSFP was discontinued. Parents referred to the reduction in food expenditure in the home when the programme served food to their children. Households coped with its absence through increased food expenditure, consumption of cheaper carbohydrates, putting children to work and increasing social reproductive burden on other working children in the household. Respondents echoed reportage by stakeholders about the lower nutritional standards of the food, although they found it a necessary part of their daily food needs.

My household missed the school feeding programme. Its absence put extreme pressure on me to get more food for my children at home. During the school closure, I bought corn dough and every morning before I go out to sell, I would ask them to prepare porridge for breakfast, and then they use the remainder for *banku* for lunch and dinner later. We did this often since maize was affordable. Honestly, the discontinuation of the school feeding programme was tough for me. There is no one to help me, no husband, and I take care of my mother, who lives with us. I wish the children do not help me sell the onions, but I have no option, so I make them sell them in the market to get more money to feed the family (Akorkor, Onion trader, Accra, 21st June 2021).

My husband, a school driver, lost his job when the schools closed, so I was paying bills and feeding the family all alone. However, some of the children who have vocational skills have been supporting with the feeding. They feed themselves and the younger ones during lunch and sometimes for breakfast (Emelia, Maize Trader, Wa, Upper West Region, 22nd June 2021).

Households used different strategies to cope with the discontinuation of the GSFP. One example is the consumption of maize-based food throughout the day due to the "affordability" of the staple. In terms of dietary diversity, the school feeding programme provides diverse food. This means that getting this food is essential, although the quality of the nutrition provided has been a subject for discussion by stakeholders, as earlier stated. Thus, the school feeding might not be nutritious, but it is diverse. Some households put children to work to feed themselves and to support the household income. When households are in economic turmoil, children's labour is used extensively to generate income to supplement adult earning (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) estimates that 21.8 per cent of children aged five to seventeen are engaged in labour activities to support household needs (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). School meals supplement what children eat at home and additional meals they buy from vendors. School feeding is therefore at the junction between home food and non-home cooked food. Similarly, households sometimes subsidise the GSFP in terms of the quality and quantity of food served. Some parents give monies to their children to buy food in school to support what they are served while others provide additional lunch when children return home due to the inadequacy of food served. However, the extremely poor households cannot afford the additional lunch and therefore became more vulnerable during school closures.

For some women, the provision of lunch for the children reduced labour spent on cooking. The discontinuation therefore meant that women who relied on the programme must balance their economic activities with cooking for the children while they stay at home. Fatimah in Wa reiterated this point when she said "*when the children go to school and eat, I don't cook lunch at home again. During the week, I don't cook lunch*". Increased household expenditure on food and uncertainty of daily income for traders jeopardises the food security of households.

While the programme for the most part is helpful for parents, guardians, households and beneficiary children, some households did not miss its discontinuation mainly because food served to the children was inadequate before COVID-19, and parents still had to provide lunch. In addition, some children stopped eating the food due to safety and nutritional concerns. Apart from these, long queues at serving tables demotivate children from eating the food. Sometimes, due to inadequacy, there are shortages and those at the end of the queue do not get food to eat.

Despite the varied views about the programme, respondents indicated that the nine months discontinuation of the programme due to COVID-19 affected them negatively. Households substituted what children eat at school, which increased their expenditure in a crisis context when livelihoods have been affected and food prices increasing. Fatimah noted that “*when the schools were closed, I was battling with feeding the children at home. The closure of schools increased household expenditure in terms of food and utility bills*”. This reiterates feminist concerns that the pandemic has increased women’s reproductive burden.

The relatively non-poor households who reported not missing the programme after its discontinuation reiterated some of the critiques about the programme. When emphasised the problems of the GSFP when she said “the School Feeding Programme is of no importance to us now because the food they give to children is not enough. Government is just implementing it for show”. By this, she has reiterated the state of many social protection programmes in the country which are highly politicised, poorly implemented yet popularised in the public discourse. For a very long time, caterers have raised alarm about the low amount paid per child which is inadequate and has remained the same for a very long time regardless of inflation and the increasing living cost. The state pays GH¢1.00 (USD0.17 cents) per child per meal^{xiii}. The caterers are required to cook nutritious meals with this amount of money. It is not surprising that the meals are reported to be low in nutrients and quantity. A wealthy male onion trader dismissed the importance of the programme for his household as he still had to provide money for his children to use for food when they were going to school.

THE EFFECTS OF AUSTERITY ON FOOD QUALITY AND THE LIVELIHOODS OF FARMERS, CATERERS, AND VENDORS

The political face of the programme has been described as “populist” and a “show” because as they argue, the amount of food given the children is woefully inadequate to attract any commendation. Respondents highlighted the heist at the programme. A parent noted that the school feeding caterers send most of the raw food back home which affects the quality and quantity of food cooked for the children. She said, “*the quantity of food they serve to these children these days is pitiful!*” (Mama, Fish Trader Wa, 19th June 2021).

Other respondents contextualised the quality problem within the broader economic context of rising food prices but without corresponding increase in the fees that government pays per child. Caterers must cope by using austerity measures that affect both quality and quantity. For example, some traders who bemoaned the closure of schools, said it's the caterers who buy the "*softened onions and tomatoes*". The inadequate grants allocated for feeding a child is an important issue as this reflects the government's commitments to redistribute care responsibilities, which has important repercussions on gender equality. Mama, a mother with children in a school under the GSFP, further emphasised the effect of multiple problems of the programme by stating that "*what used to be food for one child is now served for two children*" (Mama, Wa, 18th June 2021).

Government's indebtedness to suppliers is a major concern. Given that the programme is localised and requires the acquisition of local food items, indebtedness affects the people in the food chain in the communities most are male farmers and female traders. This affects the food itself, but also the livelihoods of suppliers, mainly market women, who give food items on credit to caterers. The discontinuation of the programme meant that traders with supply relations with school feeding caterers are severely affected without replacement of their livelihood losses. Mama, a fish trader stressed this relationship by stating that "*the caterers buy on credit from the market women and do not pay on time. This affects everyone in the food chain in terms of the supply of food to the schools*" (Mama, Fish trader, Wa, 18th June 2021).

Schools reopened in January 2021 and while this should be a relief to parents with children in the GSFP schools, parents observed that there is more austerity in the programme as demonstrated in this statement,

Upon resumption of school, the food served the children is even smaller and of less quality. And imagine that before the COVID-19 and the closure of schools, food staples were not that expensive. For example, maize was GhC3.50 [0.58 cents) per bowl but it's now GhC7 [USD1.16] (Mansa, Maize trader, Wa, 18th June 2021).

The indebtedness of the programme to farmers and traders has also crippled the programme's own objectives of enhancing local food production and consumption. For example, the following announcement to the GSFP caterers is evidence of long delays in payment to caterers.

The MGCSP and the Management of the GSFP wish to inform all caterers under the GSFP that outstanding arrears owed them for the first term of 2019/2020 academic year has been disbursed through their various financial institutions^{xiv}

The first term started in September of 2020, which meant caterers received their funds ten months after the children were fed. The question of who feeds the children is an obvious one. Farmers and traders feed the children in the interim while it takes close to a year to get their monies paid by caterers, who have endured delays in the release of funds by government. The cause of the delay is unknown, however, since caterers are recruited from the ruling party rank and file, they cannot protest openly. With high inflation^{xv}, the monies that suppliers receive get eroded due to long delays in credit payment. In effect, women – caterers and traders - and not government bear the burden of feeding school children in public schools. This means that government action is intensifying the structural inequalities that women face.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GSFP is not in the transformation process but instead undergoing gradual austerity due to lack of resources, politicisation, and lack of political will. This deterioration of the programme occurs in the context of social reproduction and economic crises that the state cannot manage. Women who are culturally responsive to take on such responsibilities are slipping into more precarity. The crisis can increase violence against women, particularly in poorer regions, rural areas, and urban slums. In 2021, femicide reportage in Ghana became a scourge, with over 27 women murdered between January and August (NETRIGHT 2021). Food and money have been at the centre of some of the murders reported^{xvi}. The programme's state has sharply put the state's disinterest in sharing social reproductive labour/care work on families, especially women. While the use of the budget to feed older school children served a particular purpose and was novel, this was short term and discontinued for the JHS students after their examination. The meagreness of the GSFP and other social protection policies, rather than enhancing well-being, intensified the structural inequalities that women face. From a feminist approach, a transformative social policy should address longstanding gender and class-based inequalities (Tsikata, 2021). It should recognise care as an essential

investment so that women and families are not left on their own. It should aim at eliminating structural inequalities that are wrought with economic development. It must be multifunctional, have more comprehensive coverage and be sustainable. Episodic and ad hoc social protection measures do not go far enough to address solidarity, progressive development, and structural changes. The GSFP has done the reverse as female caterers and traders are at the mercy of the government. It has further increased loads of paid and unpaid work that weigh on women's shoulders.

In Ghana, COVID-19 is a crisis within a broader context of worsening inequality, agrarian distress, high unemployment, and general destitution. During the pandemic, the government implemented temporary, untargeted, and unsustainable programmes delivered with a populist exhibition in an election year. The programmes were both praised and critiqued in equal measure. The supporters commended the government for offering social programme and helping the poor, while critiques pointed to their unsustainability, politicisation, corruption in implementation and targeting problems, among others. Despite the importance of the school feeding programme, it is going through a new phase of austerity which means that many children and households will fall back into extreme poverty and food insecurity, as observed when it came to a halt. This form of austerity will exacerbate women's already fragile livelihoods and create care and social reproduction crises.

What is possible in a pandemic context is for government to dedicate enough resources to the programme by increasing the amount per child in tandem with increasing inflation, taxation, and fuel price. The government needs to properly decentralise its implementation and end the cycle of indebtedness to caterers, which also affects suppliers in the communities. We align with a mother who suggested that if the pandemic endures and schools must close again, the government can do two things – find a way to share food to children within communities and use cash transfers to reach beneficiary children. The existing cash transfer program benefits a different category of social groups. Children should not go hungry just because schools have closed. They must eat.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Government Stringency Index – a composite measure of the strictness of policy responses. The index on any given day is calculated as the mean score of nine policy measures, each taking a value between 0 and 100. Available at <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/ghana>
<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/covid-stringency-index?tab=chart®ion=Africa&country=~GHA>

ⁱⁱ World Bank, 2019. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.VULN.FE.ZS?locations=GH>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ghana Statistical Service, 2020. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

^{iv} ILOSTAT 2020. <https://www.ilo.org/sesame/IFPSES.SocialDatabase>

^v The Africa COVID-19 Community Vulnerability Index (CCVI)

^{vi} <https://schoolfeeding.gov.gh/major-themes/>

^{vii} News Ghana, 2017. Available at <https://newsghana.com.gh/npp-caterers-fight-to-take-over-school-feeding-program-in-ashanti-region/>

^{viii} Otcchere, Gertrude. Confusion in C/R NPP as School Feeding Caterers chase NPP Chairman for cash April 2021. Available at <https://www.adomonline.com/confusion-in-c-r-npp-as-school-feeding-caterers-chase-npp-chairman-for-cash/>

^{ix} Cereals, starchy roots, tubers; legumes; fruits and vegetable sources, and animal protection sources like milk and eggs.

^x GES Directors not satisfied with quality of food served pupils. July 2021. Available at <https://newsghana.com/ges-directors-not-satisfied-with-quality-of-food-served-pupils/>

^{xi}Modern Ghana. Probe Politicisation Of Food Distribution — Zanetor To Gov't Available at <https://www.modernghana.com/news/995965/probe-politicisation-of-food-distribution-zaneto.html>

^{xii} A corn dough-based staple dish

^{xiii} We Can't Cook with GHC0.97 Anymore – School Feeding Caterers Cry Out To Gov't. July 2021 Available at <https://www.peacefmonline.com/pages/local/news/202107/448383.php>

^{xiv} Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. Available at <https://www.mogcsp.gov.gh/>; posted on 17th June 2020.

^{xv} As of April 2020, the inflation rate was 10.6 compared to 7.8 in March. This continued to increase but reduced to 10.4 December. However, inflation increased astronomically to 11.8 in January 2021, and it was attributed to pressures from the pandemic. Available at www.bog.gov.gh

^{xvi} Man reports himself to police after killing wife, a mother of 9 children over food. August 2021. Available at <https://www.pulse.com.gh/news/local/man-reports-himself-to-police-after-killing-wife-a-mother-of-9-children-over-food/7we68cc>

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