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Honorée Anne-Laure Bonjawo Merlat. 2021. *Les jeunes filles 'soutiens de famille' à Yaoundé: Analyse sociologique d'un phénomène répandu mais invisible [Girls and young women as family providers in Yaoundé: Sociological analysis of a widespread but invisible phenomenon]*. L'Harmattan, collection Populations, 202 pages.

This book, which is based on the author's PhD thesis in sociology, presents a sociological analysis of the phenomenon of older adolescent girls and young women acting as family providers (*soutiens de famille*) in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Taking an exclusively qualitative approach, the author seeks to understand the logics that underlie it.

Her aim is to make visible a phenomenon that is widespread but has rarely been documented, by investigating a series of questions. Why do adolescent girls and young women play the role generally assigned to parents? How do they come to take on this role? How is this transfer of responsibility organized? How do these girls and young women, as the main breadwinners in their families, differ from their siblings? How do they go about fulfilling these family responsibilities? To what extent are their personal, family, and occupational lives affected by the role they take on with respect to their families? In a thematic analysis developed over the course of six chapters, the author offers some answers to this series of questions, showing why and how girls and young women choose to take on this role.

The author's interviews with 45 girls and young women (aged 15 to 29) form the empirical core of the study. Their biographies, presented in chapter 1, show that the provider role is a perfect illustration of changes in social, marital and family structure. Chapter 2 is more explicit about the factors behind it, from economic crisis and deteriorating living conditions to changes in marital practices in urban areas, each one illustrated with excerpts from the interviews. She particularly emphasizes failures of systems of family protection: a commonality between the majority of the respondents presented in the book is the experience of disruptions and breakdown in family life, including in many cases, losing a parent. In many African families, when the husband dies, the family of the deceased recovers all his possessions, dispossessing the widow and children. This situation is especially critical for women in polygamous unions. The respondents' biographies perfectly illustrate this factor. Unfortunately, however, it is not presented as a triggering factor as such in the book.

In chapter 3, the author offers a list of reasons for these girls' and young women's unwavering support for their parents: conditioning (socialization through the transmission of values of family solidarity) and personal motivations (giving in order to gain access to inheritance, as a guarantee against future family difficulties, for social recognition, or to make up for harm caused to their family). The details on the interviewees' biographies indicate that a large part of the sample consists of eldest siblings, a status that leaves them with disproportionate responsibilities in their birth family with respect to their siblings, above all in the African context. Alongside conditioning and

personal motivations for economic transfers, the importance of primogeniture deserves to be further emphasized.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the principal sources of income and resources that allow these young providers to combat family vulnerability: forming a union, transactional sexuality, paid work, economic projects (investments in various domains, such as agriculture, livestock, real estate, trade and transport) and the development of solidarity networks. The interviewees highlight the difficulties inherent in these various forms of work. These consist mainly in a double domination (male and family), risks linked to sexuality (STIs, unwanted pregnancy and abortion), school failure and dropout, and sexual violence (rape and sexual assault). The fifth chapter examines the costs associated with girls and young women taking on the role of family provider. It discusses problems around sterility, sorcery, and social equilibrium. Finally, chapter 6 examines the future prospects of these young female providers in various domains, including marriage, childbearing, travel, education and economic independence. It would have been interesting to extend the scope of the study by investigating the extent to which the provider role affects these young women's prospects, documenting how it influences their aspirations.

The author's interviews provide insights into the processes that lead these girls and young women to take on the role of family provider, and the three theoretical approaches that she draws on – Howard Becker's careers approach, Durkheim's holistic approach, and Raymond Bourdon's methodological individualism – offer a set of complementary and indispensable tools for grasping the topic in all its diversity. Although quantifying the problem is not the goal of the study, a survey of relevant data (in the literature and in databases such as the Cameroonian household survey, censuses, etc.) could have offered a sense of the scale of the phenomenon before attempting to understand the underlying processes and factors. Moreover, given the unquestionable predominance of patrilineal families with strongly rooted gender norms, manifested by gender-differentiated socialization, the author could have asked why boys do not play the role generally assigned to parents. Why is it girls and young women who take it on? This question could have led the author to approach the subject from a sufficiently gender-informed viewpoint to expand the range of analytical possibilities. Viewing these phenomena through a gender lens would have allowed her to take into account the dynamics of socially constructed relations between men and women, hierarchies, and norms of behaviour at both the micro level and the societal macro level. For example, the various types of conditioning that the author presents as the motivations for (female) children's unwavering support for their relatives operate in the context of socialization that is differentiated by gender.

This original and accessible study represents an important contribution to research on social inequalities. It has the potential to spur further, more

in-depth studies on the social and structural inequalities that asymmetrically characterize youth in sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere, and to serve as a frame of reference for action.

Rodrigue Babaekpa

Translated by Paul Reeve