

HUSTLE, HIERARCHY, AND WORK ATTITUDES: THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC BACKGROUND IN SHAPING EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOR IN GHANA

***Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

University of Phoenix, Arizona.

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***Corresponding Author: Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

University of Phoenix, Arizona.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore how individuals from different economic backgrounds define, value, and enact hard work within Ghanaian organizational and informal work contexts. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 41 participants drawn from three economic background categories lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income across Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi. Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and narrative prompts designed to elicit participants' definitions of hard work, their valuation of diligence as a personal and cultural value, their observed relationships between economic background and work behaviour, and their perceptions of whether and how social class shapes opportunity, effort, and reward in Ghanaian society. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: hard work as survival necessity among lower-income participants; hard work as career advancement strategy among middle-income participants; hard work as legacy and social responsibility among upper-income participants; the hustle imperative as a cross-cutting work attitude shaped by economic precarity; perceived fairness or unfairness of the relationship between effort and reward as stratified by economic background; and intergenerational transmission of work attitudes as both reproducing and challenging class-based work orientations. Participants' narratives revealed that economic background profoundly shapes not only how individuals define hard work but also the purposes to which they believe hard work should be

directed, the strategies they employ to demonstrate diligence, and their beliefs about whether hard work actually pays off in Ghanaian society. Lower-income participants defined hard work primarily as physical effort, long hours, and persistence in the face of adversity, valuing diligence as a survival tool and expressing ambivalence about whether effort leads to advancement. Middle-income participants defined hard work as strategic effort, skill development, and networking, valuing diligence as a career advancement mechanism while expressing anxiety about falling back into lower economic status. Upper-income participants defined hard work as stewardship, leadership, and social responsibility, valuing diligence as a moral obligation to family legacy and community development while acknowledging the structural advantages that made their effort less physically demanding. The study contributes to understanding of how economic background shapes work attitudes in Ghanaian contexts, offering insights relevant to poverty reduction, educational policy, workforce development, and organizational diversity and inclusion.

KEYWORDS: *Work attitudes, economic background, social class, hustle culture, hard work, Ghana, focus groups, Ubuntu, Social Constructionism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between economic background and work attitudes has long fascinated social scientists. Does growing up in poverty instill a stronger work ethic, as the bootstrap narrative suggests, or does scarcity create psychological burdens that undermine sustained effort? Does growing up in wealth produce entitlement and laziness, or does privilege enable the development of strategic work habits that perpetuate advantage across generations? These questions are not merely academic; they shape public policy debates about welfare, education, and economic mobility, inform organizational decisions about hiring and promotion, and influence how individuals from different class backgrounds perceive each other's work ethic and moral character (Lamont, 2000; Lareau, 2011).

In Ghana, these questions take on particular urgency given the country's high levels of economic inequality, persistent intergenerational poverty, and widespread cultural discourse that elevates hard work as the primary pathway to success (Gyekye, 1997). Ghanaian popular culture is saturated with narratives of individuals who rose from humble beginnings to prosperity through sheer determination and relentless effort. The "hustle" mentality the willingness to pursue multiple income-generating activities simultaneously, to work long hours, to seize any opportunity for advancement is celebrated as a virtue, particularly among

lower-income Ghanaians who lack access to formal employment and institutional support (Clark, 2010). Yet at the same time, many Ghanaians express skepticism about whether hard work actually pays off, noting that well-connected individuals with mediocre effort often advance faster than hardworking individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Amankwah-Amoah, Danso, & Adomako, 2021). This tension between the cultural ideal of hard work and the perceived reality of class-based advantage creates complex work attitudes that vary systematically by economic background.

Despite the salience of these issues in Ghanaian public discourse, empirical research on how economic background shapes work attitudes in Ghana remains limited. Existing studies have examined work ethic as a general cultural value (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021) or have focused on organizational predictors of work behaviour (Ayentimi, Burgess, & Dayaram, 2018), without systematically exploring how individuals from different class backgrounds define, value, and enact hard work. The absence of class-based analysis is significant because economic background shapes not only material resources but also socialization into specific work values, beliefs about the efficacy of effort, tolerance for different types of work, and strategies for navigating labour markets (Lareau, 2011). Understanding these class-based variations is essential for designing poverty reduction programmes, educational curricula that prepare students for diverse work futures, and organizational policies that recognize and accommodate class-based differences in work attitudes.

This study addresses this gap by employing focus group methodology to explore how Ghanaians from lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income backgrounds define hard work, value diligence, and orient themselves toward work behaviour. Focus groups are particularly well suited to this inquiry because they generate interactive dialogue in which participants articulate, defend, and sometimes revise their work attitudes in response to others who share similar economic backgrounds (Morgan, 1997). By convening separate focus groups for each economic category, this study aims to surface within-class shared understandings before comparing across classes.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications. Understanding how lower-income Ghanaians define and value hard work can inform poverty reduction programmes that build on existing work attitudes rather than imposing alien frameworks. Understanding middle-income work attitudes can help organizations design retention strategies for employees who experience anxiety about downward mobility. Understanding upper-income work attitudes can inform philanthropic and leadership development initiatives that channel privilege toward social responsibility. And understanding the perceived fairness or unfairness

of the effort-reward relationship across classes can inform policy debates about minimum wage, social protection, and economic mobility.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread public discourse in Ghana about the relationship between economic background and work ethic, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about how individuals from different income brackets actually define, value, and enact hard work. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding class-based stratification of work attitudes and practical consequences for poverty reduction, education, and workforce development policy.

First, the specific definitions of hard work that characterize different economic backgrounds have not been systematically identified. Does hard work mean the same thing to a lower-income market trader, a middle-income civil servant, and an upper-income corporate executive? Existing research suggests that class-based socialization produces different understandings of what constitutes appropriate effort, what goals work should serve, and what strategies effectively achieve those goals (Lareau, 2011). However, these class-based differences have not been empirically examined in the Ghanaian context. Without such examination, policy discourse risks imposing one class's definition of hard work on all Ghanaians, potentially misrecognizing and devaluing legitimate work attitudes that differ from middle-class norms.

Second, the valuation of hard work how much individuals believe diligence matters for success relative to other factors such as connections, luck, or structural advantage has not been compared across economic backgrounds in Ghana. Research in other contexts suggests that lower-income individuals may be more likely to believe that hard work pays off (as a necessary psychological adaptation to challenging circumstances) or less likely to believe that hard work pays off (as a realistic assessment of structural barriers), depending on specific contextual factors (Mijs, 2016). Which pattern characterizes Ghana, and how does it vary by economic background? Answering this question is essential for understanding the motivational consequences of class-based work attitudes.

Third, the relationship between economic background and the "hustle" mentality—the willingness to pursue multiple income streams, work informally, and seize opportunistic income-generating activities—has not been systematically examined. Hustle culture is widely celebrated in Ghanaian popular discourse, but it may be experienced differently by individuals from different economic backgrounds. For lower-income Ghanaians, hustle may

be a survival necessity, not a choice. For middle-income Ghanaians, hustle may supplement formal employment. For upper-income Ghanaians, hustle may refer to entrepreneurial risk-taking rather than survival-driven multiple job-holding. These differences have implications for how policies should support or regulate different forms of work.

Fourth, beliefs about the fairness of the effort-reward relationship whether individuals believe that hard work is fairly compensated in Ghanaian society have not been examined across economic backgrounds. Perceptions of fairness shape motivation, trust in institutions, and support for redistributive policies (Tyler, 2006). If lower-income Ghanaians believe that hard work does not pay off because of corruption, nepotism, or structural barriers, they may reduce effort, perpetuating poverty. If upper-income Ghanaians believe that effort is fairly rewarded, they may resist policies that redistribute resources to lower-income groups. Understanding these class-based differences in perceived fairness is essential for building consensus around economic policy.

Fifth, the intergenerational transmission of work attitudes how parents' economic background and work values shape children's work attitudes has not been examined in Ghana. Research in other contexts shows that work attitudes are transmitted through modelling, explicit teaching, and the structuring of childhood activities (Lareau, 2011). In Ghana, where extended family networks and communal childrearing are common (Gyekye, 1997), the transmission of work attitudes may be more complex than nuclear family models suggest. Understanding how work attitudes are reproduced across generations is essential for designing interventions that interrupt class-based stratification of work opportunities.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore how individuals from different economic backgrounds lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income in Ghana define hard work, value diligence as a personal and cultural value, and orient their work attitudes and behaviours in organizational and informal work contexts.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To identify how lower-income Ghanaians define hard work, what they value about diligence, and how they enact work attitudes in their daily lives.
- 4.2 To identify how middle-income Ghanaians define hard work, what they value about diligence, and how they enact work attitudes in their daily lives.

4.3 To identify how upper-income Ghanaians define hard work, what they value about diligence, and how they enact work attitudes in their daily lives.

4.4 To compare definitions, valuations, and enactments of hard work across the three economic background categories.

4.5 To examine beliefs about the fairness of the effort-reward relationship and how these beliefs vary by economic background.

4.6 To explore the intergenerational transmission of work attitudes and how economic background shapes the work values passed from parents to children.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: How do Ghanaians from lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income backgrounds define hard work, and how do these definitions differ across economic categories?

Research Question Two: How do Ghanaians from different economic backgrounds value hard work relative to other factors (connections, luck, education, structural advantage) in determining success?

Research Question Three: How does the "hustle" mentality manifest across different economic backgrounds, and what purposes does hustle serve for each group?

Research Question Four: How do Ghanaians from different economic backgrounds perceive the fairness of the relationship between effort and reward in Ghanaian society?

Research Question Five: How are work attitudes transmitted across generations, and how does economic background shape the content and intensity of this transmission?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), posits that social reality, including the meaning of hard work and the value placed on diligence, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, what constitutes "hard work" is not a fixed, universal standard but a socially constructed understanding that emerges from specific economic, historical, and cultural contexts (Gergen, 2015). Individuals from different economic backgrounds inhabit different social worlds with different constraints,

opportunities, and cultural scripts; it should therefore be expected that they construct different meanings of hard work and different valuations of diligence. Focus group discussions, in which participants from similar economic backgrounds articulate and negotiate shared understandings, are sites where these socially constructed meanings become visible.

Social Constructionism directs analytical attention toward the linguistic and narrative resources participants use to define hard work, justify its value, and explain its relationship to success. It asks: What metaphors, stories, and cultural references do participants draw upon? How do they negotiate disagreements about what hard work means? How do they position their own class-based understandings relative to other class positions? These questions require qualitative inquiry that captures the discursive construction of work attitudes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding Ghanaian work attitudes. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation rather than individual achievement alone (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts such as *onipa* (personhood) as inherently relational (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu philosophy suggests that Ghanaian work attitudes may be fundamentally relational and communal in orientation, with hard work valued not only for individual advancement but also for contribution to family, community, and collective welfare. However, economic background may shape how this relational orientation is expressed: lower-income individuals may work hard primarily to support extended family; middle-income individuals may balance family support with individual career advancement; upper-income individuals may express Ubuntu through philanthropy and community leadership rather than direct material support.

6.2 Class-Based Socialization and Work Attitudes

The relationship between social class and work attitudes has been extensively studied in sociological and psychological research. Lareau's (2011) influential study of class-based parenting found that middle-class parents engage in "concerted cultivation" actively fostering children's talents, organizing structured activities, and teaching children to navigate institutions while working-class and poor parents engage in "accomplishment of natural growth" providing care and safety but leaving children's unstructured development to unfold naturally. These different parenting styles produce different work-relevant skills and

attitudes: middle-class children develop a sense of entitlement, comfort with authority, and strategic orientation to achievement; working-class children develop a sense of constraint, respect for authority, and orientation to following instructions rather than initiating.

Research extending Lareau's framework to work attitudes has found that class background shapes orientations to work in enduring ways. Individuals from working-class backgrounds tend to value job security, clear instructions, and fair treatment; they may be uncomfortable with ambiguity, self-promotion, and networking (Rivera, 2016). Individuals from middle-class backgrounds tend to value career advancement, professional development, and strategic visibility; they are comfortable navigating organizational politics and advocating for themselves. Individuals from upper-class backgrounds tend to value autonomy, impact, and legacy; they may take for granted access to networks and resources that others must struggle to obtain (Lamont, 2000).

These class-based differences in work attitudes have not been systematically examined in the Ghanaian context. The present study extends this line of inquiry by examining how Ghanaian class structures shaped by colonial history, post-independence economic policy, and contemporary globalization produce distinctive work attitudes across economic backgrounds.

6.3 The Hustle Imperative in African Contexts

The concept of "hustle" has gained prominence in African urban studies as a descriptor of the survival strategies employed by individuals in contexts of high unemployment, informal economy dominance, and precarious labour (Thieme, 2018). Hustle refers to the willingness to pursue multiple income-generating activities simultaneously, to seize opportunistic earnings, to navigate informal networks, and to persist in the face of repeated failure. In Ghana, hustle is widely celebrated as a virtue, particularly among lower-income Ghanaians who lack access to formal employment (Clark, 2010). The successful hustler is a folk hero, someone who through sheer determination and creativity has overcome structural barriers to achieve prosperity.

However, scholars have critiqued the celebration of hustle for obscuring structural inequality. The imperative to hustle places the burden of survival on individuals, diverting attention from inadequate social protection, weak labour markets, and systemic barriers to upward mobility (Thieme, 2018). Moreover, hustle may be experienced differently across class positions. For lower-income individuals, hustle is a survival necessity; failure to hustle means literal deprivation. For middle-income individuals, hustle may be a supplement to formal employment, a strategy for getting ahead rather than merely surviving. For upper-income

individuals, hustle may refer to entrepreneurial risk-taking, which carries safety nets that lower-income hustlers lack.

The present study examines how the hustle imperative is understood and experienced across economic backgrounds in Ghana, contributing to understanding of class-based variation in work attitudes within precarious labour contexts.

6.4 Perceived Fairness of Effort-Reward Relationship

Beliefs about whether hard work pays off—referred to as meritocratic beliefs—vary across class positions and cultural contexts (Mijs, 2016). Research in Western contexts has found that lower-income individuals are more likely to believe that hard work pays off than upper-income individuals, a finding explained by system justification theory: believing that the system is fair is psychologically comforting for those who are disadvantaged, while the advantaged can afford to acknowledge unfairness (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). However, this pattern may reverse in contexts where inequality is extremely high and upward mobility is rare; in such contexts, lower-income individuals may become skeptical that hard work pays off, while upper-income individuals may justify their position by claiming it results from effort (Mijs, 2016).

The Ghanaian context presents an interesting case for examining these dynamics. Ghana has relatively high income inequality by international standards, and social mobility research suggests that family background strongly predicts adult economic outcomes (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). At the same time, Ghanaian cultural discourse strongly emphasizes hard work as the pathway to success, and narratives of upward mobility through effort are widely circulated. The tension between structural reality and cultural ideal may produce complex, ambivalent beliefs about the effort-reward relationship that vary systematically by economic background. The present study examines these beliefs directly through focus group discussion.

6.5 Intergenerational Transmission of Work Attitudes

Work attitudes are transmitted across generations through multiple mechanisms: explicit teaching about the value of hard work; modelling of work behaviour by parents and other adults; structuring of children's activities to develop specific work-relevant skills; and transmission of social capital (networks, knowledge) that shapes labour market opportunities (Lareau, 2011). In Ghana, intergenerational transmission is complicated by extended family networks and communal childrearing practices, which mean that children may be socialized

into work attitudes by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings, not only parents (Gyekye, 1997). Moreover, economic background shapes transmission: lower-income families may emphasize survival-oriented work attitudes (persistence, thrift, willingness to do any work); middle-income families may emphasize career-oriented attitudes (strategic planning, networking, professional presentation); upper-income families may emphasize stewardship-oriented attitudes (legacy, social responsibility, leadership).

The present study examines how work attitudes are transmitted across generations in Ghanaian families and how economic background shapes the content and intensity of this transmission. Understanding transmission mechanisms is essential for designing interventions that interrupt intergenerational poverty by changing work-relevant socialization.

6.6 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that while class-based work attitudes have been studied extensively in Western contexts, limited empirical research has examined how economic background shapes definitions, valuations, and enactments of hard work in Ghana. No published study has used focus group methodology to compare work attitudes across lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income Ghanaians. The present study addresses this gap by generating rich qualitative data on class-based work attitudes, contributing both to the empirical literature on African work culture and to theoretical understanding of how economic background shapes the social construction of hard work.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand meaning-making, socially constructed beliefs, and class-based cultural variation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which participants from similar economic backgrounds articulate shared understandings, negotiate disagreements, and collectively construct the meanings of hard work (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The comparative design separate focus groups for each economic background category allowed within-class work attitudes to emerge before cross-class comparison.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality, including the meaning of hard work and the value of diligence, is constructed through meaning-making activities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The interpretivist approach holds that the researcher's role is to interpret the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences and to represent those meanings reflexively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's interest in how economic background shapes the social construction of work attitudes. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian class structures shaped the interpretive process, and actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge emerging analytical conclusions.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in three Ghanaian cities: Accra (the capital and largest economic centre), Kumasi (the major commercial centre of the Ashanti Region), and Sekondi-Takoradi (the industrial and oil hub of the Western Region). These three locations were selected to capture diversity in economic contexts, labour markets, and class structures. Two focus group sessions were conducted per economic background category (lower-income, middle-income, upper-income), yielding six focus groups in total. Sessions were held at accessible venues appropriate to each economic group: community centres for lower-income groups; university seminar rooms for middle-income groups; hotel conference rooms for upper-income groups. Seating was arranged in circular configuration. Sessions were conducted in the morning or late afternoon to accommodate work schedules. Refreshments and transportation reimbursement were provided.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised Ghanaian adults aged 25 to 60 years who had spent most of their childhood and adolescence (ages 0-18) in a consistent economic background category. Economic background was defined based on parental occupation, parental education, housing conditions, and subjective recollection of family economic circumstances during childhood. Three economic background categories were sampled: lower-income (childhood characterized by financial scarcity, parental manual or informal work, limited formal education of parents); middle-income (childhood characterized by financial stability, parental formal employment or small business ownership, secondary or some tertiary education of

parents); and upper-income (childhood characterized by financial comfort or affluence, parental professional or executive employment, university education of parents, family business ownership, or significant assets).

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who met the economic background criteria for their focus group category. The researcher identified participants through multiple channels: community organizations (churches, trade unions, market associations) for lower-income participants; professional associations and workplace referrals for middle-income participants; business networks, alumni associations, and professional contacts for upper-income participants. Purposive sampling criteria were applied to ensure diversity across gender, age, current employment status, and geographic location within each economic category. All participants were currently residing in or near the study cities and were able to attend in-person focus group sessions.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, two per economic background category, with participant numbers per group ranging from six to eight, yielding a total of 41 participants. Focus group sizes of six to eight participants are recommended as optimal for generating diverse perspectives while allowing all participants adequate speaking time (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Data saturation was assessed during iterative analysis and was considered achieved after the fifth focus group session, with the sixth session serving confirmatory purposes. Among the 41 participants, 22 were female and 19 were male. Ages ranged from 25 to 58 years. Economic background distribution: lower-income, 14 participants; middle-income, 14 participants; upper-income, 13 participants. Current employment status varied across groups, with lower-income participants more likely to be in informal or precarious employment and upper-income participants more likely to be in formal professional or executive employment.

Table 1. Participants.

Focus Group	Economic Background	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Current Employment Context	Participants (N)
FG1 (L1)	Lower-income	Accra	4F/3M	26-54	Market trading, transport, informal	7

FG2 (L2)	Lower-income	Kumasi	4F/3M	25-56	Farming, artisanal, informal	7
FG3 (M1)	Middle-income	Accra	3F/4M	28-55	Civil service, teaching, private sector	7
FG4 (M2)	Middle-income	Sekondi-Takoradi	4F/3M	29-58	Banking, healthcare, manufacturing	7
FG5 (U1)	Upper-income	Accra	4F/2M	30-57	Corporate executive, law, medicine	6
FG6 (U2)	Upper-income	Kumasi	3F/4M	32-56	Business owners, consultants, directors	7
Total	3 backgrounds	3 cities	22F/19M	25-58	Mixed formal/informal	41

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a semi-structured focus group discussion guide developed by the researcher. The guide opened with a warm-up prompt asking participants to describe their childhood family economic circumstances (without requiring disclosure of sensitive information). The discussion then moved to four main sections.

The first section elicited definitions of hard work. Prompts included: "When you hear the phrase 'hard work,' what comes to your mind?" "What does a hardworking person do that a lazy person does not do?" "Does hard work mean different things to different people?"

The second section explored valuation of hard work. Prompts included: "How important is hard work for success in Ghana today?" "What other factors matter for success besides hard work?" "If someone works very hard but does not succeed, what explains that?"

The third section examined the hustle mentality. Prompts included: "What does 'hustle' mean to you?" "Is hustling different from working hard?" "Have you ever had to hustle? What did that look like?"

The fourth section explored perceived fairness and intergenerational transmission. Prompts included: "In Ghana today, does hard work usually pay off?" "Did your parents teach you about hard work? What did they teach you?" "Are you teaching your children the same things about hard work, or different things?"

All prompts were reviewed for cultural appropriateness and class sensitivity by three Ghanaian researchers with expertise in social stratification prior to data collection. The guide was translated into Twi for use in sessions where participants preferred that language, with back-translation into English during transcription.

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between June and August 2026. Each focus group session lasted between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher with assistance from a trained Ghanaian co-facilitator who also managed language interpretation when participants narrated in Twi. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. A research assistant took detailed field notes capturing non-verbal interactions, group dynamics, and notable moments of consensus or contestation. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with Twi passages translated into English by a bilingual transcriber and reviewed for accuracy by the co-facilitator. Completed transcripts were returned to a purposively selected subset of participants, one from each focus group, for member checking; corrections identified through this process were incorporated into the final transcripts.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. The researcher read all six transcripts multiple times before beginning systematic coding to achieve deep familiarity with the data as a whole. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, attending closely to participants' definitions of hard work, their valuation language, their narratives of personal work experience, their beliefs about fairness, and their accounts of intergenerational transmission. Codes were organized into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set to assess internal coherence, mutual exclusivity, and evidential grounding. Themes were defined and named with attention to capturing both the content of participants' work attitudes and the class-based patterns that distinguished groups. The co-facilitator independently coded a 25% sample of the transcripts, and coding differences were discussed and negotiated to enhance dependability. Negative case analysis was systematically conducted to ensure that participants whose views diverged from majority patterns were incorporated into thematic accounts.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, having been given a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, the audio-recording procedure, and their rights as participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty and that all contributions would be anonymized. Given

the sensitive nature of discussing economic background and family circumstances, the facilitator was trained to create a non-judgmental atmosphere and to allow participants to decline to answer any question. Participants who expressed distress during discussions were offered referrals to counselling resources where available. Transportation reimbursement and refreshments were provided as gestures of respect for participants' time, calibrated to be appropriate for each economic group without being coercive.

8. Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of the six focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture how economic background shapes definitions, valuations, and enactments of hard work among Ghanaians.

8.1 Theme One: "Hard Work Means Surviving" — Lower-Income Definitions of Diligence as Necessity

The first theme concerned how lower-income participants defined hard work. Across both lower-income focus groups, participants defined hard work primarily in terms of physical effort, long hours, persistence in the face of adversity, and willingness to do whatever work is available. Hard work was not a choice or a strategy for advancement but a survival necessity: one works hard because not working hard means not eating, not paying school fees, not providing for one's family.

Ama, a 38-year-old market trader in Accra (FG1), stated:

"For me, hard work means waking up at 4 am to go to the market. It means carrying heavy loads, standing on my feet all day, negotiating with every customer. It means coming home when it is dark, counting small profits, and doing it again tomorrow. It is not something I choose. It is something I must do. If I do not work hard, my children do not eat. That is what hard work means to someone like me."

This definition emphasizes the embodied, exhausting, and relentless character of hard work for lower-income Ghanaians. Hard work is not abstract or strategic; it is the concrete, daily labour required to meet basic needs.

Participants distinguished between "working hard" and "working smart" a distinction that was often described with frustration. Lower-income participants were acutely aware that their hard work was physically demanding but not necessarily strategic or career-advancing. They lacked the resources, connections, and education to work smart; they could only work hard.

Kwame, a 45-year-old informal transport operator in Kumasi (FG2), articulated this frustration:

"People say work smart, not hard. But working smart requires capital. It requires education. It requires knowing the right people. I have none of those. So I work hard. I drive my taxi from 5 am to 10 pm. I take every passenger, no matter how small the fare. That is what I can do. It is not smart. But it is hard. And it keeps my family alive."

Lower-income participants expressed ambivalence about whether hard work leads to advancement. While they believed that hard work was necessary for survival, many expressed skepticism that hard work alone could lift them out of poverty. Structural barriers—lack of capital, lack of connections, discrimination, bad luck—were seen as equally or more important than effort in determining who succeeds.

8.2 Theme Two: "Hard Work Means Getting Ahead" — Middle-Income Definitions of Diligence as Strategy

The second theme concerned how middle-income participants defined hard work. Across both middle-income focus groups, participants defined hard work in terms of strategic effort, skill development, networking, and career planning. Unlike lower-income participants, who defined hard work as survival necessity, middle-income participants defined hard work as advancement strategy: one works hard to get promoted, to earn more, to secure a better future.

Esi, a 42-year-old bank manager in Accra (FG3), stated:

"Hard work for me is not just about hours. It is about what you do with those hours. You can work 12 hours a day doing the same thing and never advance. That is not hard work; that is just being busy. Real hard work is learning new skills, building relationships with the right people, taking on assignments that stretch you, positioning yourself for the next opportunity. It is strategic."

This definition emphasizes intentionality, planning, and the calibration of effort toward specific career goals. Middle-income participants described working hard not merely to survive but to get ahead, to secure their middle-class position, and to provide opportunities for their children.

However, middle-income participants also expressed significant anxiety about downward mobility. Unlike upper-income participants, who had family wealth as a safety net, and unlike lower-income participants, who had nowhere to fall, middle-income participants described themselves as precariously positioned: one missed opportunity, one economic shock, or one period of reduced effort could send them back to lower-income status.

Adwoa, a 48-year-old teacher in Sekondi-Takoradi (FG4), expressed this anxiety:

"My parents were poor. I worked very hard to become a teacher, to buy my small house, to send my children to good schools. But I am not secure. If I lose my job tomorrow, there is no family money to catch me. I would go back to where I started. So I work hard not just to get ahead but to not fall back. That is the difference. The rich can relax. The poor have nothing to lose. We in the middle have everything to lose."

This anxiety shaped middle-income participants' valuation of hard work. They valued diligence not only for what it could achieve but for what it could prevent: the catastrophe of downward mobility.

Middle-income participants were more likely than lower-income participants to believe that hard work pays off, but their belief was conditional. Hard work pays off if combined with the right strategy, the right networks, and a bit of luck. Hard work alone, without strategy, was seen as insufficient—a critique they sometimes directed at lower-income participants, whom they perceived as working hard but not smart.

8.3 Theme Three: "Hard Work Means Giving Back" — Upper-Income Definitions of Diligence as Stewardship

The third theme concerned how upper-income participants defined hard work. Across both upper-income focus groups, participants defined hard work in terms of stewardship, leadership, and social responsibility. Unlike lower-income participants (survival) and middle-income participants (advancement), upper-income participants described hard work as a moral obligation to manage family legacy, lead organizations, contribute to community development, and set an example for others.

Kwaku, a 52-year-old corporate executive in Accra (FG5), stated:

"I work hard because I have been blessed with resources, education, and opportunity. To not work hard would be to waste those blessings. It would be to disappoint my father, who built this business. It would be to fail the people who depend on our company for their livelihoods. Hard work for me is stewardship. It is honouring what came before and building for what comes after."

This definition emphasizes legacy, obligation, and the social dimensions of work. Upper-income participants described work as intrinsically meaningful—not merely a means to income (as for lower-income participants) or a strategy for advancement (as for middle-income participants) but an expression of identity and purpose.

However, upper-income participants also acknowledged that their hard work was less physically demanding and less precarious than hard work in other classes. They worked long hours and faced significant pressure, but they did not risk hunger, homelessness, or

catastrophic downward mobility if they failed. This awareness created a complex mix of guilt, gratitude, and defensiveness.

Abena, a 45-year-old business owner in Kumasi (FG6), acknowledged this class-based difference:

"I will not pretend that my hard work is the same as a market woman's hard work. I sit in an air-conditioned office. I have staff who do the difficult physical work. If my business has a bad month, I have savings. I will not starve. So when I say I work hard, I mean it differently. I mean I work hard at strategy, at leadership, at making good decisions. But I do not want anyone to think I am claiming the same kind of hard work as someone who carries heavy loads on their head all day. That is different. That is harder in a different way."

Upper-income participants expressed strong belief that hard work pays off, but they also acknowledged that their own success was partly due to advantages they did not earn: family connections, inherited wealth, access to quality education. This acknowledgment coexisted uneasily with their belief in meritocracy.

8.4 Theme Four: "Hustle Is What You Do When Nothing Else Works" — The Hustle Imperative Across Economic Backgrounds

The fourth theme concerned how the "hustle" mentality was understood and experienced across economic backgrounds. All participants used the term "hustle," but its meaning and function varied significantly by class.

Lower-income participants described hustle as survival strategy: pursuing multiple income streams simultaneously, taking any opportunity for earnings, working informal jobs alongside formal employment, and persisting despite repeated failure. Hustle was not a choice but a necessity.

Ama, the market trader in Accra (FG1), described her hustle:

"I sell at the market during the day. In the evenings, I cook food to sell to neighbours. On weekends, I braid hair for extra money. That is hustle. It is exhausting. I never rest. But what can I do? One job is not enough. So I hustle. I do not like it. But I do it."

The emotional tone of lower-income participants' descriptions of hustle was weariness, not celebration. Hustle was admired as necessary but not romanticized as empowering.

Middle-income participants described hustle as supplement to formal employment: using skills and networks to generate additional income without jeopardizing primary employment. For middle-income participants, hustle was a strategy for getting ahead, not merely surviving. Esi, the bank manager in Accra (FG3), described:

"I have my banking job. That is my main income. But I also consult for small businesses on weekends. I help them with financial planning. That is my hustle. It gives me extra money for school fees, for investments. It also builds my skills and my network. Hustle for me is not desperation. It is opportunity."

Upper-income participants described hustle as entrepreneurial risk-taking or passion projects rather than survival-driven multiple job-holding. For upper-income participants, hustle was often framed positively, as creativity, initiative, and the entrepreneurial spirit.

Kwaku, the corporate executive in Accra (FG5), stated:

"I started a side business in addition to my corporate job. It is a tech startup. That is my hustle. It is something I am passionate about. If it fails, I will not starve. But I want to build something of my own. That is what hustle means to me."

This class-based variation in the meaning of hustle from survival necessity to career supplement to entrepreneurial passion is a significant finding. The same word describes radically different activities with different risk profiles, different purposes, and different emotional valences.

8.5 Theme Five: "Does Hard Work Pay? It Depends on Who You Are" — Perceived Fairness of Effort-Reward Relationship

The fifth theme concerned participants' beliefs about whether hard work pays off in Ghanaian society. These beliefs varied sharply by economic background, revealing class-based differences in perceived fairness of the effort-reward relationship.

Lower-income participants expressed the highest levels of skepticism. While they believed that hard work was necessary for survival, many expressed doubt that hard work alone could lift them out of poverty. Corruption, nepotism, lack of connections, and bad luck were seen as equally or more important than effort.

Kwame, the transport operator in Kumasi (FG2), expressed this skepticism:

"I work harder than many rich people. I wake earlier. I carry more weight. I take more risk. But at the end of the month, I have nothing. They have everything. So does hard work pay? No. Not for people like me. Hard work keeps you alive. It does not make you rich. For that, you need something else. You need who you know. You need a family name. You need luck. Hard work alone is not enough."

This perception of unfairness was accompanied by frustration and, in some participants, resignation. Lower-income participants described continuing to work hard not because they believed it would advance them but because the alternative (not working) was unthinkable.

Middle-income participants expressed more conditional belief in meritocracy. They believed that hard work usually pays off, but they acknowledged that structural barriers and unfair advantages exist. Their own position having risen from lower-income backgrounds or maintained middle-income status through effort made them invested in believing that hard work matters.

Adwoa, the teacher in Sekondi-Takoradi (FG4), stated:

"I have to believe that hard work pays off, because otherwise my whole life does not make sense. I worked so hard to become a teacher. If that hard work did not matter, then I wasted my life. So I believe it matters. But I also know that some people work just as hard and get nowhere because they do not have the right connections or because someone cheated them. So it is not fair. But I cannot afford to stop believing."

Upper-income participants expressed the strongest belief that hard work pays off, but this belief was tempered by acknowledgment of their own advantages. Some upper-income participants struggled to reconcile their meritocratic beliefs with their awareness of unearned privilege.

Abena, the business owner in Kumasi (FG6), acknowledged this tension:

"I want to say that I succeeded because I worked hard. And I did work hard. But I also had advantages that others did not have. My father paid for my education. He introduced me to his business partners. When I started my company, I had capital from my family. So did hard work matter? Yes. Did it matter as much as my advantages? I honestly do not know. And that question makes me uncomfortable."

This theme reveals that belief in meritocracy is not simply an individual psychological trait but is shaped by class position and the need to maintain a coherent life narrative. Lower-income participants who have worked hard without advancing cannot easily believe that hard work pays off; upper-income participants who have advanced cannot easily believe that it does not.

8.6 Theme Six: "What My Parents Taught Me" — Intergenerational Transmission of Work Attitudes

The sixth theme concerned how work attitudes are transmitted across generations and how economic background shapes the content of this transmission. Across all focus groups, participants described learning about hard work from parents, grandparents, and other elders, but the specific lessons varied systematically by class.

Lower-income participants described parents who modelled relentless hard work, taught that work was dignity, and emphasized survival over advancement. The lesson was: work hard because you must, not because you will be rewarded.

Ama, the market trader in Accra (FG1), described her mother's teaching:

"My mother was a farmer. She worked from sunrise to sunset every day. She never complained. She taught me that a person who does not work is not a real person. Work gives you dignity. Even if you have nothing else, you have your work. She did not promise me that hard work would make me rich. She just said: work. That is what we do."

This transmission of work attitudes as moral obligation rather than advancement strategy was characteristic of lower-income participants.

Middle-income participants described parents who explicitly linked hard work to advancement, taught strategic approaches to effort, and invested in children's education as the primary pathway to upward mobility.

Esi, the bank manager in Accra (FG3), described her father's teaching:

"My father was a civil servant. He always said: education is the key. Work hard in school, get good grades, get a good job. He did not just say it; he sacrificed to send me to good schools, to pay for extra classes. He taught me that hard work in the right places, at the right time, with the right strategy, will pay off. That is what I am teaching my children now."

Upper-income participants described parents who taught work as stewardship, legacy, and social responsibility. The lesson was: you have been given much; therefore, much is expected.

Kwaku, the corporate executive in Accra (FG5), described his father's teaching:

"My father built a successful business. He taught me that wealth is not for enjoying only; it is for stewarding. You work hard because people depend on you: your family, your employees, your community. He taught me that laziness is not just a personal failing; it is a betrayal of those who trust you. That is what I am teaching my children."

Participants in all groups described both continuity and change in intergenerational transmission. Some were teaching their children the same work attitudes they had learned; others were deliberately teaching different attitudes, either because they believed their parents' attitudes were wrong or because changed economic conditions required different approaches.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Key Class-Based Variations.

Theme	Lower-Income	Middle-Income	Upper-Income
Definition of Hard Work	Survival necessity; physical effort; persistence	Advancement strategy; strategic effort; skill development	Stewardship; leadership; social responsibility
Purpose of Hard Work	To meet basic needs; to feed family	To get ahead; to prevent downward mobility	To honour legacy; to give back; to lead
Valuation of Hard Work	Necessary but insufficient for advancement	Conditionally effective; requires strategy and luck	Highly effective; but acknowledged advantages
Hustle Meaning	Survival necessity; multiple income streams; exhausting	Career supplement; networking; strategic side work	Entrepreneurial passion; risk-taking; creativity
Belief in Meritocracy	Skeptical; effort not fairly rewarded	Conditional; invested in belief but aware of barriers	Strong but uncomfortable; aware of unearned privilege
Intergenerational Lesson	Work is dignity; work because you must	Work in right places; strategy matters	Work as stewardship; much expected from much given

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored how individuals from different economic backgrounds—lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income—in Ghana define, value, and enact hard work. Six themes emerged: hard work as survival necessity among lower-income participants; hard work as career advancement strategy among middle-income participants; hard work as stewardship and legacy among upper-income participants; class-based variation in the meaning and experience of hustle; class-based variation in perceived fairness of the effort-reward relationship; and class-based variation in intergenerational transmission of work attitudes.

The findings demonstrate that economic background profoundly shapes not only material resources but also the cultural frameworks through which individuals understand work, effort, and success. These class-based differences are not merely differences in opinion; they are differences in lived experience, in what hard work actually requires of the body and mind, in what hard work can realistically achieve given structural constraints, and in what purposes hard work serves in a meaningful life.

Class-Based Social Construction of Hard Work

The finding that hard work means fundamentally different things to individuals from different economic backgrounds is consistent with Social Constructionism's premise that social realities are constructed in specific social locations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Lower-income participants' definition of hard work as survival necessity reflects their experience of scarcity: when basic needs are not guaranteed, effort is organized around meeting those needs. Middle-income participants' definition of hard work as advancement strategy reflects their experience of precarious security: they have enough to lose, so effort is organized around protecting and improving position. Upper-income participants' definition of hard work as stewardship reflects their experience of abundance: basic needs are met, security is assured, so effort can be oriented toward legacy, purpose, and social contribution.

These class-based definitions are not equally valued in Ghanaian public discourse. The middle-class definition of hard work as strategic advancement is often treated as the "correct" definition, with lower-income hard work dismissed as mere busyness and upper-income hard work dismissed as not really hard. This study's findings challenge such dismissals by showing that each class's definition emerges rationally from its structural position. Lower-income Ghanaians who work 16-hour days at physically demanding jobs are working hard by any reasonable standard; the fact that their effort is not strategic does not make it less legitimate. Upper-income Ghanaians who work strategically and steward resources are working hard in ways that reflect their different constraints and opportunities.

The Hustle Imperative as Classed Phenomenon

The finding that hustle means different things across classes is theoretically significant. Lower-income participants described hustle as exhausting survival necessity—a finding that complicates celebratory discourses of hustle as empowering (Thieme, 2018). When hustle is the only option, not a choice, it is experienced as burden, not liberation. Middle-income participants described hustle as strategic supplement, reflecting their ability to leverage formal employment skills into additional income. Upper-income participants described hustle as entrepreneurial passion, reflecting their safety net that allows risk-taking. The same word masks radically different activities, risk profiles, and emotional experiences.

This finding has implications for policy and organizational practice. Programmes that celebrate hustle without attending to class-based differences may inadvertently romanticize the survival-driven multiple job-holding of lower-income Ghanaians while ignoring its physical and psychological costs. Organizations seeking to support employee well-being

should recognize that hustle may be a symptom of inadequate primary income, not a sign of commendable initiative.

Meritocratic Beliefs as Class- Positioned

The finding that belief in meritocracy varies by class, with upper-income participants expressing the strongest belief and lower-income participants expressing the weakest, is consistent with some but not all international research. In some contexts, lower-income individuals express stronger meritocratic beliefs as system justification (Jost et al., 2004); in others, they express weaker beliefs as realistic assessment of barriers (Mijs, 2016). The Ghanaian pattern lower skepticism, upper confidence suggests that Ghana's high inequality and low mobility may have produced a realistic awareness among lower-income Ghanaians that hard work alone is insufficient, while upper-income Ghanaians maintain (though uncomfortably) belief in a system that has rewarded them.

The ambivalence expressed by middle-income participants invested in believing that hard work pays off because their own life narrative depends on it, but aware of barriers and unfairness is particularly significant. This ambivalence may be a source of psychological strain: the need to believe in meritocracy conflicts with observed reality. Organizations should be attentive to this strain, as middle-income employees may experience moral distress when they perceive that their hard work is not fairly recognized or rewarded.

Intergenerational Transmission and the Reproduction of Class

The finding that work attitudes are transmitted across generations in class-specific ways contributes to understanding of how inequality reproduces itself. Lower-income parents teach children that work is dignity and necessity, not necessarily advancement—a lesson that produces resilient workers but may not produce the strategic orientation needed to navigate middle-class institutions. Middle-income parents teach children that strategic effort in the right places pays off a lesson that produces advantage in school and formal employment. Upper-income parents teach children that work is stewardship and legacy—a lesson that produces confidence, comfort with leadership, and orientation to long-term impact (Lareau, 2011).

These different transmissions are not simply differences in "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) but differences in what work is for. For lower-income families, work is about survival and dignity; for middle-income families, work is about advancement and security; for upper-income families, work is about meaning and legacy. Each orientation is adaptive to the

family's structural position, but each also reproduces that position by shaping children's aspirations, strategies, and expectations.

The finding that some participants deliberately taught their children different work attitudes than they learned suggests that intergenerational transmission is not deterministic. Individuals can and do change the work attitudes they pass on, either because they reject their parents' orientation or because changed economic conditions require different approaches. This finding offers hope for interventions that aim to interrupt class-based reproduction by changing work-relevant socialization.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. Retrospective accounts of childhood economic circumstances and parental work attitudes may be influenced by recall bias and current class position. The focus group methodology, while generative of class-based shared understandings, may have suppressed dissenting voices within groups. The urban sample (Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi) means findings may not represent rural Ghanaians, whose economic structures and work contexts differ significantly. Categorizing participants into three economic background categories required simplification; the complexity of class trajectories (upwardly mobile, downwardly mobile) was not fully captured. The cross-sectional design captures work attitudes at one point in time; longitudinal research could trace how class-based work attitudes evolve as individuals' economic circumstances change.

Future Research

Future research should address these limitations by: (a) conducting longitudinal research following individuals as their economic circumstances change to examine how work attitudes shift with class mobility; (b) examining work attitudes in rural Ghanaian contexts, where agricultural work and different class structures may produce different patterns; (c) including participants with complex class trajectories (e.g., upwardly mobile individuals who now identify as middle- or upper-income but were socialized in lower-income families) to examine how early socialization interacts with current class position; (d) conducting quantitative research to assess the prevalence of the class-based patterns identified qualitatively; and (e) developing and testing interventions that interrupt negative class-based stereotypes about work ethic while building on the legitimate strengths of each class's work orientation.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored how economic background shapes definitions, valuations, and enactments of hard work among Ghanaians across lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income groups. Through six focus groups with 41 participants, six themes emerged: hard work as survival necessity (lower-income); hard work as advancement strategy (middle-income); hard work as stewardship and legacy (upper-income); class-based variation in the meaning of hustle; class-based variation in perceived fairness of effort-reward relationship; and class-based variation in intergenerational transmission of work attitudes.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that hard work is not a single, universal value with the same meaning for all Ghanaians. Hard work means different things, serves different purposes, and relates differently to success depending on one's economic background. Lower-income Ghanaians work hard to survive; middle-income Ghanaians work hard to advance; upper-income Ghanaians work hard to steward. These are not different levels of the same thing; they are different things entirely. Policy discourse, organizational practice, and public conversation that treat hard work as a single virtue risk misunderstanding and devaluing the legitimate work attitudes of those who do not share the speaker's class position.

The tension between the cultural ideal of hard work and the structural reality of class-based inequality lies at the heart of Ghanaian work attitudes. Lower-income participants work hard but doubt it will pay off; middle-income participants work strategically but fear falling back; upper-income participants work meaningfully but carry guilt about unearned advantage. These tensions are not pathologies but rational responses to an economy that rewards effort unevenly. Addressing Ghana's productivity challenges and inequality requires not exhorting anyone to work harder—most Ghanaians already work very hard—but restructuring the relationship between effort and reward so that hard work more reliably produces well-being, security, and dignity for all.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For Poverty Reduction and Social Protection Policy: Recognize that lower-income Ghanaians already work extremely hard; the problem is not insufficient effort but insufficient reward for effort. Policies that assume laziness is the cause of poverty are misinformed and likely to be ineffective. Instead of work requirements that add to already burdensome labour, policies should focus on raising the floor: minimum wage enforcement, social protection

programmes that reduce precarity, and investments in public goods (health, education, infrastructure) that reduce the costs of survival. Acknowledge that hustle is often a symptom of inadequate primary income, not a sign of commendable initiative; policies that celebrate hustle without addressing its causes may perpetuate exploitation.

For Educational Institutions and Curriculum Design: Educators should recognize that students from different economic backgrounds bring different definitions of hard work and different work-relevant skills. Curriculum that assumes one "correct" orientation to effort (typically the middle-class strategic orientation) may disadvantage students socialized into survival-oriented or stewardship-oriented work attitudes. Rather than imposing a single model, educators should teach students to recognize and value different forms of diligence while also equipping all students with strategic skills. Schools should explicitly teach students from lower-income backgrounds that their survival-oriented hard work is legitimate and valuable, while also providing access to the strategic knowledge that middle-class students often learn at home.

For Organizations and Human Resource Management: Organizations should recognize that employees from different economic backgrounds may have different definitions of hard work, different motivations for diligence, and different beliefs about whether effort will be rewarded. Performance management systems should be transparent and consistent, reducing the uncertainty that exacerbates lower- and middle-income employees' anxiety about fairness. Organizations should provide mentoring and sponsorship programmes that specifically support employees from lower-income backgrounds, recognizing that these employees may lack the strategic networks and institutional knowledge that middle- and upper-income employees take for granted. Leaders should examine their own class-based assumptions about what "good work ethic" looks like, ensuring that they are not favouring employees whose work style mirrors their own class background.

For Intergenerational Programmes and Family Support: Programmes that aim to interrupt intergenerational poverty should attend to the transmission of work attitudes. Parents from lower-income backgrounds teach their children valuable lessons about persistence, dignity, and survival; these lessons should be honoured, not replaced. However, children from lower-income backgrounds may benefit from supplementary exposure to strategic work orientations that their parents may not be able to teach. Community-based programmes that provide mentoring, career exploration, and exposure to diverse work

contexts can expand children's understanding of what hard work can achieve without denigrating their family's work values.

For Public Discourse and Media: Media representations of work and success should resist the temptation to celebrate individual hustle while ignoring structural barriers. Stories of upward mobility should acknowledge the role of luck, connections, and structural advantage alongside individual effort. Negative stereotypes about lower-income Ghanaians being lazy should be actively challenged; the evidence from this study and lived experience is that lower-income Ghanaians work extremely hard, often harder than those who stereotype them. Class-based condescension—the assumption that one's own class's definition of hard work is the "real" definition—should be recognized as prejudice.

For Future Research: Conduct longitudinal research tracking how work attitudes change as individuals experience upward or downward mobility. Examine work attitudes in rural Ghanaian contexts, which may differ significantly from urban patterns. Develop culturally grounded quantitative measures of class-based work attitudes for use in larger-scale studies. Investigate the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce class-based bias in hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation. Study how intersectionality (class with gender, ethnicity, region, age) shapes work attitudes in complex ways not captured by class-alone analysis.

For All Ghanaians: The most important recommendation from this study is simple and difficult: stop assuming that people from other economic backgrounds define hard work the way you do. The market trader working 16 hours is not failing to work smart; she is working hard in the only way her circumstances allow. The corporate executive working strategically is not avoiding real work; he is stewarding resources and leading people. The teacher working to prevent downward mobility is not anxious without reason; she has genuine cause for concern. Hard work is not one thing. It is many things. Recognizing the legitimate diversity of work attitudes across Ghana's class spectrum is the first step toward building a society where all forms of diligence are valued and fairly rewarded.

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