

Street Children: Experiences from the Streets of Accra

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Abstract

The phenomenon of street children is a growing concern in many developing states, particularly in Africa. Ghana is no exception to the general trend of children fending for themselves on the streets. However, very little is known about this unique population in Ghana. This study provides a general overview of the phenomenon of street children in Ghana. This article particularly examines the experiences of street children in Ghana, how they ended up in the streets, how they survive in the streets, and abuses they suffer from being in the streets. This is a qualitative study, which uses interviewing as the primary data collection tool. The data is analyzed by using a phenomenological frame work, where the final result is a description of the phenomenon, as seen through the eyes of people who have experienced it firsthand.

Introduction

The problem of street children is a worldwide phenomenon. Many capitals and urban centers of the world have become a haven of survival for many children in distress. For instance, LeRoux & Smith (1998) indicate that;

The street children phenomenon is an alarming and escalating worldwide problem. Street children are maltreated, imprisoned, and in some countries killed . . . The phenomenon of street children, and offspring of the modern urban environment, represents one of humanity's most complex and serious challenges (p. xx).

The LeRoux & Smith's findings point to a problematic phenomenon that is emerging and threatening the very fabric of our societal advancement. The problems facing the 21st century child is further embodied in the recent report of *The State of the World's Children 2005*, from the United Nations, "Childhood Under Threat, "that more than 1 billion children are denied a healthy and protected upbringing as promised by 1989's Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2005). This coupled with the growing disparity in incomes between the rural and the urban, and unequal development between the industrialized north and the developing south further exacerbates the already difficult circumstances of deprived children.

The situation of children in Africa in the 21st century presents a challenge to all stakeholders in the society. Mwansa, Mufune & Osei-Hwedie (1994) maintain that the street children phenomenon has become one of the biggest problems of social welfare in most African countries. The condition of children living and working on the streets of most urban areas in Africa has assumed problematic dimensions because many people are beginning to identify with the situation as needing an urgent and pragmatic attention. Unfortunately, the realization of the problematic nature of the street children phenomenon has not corresponded with an aggressive response from governments to deal with the problem. Epstein (1996) asserts that the inaction of governments of developing states is as a result of many factors. Among other things, he posits that;

subject to influences of several external economic dependency and/or internal civil strife, most of the institutional apparatus that have been created in support of the state

are immature or incomplete and are unable to fulfill the mandates that would offer the promise of broad social and political inclusivity (p. 296).

The social and political accountability of most African societies to these children is non-existent and to a large extent not challenged either by internal or external elements. The plight of these children is thus left in their own hands or on some few Non Governmental Organization(s) (NGOs) who are limited by their function and resources to deal effectively with the situation.

The escalating proportions of children surviving on the urban streets in Africa (see Mwansa, Mufune, & Osei-Hwedie, 1994) and other developing states including Ghana should prompt an engagement among the various stakeholders in the society to begin to open up a dialogue on the concept of the child in Africa.

The African child does not only have limited access to basic resources, but in many instances has been denied the right to childhood. Stephens (1995) contends that the dominion of childhood has been threatened, invaded and polluted by adults. Stephens further asserts that children in many instances are perceived as miniature adults and not as biologically immature human beings. Children are thus entrapped in a quagmire of social, political and cultural misunderstandings. Scheper-Hughes & Sargent (1998) assert that children "exist in a social liminal realm, vilified as dangerous and antisocial dwarves-enemies of families and civilized society" (p.26).

In Ghana, it is a common feature to see children ranging between the ages of 10 -15 years roaming the street and engaging in menial jobs for their survival. It is estimated that there are about 20,000 street children in the capital, Accra, alone (Beauchemin, 1999). Although the figures could be higher, lack of statistical data make their estimate speculative. But their visibility on the streets signals the enormity of the problem. The street children phenomenon in Ghana has become problematic because of the multiple factors of causality. Among them are rural urban income disparities, rapid urbanization, breakdown of the extended family system, single parenthood, and physical and sexual abuse (Beauchemin, 1999).

The problem of street children in Ghana demonstrates the inability of the government and policy makers to comprehend the gravity of the situation. This is manifested by lack of official head count of the street children in Ghana. It is even more precarious a situation because very little is known about these children. This study provides an opportunity to begin to understand this peculiar segment of the society and also serves as a foundation to initiate a dialogue on what should be done to ameliorate the phenomenon.

This is a qualitative study in which 11 street children from Accra, Ghana were interviewed over a period of about three months. This study was to understand the holistic nature of the phenomenon, including the causes, how the phenomenon is defined by the children, how the children are treated and their experiences as street children. Methods used in analyzing the data included categorization and interpretation of the data in terms of common themes and using analytic coding and noting. The final result is a description of the phenomenon, as seen through the eyes of the people who have experienced it firsthand. To protect the identities of my children participants I replaced their real names with synonyms.

Who are Street Children?

The definition of street children is varied. The definition given by Inter-Non Governmental Organizations (Inter-NGOs) as "those for whom the street more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults" (Ennew, 1994, p.15). This definition is considered simplistic. Panter-Brick, (2004) argues that there should be a shift in the paradigm of analysis on the street child from the street as the primary focus to the children and their experience and views. Thus street children are not viewed in isolation from other children living in abject poverty in the urban areas. In this study however, all children under between the ages of 9-18 years who spend the bulk of their time on the streets (ie. Either working all day on the

streets and returning home or sleeping on the streets) without a responsible adult supervision and are not enrolled in any educational training or program will be considered as a street child. A child participant from the study defined street children as “Children who have been neglected by their family, and have to struggle everyday to find food to eat” (participant). For many of the children in the study, street children were children of the street.

Experiences of Street Children from Accra

Street children have some of the horrific experiences, and one can only understand their circumstances by appreciating their experiences. While the immediate circumstances of all street children can not be addressed to anyone’s satisfaction, their experiences when reported may ignite the appropriate responses from various stakeholders. The question was how did you get to Accra?

AB who is a 15 year old boy from the Ashanti region of Ghana intimated that;

I used to live with my mother. When my mother and father divorced, the case was taken to the social welfare office and it was agreed that I should stay with my mother and my father was supposed to give my mother ₵200,000 towards my upkeep.⁷⁷ One day while in school my father sent ₵40,000 through one of my siblings to be given to me. He indicated that I was supposed to give it to my mother since he was traveling. At that time, I was hungry so I used some of the money to buy food and I was left with ₵25,000. I took the rest of the money to my mother and she was not pleased that I had spent the money. She then decided that if I’ve used money that was for my upkeep, then she cannot cater or look after me anymore. Because I had no where else to go, I went to my father and he told me that Social Welfare had ordered that I should not come to his house or else I would be arrested. My father’s wife used to drive me away whenever I went to the house. I had nobody to turn to so I stole my mother’s twenty thousand cedis and I came to Accra. I went to the main transport station in Kumasi central, and boarded a bus to Accra. I alighted at Circle around 5pm, and started roaming the streets (AB).

He continued with his first experience in the streets of Accra.

When I got here, it was in the evening so I walked to the station near the Mosque. I saw a church building and I slept there because other people were sleeping there. In the morning I met a boy from a nearby town who said he was a porter and that if I was strong enough to carry stuff, I will have money to buy food. He gave me a customer and the woman I carried the stuff for gave me ₵3,000 and I used that to buy food (AB).

Bansa a 14 year old boy from the Central Region of Ghana claimed that;

After my parent (mother) refused to take me back to school, my mother left leaving me with my grandmother. We had to go to the farm every day, and we had very little food to eat. I did not enjoy living in my village, so I went to Mankessim, which is a five hour walk from my village. After carrying goods at the market for a couple of days, I saved some money to board a bus to Accra, with my friend. We alighted at the Kaneshie market⁷⁸ in the afternoon, and met some boys who showed us where we could find work (Bansa).

The highlight of my field work was when I met a child I knew from my days as an undergraduate at the University of Ghana. I knew Michael P. when I was doing my field work at Catholic Action for street children (CAS) in 1998. He had just come to Accra from Saltpond in the Central Region of Ghana. Almost 7 years later, Michael P. was still on the streets, with a lot of experience, and commanded a lot of respect from his peers. At the age of 16 years Michael P. physically looked like a 10 year old boy. He stated that;

I took my father’s money and picked up a car. First I made up my mind to go and see my mother. I picked up a vehicle which costs ₵9000..... I met a boy at Kaneshie and we

⁷⁷ Ghanaian currency is called Cedi. 1 American dollar is equivalent to 9000 cedis.

⁷⁸ Kaneshie Market is a one of the busiest marketing centers in Accra. It is home to a huge market (flee market), and a major transport hop.

started to move together. He stole tins of milk from the sellers we passed by on our way. He in turn went to sell them. His lifestyle was too risky for me, so I started working for a woman at the market who sold food. I will wash her dishes, fetch her water, and she in turn would give me food, and some money. Anytime that I was sick, she would buy me medicine. She is the only nice person I have known. (Michael P.)

The experiences of every individual child are very different and unique in their own perspective. But they also share very similar characteristics. Aba is a female aged 15 years. She came to Accra at the age of 13 from the Western Region of Ghana, a place called Sefwi. According to Aba, The first time I came to Accra was with my mother's sister. She used to come and sell goods in Accra. We went back after four days. A couple of weeks later I decided to come back, this time on my own. Since I did not like school, and I did not want to stay in my village, I decided to move to Accra. I sold oranges at the local market to get some money for my lorry fare to Accra. I first boarded a transport from Sefwi to Takoradi, and boarded one from Takoradi to Accra. I alighted at Kaneshie in the evening and roamed the market to find a place to sleep (Aba).

The story of my next participant was also very intriguing. Musah was in fact staying on the streets of Accra with his father. His father had been a janitor at the Ministries, which refers to the area of the capital, which houses all the government offices. His father was incapacitated, and as a casual worker (temporary employee) did not have any benefits or retirement. They lost their housing and ended up sleeping outside the offices at the Ministries. According to Musah "We were (him and the father) sleeping on the corridors outside the offices in the Ministries.....because my father had worked there for several years, the watchmen (security) allowed us to sleep on the corridors." He further asserted that although their sleeping place was secured "When it was raining, we had to stand till it stopped, and waited for the floor to dry before sleeping again" But there were other problems he encountered sleeping on the streets. Musah claimed that;

During the harmattan season (period between November and March) it was so cold and the cloth I used to cover my self was not big enough to cover my whole body, this made me feel very cold at night. Also we were fair game for mosquitoes. Because of the many open drains around the area, there are so many mosquitoes, they really "fed on us" (Musah).

The daily experiences of my respondents in many ways were very similar. All of these children were living lives of extreme deprivation, but also in many respects every one of my participants had their own unique twist to their experiences, and I try to capture some of these experiences in their own words.

The daily experiences of the children defy every reasonable definition of a child. All the children in my study had gone through some traumatic experiences, which in many cases, are epitomized by abuse, be it physical, emotional or sexual. For these children negotiating the complexities of the hostile urban streets is an art of survival, and sheer guts.

KN is a 13 year of boy from a village in the Central Region of Ghana called Krofo. At the time I met him, he had only been in Accra for five months, and there was no immediate indication that he was going back to his village. Although Accra was very strange and chaotic for a rural child, the prospects outweighed the risk associated with living on the streets. KN maintained that;

I was at village and a friend of mine was coming to Accra, so I told him to bring me along and he agreed. A little while after we got to Accra, our money got exhausted, so we went begging. That day I got ₵5,000. It was then I realized there was money to be made here, so I decided not to go back (KN).

But how was his living condition in the streets of Accra? According to KN

"I sleep anywhere I get. If I get a cardboard I just spread it out and sleep on it".

There is a popular place that many of the children I came into contact with were sleeping at night. Kaneshie is a major market and transportation center in Accra with bustling business. This

provides an attractive conduit for the children to earn their daily living by working as porters at the market. At night, this same place becomes a lodging place for the children. It is very convenient because they wake up in the early hours of the morning and start working right there. The most popular of their sleeping places is under the “overhead bridge”. The “overhead bridge” is a foot bridge across a major thoroughfare in Kaneshie. Beneath the bridge is where you will find many of the children sleeping at night. But the place is also a den for thieves and urban scavengers. And for new entrants like KN, the “overhead” could be a lion’s den for him. When I asked KN why he did not sleep at the “overhead”, he said;

When you sleep there (Overhead) the older guys come with blades (razors) to cut your dress and strip you naked and steal your money so I hardly sleep there....if someone attacks me, Ah! there is no one to report to.... I used to sleep under the overhead but because of stealing and extortion there, I now sleep at the cold store ⁷⁹ ((KN).

There is no safe place for children in the streets of Accra. As long as they sleep in the streets they are prone to abuse. Truly no one knows the extent of abuse these children are subjected to on the streets. This is mainly due to the fact that they never report these crimes for fear of further retributions. According to KN “at dawn people come to search your pockets, if they did not find any money they beat you up. They stop when you cry and plead with them. But if you don’t cry they will not stop beating you”.

The situation of girls in the streets is even more precarious. Apart from the general hardships of surviving on the streets, many of the girls endure the most gruesome sexual attacks on the streets. Because of the sensitive nature of their experiences, with respect to sexual abuse and rape, they do not talk about it openly. Also there is a lot of stigma amongst the children especially the girls if you were a victim of rape. A victimized girl street child is perceived by her peers as weak, and that her assault was her own doing. Abi a 15 year old girl claimed that;

Sometimes the boys strip you naked when you are sleeping and rape you. Some of the girls agree to sleep with them and others don’t, so they wait till you are fast asleep. They come between 1 and 2 a.m. to strip you naked and do whatever they want to do to you (Abi).

Abi has been in the streets for the past 1½ years, and has no immediate plans to go back home, despite the harsh realities of her daily existence on the streets. Another girl participant was 18 years old Sedi, who also had 9 months old baby girl. She was the only one who would not allow me to audio record our interview.

Her reason was that, she did not want her voice to be anywhere she could not be. She was very untrusting, and had a hard time talking about her experiences. Among my participants, Sedi was the one with the longest experience on the streets. She had been on the streets for about 4 ½ years, and actually this was her second child. The first child died before the age of one. But she provided valuable insights into the difficulty of being a street child, as well as a girl. On how girls were treated at night on the streets, she claimed on the verge of tears that sometimes the boys invited girls to share a drink with them. After getting the girls intoxicated the boys will take them to an isolated place and rape them. She also mentioned that sometimes people just came and “pounced” on them while they slept.

The perspectives of the girls and boys on the issue of sexual abuse were interesting, and I want to share some of the sentiments of the participants, which also opens a window to the grim experiences of these children in the streets. According to BJ, who had 3 years of experience on the streets of Accra, many of the girls bring these problems upon themselves. He left home at the age of 12 years, and has been surviving on his own. He is well traveled, including aiding a blind man on a trip to Nigeria to beg on the streets of Lagos. He asserted that;

I suppose since you came around, you have heard people using the phrase, ‘I have collected your John’?...Ok, sometimes, the girls collect money from the boys to have sex with them, they then runaway that is the girls, without performing their part of the

⁷⁹ A refrigerated warehouse for frozen fish and meat located around the Kaneshie Market.

deal. That is when they use the phrase, 'I have collected your John'. There are prostitutes there you can pay to have sex with. As for some of the girls, the guys come to ask them to be their girlfriends. In that sense you can't harass them if you give them money and they refuse you sex (BJ).

This is not in anyway justifying the traumatic experiences of girls on the street. The atrocities against these children are not justifiable under any condition. However the contentions by the boys go to portray how girls in the streets are perceived as sexual objects. This perception increases the vulnerability of the girls, which makes them easy targets for sexual aggression. In fact the experiences of street girls in relation to sexual abuse on the streets are not peculiar to the Ghanaian situation. For instance Kilbride, Suda, & Njeru (2000) asserted that "perhaps the most threatening to girls is a fear of rape by street boys that is frequently realized in practice" (p.123). It is also reported by Suda (1997) in a study of street children in Kenya that;

the most common forms of abuse experienced by street children during the course of their work include harassment by the police and other law enforcement agencies, rape by some night watchmen, rape by street boys, commercial sexual exploitation, lack of food....and lack of sympathy or contempt from the public(p.231).

The insecurities experienced by the children on the streets prompt many of the children to arrange for their own protections on the streets. For the girls their best protection is to be in a relationship with a strong boy. The boys on the other hand have to bond together to avoid harassment, or sometimes pay for some older person to protect them. According to Sedi;

If you have a boyfriend, it is much safer, because he will protect you from other boys. You sleep with him at night, and during the day, when he makes money, he gives you some. The girls who do not have boyfriends or anybody to protect them are those who get raped and beaten for sex at night. I have a boyfriend, he is the father of my child, and he gives me money everyday (Sedi).

Because the children are highly sexually active, many of the girls I came into contact with were already mothers. Of all three girls that I interviewed two of them were mothers before the age of 16. I also witnessed at CAS that many of the girls were carrying babies. For the period of my stay at CAS I observed about ten girls with babies, and all of them were either 18 years or below. The trade off for security for the girls is to be in relationships, and that unfortunately is producing a second generation of street toddlers.

The younger boys rely on the older ones for their protection on the street. Baba, a 9 year old boy was protected by AB during the day. Baba the youngest of my participants, and he had been on the street for just over a month. He ended up on the street when his mother was evicted from her rental house for delinquency in a suburb of Accra. He was sent to his father in a village in the Volta Region of Ghana. After staying for a couple of days, he ran back to Accra, only this time not to the comfort of a nesting house, but to the chaos of the street. At the time I met him, he looked unkempt with wounds all over his body. He claimed it was as a result of mosquito bites. Baba stated that;

I sleep at the Cold Store with AB, and sometimes the older boys will come and take money from us. Sometime we have to pay them before we can get a place to sleep. If you do not pay, they will take your sleeping box from you, and there will be no place to sleep. When the older boys come we all get scared (Baba).

The children also reported how certain individuals (adults), were taking advantage of their situations. Some of these individuals collected monies from the children under the guise of providing security or providing some "services" for the children. BJ for instance referring to the activities of these adults said;

They collect ₵1000 from the blind persons who beg around here (where they sleep). They also collect from the little kids.... There is this man we call Van Damm, when he comes around he collects thousand cedis from all the beggars and street kids regardless of your age and sex. Van Damme has cloths that have been sewn into tents. He ties the

tents to the walls and sells the space for people who want to have sex. No one sees you when you are in the tent (BJ).

The lives of these children have exposed them to all the possible ills in the society. They talk about drug use, prostitution and pick pocketing and other activities, which borders on criminality. However, none of the children I interviewed ever owned up to any of the activities I have mentioned above. When I talked to the girls separately, they alluded to the fact that some of the boys engaged in illegal activities including male prostitution, drug use etc. I must emphasize that these were mere allegations, and all the boys that I interviewed denied ever engaging in such activities. There is however evidence from other studies that seem to confirm the allegations of drug use among street children. For example, in a study conducted by Kilbride et.al (2000), in Kenya, many of the children were abusing some form of a drug. Common among the children in Kenya was glue sniffing. In Ghana, many of the younger boys although denied ever using drugs, they alleged that the older boys usually used drugs, and common among these children was “wee” marijuana.

The boys also intimated that many of the girls engaged in prostitution. According to BJ; If you want to know where the girls get their money to do their hair and buy all the nice cloths, just go to Circle or the CMB⁸⁰ at night, and I bet you will see many of them working as prostitutes. I have seen many of them, and they are aware I know what they do (BJ).

I must emphasize that the trading of allegations along gender lines is very common among the children I interviewed. This may be due to the general relationship between the genders. The boys normally did not play with the girls, unless they were romantically involved. In spite of this trend, the underlying difficulties characterizing the lives of these children were very evident. Many of these children engage in odd jobs to maintain themselves. For Abi, my 15 year old girl participant, making enough money to cater for her daily expenses on the street was not only physically challenging, but it also posed some health risks. She worked in a chop bar (a road side eating place, where local dishes are served), but she endured some hardships. She claimed that, “I work at a chop bar but the sun shines hard on your head when you go outside. I have this sickness which occurs every time I am exposed to harsh sunshine my nose starts to bleed” (Abi).

For Michael P. a typical day involves waking up in the morning, and scrambling to find someone’s goods to carry around the market. He maintained that;

Sometimes we have to fight to get some loads to carry. The bigger boys will be pushing us off the buses that bring the goods, and sometimes the market women refuse to let us carry their loads because they claim we are too small to carry the load. On a bad day, I will make no money, and that means no food. I sometimes go to bed with no food and I cry (Michael P.)

The life stories of these children on the streets of Accra underscores an important fact, and that is the neglect of a section of population, children, who do not have the requisite capacity to function in a chaotic and adult environment. These are children, but they have already experienced some of the difficult circumstances of lives. AB is 15 years old, and has been living on the streets of Accra for the past 6 months. As a relatively newcomer, his only social networking system on the streets are some benevolent individuals. He came to Accra after his parents divorced and no one was prepared to cater for his school or provide for his basic needs, including providing for adequate food and shelter. He joined a friend of his, who was much older and had moved to Accra. His friend paid for his lorry fare, and set him up at Circle. On a typical day AB said;

If I don’t start early and I wait till 5.00 p.m., I will not get anything to carry because there’s no brisk business in the evening. Some customers believe that the porters can run away with their goods because it’s dark. This has happened to me before (AB).

He continued that on some days;

⁸⁰ Circle is a poplar intersection downtown Accra. CMB is referred to the area around the Cocoa Market Board headquarters, which is in the central business district of Accra

I had no money so I had to go to bed with an empty stomach. In the middle of the night, I had hunger pangs and I had to go to a porridge (cereal) seller to beg for some. She had mercy on me and gave me a little to eat. I then went back to sleep (AB).

AB further maintained that;

Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm not. The reason why I'm not happy all the time is that around here I sleep alone so when I remember my siblings back in Juaso, I cry. I'm happy sometimes because I get to buy whatever I want (AB).

Many of these children have been deprived of their childhoods, and the skills available to them are those learned from the harsh realities of the streets. Their stories are not only compelling, but it gives them a voice, which has been buried from the major discourse of social and human development (see Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998)

Conclusion

Street children in Ghana have formed some complex relationships to ensure their survival on the streets. For instance, they slept in groups and the more experienced children served as resource persons for newcomers. They also sometimes paid older people to protect them from other street scavengers. Additionally, the research also found abuse against street children by other street children and urban scavengers to be wide spread. Particularly interesting was the circumstances of the street girls. While the boys protected themselves by engaging in groups, the trade off for security for the girls is to be in sexual relationships with boys who could protect them. This unfortunately is producing a second generation of street toddlers. Many of the street girls I encountered were mothers, and they were staying on the streets with their babies. There were also reports of drug use among some of the children.

This study has provided a picture of some sort of this unique population and the phenomenon of street children. The next challenge will be what the society needs do to ensure that this form of social and moral travesty is either eliminated or reduced to its barest minimum.

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