

## Surviving in the Streets; the Story of a Street Girl from Ghana

**Agya Boakye-Boaten, Ph. D**

Director of Africana Studies Program & Assistant Professor  
University of North Carolina at Asheville

### Abstract

*Street children have become a permanent feature of the most urban landscapes in many developing nations. They are hard to miss, since the realities of existence fall within the realms of our daily consciousness, either by reading about in the newspaper or seeing them in some of the most uncomplimentary manner on the televisions or the internet. Yet the plights of these children continue to deteriorate in many developing countries, where resources are woefully inadequate to deal with the situation. Many published accounts of street children see them in aggregate terms, thus readers are not able to develop a more personal and a heightened sense of empathy for these children. Thus paper provides an individualized account of a street girl, from birth to the day she enters the streets. In a form of a narrative, the street girl opens up the life that in most cases are shielded from field researchers. She opens up about abuses street girls face, and the mechanism they employed to protect themselves. Data was collected through interviews and field observations, and the author tries to capture the incredible story of the girl through the words of the girl. Hopefully such direct contacts between street children and reader would ignite a stronger advocacy on behalf of these children.*

**Key Words:** Street children, Family System, Child Abuse, Social Institutions, Child Neglect, Street Life

### Introduction

A common feature in many urban areas in Ghana is an army of young children scrambling to maintaining a presence in the urban landscape. Many of these children at school going age have been abandoned by their families or in some cases the children have abandoned their families. But irrespective of who abandoned who, these children definitely do not deserve their lives circumstances of destitution, squalor, disease, abuse and societal neglect. My primary objective is to understand the phenomenon of street children, to be a better advocate, one who can articulate the needs and concerns of these children with respect to the formulation of policies that will truly be beneficial to the afflicted children. It is for this reason why I want to understand from standpoint of the children, especially street girls, their experiences in the streets. A common feature among street girls in Accra, the capital of Ghana that I have observed is the motherly roles they have assumed by having babies. Albeit there is no reliable data on second generation street children, that is children bore by street children, from an observational point of view and their sheer numbers, it is becoming an alarming issue.

The immediate concern about this population of street children involves the health of the babies and their mothers, and the potential disease that many of these mothers and children are exposed to. But that is a conversation for another time, although it remains a major concern of mine. This paper is a case study of a street girl in Accra. In a form of a narrative, the paper examines among others the journey of a street girl from her origins in a rural area to her eventual destination on the streets of the capital city, her coping capabilities, and the dynamics of poverty and failure of the family system. The paper journeys through the intricate structural inadequacies, including lack of family system, lack of social safety nets, which largely assumed a catalyst role in eventually determining the potential destination for this street girl. This paper is primarily about one street girl who led me into some of her encounters with the streets and her extraordinary tales of survival.

### Methodology

The method of data collection was interviews and observations. Initially, I interviewed 3 young girls and observed them for two months. However, I decided to do a case study on one of the three because of her unimaginable circumstances, and her willingness to let me have some access to some of her most guarded dark hours. I met the interviewee at one of the many centers established by Non Governmental Organizations that serve as refuge for street children in Accra, Ghana. The children come to these centers during the afternoon to escape from the harsh afternoon sun. At these centers, they are able to take their baths, watch their few belongings, and get some rest. Some of the centers also run education programs for the street children. These programs are not mandatory, but participating children get some incentives, including securing sponsorship to go to a trade school or some loans to start their own trade. Thus these centers to some extent serve as surrogate guardians for these children.

Interviewing street children is very challenging. First, was the realization of the vulnerabilities of the children, and second, my interaction with them was not going to harm them in anyway physical or physiological. My experience as a social worker who has worked with street children for many years became an important asset. The initial process was to establish a rapport with the children, first to gain their trust, and second so they could allow me access to some of their experiences in streets. At the end of the process, I was able to gather insightful information of their experiences and worldview. The major instrumentation for this study was semi structured interviews. According to Patton (2002), the interviewing is “to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences” (p. 348). )

The case study approach is also used in this research, because it enhances the understanding of a particular phenomenon. This method provides an in-depth inquest into the lives of street children through the perceptions and perspectives of the street children. A case study is the “study of particularity and complexity of a single case incoming to understand its activity within important circumstance” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). The researcher in a case study collects data on the individuals on which the investigation is focused. Since, a case study is especially suitable for learning about a little known situation (Leedy& Ormrod, 2001), it fits appropriately for understanding the complex world of street children. As I have stated earlier this paper is written in a narrative form, which purports to capture the experiences of my subject in a holistic manner.

### **Who are these children?**

Several definitions and profiles have been advanced for street children (Ricter, 1988; Keen, 1990; Swart, 1990; Aptekar, 1989). The Inter Non-Governmental Organizations for instance define street children 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) maintains 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 should not viewed in isolation to other children living in abject poverty in the urban areas. In this paper however, my subject is a 16 year old girl who spends the bulk of her time on the streets without a responsible adult supervision and is not enrolled in any educational training or program. This is my classification of a street child.

### **Street Girls**

It is estimated that a majority of the world’s street children including that of Ghana are males (Kilbride et al., 2000). There are several reasons that may account for gender disparity among the children on the streets. For instance, Gebers (1990) concluded that the main reason why street children in South Africa are predominantly male is because girls are traditionally responsible for staying home and caring for their younger siblings. Gebers study showed that males made up 81% as against 19% of females. Ghana’s street children population can be characterized as having more boys than girls. This may be attributed to the culture of gender expectations. Culturally, boys are encouraged to be adventurous and move out of their nest in search of better lives for themselves and families. Girls on the other hand are expected to stay in their nest or close by to help with the preservation of the house and other obligations while the boys are out. This comes from the traditional notion that boys should work hard to provide for their families. However, these cultural expectations are over shadowed by economic realities, which have become a focal point in people’s decisions to move out their nest in search of greener pastures.

Street girls are some of the most difficulty populations to study. This is attributed to many factors.

1. Many of the girls have been abused by people they trusted, thus their ability to trust, especially people they do not know is very little
2. The often operate within the shadows of their male counterparts (protectors) making access to them very limited and sometimes impossible

This is not to say street girls are invisible population. In fact the urban landscape of the capital of Ghana, Accra, is proof of the visibility of street girls who work during the day primarily as head porters, sellers, cleaners, any job that can provide some means of survival on daily basis. These girls move in clusters, some with their babies and belongings relaxing under any shade to escape from the harsh rays of the tropical sun. At night, the sleeping places of many of these girls are equally evident. In many open spaces, in front of businesses, under bridges and any public space they can contest as their legitimate abode.

## My Story

*The beginning was decent, although all such memories of serenity and tranquility has fizzled out, giving way to the realities of present hardships. My birth to the best account, if I can rely on my memory or at least what I have witnessed, was a joyous occasion. Like the birth of many African children, it was filled with celebration, vindication, and the greatest of all, expectations, that one day I too will grow and fulfill similar societal roles. Parents become for a moment icons, results of their good labor now manifests in their new born. The euphoria surrounding the birth of a child in my village is captured in songs, dances and numerous rituals, asking all, the ancestors and the living to play an active role in the upbringing of the child. In some instances, celebrations can extend for days, a reminder of the importance of a child in my community. It is a belief in my society that the future of the child is dependent on fate or the destiny of the child, which is determined not by man, but by the following of the actions and procedures that the society has promulgated for its younger generation. My life would be filled with bliss, if all played their expected roles. As mother indicated to me, the future according to my spiritual forecast was on with many children and a big household. A status symbol worth pursuing, to be labeled a success in my community.*

*But the excitement of a new life, and all the pomp and pageantry is replaced by the challenges of daily struggles to survive. This reality sets in immediately the adoring crowds and spectators retreat to their own realities. I guess my birth provided many with a brief period of escape. At least for a short period of time, the celebrations of my birth masked the tribulations of many including my parents. My father was a farmer and my mother worked from home selling the surplus from my father's farm. She also sold kerosene, which was the main source of energy in my village. There were many people in my household. It was a compound, which housed about 10 different households. I had 7 other siblings, and there were countless number of extended family members. My family shared a room, which was divided into a chamber and hall. My parents had the chamber, which a bed and a stack of bags, which I believe contained some of precious belongings of my parents. My siblings and I occupied the floor in the hall. At bedtime, we moved the little furniture we had to make room for mats on the floor. This was not the best of situations, but at least we had the protection of our family, and there was food at least once a day on the table.*

*Some of my siblings were attending school, especially my three older brothers. Some of my sisters also attended school, but many times, they had to help my mother with the selling of her goods, and caring for their younger siblings on days that my mother accompanied my father to the farm. I have fond memories of playing with my sibling and other children from my compound and surrounding houses. I had survived my first three years of life with some stability and some insights into how my world operated. For instance, I knew that it took an hour from our homestead to the nearest water body to get water for household chores. Food was normally cooked once a day in the evening, thus the concept of breakfast and lunch was not in my consciousness. But there was always something to eat, including some fresh fruits and nuts. I was especially excited about mangoes when they were in season. For us the kids, there was always something to do. In fact, we played the whole day, occasionally taking a rest under a tree or sleeping on the veranda.*

*However, this seemingly peaceful life was about to be interrupted. At the age of six, I had started kindergarten. My first day of school was particularly funny. I did not have the prescribed uniform. My mother however assured me that, it was being made, and will be ready in a week's time. I was one of the very few pupils with no uniforms. We were called in front of the class, and given a warning that we could not come back to school until we had our uniforms. I delivered the message as emotionally as it could be conveyed to my mother. Her calm response provided some level of comfort, but for a brief period. I knew I wasn't going to school the next day, and next day, and day after that, and for a week. Anyway, as it turned out, my only experience with formal education was my first in kindergarten and the vivid memories of standing in front of the class with unprescribed attire and tears rolling down my cheeks.*

*My parents had split up at this point for reasons still clueless to me. One day my father did not come home in the evening. The answer to his absence from my mother was that he was visiting some relatives in another region of the country. Weeks passed by without any signs of him, and I began to imbibe the rumors around town to be the truth. My father had abandoned us. This was the genesis of my fate on the streets. After a while, my mother left me and two of my siblings with my grandmother.*

*It started as brief periods of stay, and finally one day the long haul. My mother did not return after 6 months, and the frustrations faced by my grandmother were projected on us. My grandmother never physically abused us, but her verbal venom was enough to kill a chicken. At the market one day, I met one of my older brother's friends, who had just come from the city. At this point I had no idea where my older brothers were. My brother's friend indicated that two of my brothers were in the big city, Accra. From his outfits, and his new electronic gadgets, I could image that where he came from could not be that bad. At least, you will have a job, and be able to buy some of this you have only imaged in your entire life. He spent just a week, but his stories about the big city only proved to be a place of opportunities and little risks. On the eve of his departure my plan to venture into the city and alter my destiny was crystallized.*

### ***The City, my triumphant entry***

*Three commercial vehicles left my village for Accra every day. With the help from one of my mother's friends, I had enough money to make it to Accra. I caught the first bus, which left at the crack of dawn. This was a seven hour journey on some of the most unfriendly roads in the country. It was not only filled with huge craters, it was also very dusty. You could see the trail of dust racing behind you. We got to Accra around 3pm, and alighted at the main lorry hob, famously called "circle". I had as my only belonging a black plastic bag with my change of clothes and some food. The city was much different than I thought. I knew there were many people in the city, but the actual experience of the walking among people, struggle to maintain a path, and coupled with no exact destination was beginning to be frightening. The sheer mass of humans beyond fascination, in fact, I was beginning to experience my first remorse, maybe I should have stayed in my village, maybe this is not the right place for me, maybe I would never make it here. The maybes were not only overwhelming, they were sowing a seed of regret, defeat, and above all, a heightened sense of fear. Now, it's getting dark, and I still haven't found a place of refuge. I walked aimlessly for another hour till I was noticed by a lady who was preparing her table to start selling food for the evening. She asked me, "Who do you work for?" I say "I am very new to this area". She responded "this means, you have nowhere to go? Do you know how dangerous this place is for girls like you? She quizzed. But fate has a way of manifesting in everyone's life. My brief conversation with this woman turned to be my passport to a legitimate street survivor. After inquiring where I came from, she introduced me to another woman, who also sells food nearby, only to find out that they knew my mother's younger sister. She has been in the city for many years, in fact I could not remember the last time I met her. The only problem was that she worked in another part of the city, which meant meeting her was not an immediate possibility. My first lady was generous enough to offer me some food, which I reciprocated by washing dishes and cleaning the table after her customers had had their dinner.*

### ***My First Night in the Streets***

*I worked with this Samaritan of mine the whole night. We rounded up our selling around midnight, packed up all the wares, scrubbed the tables, I knew that people did not sleep in the city, but did not know that the night life for some was only their life. Loud music was coming from different parts of the city, especially around a popular place called "circle". Many girls my age were all dressed up, some really nicely, and they all seemed to be walking towards a popular drinking bar, or what we refer to as a drinking spot. Many of the girls were in the company of older boys, which I later came to understand and appreciate as one of the best protections you get in the streets. That night I slept at the spot where I was helping my madam sell. It was not too peaceful a night, and sleeping on a cardboard was also not too pleasant an experience. In any case, my first night in the streets was a night of many dreams, anxiety, fear, and yet, there was a determination on my part to make it, no matter the circumstances. However my experiences that day, my journey in the streets had began.*

### ***Surviving in the Streets as a Girl***

*My first charge was to secure a job. Many girls like me were selling on streets by day and "working" at night under the supervision of their "boyfriends". I started selling oranges at the main lorry park. The oranges belonged to a madam, who supplied the oranges to the girls at a discount. After a day of hard work, I earned about the equivalent of a dollar. From this money I will buy food, pay to take a bath and tried to save a little. I usually ate once a day, in the afternoon. On days that I did not make enough, I would get some credit from my madam. The nights were extremely scary because of the many stories I had heard.*

*I knew of the stories of a few of the girls who had been raped repeatedly by the boys, their monies stolen. Many of the girls also told me stories of how they were physically abused by some of the boys for refusing their advances. I dreaded nightfall, because you did not know what was waiting in store for you. One of our survival strategies was to always move in groups. In my group were 5 girls, the oldest was about 18 years and she was on her second pregnancy. Her first child died a few weeks after she was born. She was the matriarch by virtue of the respect she commanded. She had been in the streets since she was 13 years old and knew everything one needed to survive in the streets.*

*The other girls were followers and just as scared as I was. My protection from the ills of the streets was only temporary. Sooner than later, I began experiencing some of the wild stories that I have heard. I was physically abused by some boys, when I refused their advances. They destroyed my sleeping cardboard and poured water on me when I was sleep. They also stole my money and other few belongings and when I confronted them, I was given a severe beating. This abused continued for a while with no intervention in sight. Some nights I would be sexually assaulted by two different gangs. Many of these attacks took place in the open, but no one had the courage to come to my rescue. The leader of my group would be insulting and yelling at the boys, but that was her only weapon. In fact she got away with her actions because she was pregnant and knew some powerful people in streets she could rely on. Luck however came my way when I was introduced to one of the boys by the leader of my group. He immediately became my "boyfriend", the first process of protection on the streets for girls.*

*Life with a "boyfriend" was much more bearable. I was protected from the insanities of the street violence, at least from pain sexual assaults I was subjected to frequently. I started working for my "boyfriend" selling his wares. Most of the items I was selling were stolen, but at least I had access to food, protection and some credibility. To be the girlfriend of a powerful street boy came with some respect and some incentives. For instance, I could get most of the things I wanted when I invoked the name of my "man". Soon I was working my way up in the chains of influence and command. I had moved from scared to adventurous. My understanding on streetism was growing and I was beginning to enjoy my life on the streets. In the same time, the fear of the streets however remote still lingers on. I know I will be pregnant and my "man" would want to move on to another girl. I know I am susceptible to deadly diseases, and may die. I know I have no means of looking after my child, and my child may die soon after it is born. The signs and experiences are so glaring, and I know it just a matter of time. But I cannot worry about the future. For now, I am safe, I'm enjoying many of the things I did not have in my village, and city life is beginning to get to me and fast.*

### **Conclusion**

The above provides a rare glimpse into the lives and struggles of street children, particularly girls. All street children are vulnerable, but the situation of street girls is more precarious. The experiences of street girls may all have some uniqueness; there are also many similarities, especially with the studies down in other African countries. For instance, street girls in order to survive must engage in survival sex. No matter how exploitative this may look like, it becomes an absolute if one is to survive on the streets. For instance, Rumbidzai Rurevo & Michael Bourdillon (2003) maintain that the only source of protection for these girls is one provided by their male "friends". In most cases compensation for such protection is sex. Most of the girls also earn income through the active participation in prostitution. The circumstances that many street girls find themselves not only lead to persistent abuse, physically, sexually and emotionally, they are also susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, and high infant mortality rate and poor general health of the girls.

Anarfi (1997) in his study on street children and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases concludes that how street children are at a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. He contends that the children are prone to adverse health effects based on their exposure to some physical and social environmental elements. There is no doubt that governments in developing nations in general should revisit the issue of street children in a more comprehensive manner. Girls especially should be given priority due to the extreme vulnerabilities they are exposed to in the streets. As members of the society, street girls should be afforded all the necessary protections including access to primary health care. Pregnant girls should also have access to prenatal and postnatal care. These are some of the most vulnerable groups of people in any society, and without going into the debate as to why and how they exist, they should be treated with compassion and dignity. They are also citizens.

**References**

- Aptekar, L. (1989). "Characteristics of the Street Children of Colombia, Child Abuse and Neglect", *The International Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 427-439
- Ennew J. (1994). *Street and Working Children—A Guide to Planning*. London: Save the Children
- Gebers, P.E. (1990). "Health of street children in Cape Town". *The Child Care Worker*, 8(9), 11-14.
- John K. Anarfi (1997) Vulnerability to STD: street children in Accra *Supplement to Health Transition Review* Volume 7, 1997
- Keen, J. (1990). A window on the inner world of street children. *The Child Care Worker*, 8(5), 11-12.
- Kilbride P, Suda C, Njeru E. (2000). *Street Children in Kenya—Voices of Children in Search of a Childhood*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey
- Leedy, Paul. D, and Ormrod, Jeanne E. (2001). *Practical Research: Planning and Design. (7th Ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Panter-Brick, C. (2004). Homelessness, poverty, and risks to health: Beyond at risk categorisations of street children. *Children's Geographies* 2(1): 83-94.
- Stake, R.E. (1995), *The Art of Case Study Research*. Sage Publications, London.
- Swart, J.M. (1990). Street children: Their health and welfare. *Chasa*, 1(1), 5-12.
- Richter LM 1988. Street children. The nature and scope of the problem in Southern Africa. *The Child Care Worker*, 6:11-14.
- Rumbidzai Rurevo and Michael Bourdillon (2003). Girls: The Less Visible Street Children of Zimbabwe Children, *Youth and Environments Vol 13, No.1 (Spring 2003)*