

The situation of street girls in Kampala and Addis Ababa

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The challenges faced by girls living on the streets are often hidden; not only because street girls' lifestyles are less visible but also because gender discrimination in some countries is so deeply entrenched.¹ More needs to be done to provide specific services to street girls which can reduce their vulnerability to the harsh realities of street life and provide them with a real alternative. This report highlights the situation of girls living on the streets in Kampala, Uganda and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and provides recommendations on the development programmes required to address their needs.

Retrak recently undertook situational analyses of street girls in Kampala and Addis Ababa. The purpose of this research was two-fold; firstly, to gain a deeper understanding of the situation for girls on the streets of these two cities and, secondly, to guide Retrak and other street children practitioners on the methods and programmes that would best meet their needs. This report is a summary of the research key findings and recommendations.

Methodology

The research in both locations adopted a qualitative design. The primary data was received directly from street children, as well as from key informants working with street children in government organisations and NGOs. Secondary

¹ Volpi, E (2002) *Street Children: Promising Practices and Approaches*, World Bank Institute Working Papers, Washington DC, World Bank; and Thomas de Benítez, S (2007) *State of the World's Street Children: Violence*, London, Consortium for Street Children

data was taken from published studies and reports.

It should be noted that the qualitative nature of the research gives rise to certain limitations. In both locations, Retrak found a lack of evidence-based records with regards to the actual numbers and characteristics of girls living on the streets and the services they are receiving; therefore issues could be exaggerated or under-reported. This is a global problem, for instance the frequently quoted figure of 100 million street children globally "has no basis in fact".² Possible bias and misinformation could have affected the research as most girls on the street will lie about their age because they believe younger children are more likely to be assisted. The studies are not comprehensive in covering all NGOs who work with street children, as clear data on these is again lacking. Therefore the results of this research cannot be generalised. However, the data does provide important information on the opinions, situation and needs of girls on the streets of Kampala and Addis Ababa.

Situation of street girls

Recent reports by UNICEF and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have shown concern at the increasing numbers of street children in major urban centres³. Although providing estimates of numbers of street children is difficult, it has been reported that there are around 10,000 street children in both capital cities, of whom 25% or 2,500 are girls⁴.

² Thomas de Benítez, S (2007), *op cit*, p64

³ UNICEF (2012) *State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an urban world*, New York, UNICEF; and UN CRC, Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations: Ethiopia*, CRC/C/ETH/CO/3 (1 November 2006) New York, United Nations

⁴ Ugandan MGLSD database (2010); and UNICEF, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Street Invest (2010) *Street Children Headcount 2010*

Girls are less visible on the streets. They are frequently employed daily to do housework or sell food; others hideaway in video halls or are involved in commercial sex work⁵. In the evenings and nights, when groups of boys are clearly visible on the streets, girls instead come together to rent rooms or try to find safer places.

“Girls sleep in churches and in rooms during the night; during the day we may not be seen on the streets because there is a lot of stigma from the community. Our priority, more than anything, is shelter. We prefer some times to go without food in order to pay the room rent.”

A girl who has been on the street for 2 years in Addis Ababa

Both boys and girls go to the streets because of multiple difficulties at home – often due to a combination of poverty, social exclusion and family dysfunction⁶. In Uganda, Retrak found that the majority of girls on the street are orphans or from broken homes and had previously lived with grandparents or extended-family. The most common push factors were a lack of food, clothes and education as well as being physically abused.

“We could spend some days without food. The only alternative was to go to work for other people in their fields. Because I was too young to cultivate a big area, they would only give me a little food that was hardly enough for both lunch and supper. At times I would fail to get any work. As a result we would have a cup of sugarless tea. One day, a friend who brought me to town in an attempt to get a job but I failed and resorted to...”

A 15 year old street girl in Kampala who broke down in tears

Every street child lacks everyday needs, such as

⁵ Volpi, E (2002), op cit; and Thomas De Benítez, S (2011), op cit

⁶ Ray, P, C Davey and P Nolan (2011) *Still on the streets-still short of rights: Analysis of policy and programmes related to street involved children*, Geneva, Plan and London, Consortium for Street Children; and Thomas de Benítez, S (2011) *State of the World's Street Children: Research*, London, Consortium for Street Children



food and clean water, and they are unable to access public services such as health care and education. For girls, however, there are extra concerns around shelter, clothing and the ability to bathe, which are more significant than for boys. Shelter for girls means safety from abuse; and cleanliness is vital for girls, especially when sanitary pads are unavailable.

Street girls are also more vulnerable to violence and abuse, especially sexual abuse and rape.⁷ It was reported that street boys and other community members take advantage of girls who are weak and desperate for protection. This leads to many street girls being pregnant and places them at great risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other STIs. However, UNICEF states that the daily reality of sexual harassment and violence for girls in urban spaces is one that is often neglected.⁸ In comparison to street boys who sometimes become aggressive and replicate violence, street girls tend to internalise violence and become more vulnerable to abuse and victimisation.⁹ As a result, they suffer psychological trauma often resulting in low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Girls have acknowledged that all of these difficulties make it even harder for them to survive and care for

⁷ UN OHCHR (2012), *Protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the street*, Geneva, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Railway Children (2012) *Struggling to Survive: Children living alone on the streets in Tanzania and Kenya*, Cheshire, Railway Children

⁸ UNICEF (2012), op cit

⁹ Thomas de Benitez (2007), op cit



themselves and/or for their children on the streets.

“Most of the girls I know on the street are pregnant. Being raped is the worst thing that can happen to a girl. It shatters the future and leaves you hopeless, depressed and with a very low self esteem. After having a baby my friends were challenged to feed both the child and themselves”

A street mother in Addis Ababa whose baby had died one day before the interview

In line with widespread gender discrimination, public attitude towards street girls also seems to be more severe than towards street boys.¹⁰ Girls reported that they are verbally and physically attacked and treated as useless and worthless. This stigma can have a great psychological impact.

“The major problem that makes me feel uncomfortable is lack of sanitary pads. The problem is coupled with lack of water to clean myself. So I have to keep away from people to avoid their abusive words.”

A 15 year old street girl in Kampala

It is clear from Retrak’s research that the current service provision in Kampala and Addis Ababa is not enough to meet the needs of girls on the streets. There are few organisations targeting girls and they often have limited capacity. In Addis Ababa, eight organisations were identified as serving street girls, but most of them only provide for their basic needs; a few go beyond this to offer formal education, vocational training and family reintegration. Furthermore they reach only 30% of

the girls on the streets, leaving thousands with no support at all. In Kampala, only one organisation offering help is known to the girls on the streets. In fact this organisation now focuses more on girls from poor families rather than street girls. Other organisations do offer support to girls, but they have a very limited intake.

“We don’t see anyone coming to support us. Most of the support is given by organisations to the local community and you need to belong and live in that community. We are not members of the community. At least people think we are not.”

A street mother with a 7 month old child in Addis Ababa

Programmatic implications

Street girls require the same basic services as boys in order to meet their basic needs and help them transition away from street life. In the first instance they need to be provided with food, education and health care and to be given counselling and a chance to build trusting relationships with adults.

However, it is also important to develop services that meet the specific needs of street girls.¹¹ Some areas which would need to be addressed differently include:

- **Outreach activities need to go beyond street visits in order to find girls who are more hidden away.**
- **Shelter must be a priority because it means safety for girls.**
- **Clothing, toiletries and a place to wash are also vital to girls’ safety and self-esteem.**
- **Counselling and psychosocial activities (life-skills lessons, arts and sports) must be adapted to deal with the impact of sexual abuse, early motherhood and involvement in commercial sex work.**
- **Health education, including reproductive health and HIV prevention and care, must be available to girls whilst they are on the streets as well as whilst participating at centres.**

¹⁰ Thomas De Benítez, S (2011), op cit

¹¹ Volpi, E (2002), op cit

- **Any full-time programme must be accompanied by some form of child care, so that mothers are able to participate fully.**
- **Family and community reintegration programmes must explicitly address the challenges of stigma, especially if girls are to return home with clear signs of sexual activity, such as being on HIV treatment or with children.**
- **Vocational training and business start-up activities must reflect the potential income from commercial sex work which can provide a relatively high standard of living. Girls will need to be encouraged to participate and may need some sort of compensation.**

These extra considerations in providing services to street girls means there is likely to be a high cost per child. There is a great need for funding which specifically targets street children, not only including programme services but also the staff training, monitoring and evaluation, institutional cooperation and advocacy work.¹² Funding these areas allows organisations to become more professional and offer higher quality services for street children.

Recommendations

Due to the limited services being offered to street girls in both Kampala and Addis Ababa, it is recommended that **service provision should be scaled-up**. In order to do this current service providers should immediately consider how they can expand their services to reach (more) street

girls with basic services, such as food, shelter and health care. Longer term plans should then consider a gradual increase in capacity to be able to deal with the greater psychosocial and physical issues which street girls will present.

In order to provide shelter and child care and the space for healthy personal development, **new facilities should be established** separate from current activities which target boys.

It is also necessary to **build the capacity of staff** to handle issues of sexual abuse, early motherhood and commercial sex work. This could be through training or new employment. Activities such as counselling, life-skills lessons, health education and parenting skills training should also be adapted to address these issues with both girls and their families.

When providing vocational training and income generating activities, whether in families or for independent girls, **consideration should be given to the income of potential trades and how it compares to the earnings in commercial sex work**. It will be necessary to undertake market assessments in order to find appropriate existing training courses or to develop new ones.

Adequate funding needs to be set aside by donors and governments to ensure that suitable services can reach this currently under-served group of very vulnerable children.

“People come and write about our story and just go and never come back. We used to think they are going to help us when they were writing our story, but it has never been so.”
A street child in Addis Ababa

¹²Volpi, E (2002), op cit



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