The Social Support of Street Children: The Experiences and Views of Female Head Porters in Kumasi, Ghana

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Authors EC and AA designed the plan for the study and author AA identified the study site. Authors EC and AA conducted the interviews and author AA transcribed the interviews. Both authors conducted the data analysis. Author EC conducted the literature review and author AA wrote the findings. Author EC compiled and read the manuscript while author AA proofread.

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ABSTRACT

Female head porters, a category of street children in Kumasi, Ghana, face numerous challenges while working and living on the streets. Yet, very few research has been done to ensure that this section of the disadvantaged population have better lives on and beyond those of the streets. Most studies with this population have focused on their troubles, with little done on the ways to help them improve upon or change their conditions. Focusing on female head porters receiving services from a non-governmental organisation in Kumasi, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of the female head porters on their social support and how that helped them cope with life on and beyond the streets. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 female head porters in Kumasi with the help of an interview guide, for a period of four weeks. Thematic analysis

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was used to analyse data gathered from the interviews. Institutional, financial, emotional and casual supports were commonly indicated as support received by participants. Participants believed that institutions were more capable than family and friends to provide sufficient support. Also, findings revealed that friends were more supportive to the street children than families. The study concluded by recommending to government to provide sufficient support to (or liaise with) organisations working with street children to ensure that the plights of the street child are heard.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are more than 100 million street children in the world with about 30 million in Sub-Saharan Africa [1]. Census from street children in Ghana has it that over 33,000 children spend their lives on the street with 75 percent of the population situated in Accra and Kumasi [2]. All over the world, in the past two decades, there has been increasing attention towards the unfortunate conditions of street children, especially in the developing world [3]. Gaidhane et al. [4] makes a distinction between children of the street and children on the street. The former refers to street children who are homeless and the latter, the focus of this article, describes children who are not necessarily homeless but return to some form of family during the night.

Research evidence on street children have shown that children on the streets are faced with a number of inhumane conditions. A study by Gaidhane et al. [4] revealed that street boys are at risk to various forms of abuse including substance, physical and sexual. In their study, substance abuse was found to be common among most street boys and the desire to indulge in the abuse of substances was influenced by peers. A similar pattern has been found among street children in Egypt showing that they engage in maladaptive behaviours like the use of drugs and engaging in risky sexual behaviours to cope with the difficult conditions on the streets [5]. It appears that most children on the streets engage in these risky behaviours in order to get by, to survive, on the streets.

Marshall [6] has observed that most children from poor families find themselves on the street engaging in menial jobs to care for their family. In order to survive on the streets, the children engage in a number of activities that attract moral condemnation from society and other activities that do not attract moral condemnation from society. Society frowns upon those behaviours which are exhibited by street children including the sales of drugs [7], glue-sniffing and smoking [8] and prostitution [9]. On the other hand, some street children engage in other activities like hawking, food vending, load carrying and begging [10,11], to survive on the streets and these are considered acceptable by the Ghanaian society.

The situations of street children in other parts of the world are not very different from those experienced by the Ghanaian street child. Not only do street children in Pakistan engage in the misuse of drugs and high-risk sexual activities [12] but street children in Ghana are also noted for engaging in risky sexual behaviours and substance abuse [13]. Further, Boakye-Boaten [8] has found that some street girls in Ghana are sexually assaulted by gangs while they sleep and others have their hard-earned monies stolen. Considering the problems encountered by street children, very few studies have been conducted to address their concerns.

Social network describes the social structure and quantity of an individual's set of interconnected social ties. A person's social network can involve both informal and formal relationships. Informal relationships can include interactions with family, friends and neighbours while formal relationships involve those with organisations and formal groups. Further, social support refers to support resources provided to persons or perceived to be available from a person's social network. It could be provided from formal and/or informal relationships [14]. Studies have shown that having large network size does not necessarily mean more support [15].

Social support resources are noted for producing positive changes and adaptability in difficult situations [16]. Therefore, it is important to examine the influence of social support on the difficult lives of street children, particularly head porters. Consequently, this study sought to explore the perceptions of female head porters in Kumasi on the influence of their social support resources on their lives. This study is grounded in the theory of resilience which posits that every

individual is capable of adapting positively to significant adversities [17]. By this, we argue that although the female head porters in Kumasi face significant challenges, there are resources within the environment (social support) they can use to overcome their adversities.

Studies on street children in Kumasi have revealed four different categories of this group to include female head porters (known as *kayaye*), sex workers, cobblers and hawkers [18]. This study focused on young girls from rural areas who have moved to an urban centre, Kumasi, to serve as *kayaye*, girl porters who carry goods on their heads for a negotiated fee. The study explored the support resources available to a group of female porters in Kumasi receiving services from the Street Children Project (SCP), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working with children on the streets. This research sought to achieve the following objectives; that is, to identify the social networks of female head porters in Kumasi, to determine their sources of support and to explore the experiences of the female head porters on their social support.

2. METHODS

2.1 Study Area

Data for the study were collected from female head porters in Kumasi at the SCP. Kumasi is the capital town of the Ashanti Region in Ghana and the country's second largest city with a population of 1,730,249 [19]. Majority of the people in Kumasi speak the Twi language. It is difficult to provide an exact number of street children in Kumasi largely due to their high mobility rate. There is no current statics on the number of street children in Kumasi. However, Kumasi was home to more than 10,000 street children in 2002 [20]. Most youths in the rural areas migrate to Kumasi in search for better lives than they experience in their hometowns. While some of these children come to Kumasi in order to supplement household income, others come because of their parent's inability to take care of their needs. Still, others move to Kumasi because they have been completely neglected by their parents [18]. However, these children arrive at Kumasi only to discover that the so-called greener pastures in the city is only a fallacy, resulting in their engagement in a variety of street-related activities to fend for themselves.

This study was based on interview-data collected from 25 female head porters under the SCP, an NGO established in 2006 to address the plights of young children, particularly girls on the street. The SCP aims to support young girls on the streets by motivating them to build a more stable future through rehabilitation programmes, support in basic education and skills training. The SCP runs three programmes including the Vocational Centre, the Day Care Centre and the Drop-in Centre. The Vocational Centre provides apprenticeship training to the street children in dressmaking and hairdressing. And the Day Care Centre renders respite care services to street mothers. Also, the Drop-in Centre provides stopgap services for the street children to assess their eligibility to benefit from services at the Vocational Centre. Counseling sessions are also held for the street children at the Drop-in Centre. The Drop-in Centre uses a 3-month criterion as basis to assess a child's commitment to receiving services from the organisation. When this criterion is met, the child is given the opportunity to learn at the Vocational Centre or supported to go through formal education depending on the best interest of the child. This study was conducted at the Drop-in Centre. During the period of our study, the Drop-in Centre was caring for 60 children with 40 of them being considered as committed. The 25 research participants were sample selected from 40 *kayaye* (or female head porters) who have been consistent with the agency.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Street children who have been provided for by the SCP for at least eight weeks were selected for the study which was used as a benchmark by the researchers towards achieving the 3 months criterion set by the agency. This was to ensure that research participants had adequate knowledge of the support provided by the SCP. Also, in line with Ghana's Children's Act (560) definition of who a child is, children above 18 years were not recruited for the study because they did not qualify to be classified as children as stipulated in the Act. As a result of this, 8 out of the 40 committed children were not included in the sample because they were above 18.

2.3 Study Participants

This study was conducted with 25 research participants. The research participants included female head porters who were receiving services from the SCP. During our data collection period, all street children under the SCP were females, resulting in our participants' sex significantly

biased towards females. Also, all the children work as *kayaye* (girl porters who carry goods on their heads for a negotiated fee) to fend for themselves and their families.

Considering their level of education, 3 participants had completed Junior High School, 11 had completed primary school and 11 had no formal education. This means that close to half of the participants were illiterates. This makes it difficult to engage the street children in jobs that involves reading and writing. With regards to their length of stay on the streets, 2 participants had spent three years on the street, 4 had spent four years and 19 had spent between three and eleven months on the streets. This shows that the participants have spent a considerable period of time on the streets and this lends credibility to the study's findings.

2.4 Data Collection

The data collection process begun with researchers establishing rapport and continued contacts with a gatekeeper from the SCP, who is the Director of the NGO. This was done to introduce the SCP to the nature of the research project and to gain access to research participants. This phase spanned three weeks. During this stage, the researchers learned about the programmes run by the SCP and also purposively identified potential research participants. Further, the researchers conducted observations during this period.

Data were collected via face-to-face in-depth interviews with 25 purposively selected research participants for a period of four weeks. The 25 research participants were selected from the 32 female head porters who were eligible for the study. The interviews were conducted at the offices of the SCP involving the researcher, a participant and a translator. The interviews, which averaged 45 minutes, were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview guide. Interview questions were not limited to those indicated in the guide, however, other questions followed based on the answers provided by participants. Nonetheless, the researchers ensured follow-up questions were maintained on the study's objectives [21]. Data collection ended on the 25th interview when the researchers observed that data saturation was reached [22]. However, a 26th interview was conducted to ascertain whether data saturation was actually attained, this was not included in the study. Due to the fact that no new information was identified

from the research participants, the remaining 7 female head porters were not interviewed.

Most of the research participants were non-English speakers and those who could speak English had limited vocabulary. Therefore, the researchers agreed to use the Twi (local language) in the interviews. Unfortunately, it was realised that majority of the participants could not understand Twi, they speak Dagbani (a local language spoken by most people from Tamale, in the Northern region of Ghana). Coincidentally, though, the first participant interviewed could speak and understand the Twi, as such, was used as a translator. Also, a staff at the SCP understood the native language (Dagbani) of the research participants and assisted in translating 5 remaining interviews. All translations occurred during the interview. Further, following participant's consent, all interviews were audio recorded. The use of translators delayed the interviews and extended the time spent in the interview process.

2.5 Data Analysis

The audio recorded interviews were transcribed ad-verbatim. All interviews were translated from the Twi language to English. To ensure anonymity, each transcript was assigned a pseudonym representing popular Ghanaian names. In cases where names of persons or places were mentioned in the interviews which could be linked to the participants, pseudonyms were used. The researchers adapted the thematic analysis style following Braun and Clarke's [23] suggestions. First, the transcribed data were read and re-read by the researchers to increase familiarity with data. The researchers generated codes and collated them into potential themes. Codes like 'money', 'endure' and 'formal support' emerged. The researchers related the emerging themes with the study's objectives to check for accuracy. Finally, vivid extracts matching the research questions and related to literature on the subject were selected. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, codes containing less prevalent responses were not excluded but revisited and some included for the study.

To ensure the credibility of the study's findings, the triangulation (by observer) was used [22,24]. To this effect, the two researchers involved in this study analysed responses from the interviews independently to ensure that important information were not lost. It also ensured that the

findings were consistent with the study's objectives.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

A written consent form was given to the Director of the SCP to seek their agreement with the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants before participating in the study. Also, participants were permitted to skip questions which appeared personal to them. Further, research participants were assured that they will maintain anonymous and confidential.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 The Social Networks of Head Porters

Since social support is provided by one's social networks, the researchers were interested in identifying the social networks of the street children in Kumasi. All participants mentioned the SCP as a crucial network member within their social network. They believed that the SCP is significant to their survival as head porters. Also, majority of the research participants (19 of 25) indicated family members as part of their network members. However, the participants indicated that they were not living in Kumasi with their birth parents but with other members from the extended family. This is because most birth parents influence their children to move to Kumasi in order to find work and make some money for the family back home. Still, other children come to Kumasi independently. Because the street children had migrated from their hometowns, they have very few friends (4 of 25). These friends included their counterparts on the street such as colleague female head porters and others who spend the night on the street. The participants reported that they made these friends while working on the street. The average number of friends per participant was 3 showing that the female head porters lacked sizable friendship networks. Nonetheless, more than half (15 of 25) participants viewed friends as supportive although they did not have enough.

3.2 Sources of Support

Responses from the research participants revealed similar patterns related to their sources of support. The SCP reflected in the experiences of all participants as they reported receipt or perceived availability of support from the NGO. In fact, one participant claimed she did not receive any support from network members but the SCP. On recounting this, the participant stated that she had no support from friends when she encountered a motor accident:

> *No one was there to help me, so I had to survive on my own since the driver went and left me, when he discovered that I can't speak the Twi language. And later on I came to the agency (SCP) and they are helping me.* (Yaa)

Further, majority of the research participants (17 of 25) received support from their friends on the streets. In fact, data analysis revealed that friends were more supportive to the street children than family members. Support from friends was seen as more responsive to participant's needs than support received from family. Part of this is because most of the participants are away from home. This is what a participant had to say:

> *I don't know any family member here. I live alone and sometimes get support from friends especially on days that I don't get money on the street. So, if you're talking about support, it's only my friends.* (Alia)

This was not surprising as all participants were not living with their biological parents, although 19 out of the 25 participants indicated families as part of their network members.

3.3 The Experiences of Head Porters on their Social Support: Forms of Support

In sharing their experiences of support they received from their network members, the research participants reflected on the forms of support they received. Our analysis revealed the following themes.

3.3.1 Institutional support

When asked about the support they receive from formal organisations, all the research participants made reference to the SCP as an essential avenue they believed they could receive useful supportive services. Most of the children (19 of 25) opined that the SCP has helped some of their friends to be in school whilst others are into vocational training. The participants believed this could go a long way to alleviate their plights. When asked how she came to have confidence

in the NGO's ability to provide her with support, one female head porter had this to say:

> *Yes, a time ago they took us to the vocational centre (SCP) where the children were learning the sewing, I even met a friend of mine there who advised me to be serious so that they can bring me there, and that if I don't get any proper job until I marry my husband and I will likely be unemployed partners which will not augur well for the future of our children.* (Adjoa)

Another street child narrated her confidence on the agency's ability to provide support:

> *Whenever we come here they usually educate us on the support they offer to children on the street, that alone tells me that they will support…since I started coming here (SCP) for about 4 months now, their way of communicating to me indicates to me that they are indeed willing to help me.* (Aku)

As indicated above, some of the children had confidence in the agency's ability based on the support they have offered to their friends who were already children on the street. A child asserted to this:

> *Yes, I do, I have seen several street children who have benefitted from the SCP, those who are into vocational training and others into school.* (Aba)

Another research participant added:

> *I remember one day these people (SCP) came to my village with a whom they identified from the street and they to put her back in school. so, through that I came to know them. When I also came to Kumasi with my sister to work, I met them (SCP) on the street and after talking to them I recalled the day they came to village with that girl, so I never hesitated joining them.* (Abiba)

This shows that female head porters in Kumasi value support from institutions working with street children. The implication of this to such organisations is that they have a major influence in changing the lives of Ghanaian street children.

3.3.2 Financial support

Majority of the street children (17 of 25) alluded to the fact that the dominant support they received from their peers are financial supports. They claimed that due to the unstable and unpredictable nature of their work, sometimes, they do not make any money from the street. Thus, they find it difficult to fend for themselves. Consequently, they had to rely on financial assistance from their friends, usually those they lived with in the same room. One child summarised this in the following; 'In days in which I don't get money on the street my friends give me money for daily upkeep.'(Adjoa)

Finally, 3 participants gave this account on how they got support from their friends in days they did not make money from the street.

> *Sometimes they provide me money for savings and daily upkeep if I don't make money from the street.* (Aba)

> *Sometimes they provide me financial support in days that I don't get money from the street.* (Ama)

> *We understand among ourselves to offer financial support to each other during days that some of us don't get money on the street. Personally, for me, I don't get bothered in days I don't get money because I know my friends will support me when am troubled.* (Yaara)

These accounts by the participants indicate the reciprocal nature of financial support between the street children. This shows that the street children are mutually interdependent.

3.3.3 Emotional support

Beside the exchange of financial support, majority of the children (20 of 25) also received emotional support in the form of encouragements from colleagues when they encountered abusive situations on the street. A research participant posited that their friends on the streets provided them with encouragements when they are encountered with stressful situations. This was her assertion;

> *I stay with some of my friends in the same room, when am sick, all my friends come along to provide me with emotional support.* (Esi)

However, other children who emphasised on emotional support indicated that this form of encouragement usually comes from within their individual capabilities, as their colleagues are generally incapable of encouraging them. On the

absence of emotional encouragement from outside their efforts, a child reflected on this;

> *Sometimes in our struggle to get loads to carry, people usually knock as without doing them anything and since we don't have anyone to talk for us we had to keep quiet and endure it. Also, sometimes someone can carry you heavy load which he or she knows it is not appropriate for your age and after carrying the goods to the destination he/she will in turn give you very little money, all these and many others happen to us on the street but since we don't have anyone to talk for us we have to endure it.* (Ama)

This shows that emotional encouragement is a responsibility for individual street children. This implies street children are unable to afford to provide encouragement to their colleagues.

3.3.4 Casual support

Notwithstanding the financial and emotional support obtained by street children from their network members, the participants disclosed another type of informal support they received from unknown good Samaritans. Majority of the children (22 of 25) had received some form of casual support from unknown individuals as those individuals regarded the street children as vulnerable children in need of care and protection. A child expressed her profound gratitude to these sympathetic individuals as she claimed they served as advocates for them by making sure their plights are being heard. A research participant reflected on the following:

> *I usually get casual support from people, I once encountered such help when I was crossing a road and my head pan nearly hit someone who was on a motor bike, the man on the bike stopped and started hitting me. A good Samaritan who witnessed everything came to my rescue and he also started beating the guy on the motor bike and further advised him not to do that again.* (Mina)

Another girl added to this by acknowledging that one of those good Samaritans, whom they call the *kayaye* chairman, supported her once when she was abused. This was what the girl had to say:

> *Yes, we do have the kayaye chairman who supports us in cases of abuse such as when someone beats us or when someone is hit by a car he takes the person to the hospital.*

> *Also, when we mistakenly pour someone's goods down and he get informed he pays the debt.* (Adjoa).

This indicates that street children have their own management structure, with a chairman and other management bodies set to support and protect it members from abuse.

4. DISCUSSION

Like other studies [10,11], this research found that children working on the streets depend on friends and other colleagues on the streets to survive. More so, findings from this study have revealed that, with street children receiving services from NGOs, formal supports are more prominent in their lives than informal support. This is because these children are a disadvantaged group and do not have the means to provide sufficient support to each other. Further, most of these children have moved away from their families leaving them with no parental figures to care for and protect them. Therefore, it was not surprising that all participants depended on the SCP for support. Boakye-Boaten [8] states that governmental and non-governmental organisations have been providing assistance to this group, although their efforts are limited by inadequate resources.

Also, it has been observed that having a large network size does not necessarily translates into supportive exchanges [15]. Majority of the research participants indicated family members as part of members within their network. However, the findings revealed that most of the participants did not receive support from family members. This is because most of the female head porters in Kumasi are not living with their birth parents.

The findings of the study also revealed experiences of female head porters on the forms of support they received. When asked to share their experiences on the support they received, it appeared institutional support (in the form of support from the SCP) dominated the lives of the research participants. Organisations dealing with street children are known to provide shelter, food, education and training to children on the streets [11]. However, unique to this study was that it revealed that such NGOs are the driving force influencing street children to seek formal help. This is because all the research participants have very low levels of education and that leaves them with limited skills to find

jobs for themselves. Moreover, most of these female head porters have lost ties with their family members. Therefore, they view the NGOs as their main source of survival.

Financial and emotional supports were also common among the head porters. Both of these forms of supports were usually provided by their counterparts on the streets. These findings have been reported by Orme and Seipel [25] who showed that financial and emotional supports provided among street children prevents them from engaging in risky behaviours. This study found that financial and emotional supports help street children to get by with life on the streets. Finally, studies on street children and their social networks [7,9] could not identify random members as individuals classified as supportive to street children. Findings from this study revealed that street children occasionally come in contact with good Samaritans who provide them with support.

Although literature on the social support of street children, particularly female head porters in Ghana, is sparse, this article has provided evidence to illuminate the need to include social support assessment in the research literature on female head porters.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the essential role support from the network members of street children play in their lives, this study suggests to governmental agencies and NGOs in Ghana to conduct a thorough initial assessment into the social networks of street children before providing them with services. Because this will help to maintain a balance in the service provision for street children between the service provider and the social networks of street children. Essentially, with the inadequacies of many organisations dealing with street children, it would be useful to engage the services of the social networks of the street child. Because these network members are crucial to the survival of the children on the streets.

Also, it is recommended to government to allocate sufficient funds to organisations working with street children in order to promote efficient delivery of services. Funds are needed in those organisations because this study revealed that street children have confidence in such organisations and these organisations lack adequate resources. This is especially

relevant to NGOs providing services to female head porters. As these NGOs play significant parts in the lives of the street girls through their constant contact regular contact with them. Moreover, considering the low levels of education of street children, government and NGOs can work in liaison to ensure that street children have access to the free basic education in Ghana. At least, that would provide the children with some skills to engage in a useful trade.

Further, we recommend to researchers to engage in similar studies that will include a larger sample size with an even distribution of participant's sex. This will help provide a more holistic idea of the issue under study and also allow for generalisability.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

There is a possibility that the sample of street children under the SCP for the study is biased. It is difficult to come across male head porters in Kumasi. Therefore, no male was identified for this study. Consequently, it may happen that the experiences shared by the female head porters on their support system in this study may not agree with what their male counterparts experience. Also, the sample for this study was taken from Kumasi and the practices of street children in Kumasi may differ from other towns. Considering this situation, there is the possibility that other street children may share experiences that would be peculiar to their context and different from the ones presented in this study. Finally, the use of a translator might have affected the quality of the findings since the transcripts were recorded from a second person, the translator.

7. CONCLUSION

Research on street children, especially female head porters, and their social support is underdeveloped in Kumasi. This study has filled a significant gap in the research literature by drawing on the perceptions of female head porters in Kumasi on their social support and how this helps them cope with live on the streets. Considering the dearth of literature on this subject in Ghana, it suffices to state that this study is a stepping stone for future studies in this area. Female head porters receiving services from organisations get more support from institutions than support from informal sources including families and friends.

Hence, the study concludes by informing government to provide adequate support and resources to agencies dealing with female head porters in Ghana. Finally, female head porters should be encouraged to build positive ties with family members as families can serve as a potential source of support.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

The social support of street children: The experiences and views of female head porters in Kumasi, Ghana.

Prior to beginning the interviews, the researchers would start with introductory questions like "what is your name", "how are you doing?", and so on, to build rapport with research participants. This would help the research participants to open up to the researchers.

1. Who are the people in your network?
2. Which of your network members are supportive?
3. What kinds of support do you receive from network members on the street?
4. What is your opinion on the support you receive and its impacts on your life on the street?
5. How do you perceive the support systems of street children?
6. What are the gaps in social support needs?