

# Parental Perspectives on Children Streetism in Tamale in Ghana

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## Abstract

In Ghana, there has been a search for the cause(s) of child streetism since the 1990s. Even though some interventions have been made based on the recommendations by earlier studies, the phenomenon of child streetism is still on the rise. This is a reflection of the inadequacies of the known causes of child streetism in Ghana that are largely from the perspectives of the street children themselves. This paper discusses the causes of child streetism, from the perspectives of parents and/or guardians of street children, with the view to recommend measures for curtailing the phenomenon. Primary data was collected using structured interview. Cluster, accidental, simple random, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. The study revealed that, parents' desire for their children to acquire skills in trading and other vocational skills, parental irresponsibility, divorce/separation, child fostering and preparations for marriage by teenage girls account for child streetism in Tamale. The paper recommends that, there should be community level sensitizations through governmental and non-governmental collaborations, filling of gaps in the educational system at the basic level to meet the aspirations of parents/guardians, a rejuvenation of useful traditional values and practices and above all a policy on parenting and bye-laws to bring irresponsible parents to order.

**Keywords:** Parental background, parental expectations, parental guidance, child streetism, Ghana

## 1. Introduction

Available literature suggests that street children in Ghana attracted the attention of researchers and development practitioners in the 1990s. Reviewing the literature on street children in Accra, Ghana's capital city, Hatloy and Huser (2005) cited Apt Van Ham, Blavo and Opoku (1992), Apt and Grieco (1997) and a 1996 survey by the Catholic Action for Street Children (CAS). According to Hatloy and Huser (2005), the 1992 survey purposed to provide a detailed report on the size, characteristics and conditions of vulnerable children in Ghana. Apt and Grieco work, according to the authors also revealed the factors that led to children being on the streets while the CAS and UNICEF survey was carried out to determine from the supply regions the causes of the children coming onto the streets. Korboe, (1997) also presented the socio-demographic background of street children in Kumasi, Ghana's largest city after Accra and the factors responsible for the increasing numbers of children on the streets. Other studies such as Boaten (2007) looked at the coping strategies and working conditions of street children.

Differentials in the definition of street children and the nature of activities street children carry out make a head count of the population of street children difficult, leading to differences in the estimates of the total number of street children in major cities in Ghana. The Catholic Action for Street Children (CAS) (2002) estimates of the number of street children in Accra in 2002 was 19,196 compared to 33,000 estimates by the Ministry of Manpower and Employment within the same period, as cited in Hatloy and Huser (2005).

According to the Consortium for street children, a count of street children in Ghana's capital alone revealed that there are 21,140 street children, 6000, street babies and 7,170 street mothers under age 20; meaning that these 'street mothers' - 7,170 were on the streets as children before they turned adults and mothers. Even though it is difficult to determine the exact number of street children, there are indications that the numbers could be increasing as indicated by Anarfi and Appiah (2009) and Frempong-Ainguah et al (2009).

Apt et al 1992) survey identified poverty and the low economic status of the average family as a major cause of streetism among children in Ghana. Other factors included parental neglect especially fathers, cultural practices and broken homes. The poverty factor was further reechoed in a study in Kumasi by Korboe (1997:18) when he stated that 'Poverty is clearly the principal factor underlying the decision to move into the street. In some cases, the decision to venture into the urban street was prompted by children's frustration at their parents' indifference to their emotional, financial and other needs'.

Again, Korboe (1997) has asserted that pull factors such as daily earnings by a street child exceeding the daily earnings of a secretary in the formal sector could also be accounting for the growing numbers of children on the streets. In Accra, the reasons why girls were on the streets within the same period were similar to the findings in Kumasi. Some of the reasons outlined for girls being on the streets include: to work for money for various purposes (78.58 %), escape from forced marriage (3.57%), neglect at home (7.14%), getting pregnant (0.89%), escape from dysfunctional families (5.36%) and to gain experience outside home (4.46%) (Apt and Grieco 1997). The motivation for the many children who enter the streets is to search for money (Hatloy and Huser 2005).

The greater percentage of street children, especially in Accra and Kumasi, come from the northern parts of

Ghana as indicated by Korboe (1997), Apt and Grieco (1997) and Hatloy and Huser (2005). Statistics indicate that the three regions of northern Ghana are the poorest among the regions in Ghana. For example the Ghana Living Standard Survey 5 (GLSS ) indicates that the three regions of northern Ghana occupy the last three positions on the ranking on the proportion of adults who have ever been to school. (Ghana Statistical Service 2008).

Earlier review of the literature on the trends of poverty in Ghana over a 15 year period (between the 1980s and 2000) indicate that the percentage of people living in poverty in the three regions of northern Ghana has increased by at least 50% (Darkwah 2005). Though generally, the poverty situation in the country is showing downward trends, it is not the case for all the regions of Ghana and according to Darkwah (2005: 91), 'consistently, the hardest hit regions in terms of poverty are the three regions in the northern part of the country'. This connection has given credibility to the widely held view that poverty is the overriding factor for the growing numbers of children on the street in major cities of Ghana.

While these studies have provided useful insides to the understanding of the causes of the phenomenon of child streetism, parental factors can keep children at home or push them onto the streets. Even though the popularity of the poverty factor as a cause or root cause of child streetism in the literature cannot be disputed due to the connection between the ethnic background of street children and rankings of the regions of Ghana in terms of poverty levels, it is quite uncertain since there are poor people across the length and breadth of Ghana and yet their children are not on the streets. Thus, this paper contributes to the literature on the causes of child streetism in Ghana as from the perspective of the parents and /guardians of street children in Tamale.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

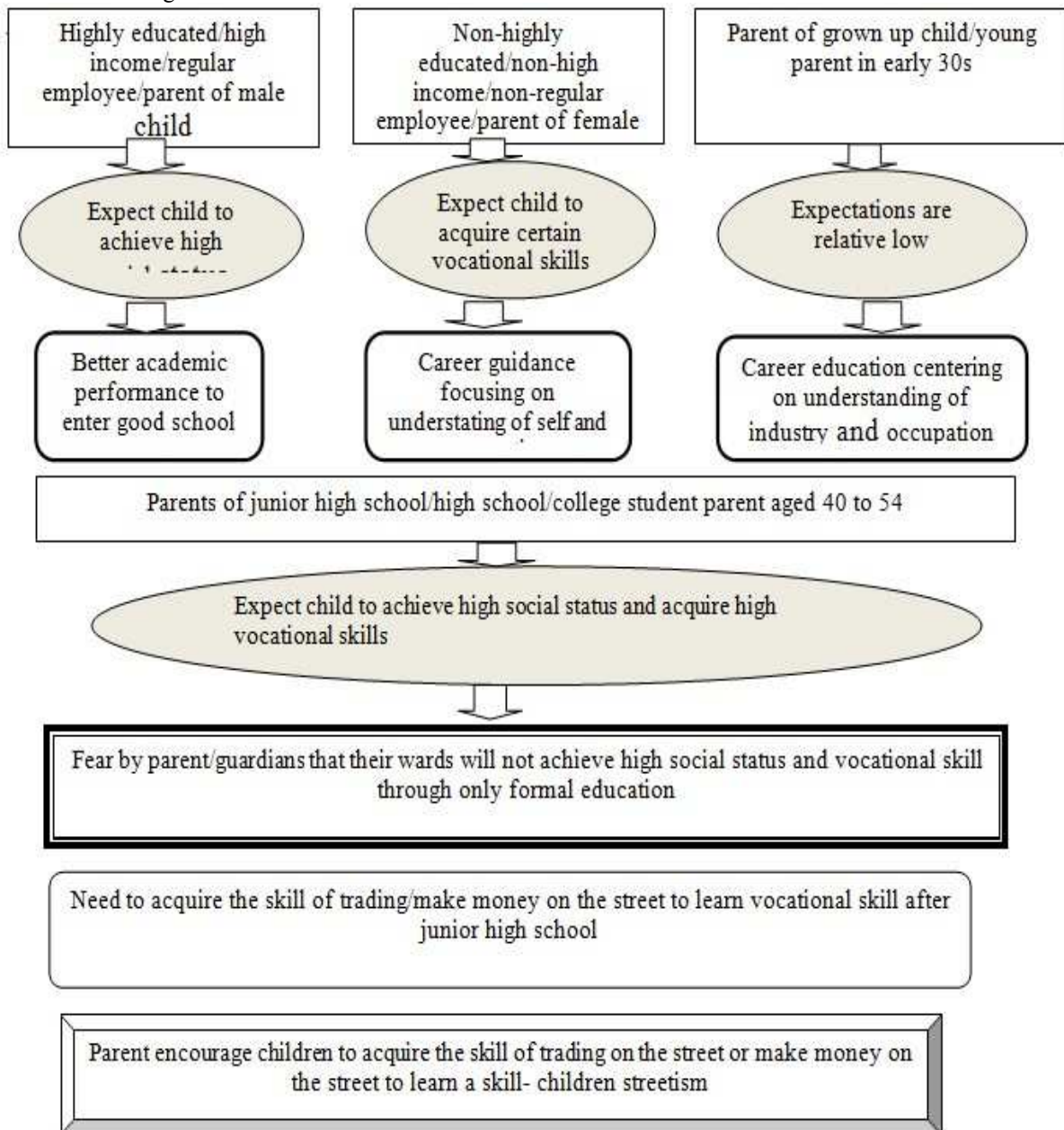
### **2.1 Causes of Child streetism in Ghana**

In the major cities of Ghana; both day and night can be found children who should have been living under the care of adults in family settings fending for themselves. "On the street children" in the literature of street children are children who spend greater part of their day on the street carrying out all kinds of economic activity but return home after the day's work. Again in the literature, "off the street children" are children who work, eat, bath and sleep on the streets.

Literature emanating from the street children themselves on the causes of child streetism in Ghana indicates that poverty in the family is a major driving force for the phenomenon. In a survey of street children in Accra and Bamako, 68% of the children cited family poverty for being on the streets, 12% gave other reasons while 8% said they were on the streets because they were not interested in school (Hatloy and Huser 2005). Literature on the upsurge of the street children phenomena have economic poverty running through almost all of them including (Korboe 1997), (Apt and Grieco 1996), (Campbell and Ntsabane 1995) and (Hatloy and Husser 2005). Studies on street children and migrant children in Accra and Kumasi (two major cities in Ghana), indicate that there are push and pull factors accounting for the upsurge of street children. In the home origin of the children, economic conditions are perceived to be unfavourable while there are perceive economic opportunities in the cities that are attracting them.

Street children in Ghana unlike others, such as those in Bamako usually have a target to achieve on the streets. Thus, they engage in active economic activities (Hatloy and Huser 2005). In a study in Japan, what children do emanated from the expectations their parents have for them in the future and corresponding career guidance parents gave (figure 1). This paper is discussed in this context to help in understanding how parental factors contribute to bringing about the street children phenomenon in Ghana.

Figure 1: Relationship between parental expectations of their children's futures and career guidance  
 Education/career guidance



Source: adapted from Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPR report, No. 92)

This framework is meant to help in the understanding of the relationship between the expectations that parents and /guardians have for their children when they become independent adults and the career education and career guidance they give to their children to aid in the understanding of cause(s) of children streetism. Determining this is essential for policy makers and organizations that are committed to liberating the streets of Ghana of street children.

The framework is the result of a study in Japan. It was found out that, parents that are highly educated and/or have high income and are parents of a male child have high expectations for their children to achieve high social status and career guidance by such parents is on better academic performance to enter good schools at the next level.

On the other hand, poorly educated/low income/under/ unemployed/parent of female expected his/her child to acquire certain vocational skills and here, career guidance centers on the child understanding herself and an occupation.

Also, parents of grown up children and or young parents in their 30s were found to have relatively low expectations for their children and therefore career education and guidance of their children were on the child understanding the industry and occupation.

In this paper, this framework is used for analyzing parental factors towards understanding the phenomenon of child streetism in Tamale. The expectations that parents and /or guardians have for their children play an important role in determining what they will permit their children to do and what not to do. The educational and career guidance parents will give to their children is shaped by the career expectation they have for them as indicated in figure 1.

### 3. Methodology

The study targeted parents and/or guardians whose children were identified as street children (“on the street children” or “off the street children”) in the central business areas, lorry stations, markets, the high street of the Tamale Metropolis and the Youth Alive drop-in-centre.

The cluster, accidental, simple random, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used in the study. Identified street children were selected accidentally after a clustering of the study area into five (5). The clusters included Tamale central market/taxi rank and streets along the taxi rank, Central/main bus stop, Youth Alive Drop in Centre, Lamashegu high street/market, and Aboabu market area. Clustering of the areas in Tamale where street children are normally found ensured selection of the children across the metropolis. The names of the children, their economic activity, suburb they live in and the names of their parent/guardians were noted upon contact to avoid reselection in subsequent hours or days. The selected street children, one after the other led the researcher to their parents and or/guardians at their work places and houses. Any of the parents/guardians was selected through the simple random technique in situations where both were found at home. The wares of some street children such as iced water, kola, etc. were bought to enable the child lead the researcher to their parents/guardians. In all eighty (80) parents/guardians were contacted. The data collected from the field were cleaned to ensure that each interview guide was completed. The data were summarized and tallied manually and with the aid of Micro Soft excel, frequencies and percentages were computed. Cross-tabulations were done and qualitative data summarized and used in the analysis.

Illiteracy is widespread among the parents/guardians of the street children in Tamale. The data gathered revealed that only 2.5% of the parents/guardians of the street children are educated up to the secondary level. Another 6.25% have attended school up to Middle school/Junior secondary level while 22.5% had only religious schooling (Koranic studies) or “makaranta”. The majority of them (52.5%) have never attended school of any kind. Those who have attended school up to primary level constituted 16.25% of the sample population. The average age of the respondents was 41.6 years. The majority (85%) of the parents and/or guardians of the street children interviewed were females.

A greater percentage of the respondents claimed they were Muslims (83.75%). The remaining also claimed they were Christians. Dagombas were the dominant ethnic group. The dominance of this ethnic group does not deviate from the existing literature on the ethnicity of street children and female porters studied in other cities in Ghana. Attention need to be drawn to the fact that the dominance of the Dagomba ethnic group in this study may not necessarily be justified because the study was carried out in northern region or Tamale where the Dagomba ethnic group come from. Given that there are no differences in ethnicity between the parents/and /or/guardians and their children or wards, studies of street children in other cities of Ghana had the Dagombas dominating. For example, studies carried out in Accra and Kumasi on street children revealed that Dagombas rather than Ga or Akans (the ethnic group of people from Accra and Kumasi respectively) were the dominant group (Apt and Grieco 1997) and (Korboe 1997).

Eighty percent (80%) of the parents and/or guardians were married and 20% were either separated or divorced. The majority of street children parents are traders (70%), other parents and /or guardians do nothing or rely on good Samaritans for a living. Only 1.25% of the respondents engage in farming. Clearly, the parents and/or guardians of the street children are poorly educated and under/unemployed.

### 4.Reasons why children are on the streets – parents and/or guardians perspectives

This section discusses the reasons why children are on streets or children engage in streetism as given by parents and/or guardians of street children in Tamale. The majority of the respondents (62.5%) were guardians to the sampled street children while the remaining (37.5%) were biological parents of the children. This categorization is meant to facilitate the analysis of the reasons why children are on the streets as provided by parents against that of guardians to children found on the street. The causes of child streetism as provided by the parents and/or guardians are discussed as well as effects. Recommendations are made on the basis of the discussions.

#### 4.1 Desire for children to acquire vocational skills/ learn a trade

As conceptualized earlier in figure 1, the level of education of parents, the expectation they have for their children in the future, and nature of work they do are connected to the career guidance they give to their children and subsequently what the children do. Given their own poor educational background and occupation is trading, most parents sought to engage their children in their trades. While for (33.3%) of biological parents of the street



children contacted their children are on the street because they see what their children are doing on the street as a skill acquisition process, (30%) of guardians of the street children sampled gave the same reason. Parents/guardians consider trading as a good career path. This is in line with the level of education of parents and parental expectations and guidance as indicated in figure 1. They want their children to learn the skill of trading and to begin with; they have to engage in streetism. A 42 year old woman was asked why her 15 year old girl was on street. She responded *she is a woman, so she must learn a trade so that if she does not pass her exams to go further she can rely on her business*. Another 13 year old girl was sampled at the Tamale central market area roaming around with sachet water. Her mother was asked why the girl was on the street and she cheerfully replied *she is learning a trade. She sells iced water*. Children that are in school and engaging in streetism are likely not to do well in school because they will get exhausted after their activities on the streets and will not be able to study at home. This will then confirm the fears of the parents and/ or guardians for guiding their children into streetism. Thus, the tendency for many more parents to guide their children to start skill acquisition process in similar ways rather than concentrating in school is high.

#### 4.2 Gap in the educational system at the Basic Level

For some parents and/or guardians, they are not sure whether their children will be successful in life through formal education. Parents and or guardians believe that, the educational system is not providing the required practical skills that will enable Junior Secondary School leavers to make a living if they are unable to progress academically. Again, it does not provide students with the opportunity to re-take their exams to progress to the next stage when they are unable to pass their exams at the first sitting. While in school, the parents want them to start raising capital by engaging in whatever economic activity that can fetch them some money on the street after school and full time during holidays. This is suppose to help the children get a startup capital to engage in an economic venture on their own if the fail to make the grades to go to Senior High School or use it to learn a trade from a master craftsman. Even though parent and/guardians are skeptical about any positive prospects for their children through formal education, their background is important in understanding the path they are guiding their children into as indicated in figure 1. The majority of the parents and/or guardians were women, poorly educated/low income/unemployed/under employed. As in figure 1, such parents and /or guardians expect their children to acquire certain vocational skills and the career guidance for their children focuses on children understanding themselves and an occupation even though they are attending school. Even though the majority of the children (61.25%) who led the researcher to their parents and/or guardians were attending school at the basic level, a good number of them (38.75%) indicated they were not attending school. Again, this is connected to the background of their parents and/or guardians as is shown in figure 1.

The effect of children and their parents and /or guardians finding a solution to the gap in the educational system through streetism is that from the critical level of their education their attention becomes divided and this goes to also affect their performance at the end of their basic education.

#### 4.3 Children need to raise pocket money for school the next day/support family financially

Given that some street children are “of the street” and others are “on the street” and 61.25% of the children sampled were attending school at the basic level, both biological parents and guardians to the street children sampled revealed that even though their children were schooling they have to get into the city and carry out some economic activity to raise pocket money for school the next day. During holidays, they engage in the practice all day to raise money to buy their personal needs and support the family’s income. Of the total number of parents contacted that were the biological parents to the children contacted, the greatest percentage of them (36.7%) mentioned this reason for their children being on the street while 28% of people who were guardians to the children selected on the streets, cited the same reason for the children under their care being on the streets. Clearly, a contributory factor to the growing incidence of child streetism in Ghana is parents/guardians thinking that children have a responsibility towards their own nurture. Gyekye (1996) has indicated how children are cherished in the African society as reflected by lots of sayings among different ethnic groups. Africans, Ghanaians inclusive according to Gyekye have several values that are cherished and some of these values have to do with bringing forth children (so much cherished) to acquire character traits that are acceptable in society. One may wonder whether such values are still held in high esteem if parents and guardians pushed their children to spend a greater part of their day on the streets and where they are exposed to all kinds of risks to earn money for themselves and support the family’s finances. As Nukunya (1992) argued, the traditionally held notion that Africans are known to love children exemplified by the efforts mothers in particular will make to ensure that the basic needs of their children are provided even in the most difficult of situations can no longer be held as true. It can however be realized from figure 1 that willingness of these parents and guardians to allow their children to engage in child streetism is an expression of their own background. The practice has the tendency of making children develop interest in searching for meager money rather than developing their intellect to acquire skills for decent life when they become adults.

#### 4.4 Poverty/no money

Poverty or no money was mentioned by only 16.7 % of the parents of street children and 18% of guardians to the

street children. Poverty has been romanticized as a cause of child streetism in major cities in Ghana and some African countries. Poverty factor for child streetism featured prominently in the works of Korboe (1997), Apt and Grieco (1997), Campbell and Ntsabane (1995) and Hatloy and Husser (2005). Even though this factor has emerged again in this study, it is obvious that poverty is not a major factor accounting for the phenomenon. The poverty factor cited again for child streetism by parents and /or guardians is an indication that some parents and /or guardians believe that the responsibility of providing for the household in the circumstance of inadequate finance, should be shared between them and their children. The children are to contribute through some income earning activities on the streets. It is an open fact that education is important for alleviating poverty in families and society at large. Using children to supplement families income rather than taking their education seriously, has the tendency of perpetuating poverty in such families - kind of cyclical situation.

#### 4.5 Divorce/separation

Divorce/ separation did not come out seriously as a reason for children streetism in Tamale. No biological parent respondent pointed to divorce or separation for his/her child being on the street. However, 2% of guardians to the children referred to divorce for their children being on the streets. In line with the available literature on causes of street children especially in Ghana divorce or separation is not a major factor for child streetism. However in figure 1, the connection between low educational background of parent and/or guardian and career guidance is that of the child understanding herself /himself and an occupation. This respondent has never attended school of any kind. Apart from the divorce cited, allowing the child to engage in streetism could be a reflection of the career path she wants the child to pursue; that is, trading.

#### 4.6 Need for children to support guardian in return for support to further education.

Even though this reason came up from the study it is not an important contributor to the growing numbers of children on the streets. No biological parent of a street child interviewed cited this reason. Also, only one respondent of guardians to the street children contacted, representing 2%, said her child was on the street to work to enable her also support her to further her education. Again, the literature available on child streetism does not have this featuring as a cause of children on the streets.

#### 4.7 Guardian too old to work and provide for household

Child fosterage is an acceptable cultural practice in Ghana especially among northern Ghanaians. More than half of the street children sampled in Tamale metropolis (62.5%) lives with family relations other than their own parents even though their biological parents are alive. The data gathered indicated that no parent (biological parent) pointed out that he/she was too old to work to provide for the household and does warranting his/her child being on the streets. However, some children who live with guardians are on the streets because their guardians are too old to engage in any serious economic activity to provide for their households (8% guardians gave this reason). Economic poverty which is wide spread especially among the rural folk and urban slum dwellers compel some of these families to push their children to their perceived wealthy relations in the urban areas where it is hoped they will be better catered for. The data gathered revealed that there are between 2 and 22 people in the households that the sampled street children in the Tamale metropolis live in and an average of 6 people in a household. A household in the urban areas of Ghana with six people could face the challenge of providing for the basic needs of members especially where both husband and wife are not gainfully employed. In such a situation, the children are considered as labour hands that can make money to fill the financial gap of the household and thus, contributing to the rising numbers of children on the streets.

#### 4.8 Avoid idleness at home

For some children found on the streets, they have been pushed on to the streets to engage in some economic activity because their parents/guardians do not want them to idle at home. While 3.3% of biological parents said their children were found on the streets because they did not want them to idle, 6% of guardians to some of the street children cited the same reason for their children engaging in streetism. As indicated earlier the majority of the parents and/guardians are poorly educated, low income earners and under/unemployed and so their willingness to allow their children to engage in streetism is not surprising; see figure 1. A guardian to one of the street child who does not attend school and was found roaming round with sachet water, responded to why her child was on the street; *when we all go out, there is no body at home so I told her to sell somebody's pure water for commission so that she does not idle at home.*

#### 4.9 Raise money to buy cooking wares to start life

The data collected also revealed that some parents/guardians push their children on the streets because they want them to raise cash to buy cooking wares to start life. It must be noted that this reason was in reference to girls rather than boys. While 10% of the biological parents of the children contacted cited this reason, 6% of guardians interviewed said their children were on the streets to raise money to buy cooking utensils to start life. For the parents and / guardians, starting life means that the girls are going into marriage. This revelation for child streetism is an indication that girls are going into marriage at early ages instead of going to school. In line with Apt and Grieco (1997), Hatloy and Huser (2005) and Oberhauser and Yeboah (2011), the average age of most street children is 15 years; thus, some girls being on the street because they need to raise money to prepare for

marriage is an indication that girls are going into early marriages in some parts of the country.

Also, their parents and /guardians interest in what the girls are doing on the streets rather than going to school is a manifestation of their own background as figure 1 illustrates. This also has the tendency of creating lots of parents with background like their own parents and producing similar effect for their own children.

### **5.Summary of findings**

Since the phenomenon of children streetism surfaced in Ghana, there has been a search for its cause or causes for policy actions that can help liberate the streets of street children and to ensure that every child in Ghana grows up in the context of a desirable environment and conditions. From the outsider's perspective, child streetism is not a normal process or condition for a child that is growing up because of the hazards associated with the practice and the street culture (usually a counter culture) which such children are likely to carry along.

This study has established that poverty is not a major cause of children streetism as revealed by other earlier studies. The study has confirmed that the low level of education of parents and guardians is contributing to low interest in them having their children attain high formal education. Rather, the preference is for them to acquire practical skills in trading on the streets. The results also revealed that the educational system's inability to meet the practical skills that parents desire for their children is a major contributor to the growing numbers of children on the streets. Parents and guardians have a responsibility in ensuring that this undesirable phenomenon like child streetism is curtailed. Parental irresponsibility and misunderstanding of parents and/or guardians responsibility towards their children was also identified as an important cause of child streetism. Desire for girls to acquire high education and support by their parents is important in freeing the streets of children. However, early marriage among girls was found to be a contributory factor to particularly girls' streetism and this has implications for achieving gender parity in education at all levels in Ghana.

### **6.Conclusion**

Broadening the scope in the search for the causes of child streetism can go a long way in determining its cause (s) towards providing the needed remedy. This study purposed to contribute to the literature on the causes of child streetism in Ghana as from the point of view of parents and/or guardians of street children in Tamale. The paper has demonstrated that parental factors are contributing to the growing numbers of children on the streets. Even though for a lot of people child streetism is not the path to a brighter future, parents and/ or guardians of street children regard child streetism as a path to a brighter future for their children especially in the midst of limited household income, poor educational background of the parents and /or guardians themselves and lack of opportunities for basic school children to graduate with employable skills or opportunity to retake the Basic Education Certificate Examination.

The activities that street children carry out are in line with the expectations that some parents have for their children and therefore, they see nothing wrong with children engaging in child streetism. Thus, the paper concludes that though poverty could be a contributory factor for some children engaging in streetism, as the literature suggests, it is not the main cause of the growing incidence of child streetism in Ghana. Rather, a combination of parental factors as discussed is responsible for the rising numbers of children on the streets in Ghana. Targeting parents and /or guardians with similar backgrounds as those studied in the fight against child streetism can help in preventing more parents and/ or guardians from encouraging their children to engage in streetism in Ghana.

### **7.Recommendations**

There is therefore the need for a holistic approach that involves a rejuvenation of our traditional family values and practices, policy on parenting, community level sensitizations on the consequences of child streetism at the expense of attending school or combining schooling with trading for money on the streets as well as another look at the educational system in Ghana.

#### **7.1 Policy on Parenting and by-laws by Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies**

Drawing from Aptekar L unpublished Article on Columbian Street children, the phenomena became a thing of the past in that part of the globe after the introduction of child welfare reform movement and enactment of Laws that made it mandatory for all children to be in school. In Ghana, the free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) policy should be implemented alongside a policy on parenting and bye-laws that will make parents who allow their children to engage in this practice to face the music.

#### **7.2 Rejuvenation of the traditional family values and practices**

The traditional family values have in them values that made it possible for children of unprivileged parents to enjoy welfare services from other family members. The chieftaincy and culture ministry should be charged to come out with policies that will lead to a restoration of our traditional family values.

#### **7.3 Community level sensitizations**

The Department of Social Welfare in collaboration with Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should use the platforms of the NGOs to sensitize people on the consequences of child streetism – be it the “on the street” or

“off the street” type. A national policy that makes it mandatory for all media houses to allocate space daily to sensitize people on the effects of children streetism will make some impact.

#### 7.4 Filling the gap in the educational system

One of the reasons given by parents of the street children is that their children are engaging in child streetism so as to acquire the skill of trading to use it to earn a living in the event that they do not pass their exams to continue their education. Practical skills training especially at the Junior High School (JHS) level should be strengthened through collaboration between the Ghana Education Service and the Master Craftsmen and women to offer pupils/students the opportunity to acquire practical skill in any trade of the choice after school and during holidays.

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