

## **Children of the Streets**

**By Nan J. Muhovich**

Children of poverty tell their own stories poignantly. This story was told to me by a boy named Longora John. John is 12 years old and lives in *Namatala*, a slum on the outskirts of *Mbale* town in Eastern Uganda.

My mother brought me from the village. I was taken off to Namatala. From Namatala they taught me how to come to the town to pick some charcoal for cooking. And after I knew how to pick the charcoal, I now went to the market. A certain man told me, "You, what? You go and pour rubbish." After I poured rubbish they gave me tomatoes. So I took the tomatoes up to home. We ate. After the next day I went back. The man told me, "Instead of you pouring rubbish to the rubbish pit, you should, what? Start selling tomatoes." Then the man started tying the tomatoes [in bags], of one hundred [shillings], one hundred, one hundred. So I used to move all [over] this town of Mbale. When I was selling tomatoes I was eleven years. I started selling tomatoes from the barracks. ...After I sell...I take there the money and they give me about 300 or about 500 [shillings] (twenty to thirty cents) and I take home. My mother is still in Namatala. She has even nothing she's doing. She's just there. And now I'm waiting for my own life. And if I survive, I will help her also. We are about four children.

John was forced onto the streets by hunger to feed himself and his family by picking small, broken pieces of charcoal that fall from the 100 kilo sacks as they are bagged and transported in the market. He also labored at "pouring rubbish," and hawking tomatoes on the streets, at the bus park, and in the army barracks. John made \$.25/ day when he was working the streets of Mbale, Uganda. But John is a lucky boy, a local Christian organization, Child Restoration Outreach (CRO), invited him off the streets and sent him to school. John tells the story of his dramatic transformation:

Now one day I brought the tomatoes up to the bus park. After that the [CRO] teachers got to me from there. They asked me, "Do you want to learn?" And I said, "Yes." They told me, "If you want to learn, you return the tomatoes and come. We take you to school." And even me, straightway I returned the tomatoes. They asked the name of my mother and the name of my father. And they told me, "Where have you come from?" They pushed me off to here (CRO). After that they told me, "You bathe." My clothes were dirty. And now, the way I look now, I am somehow, *a person*. And now CRO has helped me in so many ways....They took me to the farm. And now I am someone else! I even put [on] clothes which can be even [better] than the other ones on the street. And now my life is somehow okay. I can't be like the other way round, whereby I used to sell tomatoes.

John Langora, with his eager eyes, and smiling face, was the first child to tell me of his experience as a street child, how CRO had helped him return to school and find a safe place to sleep. He is proud of the changes in his life. Today he is wearing a clean,

although somewhat mussed, school uniform and he is carrying his well-used school note books home for study. John has moved seemingly a million miles from being a *street child* to being a *school child*.

### ***The Cost of Education***

*“I want to go to school; I want to be a nurse.” –Nabukwasi Sumaya, 10 yrs.*

Universal primary education is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), “to insure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary education” (Sachs, 2005, p.211). And while Uganda, like many low-income nations, promises its citizens free public primary education, the cost of uniforms (mandatory for all students), school supplies (text books, notebooks, and pencils), lunch, and the cost of children’s lost earnings puts even primary education out of reach for many poor children. In Haiti, text books cost around \$6 each. The total cost for a child’s books could be around \$32/year. Multiply these educational fees by four or five children, and you can see why many impoverished families, earning only a dollar a day, are forced to divert most of their children into domestic servitude, child labor, or directly onto the streets, remaining with only one or two children who can receive an education.

Nabukwasi Sumaya, a ten year old girl from *Budadiri*, Uganda could not afford to go to school. She is an orphan, her mother died, leaving her husband with six children to care for. In many parts of the world when a child loses one parent they are considered an orphan. All of Sumaya’s siblings were working on the streets. This is the story Sumaya told me:

We have six children in my family. My mother died. My father is in Namatala (slum). Five of my siblings were picking charcoal. I am a *Mugisu* (tribe) from Budadiri (Eastern region, Uganda). My father brought me here after my mother died. It was here in town, I was picking charcoal...I was dirty and I ate in the dustbin, bad food in the dustbin. I came here and the teacher gave me clothes. When she finished giving me clothes the teacher told me, “You want to go to school or you want to go again to town?” I answered, “I want to go to school...I want to be a nurse.”

Children who are working on the streets generally desire to be in school but lack the necessary resources to be school children. The cost of education is one of the primary causes for displacement of children according to Kovaks-Bernat (2006), an anthropologist, who has studied street children and childhood in Haiti for over ten years. All Haitian children are promised a free public primary education, according to the constitution, but less than half of eligible children actually attend primary school, well over one million of Haiti’s primary-school-age children. Sixty percent of all Haitian children find themselves abandoning primary school before completing six years (UNICEF, 2004).

The *promise* of universal primary education is constitutional in many countries, but the actual *right* to go to school and complete 6 years of primary education is not extended to many of the poorest children in low-income nations. In Sub-Saharan Africa,

44% of the population is under 14 years old, and only half of the children ages 7-14 attend school. Primary school completion rates are only 62%. In the Middle East, where 33% of the population is below the age of 15 years, secondary school enrollment is below other middle income regions at 67% (World Bank, 2006). In South East Asia there are an estimated 164 million children of primary school age, but 42 million (25%) do not attend school. Of these children, 38.4 million (91%) live in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and approximately 23 million (55%) are girls (UNICEF, 2007).

Education plays a vital role in ensuring that boys and girls have equal income-earning opportunities as adults. Education of girls and women not only increases their earning potential, but numerous studies have shown that it also improves the health status of the family and child education rates, and it decreases their overall fertility rates. Mortality rates for children under five years old fall by about one half when their mothers have a primary school education (UNICEF, 2006).

Although poverty is the greatest deterrent to schooling for girls, gender discrimination, caste, class, religious and ethnic divisions all conspire to keep girls out of school in South Asia. Simple things such as providing a separate toilet for girls could increase the numbers of girls attending primary school by 15%, according to one study in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2007). Building schools close to girls' homes and making school facilities safe from violence will also help girls attend. Obviously, fees and indirect charges for education are a major barrier to the poor, but quality of education also determines whether the poor will keep their children in school. Teacher absenteeism, corporal punishment, crowded and poor facilities dissuade many poor families from making the extraordinary sacrifices necessary to keep their children in school and off the streets (UNICEF, 2007).

### ***Child Labor***

*"I used to sell tomatoes." – Longora John, 12 yrs.*

Street children work in the informal economy. They carry groceries, wash cars, wipe windshields, shine shoes, guard cars, hawk food items, and run errands for merchants. They get paid a few pennies with which they usually buy food items. Christine, a street child I met in Mbale, would mop and wash for women vendors. Then she would buy cooking oil to fry her pieces of Irish potatoes that she had scavenged from the dustbin. Many street children prefer working to begging or stealing. They say that begging makes them "feel dirty" and they are afraid to steal. They are part of the informal economy of impoverished cities and neighborhoods, working odd jobs, but their labor is rarely measured, valued, or protected.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) laid out universal standards for the international establishment and recognition of the rights of children. The convention guarantees the fundamental right of children to identity, to be registered immediately after birth. The convention also makes the state responsible to guard the child's right to be protected from economic exploitation and work that interferes with education or jeopardizes the child's physical, mental, moral, or social development.

In Haiti, the *restavek* system of domestic servitude is viewed by the poor as a way for rural children to escape poverty. Poor girl-children are sent to the city to work in the

homes of middle class Haitians. In return for their labor they are supposed to be given safe housing, food, and education. Eighty percent of the 250,000 *restavek* in Haiti are girls under the age of fourteen. “The gender division intrinsic to traditional Haitian child rearing is mirrored in the gender division of child displacement: four-fifths of *restavek* are girls, three fourths of *timoun* [street children] are boys” (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p. 60).

Girls have the double or triple burden of housework, sibling care, and work outside the home. In Egypt, girls are expected to do the majority of the housework. In the Dominican Republic, girls are expected to care for their siblings as well as do housework (UNICEF, 2007).

Many rural girls in East and South East Asia are sent into domestic service as early as age eight or nine. Domestic work is the least regulated of all occupations. These children are invisible to the world and are vulnerable to abuse, violence, and exploitation, and often do not receive the education they were promised. More girls are employed in domestic work than in any other form of labor. According to Human Rights Watch (2007) child domestic workers are routinely abused and exploited by their employers. Working alone in their households they are nearly invisible. They are often confined to their employers’ household, sometimes locked in from the outside. Many are vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence from the men and boys associated with the household. Due to financial pressures and debts, most remain silent, fearing they will lose their employment if they report abuses, becoming virtual child slaves. This is a story of Saida, B., a 15-year-old child domestic worker in Morocco:

If I did something the employer did not like she would grab my hair and hit my head on the wall. She used to say things like, “I don’t pay you to sit and watch TV! You don’t wash dishes well. I pay your mother good money, and you don’t do anything [to deserve it].” ...Once I forgot the clothes in the washer, and they started to smel, so she grabbed my head and tried to stick it in the washing machine. (Human Rights Watch, 2007, par. 4)

### ***The Girl Child***

*“I was suffering so much.” –Nakayeze Betty, 10 yrs.*

More boys are street children, but girls who are displaced to the streets are often orphans. This story was told to me by ten year old Nakayeze Betty, an orphan street girl:

I was suffering so much. When my mother brought me to *Namatala*, my aunt told me, “Your mother is going to the village and is going to come back.” She went to the village up to now. My father got an accident. When I was still young up to now I know my aunt as my mother. I was nine years. I usually go in the town there picking charcoals. My friends would tell me, “You’re missing life in the town there.” I went to town picking charcoals. Every day we go and pick charcoal in the town there. One day I went in the town there, I found the teacher of CRO. They came and told me, “What are you doing here?” I told them, “Nothing.” They told me, “You are going to CRO.” I told them, “To do what?” They told me, “You will see.” We went CRO, here. They asked me some questions, that “You have your mom?” I told them, “No.” “You have your dad?” I told them, “No.” So there

they told me, “You want [to go to] school or you want to remain picking charcoal?” I told them, “I want to go to school.” They told me, “You are going [to] CRO. You are going to be in rehabilitation. So we came [to] CRO. They start asking me questions. They say, “You go and bathe and play.” I bathed and I played. We ate food. And then after eating food, they asked me questions. I was in rehabilitation for one year. Now they took me to school. Now I am in P3 (primary three). Now I stay with teacher of CRO. Now I am so, so happy for helping me from streets to CRO. I thank CRO so much, and I thank God. I stay with teacher Elizabeth, she works in CRO. Now I’m special.

Hunger, disease, death, and abandonment force children onto the pavement to live. They may have one parent left, siblings, or relatives that they know, but for many reasons they cannot live with them. Betty was left by her mother at her aunt’s house when she was nine years old after her father died in an accident. She never saw her mother again. Abandoned, Betty found her way to the streets. Luckily for Betty—she was rescued by CRO and given a warm home with teacher Elizabeth.

Christine is also an orphan and nine years old. Like most children sleeping rough, Christine left home for multiple reasons: her father’s death, her mother’s illness, the death of her siblings, and hunger. This is the story Christine told me:

My names are called Achen Christine. My village is *Soroti* (North Eastern Uganda). I’m a *Muteso* [tribe]. My mother was sick. My dad died. Nothing to eat. I decided to go on the street to pick charcoal, tomatoes, these Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes... When I got [there], somebody would tell me, “Come here and mop.” I mop. They give me some money. I go and I buy cooking oil, and I cook that Irish [potato]. Then we eat. Tomorrow again I go like that. ... Then they pick me from the streets. Teacher Carol and Janet came to the street, there they pick me. They brought me here and they asked me very many questions, “To go to school or staying on the street, which one do you want?” I told them, “I want to learn.” I want to learn because I want to help even my mom in future. Because no one can help my mom. I’m the one, I must help my mom. If she dies—then I remain alone, because my dad died. No one can remain with me. I had ten brothers, but four died. We are six now remaining. Three are in the village. Three are here, they came to see Mama. I was in rehabilitation one year. Then they took me to Namatala Primary School from Primary 1. I am in Primary 4 now.

Christine, at the age of six years, was forced onto the streets because of hunger. Her father was dead, her mother was sick. There was nothing to eat at home, so she went to the streets to find food to feed herself, her mother and her siblings.

Girl children suffer more than boys. In some countries, discrimination against girls begins in the womb. In cultures that have clear cultural or economic preferences for sons, such as India and China, birth histories and census data reveal an unusually high proportion of male births and males under the age of five, suggesting female foeticide and infanticide in the world’s two most populous countries (UNICEF, 2006).

In the middle years girls suffer from educational disadvantage in lower primary and secondary schooling rates. Nearly one of every five girls who enroll in primary

school in developing countries does not finish her schooling (UNICEF, 2006). Only 43% of girls of the appropriate age in the developing world are attending secondary school for various reasons: no secondary schools exist for girls, parents may decide the girl's labor at home or on the streets is too critical to family survival to allow her to go to secondary school, or she may be married by the time she's of secondary school age. But if a girl child is orphaned at a young age she will often wind up on the streets.

Bel Marie, a 15 year old Haitian orphan, lost her mother in a flood when she was six years old. Her father died in a car accident a month later. Frightened by her empty home, she moved in with an aunt and a mentally ill cousin who one day inexplicably attacked her, injecting her left inner thigh with a scavenged syringe full of what Bel Marie called,

*dio malad* [sick water]—stagnant water from a fetid pool left by [Hurricane] Gordon's rains. The wound grew infected and festered and she was taken by her aunt to the hospital. After she was treated and released with the wound dressed but still seeping, she left her aunt's house for the capital and has lived near the National Cemetery in Port-au-Prince with the glue sniffers ever since. (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, pp. 63-64)

Bel Marie hates living on the streets; she does not know why she has survived for nine long years on the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, but now that she has developed into a young woman she is even more worried about street dangers.

### ***Womanhood on the Streets***

*"Tragic Boulevard Madonnas" – describing child-mothers in Haiti*

Womanhood adds to girls' fears of rape, pregnancy, and motherhood. They have to hide themselves from older boys or police who want to have sex. They lack adequate sex education or sanitary facilities. Older street girls will sometimes instruct younger girls frightened by their first menses, to tuck squares of paper or cloth into their underwear to keep their clothes clean. When the flow is heavy they remove their underpants and squat to let the blood drain onto the pavement (Kovats-Bernat, 2006).

Some girls attach themselves for protection to an older street boy as a boyfriend. It is the norm in these relationships for the girl to be hit, kicked, and bruised, yet people do not step in to defend or protect her. Girls on the street are always dependent on their boyfriends. They are dependent on their love, distorted though it may be, as well as on their money for food and survival. If the girl is expecting or is a mother, she is even more dependent on the boy. She depends on him to be a father for her child, for baby needs, and baby health care. Speakman (2002) who worked with a faith-based NGO among street children in Lima, Peru, described the motherhood she met on the streets:

Tuany was sixteen when she had her first child. She brought her baby home to a room the size of a small walk in closet. The room is tiny, and is located in the corner of a restaurant in the center of Lima....The baby, Tuany and the father all sleep together on a small mattress, and often other children will spend the night on the tiny patch of floor beside the mattress. Tuany spends her days inside this

room, taking care of her little baby boy. Fifteen year old Caramelo was proud to see his new son at home, but he doesn't stay home too much because he's got to steal to pay for the room and buy diapers for his baby... This is a family complete with mom, dad, and child. Tuany and Caramelo are lucky. They have a place to stay, unlike the majority of children living on the streets. (Speakman, 2002, p.68)

Child marriage, or marriage of persons under the age of eighteen, is very common in developing countries. In Uganda, 59% of rural girls are married before they are eighteen (UNICEF, 2005). Urbanization drops those figures to 34%, which is still a high number of child marriages. Premature pregnancy and motherhood are inevitable consequences of child marriage. Fourteen million adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth each year, and girls under the age of 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties. If the mother is a child, her baby has a 60% greater chance of dying in the first year than a mother older than 19. Often if the baby survives, he or she has a low birth weight, is malnourished, and has late cognitive and physical development (UNICEF, 2006). A child mother on the street has almost no chance of raising her baby to be a healthy child. Speakman (2002) writes of one street mother and her baby in Lima:

I'd like to tell you about one of our friends and her baby. The mother's name is Erica. She's nineteen, but could pass for a thirteen year old. Her two year old daughter's name is Anna... Anna looks to be dying slowly. I think she's terribly malnourished. Her little body is limp; her bone structure is unusually small. She's losing her hair... In addition to her poor health, she's terribly neglected and abused by her mother... Not only does Anna not feel well, but she's starved of love from her mom... Anna is very timid. There's constant fear in her eyes. She doesn't easily respond to strangers. Her mother teases her in ways that little Anna cannot understand, or perhaps she does understand. Her response to her mother's teasing is one of terribly hurt feelings... Anna loves her mom so much and is dying for her mom to return that love... I told Erica that Anna loves her very much. I asked her why Anna is so sad all the time. She said because they don't have money to buy food. (pp.75-76)

Street girls are all in danger of sexual assault, pregnancy, and HIV/AIDS. The majority of girls on the street will be raped, if not by a stranger, then by a boyfriend or a police officer. Rape, degrading comments, unwanted fondling and kissing are continuously forced on a street girl child. Often by the age of 15, a girl on the streets will be expecting her first child. Pregnancy on the streets is very dangerous. There is no health care. The water quality is poor and there are no sanitation facilities. Girls face a lot of fear and a sense of inadequacy as they confront their teen pregnancy. "How will I provide?" they ask themselves, "Will my boyfriend stick around?" Some choose suicide to avoid the despair they feel. Some return home or go to a shelter and begin a new life away from the streets. Some girls who have gotten pregnant because of rape are able to send their babies to be cared for by relatives. But many have no family, and for them, motherhood is "only a complication and a horror" inviting a baby to share their life of homelessness and poverty on the streets (Speakman, 2002, p.77). Kovats-Bernat writes

poignantly of the child mothers he has observed living on the streets of Haiti, “I have seen some of these young women nursing their babies on the street like tragic boulevard Madonnas” (2006, p.66).

### *Sniffers*

*“Every night I sniff. Every night I sniff.” Otim Aramazan, 13 yrs.*

Severe poverty stresses family systems to the breaking point: disease, death, unemployment, and addictions often lead to family dysfunction and abuse. This physical or emotional abuse drives children onto the streets where they struggle to survive, often finding consolation in a bottle of fuel, paint thinner, or glue. Otim Aramazan, a 13 year old *Muteso* (tribe) from north eastern Uganda told me this story of homelessness:

I was there in the village. My mother got disease and died (HIV/AIDS). My father got another [wife]. My [new] mother gets me when I came from school, tells me “Go and wash plates.” And food is not there. Me, I started crying. I said, “Let me go to town.” When I came to town I started picking Irish (potatoes), broken Irish from the dustbin. I eat. When I finish to eat, I go there, there’s something--fuel. I started sniffing. And I sleep in the veranda, outside there. And I cover with *cavera* (plastic sack). Every day, everyday I go to the market. I walk, I walk. I pick. If I go I get there broken breads and I eat. And I come to sleep. Every night I sniff. Every night I sniff.

Otim is an AIDS orphan. His mother died, his father remarried. His new step-mother abused him, so he ran away to the streets where he ate from trash cans, slept under a veranda with only a plastic sack to keep off the cold night air, and sniffed fuel every night to warm and comfort himself. Otim is one of the sniffers, street children who sniff fuel or glue. Street children who sniff are identifiable by their especially filthy clothes, bloodshot eyes, and frail bodies. Sniffing helps these children forget their hunger, cold, loneliness and fear. Kovats-Bernat (2006) describes glue sniffers he has met in Port-au-Prince, Haiti:

One group of kids I know sniff glue near the National Cemetery in the dangerous Portail Leogane section of Port-au-Prince. Here there are both male and female users, ranging in age from about five or six to sixteen. Most of them lie down on their sides to sniff the drug, but I have observed children all over the city walking about while they sniff. The *siment* is spread around the inside of a plastic juice bottle and stirred with a stick by the user while inhaling to agitate the release of vapor. Users carry the bottles lazily concealed beneath their shirts, with the mouth of the bottle protruding from the neckline just beneath the chin. When using, the child stirs the glue and places his or her entire mouth or nose into the opening of the bottle, breathing deeply and slowly. Users repeat this regimen—stirring, sniffing, stirring, sniffing—all day long or as long as the glue lasts, with ten-to-fifteen minute intervals between inhalations. . . .None of the sniffers with whom I have spoke said that they would continue sniffing if they were physically able to

quit the habit, because long-time usage eventually brings an unpleasantness to the high. Some kids indicated that the glue gives them headaches and occasionally causes vomiting. (pp.43-44)

Described by local residents as *Zombies*, children who sniff glue in Port-au-Prince often live near the cemetery, wander the streets after dark, slur their words, and have glazed eyes, cadaverous bodies, and bad breath. Using the drug decreases their attention span, although some can remain focused and coherent. Often the glue makes them lethargic, forgetting to wash or even eat. Some children grow aggressive and belligerent, but most become passive, stumbling, and incoherent. Most sniffers also have open sores around their mouths due to the caustic vapors.

Hard drugs are rare among street children in Haiti because of their cost. Some children may smoke marijuana, cigarettes, or drink cheap sugarcane moonshine during Carnival, but almost no street children can afford narcotics. As Kovats-Bernat (2006) observed, street children are a thrifty lot and few believe that narcotics are “worth their weight in food” (p.46). The public fear of street children being the cause of increased gun and drug violence Port-au-Prince is unfounded.

### ***Hazards of Street Life***

*“Sleep is a dangerous necessity.” –Blak Lovli, 16 yrs.*

The street is a hostile home. Hazards are many, including contaminated water and food, traffic, vermin, crime, and civil violence. Children frequently die of starvation, thirst, fever, or diarrhea. Raw sewage runs through many slums in open trenches. Swollen by sudden thunderstorms during the rainy season, the sewage flows into the homes and markets of the poor. With the raw sewage comes malaria, diarrhea, fever, cholera, dysentery, and hepatitis A and B. Another biohazard is food sold on the street that is often washed in grayish water strained of solid matter, fried in hot oil, and then set to drain on newspapers where flies congregate.

Rain makes the lives of street children miserable. Bel Marie is an unusual street child in that she has a sweater to keep the damp chill away, but she shares this single garment with the other girls with whom she sleeps. Other daily hazards include traffic accidents, and at night, roaches, rats, cats, dogs, mosquitoes, and other pests. Blak Lovli, a 16-year-old Haitian street boy, views sleep as a dangerous necessity. He reports being awakened by swarms of roaches that come to eat crumbs from his lips and cheeks. He carries a small scar on his lip, a rat bite (Kovats-Bernat, 2006).

But his greater fear is of the *lage domi*- the sleeping wars- of which he is a veteran. The sleeping war began like this: Blak Lovli got into a fistfight with a boy named Franzi who had taken money from him. He solicited the assistance of older youth whom he knew, to revenge on Franzi. When he saw Franzi later that day, he was informed that their differences would be settled with a *sleeping war*.

Several evenings had passed before Blak Lovli was jarred awake by Franzi, who was burning an empty juice bottle on him and allowing the molten plastic to drip onto his bare feet. Days later Blak Lovli took vengeance. After finding Franzi asleep in a secluded alleyway, he dropped a large chunk of concrete onto the head

of his foe, nearly killing him. Franzi was found by a merchant early the next morning and taken to a state hospital where he made a moderate recovery. Their *lage domi* is over now. (Kovats-Bernard, 2006, p.81)

Another attack occurred to Blak Lovli when he was too sick to work. He was begging alongside another street boy. An American tourist gave him \$1, but gave the other boy nothing. When the other boy asked him to share the money, Blak refused. Angered, the boy wrestled Blak to the ground and slashed him across the scalp with a razor blade. Taking the dollar bill, the boy ran off, leaving Blak bleeding on the sidewalk (p. 82).

There are as many as 50,000 children living and dying on the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the competition for space and food is fierce and desperate.

It is an “everyday” kind of violence, one that frames daily life in such a way that the prospect of dying of starvation or thirst or gunplay is normalized and fever and diarrhea are the deadly and familiar doppelgangers of Haitian childhood. (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p.34)

Each day is filled with hunger, fights, enemies, fear, police brutality, abuse, and even violence against one’s self. In Lima, self-mutilation is common among the street children. Speakman (2002) writes that the *piranitas*, as street children are called, can be identified by deep scars on their arms. Children will take a broken piece of glass and gouge deep gashes across their arms. Self-mutilation is a way of screaming—silently. It may gain them immediate release from a police officer who fears HIV/AIDS, or it may manipulate a partner to not leave them, but it is also a physical release to the inner pain they experience. A child can more easily survive physical pain inflicted on his or her own body, than the emotional pain of being rejected, abandoned, abused, unloved, or forgotten.

Through violence the children gain attention, they make names for themselves, they fight against their powerless positions – in short, they attempt to murder the silence...something must be done for the vulnerable and innocent who know no other way than this violence. We must give power and a voice to [the] children. (Speakman, 2002, p.102)

### ***Non-Persons***

*“And now, the way I look now, I am somehow a person”—Langora John, 12 yrs.*

The street, the police, and the public are indifferent and even contemptuous of the children on the street. They are ignored when begging and walked on when sleeping. They are walked around, over, and past without people even recognizing they are there. Their lives are so pitiful that many regard them as non-persons. Not only are they seen as non-persons by the police and the public, many are actually undocumented, living without birth certificates or any identification papers. Infact, in the rural areas and the slums of Haiti most children are completely undocumented, making age, identity, and paternity impossible to determine. Birth certificates in Haiti are a constitutional

guarantee, the *right to identity*, but they are rarely issued outside of major cities. Most children in the countryside do not have them, and most children in the slums do not have them. Many do not even know their own age. These street children are without civil identity. They are perceived as:

unsocialized, noncultural....They are in effect non-persons, whether they have been rendered invisible through their routinized street labours or criminalized by the civil society. It becomes easy under these circumstances to see them as undeserving of their civil and human rights. (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p.53)

### ***Police Harassment***

*“Ugly things happen on the street.”—Susna Gomez, 16 yrs.*

Since street children are so easily overlooked, with no voice of their own, there are few significant government programs or policies concerning street children in developing countries. Often it is the Anti-Gang Unit (AGU)—a paramilitary subdivision of the police force—that becomes the state’s primary agent in dealing with street-child issues. Although police policy regarding street youth may be one of “paternalistic protection”, actual child encounters with police officers are more frequently marked by verbal abuse, physical violence, and arbitrary detention. The civil and human rights of street children are severely compromised by these police officers, but the public is slow to react to their brutality. As urban citizens grow increasingly fearful of the urban landscape,

a quiet acquiescence to police violence against street children has permeated the public conscience. A malign civil distrust of street children coupled with an ambivalent state position concerning their lot has led to the criminalization of displaced children, who are erroneously designated the primary causes for the recent escalation of drug violence and gun terror on the streets of Port-au-Prince (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p.62).

In this urban environment, the guilt of the street child is presumed, and he or she becomes acceptable targets of police harassment.

Blak Lovli has had several encounters with the National Police and is routinely searched for drugs and weapons by the AGU, but has never been arrested. On one occasion he was sleeping in a vacant market stall when three Anti-Gang officers kicked him awake

As he rose the officers beat him with batons on his head and torso. He says of that incident, *“yo te frap’m fasil”* [they beat me easily, but not so badly] and told him to sleep somewhere else. Aside from this instance, and in spite of it, Blak Lovli believes that the police afford him some modicum of protection. He tells me stories of individual officers who have intervened in street fights on his behalf, who have given him food or money, or who have arrested older boys who have stolen from or beaten him. (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p.81)

Street children throughout the world are treated as a “blight to be eradicated” rather than as children deserving of protection and care (Human Rights Watch, 2001). They are subjected to physical and emotional and sexual abuse by police. Because they are homeless, they are detained arbitrarily, charged with vague offenses such as vagrancy, lurking, loitering, or petty theft. But there are many cases of torture, beatings, and even murder of street children by the police. This story was told by a 15 year old Guatemalan boy, Beto. R. to a Human Rights Watch interviewer:

The police treat us badly. They hit us. Not for any particular reason...just because they feel like it. They've hit me lots of times. They hit with their rifles, or with sticks, on our backs and stomachs. And sometimes they just punch us in the stomach with their hands. They also take our paint thinner and pour it over our heads. They've done that to me five times. It's awful. It hurts really bad. It gets in your eyes and burns. For half an hour you can't see anything. (Human Rights Watch, 2001, para.1)

Street children are easy targets for police. They are small, young, poor, and ignorant of their rights. They often have no responsible adult advocating for them.

In 2002, a social welfare report on the Cairo Juvenile Court in Egypt, described the condition of street children brought in after police interrogation:

The children come in from the police stations beaten up, tied together with ropes. They smell horrible—even the detention room downstairs smells bad and is filthy. [In the police stations] the police beat them and hang them from their feet, and use electricity on them. I've seen a seven-year-old come in with his face swollen from the blows. When you ask the *mukhbirin* [low ranking police] who brought them about the children's condition they tell you, 'Those [children] deserve worse than that treatment. They run away and they lie.' If you ask the child, the child is afraid to talk about ill-treatment by the police because he knows he will be hit when he leaves [the social welfare interview room]. (Human Rights Watch, 2003b, para. 4)

Egyptian police routinely arrest and detain homeless children who they consider to be “vulnerable to delinquency” or “vulnerable to danger.” These categories as set forth in Egypt's Child Law have become a pretext for mass arrests to clear the streets of children. In 2001, there were more than 11,000 arrests of children on these charges, 25% of all of the arrests of children in Egypt that year. Instead of arresting these children who are begging, homeless, truants, or mentally ill, Egypt and other developing nations need to develop programs to provide for the care and assistance that their *vulnerable* children need (Human Rights Watch, 2003b).

In 2003, a Human Rights Watch report charged police with routinely beating children in northern Brazil and detaining them in abusive conditions, centers that were decaying, filthy, and dangerously overcrowded. In these detention centers the children were brutalized by other youths, were confined to their cells for extended periods of time, and often did not receive the schooling to which the Brazilian constitution entitles them (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Street children lack the resources or power to challenge this police brutality. Parents rarely are informed if their children are detained. Few street children have advocates within the law enforcement system. Many street children are afraid to even report police brutality, fearing reprisals. Susana Gomez, a 16-year-old Guatemalan girl reported that she was raped by two officers while a third watched. She was threatened with prison for having marijuana if she made any noise. "I'm sure this has happened to many other girls. But usually they won't say anything about it... Ugly things happen on the street." (Human Rights Watch, 1997).

One role that NGOs can assume is that of keeping police accountable. In Guatemala, an NGO called Casa Alianza has actively tried to hold Guatemalan police accountable by filing hundreds of complaints against police brutality. Law enforcement is slow to investigate or prosecute these cases while violence against the children continues, but the role of victim advocacy and support is one that more and more NGOs are assuming. In 2006, an NGO called Consortium for Street Children received a grant to train Guatemalan police officers in child welfare and child protection policies and procedures (Consortium for Street Children, 2006).

### ***Causes of Child Displacement***

*"I don't want street children to be in town to solve the parent's problems."  
 –Shibolo Awala, 14 yrs.*

Over the past 25 years, economic pre-conditions for child displacement in the developing world has included: the collapse of rural economies, decline in agricultural production, mass exodus of poor farmers to larger villages and urban centers, rise in urban populations, high unemployment rates, and increased national debt, all leading to a steady decline in public health, complimented by a rise in child mortality and morbidity (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p. 70). Domestic pre-conditions for child displacement generally include the following: (1) a break down of the kin group. When the kin group support network fractures and members of the family leave permanently or die, children end up on the streets. (2) Lack of significant employment in the family. In such cases, child labor, often in the form of street labor, is essential for household economic stability. (3) High number of dependent children (especially nursing infants). The greater the number of dependent children in a family, the greater the likelihood that older children will need to be displaced to the streets to free up scarce household resources. (4) A kin group making significant migrations. A complicated pattern of family movements due to poverty or armed conflict leads to the break down of the village community that helps the poor raise their children. (5) Presence of abuse or neglect in the family. Domestic abuse is common and most of Kovats-Bernat's child informants reported having sustained beatings from relatives before they left for the street. Many of my child informants described domestic arrangements that included physical or emotional abuse. Added to these major factors, are drug abuse or alcoholism on the part of a family member, motivation by the child to help their families, a desire for greater social or economic independence from adults, and the belief that they have no other course for self-preservation. These are the factors that emerge repeatedly in children's accounts of their displacement to the streets (Kovats-Bernat, 2006).

Shibolo Awala, a fourteen-year-old from *Bumbobi*, Uganda, is a street child whose life illustrates many of these negative domestic conditions. Here is the story he told me:

I was living in a village, starting [in] 2001. There I was happy with my two parents, dad and mom, with my brothers and sisters. When once my father had quarreled with my mom and my mom chose to leave home and go to Kampala. After some months, my father married another wife. That wife started mistreating us. So father chose to take my brothers and sisters to the grandmother who produced him. So we stayed there, but still the houses are related with the other man. So for me, I chose the right place to settle is to the grandmother who produces the mom. So I went there. From there we stayed with Grandmom, but she also had no job. She could just go and dig for people and then they give her some money which we fed on. After some time she can go to dig for somebody and they refuse to pay her. . . . so I came in town. At once I went back with my friends. The next time I came I picked a crust in the streets, several, I took back (home). The next time I got tired and I chose not to go back to home, because it's a must my grandmother could ask for the Irish [potatoes] several [of them]. So I started staying in the town.

Awala left home because of his parents' separation, his mother's abandonment, an abusive stepmother, numerous migrations to different relatives' homes, his grandmother's unemployment, and the persistent problem of hunger wherever he lived. These are common reasons for a child's displacement to the streets.

Awala diagnoses the underlying problem of street children as being one where children solve their parent's problems by going to the street. He said,

When I grow up I do want to become a lawyer. I want to be a lawyer and all that to judge justly, to order [against] injustice. I don't want street children to be in town to solve the parent's problems. I want to avoid street children.

Child displacement is caused when the adults in a kin group no longer are able to care for their children, forcing the children into the streets to care for themselves. As the children grow up prematurely on the streets, they become the caregiver for their parents or grandparents. You can hear this inversion in nine-year-old Christine's story when she says that she wants to help her mom in the future. "No one can help my mom. I'm the one, I must help my mom. If she dies—then I remain alone." Christine's desperate desire to care for her mother is an inversion of a healthy family system where it is the adults who care for the children, not vice versa.

### **What can I do to help?**

*"When I grow up I want to become a lawyer. I want to be a lawyer and all that to judge justly, to order against injustice."* –Shibolo Awala, 14 yrs.

Awala is a wise young man when he states that forcing children onto the streets is an injustice. Awala's dream of becoming a lawyer is an important goal to work towards:

to judge justly, to order against injustice, and to avoid the problem of street children. It reminds me of the Jewish prophet, who wrote so many years ago:

He has shown you, O Man, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
And to walk humbly with your God.  
-- Micah 6:8

We all need to learn to act justly and to love mercy, and to walk more closely and humbly with our God. Things you can do to advocate for children of the street are to mediate on scriptures in the New Testament that teach us about our relationship to children and the poor, like Luke 9:46-48; 10:25-37.

We can take an active role in our community and nation on issues of justice and mercy. Watch local and national legislation that affects children at home and abroad. For example, support *The Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2007*. World Vision has information on its web site on legislation before the House and Senate that affects children worldwide. Send an email to your legislators. Advocate for street children politically. Vote for candidates who are child and family friendly.

Check out the web sites at the end of this chapter and get involved with a faith-based organization that is supporting street children. Help a street child become a school child through sponsorship or financial support of these faith based initiatives. Many NGOs provide street children with rehabilitation and schooling opportunities. A partial list is provided at the end of the chapter of exemplary programs or online resources.

One highly successful faith-based street children program is Child Restoration Outreach (CRO) in Uganda. CRO is set up as a day center. Outreach workers meet the children on the streets, develop relationships with them, and invite them to CRO where they bathe and are given clean clothes, fed, cared for medically, and counseled. Rehabilitation takes one year, during which they are still on the streets at night, but during the day they come to school at the day center. Workers try to find and place children with an adult care giver over this first year. They receive educational instruction to catch them up to their grade level and meet with social workers and counselors to try to find a workable domestic situation for them. A lot of time in rehabilitation is spent in singing, drama, and sports because the children's attention span is decreased, due to the effect of their drug addictions and lack of sleep while sleeping rough. CRO has winning soccer and drama teams which compete around the country with other communities as well as in other East African nations. These children are also disciplined and taught about the love of God for them. After their year in rehabilitation, they are placed in a safe home and local school. CRO pays for their schooling costs and continues to give the children lunch and after-school care. CRO is not a sponsorship program, but it depends on gifts from Western friends to support the outreach, counseling, rehabilitation classes, meals, health care, and educational costs that they provide for the children. CRO Mbale has impacted the lives of over 3,000 street children since 1992 (CRO, n.d.). Currently the project is supporting 530 children:

- 70 children attend the rehabilitation program
- 319 children are sponsored in primary school.

- 85 children attend secondary school.
- 2 children attend university, 16 attend other tertiary institutions,
- 15 children attend vocational training institute and informal vocational training, while 23 children are pending resettlement.

Train to improve your skills in working with children at risk. Check out the Viva Network website and learn about the *Celebrating Children* curriculum and training opportunities.

Consider spending a semester or a year serving street children through a faith-based Non Governmental Organization (NGO) similar to CRO in a part of the world that you are passionate about. Impoverished children and youth need young adults who can mentor and love them unconditionally. You will find many opportunities to teach English, math, health, sports, music, drama, computer skills, Bible, or to simply meet their daily needs for food and companionship. Now that you know something about the global problem of street children—you can become a part of the solution!

### Let's Talk About It

1. Describe Langora John's labor as a street boy. What surprised you about his life as a street boy?
2. Describe common deterrents to primary education in the developing world.
3. What is the fundamental right to identity? Why is it important?
4. Why is homelessness more difficult for girls than for boys? What are the consequences of child marriage?
5. Describe the different hazards of street life. Which would you find the most difficult?
6. Why did the American tourist give Blak Lovli \$1 and the other child nothing? What experiences of begging have you encountered? What does the Bible say about giving to the poor?
7. With so much pain in their lives, why would a street child self-mutilate? Why does Speakman say that children need power and a voice? What ways could this be accomplished?
8. Why does Kovats-Bernat describe street children as non-persons? Who are the people relegated to non-person status in our community? What does the Bible say about non-persons?
9. Why is police harassment so pervasive against youth on the streets worldwide? Do police harass minors in the U.S.?
10. Describe the economic and domestic preconditions that lead to child displacement.
11. What makes CRO an exemplary faith based NGO working with street children? What about their program is so successful?
12. Have you ever considered giving a semester or a year of your life to serving street children? What are your fears? What are your opportunities?

### Check Out These Web Sites

1. Casa Alianza – Covenant House, Latin America; [www.casa-alianza.org](http://www.casa-alianza.org)
2. Catholic Action for Street Children, Accra, Ghana; [www.cas-ghana.com](http://www.cas-ghana.com)
3. Celebrating Children was developed by [Viva Network](http://Viva Network) by a consortium of trainers and practitioners for Christians working in childcare in NGO's and churches; [www.celebratingchildrentraining.info](http://www.celebratingchildrentraining.info)
4. Child Restoration Outreach, Mbale, Uganda; [www.crouganda.org](http://www.crouganda.org)
5. Consortium for Street Children; [www.streetchildren.org.uk/resources](http://www.streetchildren.org.uk/resources)
6. Pangea: Streetchildren Worldwide Resource Library; [www.pangaea.org/street\\_children/kids.htm](http://www.pangaea.org/street_children/kids.htm)
7. Street Kids International; [www.streetkids.org](http://www.streetkids.org)
8. World Vision; [www.worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org)
9. Viva Network: Working together to bring more children better care; [www.viva.org](http://www.viva.org)

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