

Going to the Market - part 4—Street Children

Dear Friends,

In this article, the concluding part of the series on the market, I shall be talking about a phenomenon I mentioned in the January (#79) article, that of 'street children'. It is a phenomenon because of how it evolved onto the Ghanaian social scene. It just happened and has come to stay, creating not only the menace of truancy, but juvenile problems that confront the society at large. This phenomenon, from a recent survey has given their population to be in the region of more than 90,000.

In this article, I shall be describing the terms, 'street children', 'kayayo', and, 'teenage pregnancy', in the perspective of the Ghanaian standpoint and understanding. The 'street children' can come from one of three categories/groups in relation to this article. In one group are those teenagers who dropped out of school, or completed junior/senior high school but for various reasons couldn't continue, and come from the rural areas (mainly) trying to seek means of survival. The next group are those born on the streets and therefore have no homes of their own. Such children born to street girls who had been raped, impregnated, and abandoned, by street boys or irresponsible adults who exploit their predicament. The third group are orphaned children who find their way into the big towns because they have nobody to accept responsibility of taking care of them in their villages.

The term 'kayayo' is used to describe young girls who carry loads for people for a fee. They initially were girls from the northern part of Ghana, but when their trade seemed to be a source of income, other girls from all over (school dropouts, etc..) joined the gang. They gather in front of the shops or in the markets and offer to carry the loads of purchases for a fee. The other boys, and now the girls who don't carry loads for a fee, stand on the roadside and sell all manner of things to occupants of vehicles, and passers-by; dog chains, brushes, socks, etc.,

These teenagers (male and female) are described as 'street children' because they live on the street. They sleep anywhere they can find: in empty containers, in front of the shops, at the bus stops, etc., - with all their personal belongings - and resume their trade at daybreak. Initially, it was believed that adult males were the ones raping and impregnating the teenage girls, using their brute strength and domineering size to their advantage. But it now has become evident that the street boys who also sleep where the teenage, homeless girls sleep, take advantage of the weaker girls and pounce on them, impregnating them. The children born in such circumstances end up in the same condition as their teenage mother, carrying them on their backs as they bear those heavy loads for a fee.

The problem of teenage pregnancy is a national tragedy. But it is also becoming a menace, both in the towns among the 'street children' and in the villages, but most especially for the towns, creating real social problems for the government. The living conditions of these 'street children' are such that diseases break out easily among them with dimensions bordering on epidemic. They live in filth, and their standard of living is so poor that one wonders how they are able to survive day after day.

I chose to use the word menace in regards to the 'street children' appropriately because some, if not most of them are a threat to society, particularly the boys (the younger men/teenagers) among them. Some of the armed robbery gangs have been identified as having membership from the street boys. Their crimes can also include rape of other street girls. They have created a culture of their own, kind of a society within a society: their language, dress codes, and even their outlook seem different from society at large.

Some drastic attempts are made once in a while to force them to find congenial living quarters, but because they don't have the means to sustain it, they congregate and pack themselves into conditions that offend basic human hygienic expectations. Sadly, 70% of their children never go to school, therefore adding to the already dismal future that their teenage mothers are in themselves. Some of the children born under such terrible circumstances are already sick at birth with all kinds of health issues and disabilities.

Indeed, there is a lot of empathy in our society for the 'street children', resulting in a number of non-profit organizations springing up all around with the objectives of addressing whatever aspect of this problem that they choose to manage with support from the community or government. In recent times some churches and religious bodies have set up units to help them. And the government also set up a ministry which has an office within its mandate to try and find solutions to the challenges of the 'street children'.

Tragically, some Akrampa children have been lured onto the street, because some of them also face the same challenge of fending for themselves when they fail to continue their education, past our 6th grade mission school, for lack of resources or help.

Blessings, Pastor Ben