

Teenage pregnancy amidst vulnerability: The reality of street connected girls living and/or working on the streets.

The Government of Uganda has made significant progress in establishing legal and policy frameworks that create protective environments for all children in the country, including national and local mechanisms, aligned to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in 2008.

However, gaps in inclusion of the street connected girls in the planning processes, limited efforts in addressing their high risk of exploitation, high level of exposure to abuse (including sexual abuse) and marginalization, weakness in law

enforcement specific to street connected girls, weakness in coordination and networking among actors engaged in providing services to street connected girls, weak platforms for participation and sharing information regarding street connected girls, limited understanding of the push and pull factors and limited accountability mechanisms remain and continue to put the street connected children at risk.

Key Recommendations:

UCRNN calls for the Government of Uganda to:

1. Focus on strengthening legal and policy frameworks while developing targeted support programs. This involves reviewing and amending existing child protection laws to specifically cater to the unique vulnerabilities of street-connected girls.
2. Revive the centralized coordination mechanism that brings together government agencies, NGOs, community organizations, and law enforcement to ensure a unified response to the issues faced by street-connected girls.

Current Situation of girls living and/or working on the streets in Uganda.

There is no reliable estimates on the numbers of children living and/or working on the streets in Uganda. The Enumeration of Street Connected Children survey, coordinated by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in 2017, estimates that in Buganda region alone children, aged 7-17 years, living and/or working on the streets are over 4,671 children. Out of this, 30% of them were street girls in Kampala city alone, coming from a range of different backgrounds, ethnicity and ages, from var-

ious parts of the country and a few from neighbouring countries .

- On the streets, the girls, especially the older ones, are often less visible on the street, but silently working in places that make them not easily identifiable as street girls, such as domestic servants, in the suburbs and slums, in bars, markets, restaurants or involved in commercial sex in dark hours.
- As a result of their varying identities and locations in which they live, street girls have different experiences, needs and struggles and will use the street in diverse ways.

¹Hope For Justice, 2023

²The situation of street girls in Kampala and Addis Ababa, Retrak, 2012

³USAID, Situational analysis of street girls in Kampala, Uganda, 2010

The pull and push factors.

Poverty, family breakdown, lack of adequate parental care, domestic violence and physical and psychological abuse are part of the reasons that force the girls to go on the streets. They do not have good opportunities at home or in the community and so decide to leave for places they feel offer them a better chance in life. The family instability, due to various reasons often lead to children feeling unwanted and pushed out. There also increasing rural-urban migration in search for perceived better opportunities, and in the process most of them end up in the streets..

Some of the pull factors for street connected girls include the drive to find money be able to provide for their daily needs, and sometimes to support their families.

The plights and vulnerability of street connected girls

Girls living and/or working on the streets face a multitude of challenges that are unique to their gender and their vulnerable circumstances. Their daily lives are marked by numerous hardships, placing them at a higher risk of exploitation, sexual abuse and marginalization. Some of the key challenges faced by girls on the streets are.

a) Sexual exploitation of street connected girls:

These girls are at a heightened risk of abuse and violence, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse from various perpetrators, such as street gangs, criminals, and even law enforcement officials, which further increases their vulnerability.

According to NGOs working to support street girls in Buganda, the number of girls engaged in commercial sex is high yet it has been very difficult to determine the numbers due to the silent nature of this acts. Many of them were reported to get pregnant while others live as married just to protect and hide the status of being street girls.

Cases of rape and defilement often "die" naturally or abandoned as the girls themselves or the parents' compromise with those concerned for "something" small for financial gain, fear of shame and stigma. Follow-up of

these cases has been difficult because of lack of evidence and sometimes the cases are meddled up by the parties concerned.

b) Recruitment of the girls for commercial sex:

It has been observed that there are a many local rented rooms that have been turned into brothels, where the "boss" recruits the girls who are used to satisfy the customers' sexual needs at an agreed fee. After the acts, the girls are then paid small fee for their labour that mostly go without protection. This keeps the girls "satisfied" that at least they have a regular source of income.

c) Protective culture for girls engaged in sexual activities

In some of the suburbs and slums, where communal settlements have been established like the Karamojong, the acts of girls engagement in commercial sexual activities is viewed as normal, because "it is good" to protect the culture of togetherness, as long as the financial proceeds are benefitting the other relatives. This make it very difficult to trace or even follow-up the cases

d) Communal accommodation of boys and girls

In some areas, girls and boys group up together to rent one room where about 40-50 in number contribute a small amount of money each for paying the monthly rent. In the process, the boys and girls also engage in reckless sex, some getting pregnant, diseases and others aborting or going back to the village or another place.

Risk exposures for street connected girls

a) Lack of access to safe shelter, exposing them to violence, exploitation, and health risks, poor sanitation, lack of private and safe spaces
b) Health risks and inadequate healthcare - lack access to proper healthcare services, making it difficult for them to address their health needs and maintain their well-being.

c) Stigmatization and social exclusion, social stigma and discrimination, which further isolates them from mainstream society.

Recommendation

In response to the issues on the plights of girls living and/or working on the streets, UCRNN calls on the government to:

1. Strengthen existing child protection laws and policies in regard to street connected girls at all levels and improve national, regional and district level response and coordination of these mechanisms

a) Develop and/or strengthen strategies and regulations that is specifically directed at supporting and addressing the dynamics and concerns of girls living and/or working on the streets. The current trends show that the concerns of children living and/or working in the streets are missed or excluded in national planning targets and processes..

b) Strengthen coordination and networking mechanism for all actors engaged in providing services to girls living and/or working on the streets in respect to planning, programming, delivery of quality and comprehensive services and reporting on girls living and/or working on the streets..

2. Improve strategies for implementation of programs, policies, standards and regulations in regard to street connected girls at all levels

a) Strengthen programmes that integrate protection of children living and/or working on the streets into the formal programmes and reporting systems by all stakeholders involved. This should include data on children living and/or working in the streets

b) Develop and/or strengthen strategies that promote, create and strengthen platforms that open up opportunities for children including the girls, parents, communities and other stakeholders to express their views with an emphasis on issues that children/girls living and/or working on the streets at all levels.

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