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Stream: Gender

**Negotiating social identities on the street: the life course trajectories of street children in Tanzania**

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This paper explores the intersection of issues of age, gender and ethnicity in relation to the life course trajectories of street children<sup>1</sup> and young people in Tanzania. Based on empirical research, I analyse how children and young people negotiate their social identities, within the constraints and possibilities of the social institution of childhood and prevailing gender norms.

In recent years, the literature has increasingly recognised the multiple, fluid and often contradictory nature of identities and subjectivities (Weedon 1999).

- Identities are seen as ‘emerging out of and through people’s social relationships’ (Hockey and James, 2003).
- Paradigm shift in literature on street children, directing attention towards the influence of ‘time’ and ‘place’ in children’s experience on the street.

Despite public perceptions of street children as either ‘innocent victims’ or ‘deviant youths’, street children, like all children, are a highly differentiated group of people, with differences of age, gender, ethnicity, class, disability and other characteristics affecting their experiences, self-perceptions, and treatment by others. Researchers of street children’s lives are increasingly exploring the ways that differences such as age, gender, ethnicity and class affect their experiences.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on findings from ethnographic research conducted with street children while I worked as a volunteer development worker at a centre for street children in Arusha, northern Tanzania. A feminist child-focused methodology was undertaken.

- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with children and young people, parents and professionals from non-governmental organisations.
- This was combined with participatory visual techniques and home visits to the children’s families.

## Street careers and age

Some researchers of street children argue that the concept of a street or homeless 'career' is a useful analytic device for moving away from snap-shot descriptions of children and focusing attention instead on temporal changes in self-perceptions and social experiences, and on more long-term outcomes of homelessness.

Goffman (1961) defined the moral aspects of the concept of 'career' in terms of an individual's changing self-perceptions and 'felt identity' within a social system.

In individual interviews and focus groups with street children, boys' and girls' overwhelming perception was that life on the streets was 'bad' in terms of their physical and emotional well being, due to a lack of basic needs, an unhygienic living environment which made them susceptible to illness, harassment, verbal and physical abuse, street violence, drug use, the risk of sexual coercion and sexual abuse. Furthermore, they seemed to have internalised negative connotations of 'street life' dominant in the wider community, accepting the normative view that street life is morally 'bad'. This was linked to the 'deviant' behaviour they were forced to adopt as survival strategies, such as drug use, stealing, commercial sex work, violence and sexual abuse.

Despite exposure to often severely traumatic experiences, girls and boys demonstrated considerable resilience through developing social networks with their peers, adults (such as night watchmen and shopkeepers) and 'shopping around' different non-governmental organisations set up for their benefit to meet their needs for food, clothing, medical treatment, protection, education and entertainment.

- They also mentioned positive aspects of street life, such as freedom of movement, the attractions of 'modern' urban lifestyles and employment opportunities for a cash income, educational opportunities from NGO projects, the sense of self-esteem they by earning their own money and leading independent lives away from forms of adult control within the household.

One young person interviewed, Adam<sup>2</sup> (aged 17) experienced a combination of extreme poverty, his father's alcoholism and domestic violence at home, thus, there were few incentives to stay. Street life, on the other hand, offered the chance to earn a cash income and the freedom to spend it as he chose, giving him a sense of liberation from oppressive adult-child relationships:

*I liked begging because I got money and when I got money I could do whatever I wanted with it, even if you want to smoke marijuana, there's no one to control you (16/7/00).*

Similarly, a fourteen year old girl commented: *'I used to like to live on the streets because I saw that I was free. I could go wherever I wanted'.*

The research suggests that age and time spent on the street influence the livelihood strategies available to young people within the informal sector in Tanzania. The young people participating in the study all cited begging as the first strategy they employed to earn money. Their accounts suggested that the effectiveness of this

strategy was related to their age, time spent on the street and adult attitudes towards children.

One of the young people's accounts shows how the notion of a young street child as a 'cute, innocent, victim' influenced his success at begging from wealthy Western tourists:

*'I went to beg from the tourists and because I was little, they used to give me food, money and I was very happy. I used to be able to get 2,000 Tsh. or 5,000 Tsh. [equivalent to £5]'*.

- Younger street children are more able to elicit compassion and a handout from tourists, due to Western concepts of childhood, which perceive younger children as 'innocent victims'.
- Older street children, on the other hand, may be forced to resort to stealing or commercial sex work. This reflects public perceptions that they are 'deviant' youths engaging in criminal acts, who do not deserve a handout.

While street youths are conceptualised as 'deviant' and are marginalized by society, they are also perpetrators of patriarchal social relations, and younger street boys and girls are a group over whom they can exert some power. Younger street children face considerable harassment, violence, theft and sexual abuse from older street youths. Thus, age, and the accompanying increased physical strength, combined with processes of temporality, represent key factors which determine to a large extent young people's stage of 'moral career' on the street.

### **Gendered places and life course trajectories**

The research with street children in Arusha found that gender was a salient differential which influenced young people's use of public space, their 'street careers' and life course trajectories.

Many of the research participants (both male and female) perceived girls to be more vulnerable than boys to sexual violence whilst living on the street, supporting the notion of being the 'wrong' gender and in the 'wrong' place.

Several of the girls interviewed thought that life on the streets was more dangerous for girls because of sexual violence and abuse, as one girl commented:

*It's easy for boys, they are more able to survive on the streets. Girls get more problems, a youth could want you and force you and you don't want him, he beats you. Or you can get pregnant and the youth rejects you.*

However, the experiences of street boys participating in the study showed that younger boys are also vulnerable to rape and abuse from older street youth, night watchmen, the police and other men. Thus, assumptions about exclusively female sexual vulnerability are not born out by young people's experiences.

- Girls experienced of higher levels of discrimination and verbal and physical abuse from members of the public.

The livelihood strategies and employment opportunities in the informal sector available to girls and young women were more limited than for boys. While some girls participating in the study engaged in small business activities, begging or theft, in interviews, many of the street girls said that they were employed as domestic workers within people's homes for periods of up to several months, where they were sometimes exploited and harassed. Many girls and young women engaged in sexual relationships with older men or youths in exchange for resources, and some were occasionally involved in commercial sex work. Boys and young men, on the other hand, were more able to survive by begging, doing a range of casual jobs in the informal sector, or working in the mining industry. Thus, the social position of street girls is doubly marginal to that of street boys, in terms of discrimination and income-generation opportunities.

The narratives of the young women interviewed suggest that their 'street careers' were characterised by considerable fluidity of movement between the street, periods of domestic work in exchange for food, shelter and financial support, staying with friends and boyfriends, and sometimes NGO projects. They would rarely stay in households where they performed domestic work for longer than a few months and often returned to the street, to friends' places or NGO projects if they felt they were being exploited or abused.

The narrative of Upendo (aged 17), a young woman staying at an NGO centre who used to engage in commercial sex work illustrates this sense of mobility and transience:

*We used to live in a guest house. We used to stay two to a room, and other girls each had their own room. [...] We stayed for a long time, then I went to [Tanzanite mining town] for three months. When I came back, I didn't stay for long in the guest house, about one week, then I came here.*

- Despite girls' doubly marginal position on the street, they are actively challenging hegemonic gender norms by pursuing independent lifestyles in urban areas.

### **Performing gender**

Judith Butler (1990)'s theory of 'gender performativity' provides a useful way of theorising the process whereby girls find themselves positioned as the 'wrong' gender in the 'wrong' place on the street. According to Butler (1990; 1993), 'gender' is conceived as a set of acts that are reiterated to produce the appearance of a stable identity category in the regulation of hegemonic norms. Butler argues that society punishes individuals who do not conform.

- Since girls and young women on the street cannot be situated in their conventional place as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers performing domestic duties in the home, they are overwhelmingly characterised as sexual beings, and the stigma of prostitution is attached to them.

Several studies have highlighted the fact that most of the thirty-six street children projects in Tanzania provide services predominantly to boys, and the number of girls in projects which provide services to both boys and girls is very minimal.

One project co-ordinator in Arusha felt that the stigma of prostitution affected the needs of street girls and responses taken by NGOs:

*The difference comes only with the stigma, the label that society puts on them. Boys are called robbers, thieves, difficult children – this is the label. The girls are labelled as prostitutes, therefore their needs are different only because of the stigma, because when it comes to handling, they need to be handled differently.*

- Projects that work with street girls appear to be driven by restrictive notions of girls' sexuality, often linked to the Christian philosophy of the projects. Street girls are accustomed to their independence on the street, and are likely to reject such restrictive institutions.

Thus, the discrimination and stigma associated with girls' presence on the street is mirrored in their access to service provision, as well as in their treatment by service providers, reinforcing the notion that girls are the 'wrong' gender in the 'wrong' place.

### **Constructing boys and girls' places**

Since young people's presence on the street subverts norms of childhood, and in the case of girls, norms of gender, they construct different urban spaces as safe, gendered places for shelter, to minimise the risk of harassment and abuse. Many of the boys mentioned a relatively stable attachment to territories, where they regularly slept, under the protection of a night watchman. Girls' presence on the street was less visible and therefore girls often stayed in guesthouses, or in temporary accommodation with girlfriends or boyfriends/ partners for periods of up to several months, rather than sleeping out on the street.

The photographs that street boys and girls (aged 14-16) took over a 24-hour period to represent their lives illustrate how children and young people construct and negotiate different gendered places and identities within the street environment. The photographs taken by street boys show images of themselves in public spaces with their male friends. They are engaged in a range of activities. Here, you can see them crouching in front of a popular tourist café, where they were often chased away from; and here, there is a boy showing off a watch while the other put a finger up at the camera in front of an independence monument in the small park where they often played football and relaxed in the afternoons. These images suggest that the boys were very self-aware that they were children 'out of place' in the street without adult supervision and that consequently, society imposes the label of 'street children' on them. Through playfully manipulating the images, they are parodying stereotypical assumptions about their deviant behaviour in the centre of town, where they are considered a social embarrassment and nuisance to foreign visitors.

The photographs taken by some of the street girls differ markedly from those taken by the street boys and suggest that girls construct their own gendered places in urban areas within predominantly private spheres. Here you can see the girls in domestic settings, outside the two small rooms rented by one of the girls' mother, where they had lived together for the past few months. The girls are hanging out with older boys (who they told me were their boyfriends); and dancing. In the same way as the boys'

photographs, these images show how girls and young women resist hegemonic norms and assumptions about their behaviour as 'prostitutes'. They also illustrate how young women construct their own gendered sense of place or 'geographies of resistance' within the urban environment (Beazley 2002).

### **Reconfiguring norms of the 'family' and 'home'**

Theorizing about the life course has challenged the idea of the 'home' as a fixed space within which different members of the family live and embraces a broader definition of home as 'where and how identities come into being' (Hockey and James, 2003:175).

Children and young people who live, work and sleep in the street environment in Tanzania, largely without adult supervision, or those who stay in street children institutions set up for their benefit after a period on the street, can be seen as actively reconfiguring traditional notions of 'home' and 'the family'. By making their home on the street or in street children centres, young people are redefining their social identities and organising their living arrangements among their peers rather than within traditional kinship relations.

- Children and young people who move to the street can be seen as rejecting conventional kinship relations and household structures, which, in their narratives of 'home', they often experienced as oppressive.
- The stage of young people's 'street careers' and processes of temporality affect how young people negotiate their relationships with their peers and reconfigure concepts of 'home' and 'family'.

As they became older, some young women moved into a rented room with their male partners, particularly if they became pregnant, recreating a new sense of 'home' and 'family'. However, they could also be seen as participating and colluding in hegemonic gender relations and reaffirming heterosexuality.

Using Butler's notion of 'iterability', it is through the constant repetition of gender performances in different contexts, such as homelessness and dislocation from conventional kinship relations, that such dominant norms are destabilised and subverted. This enables new meanings and more empowering and supportive family forms to emerge, such as the experiences of some of the girls who lived with their peers with one of their friend's mother. Street girls often stay with friends for periods of up to several months as a strategy to avoid sleeping on the street or as an escape from abusive relationships. Young women appear to construct female-headed households in urban areas as safe, gendered places, and reconfigure notions of the 'home' and 'family' through their friendships with their peers and other women.

### **Ethnicity and cultural values**

- Both boys and girls felt a sense of collective identity as street children regardless of ethnicity and were found in groupings of mixed ethnicity, thus belonging to particular ethnic groups did not appear to significantly affect young people's self-perceptions and social relations on the street.

- Swahili was the common language used on the street, as throughout Tanzania, which meant that young people's ability to speak their local tribal language often diminished in relation to the period of time spent away from their 'home' communities.
- Ethnicity and cultural values, manifest in initiation rites of boys and young men, intersected with gender and age to provide opportunities for becoming reintegrated into 'home' communities for temporary or more permanent periods, depending on the time spent on the street<sup>3</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that young people's 'street careers' and gendered life-course trajectories in Arusha, northern Tanzania are characterised by considerable diversity and fluidity of movement.

- Gender, age, and time spent on the street and to a lesser extent, ethnicity, are important factors which intersect to both constrain and enable children and young people to construct their social identities.
- Girls are positioned as doubly marginal on the basis of gender and age inequalities and have differential access to service provision.
- Girls are actively subverting gender norms by seeking independent lifestyles in towns and cities.
- The street represents a transitional stage for some young people, until they can assume a more adult and independent status in the community.
- As children and young people grow older, they reconfigure norms of 'the family' and 'home', establishing new household forms with their peers within the freedom of the urban environment.
- Girls and young women seek relationships with male partners as a way to create their own families and for financial support.
- This highlights the importance of diversity and processes of temporality in understanding children and young people's life course trajectories on the street.

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## **Notes**

1. The term 'street children' is in itself problematic, since it sets up a dichotomy between children who use the street to live and work, and 'normal' children who live at home. However, the term is used here to discuss the particular situation of children and young people who live independently on the street in urban areas, supporting themselves, largely without adult supervision and with little or no family contact, or those who were staying in street children centres or other temporary accommodation, following a period on the street.
2. The names of all research participants and non-governmental organisations involved in the research have been changed to protect anonymity.
3. The illegality of female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) meant that there was widespread secrecy about the practice among tribes who still performed FGM, such as the *Waarusha*. The research was therefore not able to explore girls' experiences of female initiation rites.

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