

*Review*

## Traits of street children

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**Street children: who are they? Why are they homeless? How do they actually live on the streets? What quality of life do they enjoy? What are the characteristics of these children? These questions appear to be simple, but the answers are so very complex. Very often the public lacks proper information about these children and they instinctively judge and cast aspersion on them. This non-empirical paper presents a clear understanding about some of the characteristics of street children. With the use of existing literature, it tries to provide a definition and quantify the number of street children. It explains the difference between children “on” and “of” the streets and highlights some of the notions of street culture. It is the firm view that if the public is more cognizant of the reasons these children live on the streets, they may tend to be sympathetic and understanding to their needs. This paper does not evoke sensationalism but tries as far as possible to create an awareness of the lifestyle of street children.**

**Key words:** Street children, street culture, street life.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, there have been a growing number of children who live on the streets. Although very little is still known about them, they are often regarded in a negative light. This non-empirical paper explains some of their characteristics with the support of existing literature. It offers possible definitions and shows the complexity in trying to quantify them. It examines the difference between children “on” and “of” the streets and talks about street culture. It is the firm view that if people are more informed about the lifestyle of these children, they may be more sensitive to their needs.

### DEFINITION OF STREET CHILDREN

Mondal (2013) holds the firm view that “Children are the

source of hope and inspiration for the society.” He further insists: “That is why they have the right to be brought up in a positive environment”<sup>1</sup>. This perspective by Mondal (2013) is crucial, but it is completely contrasting when one tries to arrive at a conceivable definition of street children. There exist many definitions on the grounds that different countries construe them in several ways. Thus, it is very complex to accurately formulate an accurate one for them. Reza and Henly (2018) believe that the street environment is often filled with illness, violence and poverty and these children rely on each other for survival. Consortium for Street Children (CSC) notes that many people use the terms “street children” and “homeless children” interchangeably but there are some differences. For example, not all street children are homeless.

Some of them seek accommodation at night shelters

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and hostels. Conversely, children who are described as street children are not necessarily homeless. They work, play, and spend time on the street, but return to their family or parents. The street is their home and they do just about everything for survival. In this manner, they become vulnerable (Kwaku, 2019).

A review of the literature clearly indicates that street children are often described in a negative manner. Atwar and Engkus (2020) state that: "Street children are always associated with acts of violence, crime, and social disturbances"".

They become socially susceptible and vulnerable to their environment, both as causes and victims. Dabir (2014) notes that unsupervised minors who constantly dwell on the streets and make it a source of livelihood could be considered as street children. Irawati et al. (2021) think that street children work on the streets and unsuitable places such as under bridges and vacant land. They also hold no support from family and are unsupervised. Embleton et al. (2016) suggest that street children are persons, aged 12 to 24, for whom the street is their chief source of livelihood, and they also spend a significant time on the streets. Mulekya et al. (2021) define them as individuals who literally dwell on the streets. Sanjay et al. (2019) note that street children are constantly at high risk. They are vulnerable to all types of exploitation, abuse and sickness. They are also deprived, neglected and denied of their rights; especially those of their childhood. Sanjay et al. (2019) also claim that without proper guidance, these children may look forward to a very uncertain and productive future. The preceding paragraphs demonstrate the complexity to arrive at a factual definition of street children. The following segment demonstrates the difficulty to quantify them.

## NUMBER OF STREET CHILDREN

It is instructive to mention that the lifestyle of these children is dynamic for the simple reason that they constantly change locations or move from one area to another. However, they commonly live in public spaces like markets, parks, buses, or train stations to name a few. Most of these spots have no access to the basics: food, water, and clothing (Brenda et al., 2020). Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain the exact population. There are many factors that contribute to the increase of street children (Atwar and Engkus, 2020). Darragh (2019) offers this likely explanation for the inability to adequately quantify street children. They explain that these children tend to move from one location to another. They practise this behaviour for the simple reason they do not want to be caught. Sofiya and Galata (2019) further add that because the life of street children is often secluded, it is almost impossible to ascertain an accurate number for those who dwell on the streets. Jacob and Teresa (2018) offer a similar

perspective and add that this is probably because very little is known about them. Sanjay et al. (2019) support this position and further claim that the phenomenon of street children is very common in many cities of Nepal. Mondal (2013) also believes that this difficulty exists because these children are marginalized and form a "hidden" population. He states that this issue is further exacerbated since the population often fluctuates. However, Mondal (2013) indicates that about 100,000 and 125,000 children reside on the streets and railway stations of some cities of India.

While it is not easy to quantify them, Opong et al. (2014) hold the firm view that this is a global phenomenon and perhaps millions of children inhabit the streets. Mokoena (2021) also believes that this is a growing social problem.

Sofiya and Galata (2019), state that globally the number of street children continues to rise at an alarming proportion. They further claim most of the street children in developing countries total about 650 million. On an international scale, there are about 100 million street children, and this number continues to increase rapidly with a high concentration in the developing world (Kamruzzaman and Hakim, 2015). UNICEF (2012) state: "Globally there are over 100 million street children: 40 million in Latin America, 30 million in Asia, 10 million in Africa and the remaining 20 million in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia." UNICEF (2012) claims that while it is impossible to quantify street children, they are increasing daily at alarming proportions.

The aforementioned demonstrates that it is neither easy to establish a proper definition of street children nor quantify them. It also highlights that street children form the most vulnerable groups in any society. They regularly encounter tremendous hardships and difficulties on the streets. They are marginalized, deprived, and ostracized. They are often treated with scant courtesy and are shunned and ignored by a majority of members of the wider society. The next segment describes life on the streets.

## STREET LIFE

The term "street" does not exactly convey the same meaning for street children as it does for the public (Aptekar and Stoecklin, 2014). It is instructive to mention that the word "street" is made up of an integral part of life for street children.

It is their world, their environment; way of life, their abode (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014). They survive on the streets. They establish friendship on the streets. They socialize on the streets. A review of the literature, Makofane (2014), Nega et al. (2021), (Reza and Bromfield, 2019a), Sorber et al. (2014), Stephen and Udisi (2016) recognises the plight of street children. They state that street children are always associated with acts of

violence, crime, and social disturbances. They become socially susceptible and vulnerable to their environment; both as causes and victims.

In almost every part of the world, there is a growing presence of street children (United Nations, 2017). Darragh (2019) states that globally these children experience a poor quality of life which is often marred by violence. Research in Bangladesh by Reza and Bromfield (2019b) revealed that street children are exposed to all types of abuse and exploitation. Their findings also regard street children as those who perform: “3-D” jobs dirty, dangerous, and demanding. These children do not possess a permanent residence nor a comfortable place to lay their heads. Hence, it is not unusual for them to dwell and sleep in abandoned shops, stores, cinemas, and marketplaces. Some even live in bus terminals, railway stations and under bridges. Very often, these places are not hygienic and riddled with rats and other animals that could spread disease. They drink water from the drains and use public bathrooms and toilets where available. Some girls, because they are more vulnerable, often spend their nights with security guards. This type of behaviour only compounds the scenario and makes them susceptible to further abuse (Okoequale et al., 2020). In this way, the phenomenon of street remains a big issue, Irawati et al. (2021), this vicious cycle continues, and street children suffer considerably.

Sorber et al. (2014) suggest that because these children lack adult supervision, they are subjected to psychosocial, emotional, and social problems. This often lowers their self-esteem, and they are reduced to feeling inferior. Moreover, they are prone to contracting communicable diseases. Kwaku (2019) conducted research in Accra and claimed that street children work mainly as porters and sex workers. These illicit activities further expose them to great risks. Therefore, it goes without saying they are even more prone to violence, sexual abuse, and physical and psychological harm.

Life on the streets is utterly burdensome, exacting, and oppressive. It is not uncommon for street children to work in car parks carrying out menial tasks. Some of them sell goods and beg at traffic intersections. Life is so harsh and rugged that some of them exchange sex for money.

As mentioned in the definition, street children are the most vulnerable group in society. Accordingly, they continually face difficulties and hardships on the streets. Mokoena (2021) notes that street children ought to find ways to survive on the streets. A study done in South Africa by Makofane (2014) describes them as resourceful. Kwaku (2019) offers the view that social relationships and interpersonal resources boost them to become more resilient and cope with adversity. In the midst of this grim reality, they cultivate survival and coping skills. For example, they are aware of the various places people gather for worship and invariably appear there so as to benefit from almsgiving. They are also mindful of certain religious and cultural events, and they show up to gain access to money, food, and clothing.

They also benefit from the various NGOs and charitable organizations.

A review of the Literature (Chowdhury et al., 2017; Hills et al., 2016; Ogunkan and Adeboyejo, 2014) strongly suggests that street children regularly act in a peculiar type of behaviour on the streets. In almost all parts of the world, street children live in primary streets in the city. During the day, they wander aimlessly to looking for “employment” and money. At night, they sleep wherever possible. Some avail themselves to deserted, abandoned, and derelict buildings while others sleep on the pavement and streets. They generally use cardboard boxes, newspapers, and untidy bedding to shield themselves from the elements. Although the literature presents street children in diverse ways, Derivois et al. (2019), Raju and Sharmin (2016) and Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (2016) suggest that they basically fall into two main categories: children “on” the streets and children “of” the streets.

### **CHILDREN “ON” THE STREETS**

The literature (Aptekar and Stoecklin, 2014; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 2016) states that children “on” the streets work extraordinarily hard and under difficult conditions to maintain themselves and their families. Some of them preserve contact with their families while others go back home “after work.” Others return periodically to a drop-in centre. Children “on” engage in the following tasks: cleaning and shining shoes, selling newspapers or snacks, washing cars or performing menial jobs in mechanic shops, stores, or groceries. Although children “on” the streets work, they supplement their meager income by engaging in “illicit” pursuit such as drugs and prostitution. It is no surprise that because they are involved in such activities they are often arrested and subsequently interrogated by the police. Children “on” the streets work at a very tender age and very often their education and social life are frequently suspended.

### **CHILDREN “OF” THE STREETS**

Children “of” the streets believe and think that the streets are their homes. They spend most of the time patrolling the streets and safeguarding their territory. They work on the streets. They beg for the basic: food, money, clothing, and anything that would make their life more comfortable. They take to stealing or get involved in prostitution and drugs.

Unlike children “on” the streets, they seldom visit their families and do not even find pleasure in talking about them. When they describe or speak of their life at home, it is usually delivered in a flippant, melancholy, and dismissive manner. It is interesting to mention that children “of” the streets are usually more aggressive and more violent than children “on” the streets.

As a collective group - children “on” and “of” the streets customarily begin the day very early; perhaps at 05.00 a.m. Those who work during the night begin at around 10.00 a.m. This schedule is flexible and unplanned. Children “on” or “of” the streets constantly struggle to survive. Survival on the streets is of paramount significance. Consequently, street children do whatever it takes to survive. According to the Literature (Derivois et al., 2019; Hills et al., 2016), some of them survive by selling whatever they can find. Some even sell themselves.

In view of the fact that most of them live in deteriorating physical environments like marketplaces, bus stations, rum shops, busy streets, and traffic intersections, they are susceptible to several risks. Apart from enduring hunger, they are also exposed to social, psychological and mental hazards. To further compound this scenario, most of them have little or no educational opportunities and are conceivably illiterate. Thus, according to the Literature (Aptekar and Stoecklin, 2014; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 2016). The streets form an integral component of their lives. It is on the streets that they satisfy their basic needs: food, water, clothing, and shelter. In addition, they earn a living on the streets. This is the harsh reality: wretched and deprived, they are forced to call this space their home. This vicious cycle continues. These children who experience abuse and rejection at home embrace a similar practice on the streets.

Some members of the public may envision the lives of street children in different ways. Some think that these children hold opportunities, but they deliberately choose to live on the streets. A sympathetic and caring public may unwittingly contribute to the presence of street children. This occurs especially when street children are young. Those, about four years old, who beg on the streets or in the marketplace, look innocuous, pathetic and heartbreaking. These street children may solicit and receive donations without much difficulty. Their parents are delighted and have little or no reservation in allowing their young children to continue to beg as they are likely to bring in a sizable income. However, when these children develop physically and show signs of maturity, a totally different scenario develops. They are often chased away in an aggressive manner from occupying public space. As these children grow older, they are very often dehumanized and rejected, and this makes begging and vending even more complex.

Some street children are also vulnerable to pressures and demands from drug dealers, pimps, criminals, and pornographers. These people manipulate and exploit them. The children are promised money, food, clothing and a place to stay. Since the glamour of obtaining “easy” money is very appealing and enticing, they succumb to illegal attachments. In return for favours received, they are obligated to follow the dictates of their “new owners” and consequently they become involved in all sorts of illicit practices like burglary, prostitution, selling drugs,

and performing lewd acts.

Bar-On (1997) does not object to children who beg on the streets. While he does not evoke sensationalism, he concedes that individuals cannot: “...ignore the fact that street children are at risk and lead a harsh life.” However, he cautions individuals against categorizing street children as vulnerable and maligning them without fully understanding their situations. Bar-On (1997) argues that: “...as harsh as their situation is, it is wrong to think of it as invariably miserable or distressing.” Furthermore, Bar-On (1997) argues that people ought not to simply condemn children who work or sell on the streets without first investigating the entire scenario. He claims as poverty escalates; young boys become idle due to the fact that they are unable to find employment. The girls, on the other hand, are forced into menial domestic chores. Although life on the street is unbearable, it offers work and provides material security so that street children are not totally overwhelmed and absorbed by abject poverty. Therefore, according to his view, street children who beg and work on the streets are provided with a: “...measure of material security, which few of their non-working siblings and friends have.” More importantly, begging and working on the streets, according to Bar-On (1997) gives some street children a little “ray of hope.” It takes away the daily drudgery of poverty which in most cases would be absolute idleness for the boys and hard domestic labour for the girls. Moreover, begging on the streets may help to somewhat reduce the distress of the likely troubled interpersonal relationships that may have occurred at their poverty-stricken homes.

To refute the perspective presented by Bar-On (1997), Campos et al. (1994) contend that the rugged life that children face on the streets, regardless of the meagre rewards, could have an adverse effect on their long-term development.

They believe that the illicit and non-productive activities that street children engage in during their daily lives are harmful and include the potential to influence them negatively. Old habits usually become entrenched in people’s systems and are difficult to change. In the case of street children, there is no difference. Some of them have become so accustomed to the rugged life on the streets that possible alternatives to that life seem difficult to accept. Le Roux (1996) notes that when such behaviour among street children continues without proper mediation, the gap between them and mainstream society gets wider. It can be argued that the longer children are on the streets the more they are: “distanced from possible rehabilitation resources and thus become absorbed into the street life culture.”

## **SNIFFING GLUE TO SURVIVE**

As mentioned previously, some street children beg in

order to survive. Others work to maintain themselves and their family. Still, some engage in illegal activities. On the other hand, there are those who turn to other “substances” as a means of dealing with the hunger and frustration that they encounter on the streets.

In many parts of the “developing” world, street children use solvent-based glue to take away the pangs of hunger, to relieve themselves of the cold temperature and cope with fear and frustration. It also gives them the courage to steal and engage in survival sex. It is a pragmatic response to a life characterized by hopelessness as Mondal (2013) explains that drug and solvent abuse is widespread as an escape from the reality of daily life and many children are forced to turn to crime to survive.

The use of glue keeps children attracted to the streets (Oppong et al., 2014). They become addicted to the glue, but the use of this substance causes a change in their personalities and most of them turn very aggressive and hostile to one another and to members of the public. Although the use of solvent-based glue may render some measure of comfort to street children, it seems to have adverse social effects and deleterious physiological consequences. Sanjay et al. (2019) say that the persistent use of solvent-based glue can damage the liver, lungs and brain and can ultimately lead to sudden death.

Sanjay et al. (2019) explain that the term “inhalant” refers to a variety of household and commercial products that are legally available. They include volatile solvents such as gasoline, glue, paint and polishes, anesthetics such as chloroform, ethers and nitrous oxide, nitrates and aerosols. These products can be inhaled deliberately into the system by sniffing or huffing. The chemicals found in inhalants are as varied as their use. Cigarette lighters and refills contain the gas butane. Paint thinner may have toluene, turpentine ethylacetate or mineral spirits. Fingernail polish remover and rubber cement contain acetone. Pressurized cans of hair spray, computer cleaners and whipped cream contain fluorinated hydrocarbons. Medical anesthetic gases contain chloroform, halothane, or nitrous oxide, and are also known as “laughing gas.”

Thus far, with the use of literature, definitions were offered an attempt to quantify them was made. Street life was also explained. This next portion looks at some of the literature as it pertains to street culture.

## **STREET CULTURE**

In general, culture denotes customs, habits, and beliefs. It provides tradition and information that narrates how certain events were carried out in the past. Akande (2009) believes that certain customs and beliefs can help to explain particular events that have occurred in the past. Customs can help to make the social adjustment of

some people more predictable where individuals know what to expect and how to behave in a given situation. Akande (2009) contends that several factors help to form various cultures and the environment is one such area. For example, people who live in rural areas where there are often vast expanses of fertile soil typically become farmers and cultivate the land. Co-operation by all residents is often required for the successful cultivation of crops. Thus, it is not unusual for farmers to be seen working together, tilling the soil, irrigating the land or reaping the harvest. Those who do not conform would not be good co-workers. As a result, Akande (2009) argues that socialisation in such cultures emphasises dependability, responsibility and conformity and concludes that the realities of an environment create the condition for the development of particular cultural, socializing and behavioural patterns.

Street children dwell in an environment of hostility. They are neglected by members of the public and they often lack proper parental guidance Ilan (2016). Ehsan et al. (2017) and Eriksen and Mulugeta (2016) claim that people raise children differently. Children who are brought up in a warm, supportive, and caring environment usually turn out optimistic and well adjusted. However, those who are raised in a cold, indifferent, uncaring manner and are subjected to frequent punishment and abuse are pessimistic. They perceive themselves as inferior and do not like themselves. They are usually unresponsive and adjust poorly to changing circumstances. By trying to appreciate street culture, observers can realize that ideas and understandings can be found in collective life through anthropological fieldwork. Such work is interpretive, evocative and raises many questions.

The telling of stories and creation of myth can help individuals perpetuate a certain opinion about a particular culture and its lifestyle. This point of view may not always be purely negative. This is so because words, stories, myths, music, paintings, and objects are considered symbols. Symbols encode meanings and help people recognize culture. Rituals facilitate changes and certain rituals carried out by street children orient them to street life and are easily identifiable. They wear earrings, have tattoos over their bodies, smoke, swear, have a filthy appearance, practise “free sex” and use lurid gestures and slangs. Street children whose very manner of dressing does not conform to that of mainstream culture are perceived as outsiders. Street children who use language that is unconventional are sometimes regarded as outsiders from the mainstream culture. Generally speaking, street children are often regarded as uncouth. They are considered to be troublemakers and delinquents. Therefore, the public may not be able to identify with those who live on the streets. They may experience great difficulty in trying to comprehend street culture that may appear peculiar to them.

According to Ehsan et al. (2017) and Eriksen and

Mulugeta (2016) one of the basic tenets of culture is to establish proper social relationships. It is no surprise that those who live in the streets also have their own way of relating, thinking, and conducting themselves. To try to understand the lives of streets children, people need to study street culture and what it entails: the behaviour of street children and the way these children interpret their world. This is not easy to accomplish. It is demanding in that the notion of street culture is complex; especially when most of the depictions of these children are downright negative.

People create their own meanings in the situation, and this is precisely what street children do. They come together and literally form their own culture. Therefore, street culture is not a phenomenon. It is dynamic. It is a process. It is a way of life. Street life offers a means through which these children, who are considered alienated by society, can collectively voice their indignation. They express their dissatisfaction about the way they are treated by the State and society. They also speak about the lack of treatment and support they get from their family. On the streets, they share their experiences which often prove to be similar. Beazley (2000) adds that: "Often, street children are fleeing poverty or abusive home situations, and on the streets, they find others with similar experiences."

Through this sharing amongst themselves, street children experience comfort and security. Therefore, they have no qualms on sharing their deepest hurts and emotions. Beazley (2000) believes that by sticking together, street children feel empowered and so they can allow themselves to refuse and simultaneously subvert State ideology to some degree.

They earn money, find enjoyment, and feel safe among themselves. They develop intense emotional bonds and individual status, a position of authority and valuable connections. In mainstream society, they have nothing. They have no friends. They have no family. Very few people understand their culture and problems arise even if street children want to be integrated into mainstream culture. Beazley (2000) states that once they have experienced street life for a considerable length of time it is very difficult for street children to return to "re-assimilate into dominant society."

The behaviour pattern of the subculture of street children often represents a challenge to the values and rules of the dominant culture. This is because street children still interact with the external world of mainstream society although this interaction can sometimes be superficial. A desire for street children to return to mainstream culture means more than just abandoning the streets and returning home. Beazley (2000) contends that on the streets, street children form an alternative family. Such a family unit has its own value system. It provides emotional support and empathetic understanding that some street children no longer find at home.

Street children are faced with two sets of opposing standards which can create a conflict of values because two realities pull them into two different directions: their subculture and the dominant culture. What alternatives do street children have? Many street children, over a period of time, have evolved their own subculture, distinct from that of their parents and wider society. Although they are part of society, they are perceived as outsiders. They are not only resented and scoffed at by the public but are often abused by Law Enforcement Agencies. In an attempt to find solidarity in the face of oppression by the police and negative remarks by the public, some homeless children are forced to create their own street culture.

Some street culture is structured in such a way that the "older" children, who have been on the streets for a long period of time and who have established permanent selling points, form gangs. The older children are usually regarded as leaders of their particular gang. Trussell (1999) indicates that street children may sometimes have the support of their leaders and trust exists among members because: "They turn to each other as their sole support system." He believes that this level of trust and bonding forms an integral part of the culture of street children since without such support some street children are left alone in the streets and their chances of survival become very difficult. Therefore, Trussell (1999) suggests that trust among members of the group is very essential for the continuation of street culture and also for the survival of its members.

There is another side to the culture of street children. A number of these leaders of gangs have prospered over the years. Consequently, they are "street wise" and influential among their peers. Sometimes they seek to control the lives of younger children who live on the streets. They sometimes exploit their younger fellow street children. Trussell (1999) believes that in such circumstance, most street children have very little choice. Although they may resent the dictatorship of their leaders, it is tough for them to escape because they are young and vulnerable. They often have to confront hostile attacks from increasing violence among other gang leaders. They cannot win the battle on their own. Therefore, they have no other choice but to follow the commands of these gang leaders.

These leaders often utilized younger street children to sell stolen articles and to steal while they supervise the entire proceedings. According to Trussell (1999) street culture is organized in such a manner that it demands a collaborative effort from all members of the gang. Often the younger ones, because they are physically small, are used as thieves.

This is quite possible since they can enter quickly through small openings and "unobserved" areas like a hole in ventilation blocks or by way of the ceiling or the flooring. However, their work, dangerous as it is, does not go without reward. Their leader usually guarantees

them protection. Trussell (1999) explains that very often they are guaranteed protection because younger street children are afraid of being caught participating in illegal activities. Although some children may be initially reluctant to obey the commands of their leaders, because they are afforded protection, they are encouraged, and so most street children succumb to such pressures. In addition, because these illegal activities usually bring in a sizeable income, gang leaders are obligated to protect the younger ones and ultimately their entire gang. The younger children on the other hand, are expected to offer unreserved reverence and respect for their "elders." When misfortune strikes, the business may temporarily halt. Misfortune in this sense refers to confiscation of goods by the police, loss of cash through harassment by other gangs of street children, or cash swindled during the transaction of goods.

Perhaps some members of mainstream society can begin to learn to appreciate some aspects of street culture by spending time with street children and reading about their lifestyle. Some people from mainstream society appear to be too ethnocentric and may feel that others must learn about their culture rather than themselves. Appreciating street culture helps people to see how street children perceive life. Appreciating street culture means recognising the best in street children no matter how difficult it is.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the complexity in arriving at a precise definition of street children and as well as to quantify them. It examined the two basic categories under which some street children are usually classified: "on" and "of" the streets. It also showed how some street children survive on the streets by begging, selling, using illicit drugs, prostitution and sniffing inhalants or glue thus providing us with a clearer understanding of their lives. It further presented some of the social conditions that affect the lives of street children and underscored the significance of street culture. Childhood is undoubtedly a crucial period for acquiring healthy lifestyle habits. Unfortunately, street children cannot appreciate this luxury. It is my sincere hope that this paper will stimulate minds so that we can all realize that children are the source of hope and could be the major ailments for the development of society, nation, and the world.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interests.

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