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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE LIVES OF STREET CHILDREN IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

Background: The existing estimates by UNICEF suggest that there are tens of millions of street- children facing social, economic, physical and health challenges around the world, and Cameroon has a large number of children living on the streets in its urban cities. They are at risk of poor health, get involved in drugs, prostitution, gangs, and commit crimes. Cameroon does not have any intervention programme to address the phenomenon of street children.

Aim: The study aimed to explore the lives of street children in Cameroon.

Methods: Data was collected using qualitative methods during 2015 in the cities of Bamenda. The participants were street children and key informants working with street children. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee Durban and CAMBIN Ethics Cameroon. Data was collected by administering structured questionnaires which were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 14.

Results: Street children are children searching for love and better opportunities for themselves and family in some cases. These children are forced to run away from home because they are unhappy at home for one reason or the other. While on the streets they are faced with numerous challenges.

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Background:-

Street children in Africa remain vulnerable and are developmentally at risk in cities^[1]. UNICEF data estimated that they are in their 10s of million around the world^[1,2]. The increasing number can be attributed to family poverty, dysfunctional families, authoritative parenting style and abuse at home, among others^[1]. Their health becomes a challenge as they suffer from several health problems such as dental infections, injuries, respiratory problems, sexual transmittable diseases^[3]. On the street with no adult supervision they are more vulnerable to physical, sexual, and emotional abuses^[2]. They are also more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as substance abuse, prostitution, petty theft or joining criminal gangs^[4]. Their knowledge on HIV/AIDS is limited, putting them at a high risk of becoming infected^[4].

The aim of this study was to explore the lives of street children in three cities (Bamenda, Douala and Yaoundé), in the Republic of Cameroon, and specifically:

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- To investigate the reasons why street children run away from home to live on the streets of Bamenda, Douala and Yaoundé.
- To explore some of the challenges street children face in the cities of Bamenda, Douala and Yaoundé.

Material and Methods:-

This study was conducted from January 1st to 30th March 2015. The study used both focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews during data collection. Only one FGD session was conducted in the Bamenda, with six participants in attendance for the session. The FGD was equally represented in terms of gender (three boys and three girls). It was conducted by the primary researcher and with the help of a trained research assistant who took notes and observed the body language of the participants during the session.

The study also employed in-depth interviews as a second technique which was used to collect data from key informants and street children in the three cities. The respondents were aged 12 to 17 years. The final sample size was made up of 14 street children who comprised of five girls and nine boys recruited using a purposive sampling technique.

About 34 children were approached to participate in the qualitative study but there were many refusals. Only 14 of the children accepted to participate. The purpose of the study was carefully explained to the street children in detail including the part which stated that they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time they felt to do so. But all that did not change the mind of most of the street children we approached for the qualitative study. The 14 who accepted to participate in the in-depth interviews comprised of street children who fully understood the aim of the current study and those who gave their signed informed consent. Adding to the 14 street children who voluntarily accepted to participate, three in-depth interviews were conducted during the same data collection period with three key informants, two men and a woman, all of whom have spent many years working with street children in Cameroon as social workers and also founders and managers of organizations working with street children.

These key informants were my contact persons from the three cities that constituted the research sites of this study, one from each city. The main purpose of the involvement of these three key adult informants was to explore sensitive issues surrounding street children life such as alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, assaults from the authorities at night, health barriers experienced by these children and even issues of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmittable infections including HIV.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. There was no monetary incentive but after the interview each day, food was provided to the street children at the interview ground which was a quiet location provided by the Catholic Church so as to maintain privacy and limit distraction. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

The study respected every participant and treated everyone equally. There was no discrimination in terms of gender, religion or region of origin. For the purpose of confidentiality, no names were attached to the respond notes taken by the primary investigator, thus making it difficult for a third party to connect a particular respond sheet to a particular participant. The participants were allowed to withdraw from the interview at any time of the study without any consequences or deprived from any benefits which others might receive after completion of the interview process.

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (BREC) and the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative (CAMBIN).

Results and Discussion:-

A summary of the demographic profile of the participants who took part in the FGDs and in-depth interviews is given below. Only five of the 14 participants were girls, and all had spent more than six months living on the street. Most of them had parents who were in monogamous marriages (Table 1).

Table 1:- Summary of the demographic profile of street children who participated in the FGDs and in-depth interviews

NO.	Age	Gender (M/F)	Time spent living on the Streets in Months	No. of Siblings	Parents Marital Status
1	17	F	24	15	Polygamous

2	16	F	17	9	Monogamous
3	15	F	8	6	Single Mother
4	16	M	28	16	Polygamous
5	13	M	21	7	Monogamous
6	12	M	9	8	Monogamous
7	17	M	36	9	Polygamous
8	15	M	14	8	Monogamous
9	14	M	10	7	Single Mother
10	16	F	8	6	Monogamous
11	16	M	16	8	Monogamous
12	15	M	12	11	Polygamous
13	13	M	7	13	Polygamous
14	14	F	11	9	Monogamous

Reasons why children run away from home to live on the streets:-

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the results, namely: financial problems (poverty) of the family, parent's sickness (HIV cited as the main culprit), dysfunctional family and authoritative parents.

From the in-depth interviews with street children, two boys aged 12 and 13 years had been friends for more than a year on the streets. Both said they were forced to live on the urban streets because of financial difficulties. These two boys shared a similar story of the hardship they faced at home that resulted in taking on a new home on the street. They mentioned that their fathers were in and out of prison, while their mothers' vegetable farms could not afford them the desired quality of life. From the interviews and FGD it was also noticed that all 14 participants came from large families with the least having 6 siblings while others came from polygamous families and had up to 14 siblings.

A boy of 15 years said *"my father has 4 wives with 15 children; every woman has to take care and provide for her children. My mother got sick and can no longer go to the farm and I had no one to pay for my school fees. The situation got worse when we could not have food to eat at home; I had no choice than to run to the city to look for opportunities to survive"*. This boy's story was similar to many others, blaming poverty as the reason why they are on the streets. As a 14 year old boy said; *"we live very poorly in my family, it was hard getting food to eat and while at home without any school fees to attend school. The poverty situation was so much that my elder siblings all dropped out from school and I never got the opportunity to attend school at all"*.

A male key informant said: *"The rich people's priority is to make more money which makes them happy while the poor people make more children because they derive their happiness seeing their children and hoping that someday some of the children will evolve into a better person that will change the situation of their family"*.

According to the male informant; *"having children is being seen as riches, some sort of insurance at old age, especially when you have more girls to give out for marriage to rich men and collect huge bride prices"*. The female informant also added that *"mothers believe having more children, could lead to one or more of those children growing to be very successful; and eventually form the support base for the economic and social survival of other siblings. To these mothers, it is not about how many children you can provide for, but the family structure of older siblings taking care of the younger ones"*.

During the FGD, a boy aged 16 years old said; *"I dropped out of school because of no money to pay for my school fees and to buy basic school needs like uniforms, books, school shoes and writing pen"*. He continued by saying that, he would love to go back to school but that will mean he has to pay for his school fees and buy all that he needs by himself. But the problem with going to school will mean him stopping work on the streets, which is how he makes his money.

A girl aged 16 also added that; *"I dropped out of school because of no money and I know many other children who were also in school but have all dropped out and are presently working on the streets"*.

The second major reason that was raised from the interviews and FGD was the ill health of parents or guardians. Both adult male key informants also agreed on this point, saying the more people are exposed to the HIV virus, the more they eventually fall sick. When this happens the entire family has to face the consequences. They added that there is no support system for patients with chronic diseases in Cameroon despite the high cost of treatment for such patients. When most of these people fall sick, they get no allowances or salary from their work. Those who are farmers or traders cannot continue in what they do and eventually there is a problem with the income which he or she generates from their job. The female participant added specifically that, in the rural communities, lots of people suffer from different chronic diseases and due to the lack of good hospitals with no equipped laboratories to diagnose different diseases, people end up not knowing what they are suffering from and are left with no other option than to turn to traditional doctors for treatment or to the church hoping for a miracle.

The female informant added that; *"most of the children started to make friends on the streets before finally moving to the street to join their new found friends"*. The ill health of family members, especially parents or guardians, has also initiated the movement of some children onto the streets from home as was noted from the interviews and FGD with some street children directly. A girl aged 17 said she used to live a happy life while her parents were not yet sick. But when both parents became infected with HIV, life took a toll on her. Using her own words, she said; *"I come from a very happy home when my parents were not sick. When both of my parents felt sick, life became hard and some days we have to go without food myself and my siblings. I had to drop out of school so as to find work on the streets and gradually made friends on the streets. When my parents died my siblings were divided among relatives and no one wanted to take me, they said I was a spoiled child. I had no choice than to join my new friends on the streets"*.

A 16 year old boy also said; *"My dad used to provide for me and my 6 siblings. We went to a government public school; he used to work as a builder and my mother a farmer. One day the house they were building collapsed on him and he could not work from the accident and had problem with his back. The people he worked for refused to pay him and rather accused him for the accident, no one was willing to help so we took him from the hospital to a traditional doctor who cured him but he is always in pain when he walks around. His building job he could no longer do and we started to suffer, some days we don't even have food to eat and my siblings and I had to drop out of school because of no school fee. I started staying late night with friends on the street and from late nights, I started sleeping some nights and more nights but I do go home some days to see my siblings"*.

Another street girl aged 16 said; *"My father used to work in a company in the city. He had land dispute in the village with my uncles and when he went to the village to warn them not to take our land they poisoned him. My father stayed in the hospital for months and my mother borrowed so much money from family friends until the point where no one was ready to borrow us more money. The doctors after making us to spend much money later said they cannot cure my father, with no money and the landlord asking us to leave the house, my mother decided we all return to the village with our father so he can get treatment from the village traditional doctors. I refused going to the village because my father said it was our uncle that are behind his sickness and I was afraid they might want to kill me too, so I stayed in the city with my boyfriend who latter pushed me out of his room and I ended up on the streets"*.

The family can be seen as a shield that protects the children as said by the female adult informant. When the parents who are supposed to keep the family together and protect them, but do not do their job well, sometimes the family will become a dysfunctional one.

Dysfunctional family also came up as the third reason why some children run away from home onto the urban streets. A boy aged 13 said; *"our house has never been peaceful, my father always come back late at night and drunk most of the time. There is always quarrelling and fighting between him and my mother and nobody gets to sleep. I started to sleep on the streets with my friends and nobody noticed if I was at home or not. I feel more comfortable with my friends on the streets and don't have to be in the middle of a fight every night"*.

The fourth point that was raised from the interviews and FGD was the issue of authoritative parenting. As a male informant mentioned; *"some men over-react for very little things which could have required small advice"*. The female participants also added that some men beat their children to the point of falling sick. A 15 year old boy said; *"sometimes I think my father is not my biological father. He beats me even when another person does something wrong, he never advises me and whatever I do, be it small, I often get beaten"*. A 12 year old added that his father

used to lock him out of the house, and then, he would run away from home, because of fear of being beaten. Whenever his father locked him out, he would sleep on the street with new friends he had made there. He continued that; *"this is the reason why it was easier for me to run to meet my friends on the streets when I could no longer take the maltreatment, beatings and hatred from my father"*.

Another girl aged 17 years said; *"I was sent by my uncle to live with a very rich relative after the death of my parents, I thought I was going to live like a little princess, go to school and have a good life. But they turned me into a house girl, they refused sending me to school and I worked from morning to night no time to rest and worst of it every night the man will come to my room and have sex with me. I was afraid to report to his wife and also he was bringing me nice things from work, but one night his wife found out and she got me well beaten and threw me out of the house to die. Some girls found me, helped me, gave me some pain medicine and we became friends. They were living on the streets so I had to join them. It was safer for me to live with them than to live with that wicked rich family. That is how I found myself on the streets"*.

All the identified themes cited as reasons for choosing to live in the streets are related to family problems.

Challenges of living on the streets: Social, psychological and health problems:-

The gender dynamics of street life reveal a pattern where there are more boys found on the streets than girl children. With no form of proper adult supervision, these children, especially girl children become more vulnerable and highly exposed to many risk especially at night.

The female adult informant said; *"boys have more ways to make money on the streets than girls, boys can do several jobs on the street to make money but girls are limited"*.

From the interviews and FGD, a female street girl aged 14 said; *"I cook for the boys sometimes and have sex with the older boys at night when they come back from the streets "*. One of the male informants added that: *"street girls practically take up the role of the women of the house and make sure they protect their properties at their sleeping place so other street kids don't come steal them"*. A street boy aged 17 years said; *"I buy basic needs for my street girl friend from the money I work for on the streets, and sometimes I give her some money to keep for herself"*. This sense of shared responsibility that develops out of the intimate relationship between street boys and girls can be seen as constituting a new home for them.

Most street children are always worried about where they will sleep at night as this was mentioned by all three adult informants.

A 13 year old boy said; *"having a safe place to sleep is a challenge as we must sleep in places where we cannot be seen by the police or other street adults who can steal our money and other belongings"*. From the FGD the children mentioned several places where they sleep as they have no permanent sleeping place. These included: under bridges, in parks, deserted buildings, abandoned cars, incomplete buildings, on pavements and sometimes in-front of shops.

A 14 year old boy said he and his friends sleep on the bare floor, which is always cold during the raining season, and they have no cover. He said; *"it is very difficult to sleep at night on the cold floor, so I always look for old bags, cartons or sometimes old newspapers to place on the floor before I can sleep"*. To keep their bodies warm, they have to make a fire. In one of the incidents reported by a 12 year old boy who participated in the FGD, using his own words he said: *"because of the much cold the older street boys lighted a fire to keep us warm and we have to sleep around the fire, unfortunately at night I wanted to turn and my hand accidentally entered the fire."*

The next morning the boy applied cooking oil as treatment for the burn. Another street boy aged 15 also added that they sleep without any covers so they are forced to sleep very close to one another to keep warm. They also did mention that they received some support from the church. During the cold season, the church sometimes offers blankets to some of the street children. However, these blankets, are often taken by thugs, and sometimes confiscated by the police. A street girl also added that some street boys go around stealing others' blankets and sell them to adults for a cheaper price so as to raise money to buy food, drugs and other basic necessities.

From the interviews and FGD, most of the children complained about not being able to provide food and other basic needs. A 12 year old street boy said; *"I am always very hungry, people refuse to help me. I can only eat from the*

money I get from begging and when I don't get any money I start looking for restaurant and hotel garbage bins around the city hoping I can find something to eat from there".

The children continue to say that the kind of food and number of meals per day simply depend on what they make from the streets each day from their work. Most of the children mentioned they have to do difficult and risky jobs such as washing cars, pick-pocketing, offloading a truck full of goods, transporting goods for people from the market to the market gate, washing plates in restaurants, washing bed sheets in hotels and cleaning, selling plastic bags and other things they could find. Many girls work as service girls in bars and night clubs at night while others have to sell sex for money, food or psychoactive substances.

A 14 year old street boy said; *"At the end of the day's work some employers still refuse to pay me for all the work I have been doing. I sometimes have to beg and cry so they can have pity on me but they still don't care. They even refuse to give me food. I don't always understand why some of them are wicked to me even when I do my work very well. I eat some days but from the left over from restaurant which my friends who work as dish washer come back with"*.

The female adult informant also brought up the issue of poor hygiene among street children; she said *"these children always look dirty and scary"*. A street boy aged 15 years old said; *"I bath every Sunday morning at a stream. It is not possible to go bath every day because of the distance I have to walk to the stream"*. Another street boy aged 16 years old also said; *"tooth paste and tooth brush are very expensive, even those from china are still too expensive for me to buy so I don't always brush my teeth because I can't afford to buy them. But some days I do use chewing stick¹ so that my mouth will smell good when begging from people on the street"*.

A street girl aged 17 years during the FGD also added that most of the people on the street see them as different, they insult them, call them names, saying they wear dirty clothes, can't do their hair and do smell. But none of these people is ready to help them to look better. Most of them have only one set of clothes which they go around with every day. One of the girls mentioned that; *"life is harder when people only say what is wrong with me and can't do anything to help change my situation"*.

As the female adult key informant put it; *"these children have lost all hopes and self-esteem as they don't see themselves of becoming anything useful in the future"*. One of the male adult informants also added that, these children have resignedly positioned themselves within the margins of poverty, as they fail to make any efforts to get out of their present predicament. Efforts to survive remain the primary focus of their livelihoods.

One of street boys aged 14 years said; *"my father worked as a mechanic until his death which was as a result of tuberculosis because he could not afford treatment and his mechanic friends did not have money to assist him to get the treatment, so he died a poor man"*. He further explained why he did not see any use of institutions because you will only come out of the institution as a mechanic or carpenter and will eventually still die as a poor man like his father. He continued by saying that, the kind of training they provide in institutions cannot make one become rich to the point of owning a car for example. Such experiences leave them to the conclusion that an impoverished home is nothing better than life on the street. They would prefer to live on the streets and be doing the jobs that enable them to buy food and eat for the day. The situation or perception was different among the street girls. As one girl aged 17 years put it; *"I am positive about life and belief that someday I will meet a man who will be rich enough to help me and my siblings, I will open a business that will generate enough money to take care of myself and my siblings who are still at home in the village"*.

From the FGD, most of the street boys felt helpless with the day-to-day situation on the streets, a daily routine which never changes but gets worst every day. The street girls believed in a change; they had hope from their remarks like; *"things will not remain the same"*. Their hope was directed to two fronts, either by getting married to someone who can help them or by raising money from the work they do and opening a small business to start up with and grow into a rich and powerful woman someday.

¹Chewing stick is obtained from a shrub in the forest. It contains a bitter substance, and it is locally used as toothbrush especially in rural areas.

All three key adult informants pointed out that if these children had basic education and skills their challenges could not have been this bad. Without the above two, it is difficult for any child to survive or be integrated to do any job that can generate money. One of the male informants continued by saying that, these children barely survive from the mini-jobs they do on the streets and some use certain talents to entertain people so as to get loose coins which will be used to buy food and other basic necessities.

A 15 year old boy said; *"I want to go to school, I wish I had someone to pay for my school fees, books and uniforms"*. Again despite his ambition of wanting to go to school, he was not sure if he would be accepted in school at his age and as a street child with no one to supervise him. He said, *"I am sure they will not accept me because I am already too old for school"*.

Another common day-to-day challenge of street children is the problem of sexual abuse as the female informant mentioned. She gave example of cases where street girls and street boys have been sexually abused and dumped by the side of the road. She even mentioned cases where their team together with the sexually abused child had gone to the police to lay a formal complaint, but these case files always end up vanishing, and no investigation is ever conducted about the missing files. The male informant also added that some of the complaints from the street girls have been pointed towards some of the uniformed men who happen to be the authority of the land.

A 16 year old street girl said; *"I was arrested by a uniformed officer at night, he accused me of prostituting, I said I was only looking for my friends but he forced me to a dark corner and asked me to perform Oral sex, I was afraid he was going to beat me or do something bad to me if I refused. When he was done, he still slapped me and asked me to run; I had to run back to our sleeping place crying"*. Another street girl aged 14 years said; *"I have been raped by a uniformed officer in an unfinished building beside the road at night, he forced me there, he was from a bar drinking I am sure, he accused me of prostitution, I did not want to have sex with him but he forced me, I tried to scream and he beat me while having sex with me"*.

Another street girl aged 17 also talked about abused of girls on the streets. She said; *"I was invited for a drink in a bar by a man in the community whom I know, he was seated with his friend. We drank some beer together and it was ok because I know him. He asked if I wanted some food because he had food in his house, I said yes and followed him to his house, his friend also accompanied us. When we got to his house there was no food but he wanted to have sex with me I resisted because his friend was there in the room also. But he forced me and when I tried to scream he started beating me together with his friend. Both of them had sex with me one after another and again and again until very early in the morning, they now decided to push me outside to go, I was scared and happy they did not kill me, now when I see him on the street I run very far, he is wicked"*. She continued to explain that despite forcing her to have sex without her consent again and again and again, both men did not use any protection, no condom was used. She said she was happy that after they raped her she was not pregnant; that was her only concern - pregnancy. When asked if she had been to the hospital for a check-up, in case she had contracted any disease, she said she had not done that because she did not believe she could contract any disease, since both men looked healthy in her eyes. Besides, to do a test in the hospital actually costs a lot. It gets even costlier for a street child.

Besides sexual abuse, one of the male key informants mentioned that these children also suffer from verbal and other forms of physical abuse such as assault. These children who are often treated as outcasts are called degrading names which make them not feel good about themselves, and it is enough to destroy their self-esteem, as they start to feel rejected. One of the children aged 12 years old said; *"I am already used to the fact that people don't like me but I still have to go around the city begging them for money. Some of the people are nice especially the women in cars, but the young men always insult me, they call me names like pick-pocket, thief, armed robber, street beggar and even names I don't know the meaning"*.

This excerpt among others highlights the social stigma that is associated with children on the street; where everyone living on the streets is generally labelled with names that link them to a criminal or demeaning identity. A similar situation was raised during the FGD as the children explained that they disliked the degrading names people call them. A 17 year old girl said; *"even when you stand on your own without looking for trouble people still pass by you and insult you even without begging them for money, they really hate us because we are poor and abandoned"*.

Physical abuse is the most common point raised by the female adult informant. These children always have wounds all over their bodies, torn clothes as a result of physical abuse from street adults passing by, adults who own shops at the city Centre and from uniformed officers including security guards.

A 16 year old street boy said; *"they beat us as if we are thieves, with heavy big sticks as if they want to kill us. I was beaten for simply sleeping in front of a man's shop, when he came in the morning I was still sleeping he got me well beaten, I was sick for over 3 days, could not walk well and had no money to buy pain killers"*.

Another street boy aged 13 years old also talked of his experience of being physically abused. He said; *"I was selling plastic bags and one customer took one of my bags and asked me to come get money later, I refused because I know he might refuse to pay. He started insulting me and when I responded back he started beating me in public but no one came to my rescue"*.

A street girl aged 17 years old also said; *"I was beaten for no reason. A man met me in a bar I use to go on weekends, he proposed to give me money if I follow him to his house, I accepted because I needed money to buy some basic things. After having sex with me, he asked me to leave his house, when I asked of the money he promised me he started insulting me, calling me a prostitute. Before I could say a word he started beating me and drag me out of his house, that was in the middle of the night there were people around but no one helped me but the people around were abusing me"*.

Psychoactive substance abuse among street children is also a big problem which cannot be ignored, as one of the male participants reported. The other male informant also added that these children are seen sleeping on the road path drunk or heavily intoxicated with psychoactive substances. They also face problems with the authority after abusing psychoactive substances, he continued that; *"these children get drunk, smoke illegal drugs and when intoxicated they commit minor crimes around the community and get involved in gang-like activities"*.

The female adult informant attributed the problem to the government; the government is supposed to monitor street markets that often include the sale of these psychoactive substances. Street children freely buy psychoactive substances from roadside traders, and these traders are not usually confronted by law-enforcing officers. It is rather the street kids who suffer arrest from these officers.

A street boy aged 17 years old said; *"I and my street friends are always being physically abused by shop owners and other adult street dwellers, the only way for me to be bold to stand up to them is when I am intoxicated with any psychoactive substance"*. During the FGD several reasons came up to explain why street children use psychoactive substances. They use them to gain boldness, to feel happy, to be respected, and to be able to commit crimes, fight anyone without fear of age or size, pick-pocket in the city and other reasons. The following constitute the psychoactive substances that these street children use: cigarettes, glue, alcohol and petrol. They also said it was easy to get the substances from roadside traders and above all most of the psychoactive substances are not very expensive to buy.

The adult female informant was very concerned about the rate of exposure of street children to STIs and HIV/AIDS infections. The street girls were more vulnerable than the street boys. However, no data exist on how many street children get infected with STIs or HIV/AIDS in Cameroon. The adult male informants also added that what is known about their disease prevalence is far less than the actual prevalence. This is more reason why there should be more research around this area should be conducted and provide immediate intervention for these children on the streets.

From the in-depth interviews and FGDs, it was noticed that all the street children have heard of HIV/AIDS and very few sexual transmittable infections like gonorrhoea and syphilis. However it was noticed that they practically considered all other STIs as gonorrhoea. From the quantitative study it was also noticed that the level of awareness of HIV/AIDS among the street children was very high. However when the street children were asked to name other STIs, it was very hard for them to mention any other than the only one they knew, which was gonorrhoea. Again when they were asked to give some symptoms, most of the street children mentioned, itches, difficulty to urinate, pus around the private parts, blood mixed with urine, wounds around the private parts and swelling around the private parts. It was certain that they have mentioned symptoms of many different STIs which they have experienced but to them they considered all the above symptoms to be gonorrhoea.

Despite the fact that almost all of the street children have a basic knowledge of HIV/AIDS, most of them did not know the mode of transmission. When they were asked to give the mode of transmission, they gave answers like HIV can be transmitted by kissing, touching, eating from the same plate with a person with HIV, sleeping on the same bed, and having a handshake with someone that has HIV. These misconceptions were very consistent with those from the quantitative results. Some of them also believed that HIV together with gonorrhoea ("STIs") can be cured by powerful traditional doctors.

Condoms have been identified as a good way to protect oneself from STIs and HIV among sexually active people. All of the street children did mention during the interview and the FGD that they had heard of condoms and all said they had physically seen a condom packet. However not all of them interviewed had ever used a male condom. A shocking aspect was that of a 16 year old street girl who had had more than 5 sexual partners but she has never experienced sex with a male condom. The story was also similar to other street children interviewed. A street boy of 17 years old and another street boy of 15 years said "I cannot eat sweet covered in a plastic bag". From the interviews, most of the street children believed using condoms would reduce the sexual satisfaction.

Several barriers as to why they did not use condoms were raised during the interviews. High cost of condoms, being ashamed to buy a condom, being ashamed to ask their male partners to use condom, not being able to refuse to have sex if the male partner insists of having unprotected sex, and condoms are itchy, are the reasons that were cited as barriers against the use of condoms. However during HIV campaigns in schools the children are always given condoms that they distribute to other young people on the streets. It is through this medium that most of the street children get to know, see and touch a condom package. But because of their situation on the streets, most of the street children resell the free condoms back to some street adults cheaper than the price in shops, in order for the street children to raise money to buy food and other basic necessities.

Also from the interviews and FGD most of the children agreed to having multiple partners, and some to engaging in commercial sex ('survival sex') – an act which they did not see as constituting prostitution. A street girl of 16 years said; *"during weekends I go to drinking places and meet other elderly girls who then introduce me to men who buy me drinks and food to eat, after drinking and eating the man will take me to his house and after having sex he will give me some money and I will go"*.

Most of the street girls confirmed they were involved in this kind of lifestyle to survive and above all, they did not see what they do as prostitution. Rather they called the older girls who introduce them to men the prostitutes. Street girls usually have more sex partners who are mostly street boys because these boys protect them and support them financially. This is so because the street boys have more opportunities on the streets to make money. This does not mean that only street girls have multiple partners: the street boys also mentioned having multiple sex partners.

Regarding the issue of unwanted pregnancy, the adult female informant said; *"they continue to have reports of new babies being dumped into garbage bins around the city, and there is this assumption among the health and social welfare service providers that these children are being dumped by street girls"*.

During the interviews and FGD, all of the street children agreed that unwanted pregnancy was a huge problem and very difficult for them to find solutions when it happens. Firstly these street children do not have enough money to pay for an abortion in the public hospitals, and secondly, the street children do not have money to provide for and raise a new born child. However, gathering from stories around, it is claimed that some street girls do consult spiritualists and other traditional doctors when pregnant so they can perform an abortion. When the process of aborting the child fails, the street girls are left with no other option than to start getting ready to have the child under any circumstances. With the challenge of raising a new born on the streets, when these street girls have the child they abandon the child in front of the church hoping someone richer and capable of providing for the child can take the child for parenting. Some would abandon the child at an orphanage as well, while others leave them in garbage bins with the intention of killing the child so the child should not end up on the streets, like them.

Two street girls of aged 17 and 15 years confirmed the above stories among street girls. Both mentioned having an abortion with the help of a traditional doctor who gave them certain herbs. The experience and pain were unbearable and they both almost lost their lives. Both said many girls died on the street in the process of committing an abortion. This accounts for the reason why a pregnant girl will rather keep the pregnancy for the child to be delivered, then abandon the child in a church compound or in front of an orphanage. Both girls further testified that

they would rather give birth and abandon the child if they ever fell pregnant again, rather than to go through the painful and life-threatening process of abortion again. Another street girl aged 16 years said; *"I was pregnant and my street boyfriend was responsible. By the time I was due to have the baby, both of us had no money. I was not ready to return to the village with a child and no money. So after delivery I abandoned my child in front of an orphanage knowing that they will take better care of him"*.

Most of the street children had very negative perceptions about the public health care providers. They look at public hospitals as the Centre of discrimination towards them, a place where they are not welcome at all. This perception was validated by the following comment by a street girl aged 15 said; *"I hate hospitals, whenever I go there the nurses never attend to me, they attend to everyone who comes after me but not me, sometimes they will ask me to buy medication and go home that the doctor is not in but they letting other people to see the doctor"*. Similar stories came up during the FGD and beside other barriers that were mentioned like the high hospital cost for consultation and treatment; they talked about the complex procedure in big hospitals to see a doctor. Some also complained about the distance, as most hospitals are not situated directly inside the main city and one has to pay for transportation to and from the hospital. The small private clinics which seem to be everywhere at close range are far too expensive for them to even attempt to seek treatment from them. They concluded that these public hospitals do not accommodate them and are difficult to access, and that most information about test and other free services had not been made available to them on the streets.

Discussion:-

Both from the FGD and the in-depth interviews, all participants mentioned that not being happy at home for one reason or the other was why they had left home. Reasons like family poverty, dysfunctional family structure, authoritative parenting, and illness of one or both parents among others emerged during the interview as reasons why they ran away from home. Studies from some African countries, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Egypt, also produced similar results when they investigated reasons for children to run to the streets in cities ^[5-9].

Family is very important in the life and development of children as they need proper adult supervision to guide them as they grow from childhood to adulthood. With the absence of a strong family link or relationship the child becomes vulnerable. Results from these study showed that large families, polygamous families, single parent families, psychoactive substance abuse including drugs and other locally made substances, families with father in and out of jail all the time or prostitute mothers, all came up under examples of a dysfunctional family during the FGD and in-depth interview. Other studies on family structure and background on street children also produced similar results on how a dysfunctional family can seriously lead to children running away from home onto the streets ^[10-13].

They pointed out that being a street child does not mean cutting off ties with one's family. This separation only occurs with time or when the child is faced with rejection at home. They start by staying nights, followed by days before finally moving to the streets permanently ^[10-13]. In a dysfunctional family where the parent or parents are always drunk, come home and start a fight, this turns the family home into a war zone every night. In the case where the father is always drunk, he might never notice if his child is no longer staying at home ^[10-13].

Some of the children have lost contact with their families because they moved from city to city looking for better opportunities, and when parents do not turn up to look for their missing children, they are forgotten ^[11,12,13].

A study in Cameroon by the church shows that some parents do report to the authorities and a missing child complaint is been filed, but because these children are very mobile it makes it difficult for the authorities to find them ^[14]. A similar report from other studies also mentioned that these children change their names and identity so even when traced by the authorities they give different names and claim they come from a different town, thus making it hard for the authority to link the child to a particular missing child file ^[10-13].

Also from the interview, poverty was cited by all the participants as a major factor for them to run away from home. In a country like Cameroon money is needed to pay for education and health care services ^[14,15]. Without money children are forced to drop out from school and it is also the reason why most street children have either dropped out from primary schools or had never attended school ^[14,15].

Another point that was drawn from the results concerns authoritarian parenting where parents beat children even for small crimes and in some cases these parents lock the children out and let them sleep outside for the sake of discipline^[10-13]. In such circumstances the child gradually makes new friends at night on the street so whenever he or she is locked out it is an opportunity for him or her to get closer to his or her street friends, and eventually when he or she cannot take the beatings and harsh discipline any more, they end up disappearing to the streets^[5-9].

These children while on the streets face many challenges. The challenges are not different from those which were presented in the quantitative paper. These children reported being abused in so many different ways, some work very hard on the street only to be refused payment at the end of the day, and when they ask or complain some of their employers threaten them, beat them or verbally abuse them without considering that the payment they are asking is to buy food and other basic needs^[6-8].

The study results also report cases of physical and sexual abuses especially towards street girls. Despite their horrible experience and trauma, they still get the courage to move on from day to day hoping for a better day. To most of these children a good day is a day they can be sure to have food to eat, a day they can walk freely on the street without being physically abused, sexually abused, or arrested by the police for walking freely on the streets. The most amazing aspect about these children is, despite all the challenges they still smile, feel happy and grateful when you give them food^[5-8]. The Cameroon government should be able to provide food and much more for these children^[14].

The results from this study also show the ill health of street children to be one of their greatest challenges on the streets. It was regarded as a major challenge because health care in Cameroon is not free. Both the private and public hospitals run a pay before treatment system. Not only that, the cost of health care is very high and most street children are unable to afford the huge payment before treatment. They are exposed to several diseases on the streets not leaving out sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. Their health problems were also similar to those from other studies with little or no differences^[5-9].

Conclusion and Recommendations:-

Street children are children searching for love and better opportunities for themselves and family in some cases. These children are forced to run away from home because they are unhappy at home for one reason or the other. While on the streets they are faced with numerous challenges.

However, data scarcity about street children has been identified as the barrier to providing intervention. More studies are needed on street children in Cameroon to guide stakeholders to develop better interventions. Immediate intervention is needed to rehabilitate these children. All stakeholders should come together to develop a sustainable intervention plan for the plight of street children in Cameroon. The government should develop more interventions targeting vulnerable families as poverty and dysfunctional families were pointed out as reasons for children to run away from home.

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