

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF GHANAIAI CHILDREN

Over 25% of the 12 million Ghanaian Children experience abject poverty, are vulnerable and need social protection. These children are often economically exploited, disabled, victims of abuse and negative cultural practices and those who have come in conflict with the law. Laws such as the criminal Code (Amendment) Act 1998, (Act 560) and Juvenile Justice Act 2003 (Act 653) have been enacted to protect children in difficult circumstances. Enforcement of these laws, are however inadequate; as such, many vulnerable children's rights are being violated without any recourse for protection. Though with the establishment of Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) formally the Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU) in the Police Service, there is a visible unit where abuse could be reported for immediate redress, but there still exists a gap, as many children living in deprived areas or outside urban centres do not have access to such services. Though government and Civil Society organisations and NGOs have been working to alleviate the plight of such children, it has become evident that public campaigns must be stepped up to create awareness on the factors that put children in difficult circumstances. Also pragmatic ways of addressing the children's issues by geographic areas, gender and age must be adopted.

Adolescents and youth in difficult circumstances include pregnant teenagers, especially those who have become mothers at very early ages and have had to drop out of school and those who have had to experience unexpected pregnancies and have indulged in unsafe abortions. Adolescents in confinement as sex slaves, adolescents working as house helps, under deplorable condition detrimental to their health and well being, trafficked young boys and girls in fishing communities working without respite. Adolescents who have had to migrate from poor rural communities to urban centres and who have no source of livelihood except their hopes and aspirations are a significant part of these poor children. All these young boys and girls are considered socially and economically marginalised, face extreme poverty because of their circumstances and have become very vulnerable and need protection. It is their universal human right and they have to have a voice which must be heard by governments, donor community and society at large.

Children adolescents and youth with disabilities, generally termed Persons with Disabilities (PWD) are a special group of adolescents who are vulnerable and need protection especially from the State. These Persons with Disabilities may experience disability from birth or as a consequence of an accident, illness, malnutrition, drug or alcohol abuse. Disability partially or

completely limits a person's ability to carry out the normal functions of life. It is reflected in people with difficulty in seeing, moving, hearing, speaking, learning, feeling in the feet and hands, people with strange or unusual behaviour and individuals with fits. Many people have multiple disabilities. Reliable data is scarce in Ghana and there is insufficient national level information. Based on global WHO estimates almost 2 million Ghanaians are persons living with disability. They have less education and suffer exploitative and abusive practices including sexual abuse with ineffective legal provisions to protect their rights. (National Disability Policy Document, 2000). Poverty is both a root cause and consequence of disability. Persons with disabilities who are uneducated, unemployed, with poor health and without technical aids (eye-glasses, Braille, wheelchairs, braces, crutches, hearing aids, etc.) to function are condemned to be poor and vulnerable. Studies show that in the deprived Upper East Region, 75% of PWDs live in areas without the needed services; and 88% of the estimated 50,448 PWDs are living in poverty. The poor conditions of persons living with disabilities also affects their families and households which face financial and psychosocial problems and constraints in access to medical and social services.

Another group of children whose voices are never heard and who society does not even recognise, because they no longer exist are the children who are killed or gruesomely murdered at infancy under the guise of cultural practices such "chichiro", 'jukujuku' or "odokorbi", or infanticide. Yes, infanticide is being practiced in some communities in Ghanaian villages or rural areas. Others are dumped into pit latrines and refuse dumping grounds in urban areas by teenage mothers for fear of the unknown and lack of sustenance.

Unemployed youth have also been included in this gamut of children, adolescents and youth in difficult circumstances. Their situation is timely explosive and need immediate action, but who will speak for them. Parents have failed to do so, the Government has failed them miserably and the repercussions of their plight is looming dangerously on the shoulders of society. The upsurge in juvenile delinquency, crime, armed robbery, drug and substance abuse, rape and defilement are all outcome of the lack of work for the teeming mass of idle minds and hands.

Women in difficult circumstances are a category of women which include the economically marginalised, single mothers and women who have undergone various forms of violence and difficult circumstances that have negative effects on children. Although women are not the focus

of the study, one cannot talk about children in difficult circumstances without including these category of women.

In view of these emerging trends, Ghanaian Governments over the years have enacted a number of laws and regulations and made several provisions in its constitution to help ameliorate the plight of children. Ghana was the first nation in the world to sign and ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990. The CRC sets up the international legal framework for children Rights and has been hailed as "the cornerstone of a new moral ethos and milestone in the history of mankind" (Text Reference, Check CRC on Network). Ghana, facing up to the obligations and challenges espoused in the CRC, has tried to reform and enact laws in conformity with international demands. Ghana was, therefore, among the countries which were signatories to the African Charter on the Rights of the child adopted in at the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in 1990.