

# Reasons, practices and procedures that bring mothers to the streets as street beggars: A qualitative study of mothers with twin children begging on the streets of Ghana

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## Abstract

*The literature on street begging focuses on other categories of street beggars without paying much attention to mothers who beg on the street with their twin children. The gendered and cultural reasons for which they beg, and the activities and processes they go through before they end up on the streets are unclear. With the aid of purposive and snowball sampling, this qualitative study investigated the reasons, practices and procedures which inform street begging among mothers with their twin children in Ghana. The study reveals that the health challenges of the twin children as well as that of their mothers are the main reasons for begging on the street. The study further reveals that the activities and processes that bring women to the streets are both gendered and culturally embedded. The study discusses the complexities between cultural rights and human rights, and makes recommendations to promote the wellbeing of these mothers and their twin children who beg on the streets.*

**Keywords:** Street begging; Begging with twins; Culture – Legal duality; Gender; Street children

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## **Introduction**

The ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1948 has had positive implications for the rights of people globally, reducing discrimination, oppression and other human rights abuses (Chapman and Carbonetti 2011). Primarily, human rights laws focus on upholding the dignity of vulnerable and marginalized groups, groups who are discriminated against, stigmatized, and socially excluded from socio-economic and political processes (Morawa 2003, Chapman and Carbonetti 2011). A key foundation of universal human rights laws is the argument that human rights are fundamental rights which apply to all humans regardless of nationality and culture (Healy 2007; Johansson Dahre 2017). Consequently, International human right laws require states to tackle all types of violations in every society, particularly where such violations are masked as cultural practices (Galeotti 2007; Afshari 2011).

Despite the existence of the universal human rights, the violation of the rights of vulnerable groups, including women and children persists (Msuya 2019). Although several factors have been used to explain this persistence of human rights abuses (Marks 2011), cultural beliefs, rituals and conventions have often been used to explain and justify human rights violations '(Adunbi 2016, Diala 2017, Hodgson 2017). For Human rights activists, culture has been the cause of several human right violations against women and children in developing countries (Galeotti 2007, Afshari 2011). Cultural practices such as; trokosi, virginity testing, widow inheritance and female genital cutting have been identified as major impediments to the promotion of the rights of women and children' (Msuya 2019). Though human rights activists acknowledge a person's right to practice their culture, they argue however that this right is not absolute but rather relative; it is applicable only when its exercise does not infringe on the rights of others. Such contradictions between cultural rights and human

rights often play out in the lives of women and girls in developing countries(Hodgson 2017).

Unlike those who argue for the universal applicability of human rights laws, others challenge the universality of human rights laws, arguing rather that the peculiarities of different cultures mean that there are no absolute ideals or standards on which any culture or society may be measured aside from that of culture itself (Nayak 2013).As such, in a richly diverse world, universal human rights principles cannot be used as benchmarks for all societies (Nayak 2013). They advocate that human rights principles must be situated and interpreted within the context of different cultures rather than proposing a universal law in which every culture should abide(Healy 2007). Those who subscribe to this view, often referred to as cultural relativists (Tilley 2007, Nayak 2013), argue that it is within their rights to practice some aspects of their culture, even when those practices contradict the universal declaration of human rights. Cultural relativists emphasize the right to culture and the foreigners/otherness of universal human rights declarations (Nyangweso 2016).This is an example of how international rights and values sometimes come into conflict with indigenous norms and traditions (Kuhn 2009).

Conversations and discussions around the fundamental human rights of women often take place as a contest between cultural rights and human rights (Erturk 2012). This persisting contest between cultural rights and human rights present significant challenges for policy makers and human rights activists in upholding and promoting the rights and wellbeing of women and children globally (Erturk 2012). Some of the contestations are evident in different parts of sub Saharan Africa. Where the tensions between cultural and human rights are difficult to resolve, some countries have adopted the innovative strategy of adding legal obligations and responsibilities to these cultural rights. Such legal obligations place a responsibility on the people who uphold the culture to ensure and protect the rights of women, children and

other vulnerable groups (Kuhn 2009). These strategies emerge from an understanding that some cultural practices can only be changed through cooperation and negotiation between international and local actors. The aim ultimately is to adapt cultural values in a way that meets the needs and addresses the challenges of women and children from within specific cultures (Kuhn 2009).

One challenge with the preceding discussions is that in the process of examining rights only through the lens of culture, we pay less attention to the political and economic contexts within which these tensions take place. We ignore the micro levels of interactions within which societies apply or enforce these traditions and practices to the day-to-day wellbeing of women and children (Erturk 2012). In addition, even when women's rights are discussed within specific cultural contexts, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on preventing violence against women, ignoring other aspects of rights including decision-making and the right to say no (Erturk 2012). Within human rights discourses, national and international authorities pay attention to the civil and political rights of women compared to social and cultural rights. Again, responses to female marginalization and oppression often focus on political and civil rights, without much emphasis on women's rights within cultures (Erturk 2012). There are persisting questions as to how to accommodate human and cultural rights without violating or compromising the rights of women (Nyangweso 2016). To address this question, it is important that advocates and activists understand the reasons and decision making processes underlying some specific cultural acts and practices, and to use this understanding as a basis to implement relevant and sensitive changes from within, allowing members of specific cultures to change in ways that suit them (Kuhn 2009). This can serve as a platform for human rights advocacy and for the effective use of human rights principles within individual cultures (Kuhn 2009).

In this study, we examine the lives of female street beggars through the lens of the culture human rights contest. We further explore how day-to-day decision making that informs street begging is gendered and informs the wellbeing of female beggars. Specifically, this paper presents data on **a)** the spatial context within which women beg with their twin children, **b)** the reasons that inform the decision of women to beg on the street with their twin children, **c)** the various practices and procedures that take place before women end up on the street with their children as beggars.

### **The phenomenon of street begging: A brief overview**

Several authors have conceptualized the phenomenon of Street Begging (SB) differently; with different authors emphasizing a particular dimension of begging. For instance, some authors conceive SB as an economic activity that takes place within a public space and involves a receiver requesting some gifts (either monetary or non-monetary) from passersby without offering anything in return (Ariaenssens and Hendricks 2011). The theme of non-reciprocity is also prominent in other definitions of SB (Kamruzzan and Hakim 2005). Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) indicated that SB involves asking for money or gift without offering any service or product in return. The challenge with defining SB as an economic activity is that economic activity has often been defined as involving some form of production of goods and services (Brito 2013), in which case SB, if indeed does not offer any service in return, cannot be effectively defined as an economic activity. Furthermore, conceptualizing SB as an economic activity with unreciprocated benefits for beggars is contentious since some scholars have used religion to explain how begging actually benefits both the giver and the receiver. The laws of Islam for instance entreat all Muslims to give zakat (donation to the poor) (Bambele 2017). Thus, the challenge with such a

conceptualization is that it excludes individuals who beg for religious reasons and who, by engaging in SB, allow the givers to receive something in return (spiritual blessings from God) (Bambele 2017). For this study, SB will be defined as an act, either verbal or non-verbal, of stopping, approaching, or drawing the attention of a member of the public (often at road intersections; by roadsides or pedestrian walkways), with the aim of soliciting assistance, mainly in the form of money without offering anything tangible in return.

Researchers differentiate between different groups of SB based on the time they spend on the street (Onagun 2016); whether begging is done full time or part-time (Abebe 2008), based on the appearance of SB (Andriotis 2016), and the sleeping place of SBs (Namwata, Mgabo and Dimoso 2012). Other researchers go beyond this basic classification to categorize SBs using different criteria. In their study of SBs in Tanzania, Namwata et al. (2012) distinguished between four groups of SBs. *Beggars on the street* refer to those SBs who spend most of their time on the street, return home in the evening, and are in constant contact with family members. The second category, *beggars of the street*, was used to refer to those SBs who live and sleep on the street and rarely contact family members or relatives. *Beggars of street families*, which is the third category, was used to refer to SBs who were born and raised on the street. Most beggars under this category had parents who were involved in street begging. The final categories of beggars are *beggars in the street*. Beggars in this group are completely detached or have been abandoned one way or another by their families. Even though these categorizations are relevant, they do not fully inform us of the reasons that inform the phenomenon of street begging. Again, an examination of the broader literature reveals reasons that are multidimensional and vary depending on the context of the study (Wendosen 2017). The literature suggests that some people engage in the act for

economic, health, and cultural reasons. Economic reasons are the financial difficulties that push one to engage in the act (Musubika 2017). Health reasons are mostly biological defects that lead one into begging (Asrese, Tilahun, and Mekonnen 2007). Cultural reasons have to do with the acceptance of begging as a norm and/or a religious requirement by a particular ethnic group (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2009), mostly as part of an aspect of their culture. For instance, some societies in Uganda believe in the power of twins or triplets, thus they beg to cater for them (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2009). Further, women beg with twins in Yorubaland because it is acceptable. Culturally, the belief is that a person will receive immeasurable blessings by giving alms to the mother of twins (Jelili and Mnitp 2013). Although the literature presents an overview of street beggars, it reflects a broad generalization of findings from different studies and does not necessarily speak to specific contexts. Thus, female beggars who beg with their twin children remain a relatively under-researched category of street beggars, both globally and in Ghana. This research reports findings from Ghana that attempts to address this gap in literature and at the same time to inform policy and urban regulatory practices regarding street begging in developing countries.

### **Area of Study**

The study was undertaken in the Kumasi metropolis, Ghana's second-largest city. The city has an extensive road network with heavy traffic moving in and out of the city to various parts of the country on a daily basis. The city serves as the principal transport terminal in the country (Owusu - Ansah and O'Connor 2016) since most primary roads in the country converge in the city. Because of the extensive road network and heavy vehicular traffic, the streets of the city serve as a major source of livelihood for various actors within the city. While some urban actors earn their livelihood as street hawkers and street vendors, street begging is increasingly

becoming a common phenomenon on the streets of the city. Street Beggars (SBs) in the city take advantage of the heavy vehicular and human traffic in the city to solicit money from passersby.

## **Research Methods**

The data reported in this study is part of a larger research that used a qualitative case study as a research design to explore the strategies and sources of resilience of SBs (mothers) who beg with twin children within the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana. A qualitative case study was employed, given that it allowed for the collection of data that was important to the particular case (street beggars), with the aim of providing an opportunity for rigorous analysis of specific detail, that are often overlooked by other methods. The broader study took place over a period of 6 months and included 40 SBs and key informants. This paper reports data from 14 interviews with SBs; two key informant interviews and two group discussions; as well as observations. The availability of respondents, convenience, and the resources available to researchers ultimately determined the number of respondents included in this study.

For this paper, researchers purposively selected respondents based on criteria such as gender and the presence of biological twin children on the streets. Researchers also used purposive sampling to select respondents who were knowledgeable (professionally and culturally) about the phenomenon of interest. In addition to purposive sampling, researchers employed snowballing as a sampling technique. Snowballing was especially important since this category of beggars is a small sub-group of all street beggars and is generally difficult to find. The use of snowballing thus enhanced the credibility of the researcher and improved the willingness of other potential respondents to engage



the researcher in the study.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected using non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and group discussions. Observations were conducted before the interviews and group discussions.

***Non-participant Observations:*** The first author conducted non-participant observation at different street junctions and relevant urban spaces in the city. This tool was relevant since it allowed researchers to collect data on the spatial context of begging. Specifically, researchers observed the use of public space by SBs; the context within which begging was carried out; the use of children, and the condition of children on the streets. The ways in which SBs interacted with other street actors (pedestrians; hawkers); and the various times in the course of the day that begging was most actively undertaken were also observed.

***Semi-Structured Interviews:*** Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide. This tool made it possible for researchers to probe more and gain a richer understanding of why they beg with their children on the streets. Most respondents preferred to be interviewed while on the street engaging in the act of begging. Researchers used the dominant local language (Asante-Twi) of the study context to conduct all interviews and later translated and transcribed the interviews into the English Language. Since interviews were undertaken while respondents were working, there were frequent interruptions in data collection, especially whenever there was traffic congestion. This, however, gave researchers the opportunity to observe the interaction between street beggars and pedestrians. Because of the peculiar nature of street begging, the frequent interruptions, and

the reluctance of respondents to engage in prolonged discussion, each interview lasted for an average of 25 minutes. This undoubtedly has implications for the depth of data that this tool was able to generate. However, the data collected with other qualitative data collection tools provided further explanations and clarifications in further enhancing the depth of researchers' understanding. Researchers also interviewed a social welfare officer as part of this study. This respondent provided a professional perspective on SB and strategies for overcoming the potential challenges that SB may have on children. Furthermore, an elderly Dagomba woman from the cultural group of most of the respondents was also interviewed to provide further insight into the cultural underpinnings of this phenomenon of begging.

***Group Discussions:*** Two informal group discussions were conducted at the central market in Kumasi. Each group was made up of three women, all of whom were key informants (persons with cultural knowledge of the phenomenon under study). Researchers did not select group members based on age group, gender, or status as in the case of the focus group. Researchers were, in each case referred to one of these key informants by the SBs, who in turn called their colleagues who had knowledge of the phenomenon to join in the discussion. This is similar to what O'Reilly (2012) describe as opportunistic discussions, unplanned group discussion that occurs as part of qualitative data collection. Because of the market environment (noisy and busy with human and vehicular traffic) within which data was conducted and the fact that all participants in the group were working traders, the group discussions did not go beyond 30 minutes in each case.

## **Data Analysis**

Analysis for this study began with the transcription of qualitative data. After the transcription of data, researchers conducted

thematic analysis on the transcribed data. Since there were specific research questions informing this paper, the transcripts were re-organized under relevant research questions. After this initial organization, researchers read the transcripts thoroughly to identify relevant codes for further analysis. For instance, concerning the reasons, some of the codes included “we beg for the wellbeing of our children” and “the children want me to beg”. Researchers grouped such responses and similar ones for the next stage. After coding, the third step was to search for themes. Researchers looked for codes, which could be put together and can capture something significant about the research question. Some of the themes that emerged under the first research question include “overcoming persistent health challenges of twins” and “overcoming health challenges of mothers”. The identified themes under each research question were subsequently reviewed to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the meanings in the data and addressed the specific research question. The themes were further explored to identify inter-linkages and how they fit together in addressing the research questions of interest. The review also explored how specific themes complemented or challenged other themes in presenting a holistic understanding and response to the guiding research questions. The interlink-ages among the themes were used to enhance the presentation of results, ensuring a presentation of results that is non-repetitive and concise.

### **Overview of respondents**

Most of the respondents (beggars) of this study were women between the ages of 20-30, all of who were from the northern regions of Ghana. Thus, with the exception of three respondents whose ethnic backgrounds were Kasena, Mamprusi, and Nanumba, the remaining were all Dagombas. The Dagombas are an ethnic group found in the Northern part of Ghana. They dwell in a traditional Kingdom known as Dagbon and speak a language called Dagbani or Dagbali. The traditional Kingdom of Dagbon in Ghana predates colonialism and was considered one of the

centralised political systems apart from the Asante, and the Anlo of the Volta region (Nukunya, 2003). The Dagomba culture is heavily influenced by Islam (79%), with ancestor worship common among the rural population (Nukunya, 2003). Most of the respondents were begging on the streets for the first time. While about five of the respondents had been on the street for barely a month, the remaining had been begging on the street between 3-6 months respectively. All the respondents were married, with their husbands left back home to cater for the house in their absence.

## **RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

We present the results in three parts:**a)** the spatial context within which women beg with their twin children,**b)** the reasons that inform the decision of women to beg on the street with their twin children,**c)** the various practices and procedures that take place before women end up on the street with their children as beggars.

### **The spatial context of begging – A brief observational report**

From the observations, most of the mothers and their children appeared malnourished, smallish, and lean in stature. Observations also revealed that respondents preferred to beg on the streets which were heavily congested with people with less vehicular traffic, compared to streets which had many vehicular activities. Again, respondents in this study, unlike other street beggars, avoided moving onto the street when the traffic light turned red. On the contrary, they preferred to sit with their children and beg from the pavement between dual carriage roads. They mostly appealed to pedestrians walking on these pavements. On those streets where there were no pavements in between the road, street beggars in this study used the pedestrian walkways on the side of the roads, once again, to get access and be visible to pedestrians on these walkways. Almost all respondents in this study used large umbrellas for shelter, not unlike those umbrellas

used by street vendors on city streets and urban markets. These umbrellas, usually poorly maintained, were, according to respondents, necessary to protect their under-aged children from harsh environmental and weather conditions. Observations further revealed that respondents had with them many clothes. The clothes were used to cover their children when they fell asleep and used as a mat for their children to sit and sleep on. Finally, all respondents the researcher observed had buckets with them. They kept the foods and clothes of their children in these buckets. In addition, these buckets served as a seat for those who visited them on the streets. The respondents offered these buckets to researchers during data collection. The children of respondents were either asleep or were found playing with the bowls in which their mothers collect money on the floor of these pavements. Most of these children, because of playing on the pavements, often looked dirty.

From the observations, these women beg with their children within a spatial context that is dangerous to the children; given that, most of them beg in the middle of the street. This could have serious health implications, including motor accidents and exposure to air pollutants including exhaust fumes from vehicles. Additionally, the spatial context and the challenges presented could explain the malnourishment as well as the poor clothing observed on the beggars and their children.

### **Interview Data on Key Research Questions**

We present the results under the specific questions that guided this study. In answering the research questions, we use the themes that emerged through the analysis and present them narratively. We have replaced the real names of respondents with some pseudonyms. All respondents indicated as 'R' refer to mothers who beg with twins. All respondents labelled as 'K' refer to the key informants used in this study. Finally, all respondents labelled as

GD are respondents from the group discussions.

### **Which reasons make women beg on the street with their twin children?**

The analysis of the responses revealed three main themes that address this research question. Respondents indicated that they begged with their twins **1)As an antidote for persistent health challenges faced by the children; 2)To overcome specific developmental delays/challenges suffered by the children; 3)To alleviate the mother's own health challenges.**

### **Begging as an antidote for persistent health challenges of twin children.**

Respondents indicated that after childbirth when their children fall sick, it is necessary to beg with these children in order to curb the illness. To these respondents, begging on the street is aimed at improving the health of their twin children. For instance, R6 stated:

*'I am on the street begging in order for my twin children to get well. They are not well. They have this smallpox on them. If I beg with them, the smallpox will go that's why I am here'.*

Similarly, R7 also explained that;

*'It is the children who want me to beg. I have a boy and a girl and they have not been well for some time now. I am on the street because I want them to get well. It's because of them I am here'*

The explanation provided by R7 appears to shift the ultimate decision to beg from the mother to the twins while reinforcing the idea that it enhances the health and wellbeing of the twins. This requirement, they argued, applied specifically to twin children:

*'.....we do not beg with a single child. They do not make such a request. Concerning begging, it's only twins who normally make such requests, and twins are seen as sacred, so there is the need to adhere to what they say. Since childhood, I have never heard of begging with a single child. The single ones they never say they want to beg. No, it is always the twins (K1).*

In the above explanation, K1 did not only emphasise that begging was done with only twin children but revealed that sometimes, the twin children specifically 'request' that their mothers beg with them. Another requirement to beg with children as an antidote was the persistence of the illness. Some respondents pointed out that the health challenges of the twins must be persistent in order to necessitate street begging. In their explanations, for instance, R4 says:

*'When you give birth to twins, and the children keep getting ill, then there is a need to make enquiries as to why that is happening. In my case they have this smallpox, it goes and resurfaces so I'm here to beg with them'*

From the above narrative, it is clear that although her children had smallpox, the reason why she is on the street is not merely the presence of the disease but the re-occurrence of that particular ailment.

Further, some of the respondents and the key informants interviewed as part of this research also emphasised this reason and went further to validate the act of street begging using the culture of respondents as a basis:

*'In our culture, when you give birth to twins, sometimes they fall sick...the only way to avert*

*this sickness is to beg with them on the street. Turning a deaf ear to their (twins) wishes can have serious implications for their mother' (R11).*

*In the northern part of this country, begging with twins is our cultural belief... this belief is practiced by almost every tribe in the northern part of the country. When you give birth to twins, and constantly they fall sick or their mother continuously falls sick, there is the need to make enquiries as to why the children or their mother keep getting ill (K1).*

The arguments by R11 and K1 illustrate two important aspects of this phenomenon. Firstly, the phenomenon appears to be an accepted phenomenon within the culture of respondents. Secondly, this cultural requirement, if not adhered to, will have adverse effects on the mother. Furthermore, this belief appears to strengthen the resolve of these mothers to bring their children onto the streets, irrespective of the dangers, and the legal implications.

### **Begging to overcome child developmental delays.**

Respondents also mentioned developmental delay as a major reason to beg with their children on the streets. With this, the main reason is not on a pathological ailment per se, but with stages of development and parent's own perception about the development of her children. A mother's expertise in diagnosing the developmental delay is emphasised further by R8 in this way:

*'I am a mother of 5 so I know the time children must walk. It is time for my children to walk but they have*



I *delayed...so, I have to beg with the children since that is what they want to walk. So, I am here because of them'.*

Additionally, respondents revealed that the length of stay of beggars was dependent on the perceived improvement in the health or developmental delay. For instance, GD11 explained this in the following way:

*'For most women who beg with twin children, immediately the child starts walking, they get off the street; or when the children start showing improvement in their health. Even if they will return unless there is another problem.'*

The lack of specificity in terms of length of stay and anticipated benefits is problematic in specific ways. It allows some people to remain on the street begging for years, and still use the wellbeing of their children as an excuse. This creates challenges for efforts aimed at reducing the phenomenon and protecting the wellbeing of children. A social welfare officer had this to say:

*'The problem with this is, we can't know with certainty that this person is doing it for the wellbeing of her children or she is doing it just for the money. When you go there and ask, they all claim their children want them to beg. So, there is no way we can find out hence, we cannot do anything about it' (K1).*

For another welfare officer, there is a challenge for social welfare efforts in protecting the interests of children, especially when there appears to be some conflict between constitutional and cultural requirements:

*'...asking such populations to entirely quit a particular way of life may create*

*tensions and sometimes lead to conflict, especially when the health of the children, according to the mothers, is the main consideration for them being on the street... There is an ethical dilemma since this highlight some of the conflicts that exist between constitutional rights and the culture of the people involved...so, it is a big dilemma, trying to come up with a solution that will protect the children and appease the culture at the same time'(K2).*

For K2, the ethical dilemma that this phenomenon presents to professional welfare officers requires that all stakeholders including religious and community leaders come together and agree on a compromise, as a first step towards addressing this dilemma. Her argument is:

*'...we the professionals can suggest that since it is a cultural and religious phenomenon, then the mothers with twins should not necessarily be made to beg on the streets. Rather they should be limited to begging in and around the mosques. This way, some of the risks associated with begging by the roadside are mitigated since the children will no longer be exposed to the weather as well to accidents'*

Here, K2 suggests the need for some compromise between constitutional requirements and the demands of culture. To her, begging around mosques, most of which are not near busy city streets is one way of protecting children from street-side dangers and still respecting the culture of the people involved. While some may argue that this amounts to an endorsement of illegal activity

(street begging), an accurate answer goes beyond the current scope of this study. What this section has indicated however is that the lack of specificity regarding the length of stay on the street allow some people to remain on the streets for longer than necessary

### **Begging to alleviate the health problems of mothers with twins.**

Street begging does not always result from a health or developmental challenge facing children. On the contrary, respondents explained that sometimes begging is directly because of a health challenge faced by the mother. R2 explains:

*'I woke up one day with a swollen leg. I could not do anything. I treated it but it occurred again...I was then told that the children want me to beg with them. So, I had no option than to beg with them...'*

Even though most of the reasons are centred on the wellbeing of children, this theme of begging for the wellbeing of the mother was also re-emphasised in the group discussions. From the narrative of GD3 below, mothers may not only fall sick but may actually die if they do not beg with their twins:

*'In our culture, when you give birth to twins, there is a possibility that the mother of the children can die... when it happens so, there is the need to investigate the death of the mother. Sometimes, upon consultation, it will be revealed that the children, that is the twins, killed their mother or killed themselves as a result of their mother not complying with their request'.*

For respondents in this study, therefore, begging on the streets with twin children is sometimes, culturally necessary and relevant for

the wellbeing of twin children and their mothers. The relevance and necessity of this activity are embedded within the cultural beliefs and perceptions of respondents. The consequence of non-compliance according to respondents could be fatal for either the twins or their mother or both. While these findings provide a different insight into some of the causes of street begging, it also indicates to some extent, the potential challenge for relevant authorities and welfare officers in alleviating this phenomenon and protecting the rights of the children from a legal perspective.

### **Which practices and procedures take place before women end up on the street with their children as beggars?**

In answering this question, respondents revealed that when children or their mothers fall sick persistently, or when the children experience delays in development, certain activities must take place, and specific procedures followed before the mother goes to the street with children. Specifically, respondents indicated that before mothers engage in street begging, there needs to be **a)** some form of consultation into the spiritual world regarding the health needs of the twins; and that **b)** this consultation must be done by a man (father of children or extended family head).

#### **The consultation of a spiritualist.**

Respondents explained that twins are sacred and are gifts from the spirit. As such, anything concerning them must be decided through consultation with a spiritual medium. GD3 explains:

*'In our culture, twins are sacred; we believe they are special gifts from the spirits. When you give birth to a twin it is seen as a blessing and the mothers of these twins know this'*

Most respondents indicated that since they are from the spirits

when there is an issue or a problem it is only prudent to consult the same spirit who blessed them with the children. The children's father makes this consultation from a spiritual head. R10 elaborates on this:

*'When there is a problem, usually, the children's father makes enquiries from a spiritual head like a Mallam (male spiritualist), who can go into the spiritual world and ask the twins what they want'. If you are not a spiritual head you can't go into the spiritual realm and ask the children'*

According to their beliefs and traditions, these spiritualists, also known as “Mallam” in the local dialect, have the ability to go into the spiritual world and ask the twins what they want. Most of these children, through consultation, will indicate what needs to be done. This is relayed by the spiritualist to the mother of the children through the man (who may be the husband or the head of the extended family). The study also revealed that the suggestion of these spiritualists is often reinforced by the opinion or previous actions of significant others. For instance, R9 indicates how her mother's previous experience re-enforced her decision to beg:

*'When my mother was my age, she encountered a similar problem and she begged with my elderly sisters, it worked for her. Therefore, she believes it will work for me too. So, I have to beg with mine, if I want them to get well'.*

The above extract makes it clear that the opinions and experiences of significant others are also relevant in informing the decision of mothers to beg on the street with their children. It is also important to point out that twin children do not always require, through spiritual mediums, for their mothers to beg with them. Sometimes

the requests have to do with the purchase of specific items or goods:

*'It's not always begging, sometimes, they just want maize, others too want a goat. So, it is not only begging. If you are lucky you get other stuff' (GD2).*

*'...if you are lucky, they will request for a sheep, some also request for a fowl. In my village, some of them request a special kind of ring, an oval ring which is usually hanged around their neck...In my case, when I gave birth, my children wanted a fowl...' (K1).*

The above statement by K1: 'if you are lucky' indicates how serious respondents take the outcome of the consultation process. The research revealed that mothers do not necessarily have an option once the spiritualist makes a recommendation since there is a possibility of grave consequences if the recommendation is not adhered to. The above clearly emphasizes not only the spiritual consultation process but also the socio-cultural relevance that the outcome of the consultation carries.

### **The man as the person who consults the spiritualist**

Still on the decision processes, respondents also pointed out that a man, usually the father of the children or a male family head, must do the consultation on behalf of the mother and the twins. For instance, R10 stated:

*'It is the man who goes to make such enquiries. Whatever goes on, when he returns, he will relay whatever was said to you the mother. Whether the children want to beg or they want something else. So, it's always the man'.*

Interestingly, respondents indicated that the men do not have to join their wives and their children in begging on the streets. The following quotations explain this:

*'...if we are to make enquiries into the future of the children or ask them what they want, it is the man who goes to the mallam to make such enquires. When he goes and returns, he will relay whatever the mallam said to you. If it has to do with begging on the street, it is the responsibility of the woman and not the husband. There is no way the man will escort you to the street to beg with you. He has to work and provide for you and the children while you are on the street...it is you the woman who will go to the street with the children to beg. (K1)*

*'No, the man is not part. It is all on the woman to bring the child to the street to beg. If there is any ailment it doesn't affect the man... it's you the woman who will be affected. Consequently, it's only prudent you take them to the street to beg with them' (GD1).*

The findings here demonstrate a gendered decision-making process, where the man consults the spiritualists and then informs the mother to go to the streets and beg. Clearly, before respondents end up on the street, they go through a series of processes that are both cultural and gendered. This gendered decision-making processes, grounded firmly in spirituality and traditional beliefs of respondents may have implications on how these street beggars respond to efforts by city officials and welfare officers to remove beggars from the streets of Ghana

## DISCUSSIONS

This research has revealed information on the processes and reasons that underlie the phenomenon of begging with twins. What has been revealed is that cultural norms and beliefs, which emphasise the wellbeing of twin children, play a key role in this process. At the same time, the decision-making process is gendered, with men making decisions that have implications for women and children in terms of street begging.

The findings of this research highlight some of the instances in which cultural requirements contradict the legal expectations and appear to put the wellbeing of people at risk. Asomah (2015) for instance, recognises culture and its various requirements as one of the main sources of discrimination and abuse against women and children in developing countries (Asomah 2015). In his study of the cultural practice of Trokosi in Ghana, Asomah (2015) recognised this challenge of upholding cultural norms and human rights at the same time. He indicates the complexity and uneasy alliance in the implementation of formal laws within certain cultural norms. In contributing to this debate, Baah (2000) argues that the conceptual framework of “universally” accepted westernized human rights policy is of western origin and does not allow for variance in the understanding of cultural rights of different societies. He argued that the Akans of Ghana for instance strongly disagreed with the elevation of individual rights (advocated for by the universal declaration) at the expense of community wellbeing, advocated for, largely by the Akan culture. These culturally based objections create real barriers to the successful implementation of human rights-based policies and programs. This appears to reflect some of the findings from this study, where respondents continuously emphasized cultural-based wellbeing as justification for their practice as street beggars. This research contributes to the on-going debate about the competing demands between culture and laws or human rights. It brings attention to the concept of cultural



sensitivity and its application in developing country contexts. While we recognise the fact that beliefs and perceptions emerging from cultures influence behaviour and are key to the reaction of the public towards state policies and laws, we must emphasise here that the existence of a belief does not mean the intended benefits exist. In other words, the fact that a cultural practice is intended for the wellbeing of citizens does not mean that the practice actually promotes the wellbeing of citizens. We argue that in the context of modernisation and urbanisation, some cultural mechanisms that proved useful previously may prove harmful today. For instance, while mothers who begged with twins a century ago might have done so and benefitted, those who do it today do so within a completely different urban context. The context within which street beggars operate in today is socially and geographically different and more dangerous (risk of vehicular accident; exposure to car exhaust; risk of crime; exposure of children to extreme weather conditions) to the wellbeing of street beggars and their children, irrespective of any cultural wellbeing that is intended to emerge from this cultural practice. Our thesis is that contrary to some arguments made by cultural relativists (Megret 2010), traditional mechanisms on their own do not offer wellbeing and security for specific populations in perpetuity. In this research, we find that existing conditions in urban areas do not really protect the lives of mothers and their children, and neither did we find any evidence of actual wellbeing for respondents nor their children. Questions remain regarding the extent to which cultural sensitivity could be upheld, especially when the wellbeing of children is at stake. The response of the welfare officer in this study clearly indicates an attempt to address these competing demands by satisfying the demands of culture while protecting the wellbeing of children. The changing nature of society (both geographically and socially) means that these cultural practices must be continuously re-examined.

Another major finding from this research was the gendered decision-making process that underlies this phenomenon of begging and its cultural foundation. Every society in the world has cultural beliefs and practices which guide its members on how they should live or behave (Blake 2000). Inasmuch as culture is relevant to its members, some practices over the years have been deemed as harmful to the dignity and wellbeing of members (Mauro and Hardison, 2000). Some of these Harmful Cultural Practices (HCPs) stem from deep-rooted discriminatory views and beliefs about the roles and position of women in African societies (Donnelly 2007). From birth throughout their lives, due to role differentiation and expectation, some societies relegate women to an inferior position, which is a reflection of the cultural beliefs that have a pronounced effect on them (Donnelly 2007). For instance, in this research, it was clear that most of the decision making regarding whether a woman and her twin children must beg on the streets of urban areas rests with men (husbands; fathers; male spiritualists). The women in this research mostly comply with the outcome of the interaction between these largely male actors. While this may be indicative of the broader context within which most of these street beggars originate, it is also an example of how some cultural practices maintain and perpetuate the subordination of women in society and exclude women from decision-making processes (Donnelly 2007). Despite progress made over the years in upholding the rights of women and reducing gender-based discrimination (Hill 2006), there is still discrimination in daily interactions between men and women. Within the broader African context, men are seen as custodians of African culture and often maintain control (based on cultural norms) over decisions that affect the wellbeing of both women and children (Ademuson 2016). Women are often expected to respect and be submissive to their men and some cultures even allow husbands to 'punish' the perceived insubordination of their wives (Makama 2013). Thus, some cultural practices continue to perpetuate the subordination of

women in Africa (Arndt, 2000). This idea, which encourages male dominance, increases the acceptance and justification of subordination against women. Subordination, in the African context, is extremely common and encourages the tradition of male dominance. Asserting power over women allows men to establish “male control and dominance”, not only in relationships but also in the beliefs and structures of society (Hill 2006).

## CONCLUSIONS

This research explored the reasons that inform the phenomenon of street begging with twins and the various decision-making processes that bring mothers to the street. Unlike other street beggars, the respondents in this study demonstrate a strong welfare reason (Child health) as a basis for their activity. The cultural basis on which this argument (child welfare) is made re-emphasizes the persisting problem of how cultural rights and human rights can be accommodated to promote the overall wellbeing of people in different contexts. While we recognize the relevance of culture and the need for culturally sensitive approaches, we argue that the intended benefits of specific cultural practices are not perpetual but rather time and context specific. As such, cultural practices that were relevant in the past may not provide the same benefits today; not necessarily because the culture is 'wrong' but mainly because time and the changes that it brings (socially and geographically) may have implications on the extent to which such benefits may still exist. The findings from this study do not allow us to conclude whether the stated and intended benefits for the children involved exist or not. What is rather clear is that the risks that children face on the street are clear and present and need to be addressed. The suggestion proffered by the social welfare officer in this study may be a starting point. Though it may appear to legitimize the phenomenon of street begging, it still provides a relevant basis for policymakers to

engage with cultural stakeholders in promoting the wellbeing of children. The nature and scope of this research also prevent us from generalizing outside the scope of our study. Other questions necessary for the full understanding of this phenomenon remain unexplored. For instance, the factors that determine the choice of urban areas for begging were not fully explored by this study. Again, the economic status of beggars in this study and what beggars do with the money they receive on the street were not fully explored. This information is important since all respondents in this study indicated that money was not the motivation for their activity. Finally, the level and frequency of communication between beggars (mothers) and their spouses, while they work on the street, was not explored in this study. Do fathers communicate frequently to check on the wellbeing of their children while they are on the street? Do mothers receive support (emotional and financial) from husbands while they beg on the street? Do mothers have to seek permission from their family (husbands; family heads) before they bring their activity on the street to an end? These are interesting questions for future researchers.

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