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Interviewing the Street Children of Mekelle City, Ethiopia: Their Plight and What Help Public and Private Organizations Offer

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Interviewing the Street Children of Mekelle City, Ethiopia: Their Plight and What Help Public and Private Organizations Offer

—Merhawi Wells-Bogue (Editor: Jennifer Lee)

During the summer of 2011, after living in the U.S. for eight years, I returned for the first time to my hometown, Mekelle City, Ethiopia, which lies on the northern border of the country next to Eritrea. Everything had changed completely, and I hardly recognized it. The city and its residents had become much more modernized. Still, one thing remained the same: the large number of street children—homeless children who live on the streets.

One hot day, I was strolling in Romanat Square, an area busy with cars and people going in all directions. I saw a pile of boys lying on the sidewalk next to a building. Curled on top of each other like corpses, they slept deeply in the sun. Some were barefooted, others in worn-out shoes; all were in ragged clothes. People hurried by them as if they didn't exist. When I was a young street vendor on the streets of Mekelle, I had witnessed this same scene. Although the city had developed and changed during the past eight years, the plight of the street children had not.

Seeing these street children not only triggered past memories, it also made me realize that I was now in a more privileged position and receiving a higher education. I was inspired to try to help these street children.



(Click on map to enlarge) Ethiopia with Mek'ele (Mekelle City), capital of the Tigray Region (Nations Online Project).

A Research Project Develops and Begins

In December of that year, I returned to the University of New Hampshire where I was an English/journalism major and wrote a research proposal for a grant from the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research. Dr. Lisa Miller, an associate professor in the English department, agreed to be my faculty mentor. Friends in Ethiopia helped me find Eden Fitsum, a lecturer at Mekelle University, who agreed to be my foreign mentor. She guided and helped me connect with people who knew about the street children. I was fortunate enough to receive a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship Abroad to conduct research on the street children of Mekelle City during the summer of 2012.

My plan was, first, to capture the street children's voices through interviews with them. My journalism studies had given me the reporting skills and technical tools to tell their stories. Second, I would interview managers of private orphanages and government officials of the major agencies offering support services. Finally, I would produce a short documentary film about the children's conditions, the support services available to them, and how effective these services were.

That summer I took with me for the interviews a Nikon D5100 video camera and a professional Zoom H2n audio



The author (left) and his foreign mentor, Eden Fitsum, in Mekelle City reviewing a recent videotaped interview (Courtesy Yishak Abrhame).

recorder. I conducted all the interviews with children and most officials in my and their native language, Tigrinya. This was, of course, a great advantage. In addition, friends in the city helped me in contacting the children and in negotiating the governmental structure.

I called upon one friend almost upon arrival in the city in mid-June. Before beginning interviewing, I had to get a permission letter from the city government that would permit me to take pictures, shoot videos, and talk to street children on the streets and government officials in their offices. The Ethiopian government keeps close track of the media. If I video- or audio-taped an interview without a permission letter, I could be imprisoned.

I contacted a friend, Ato (Mr.) Fikre Assefa, director of an orphanage, for advice since he had many connections to government offices. Because my research dealt with children, he advised me to ask the Tigray Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (TBOLSA) for the letter. TBOLSA is a government

office that supports street boys and girls, vulnerable children, extremely poor families, and people with disabilities. Ato Heshe Lemma, the head of the regional office of TBOLSA, agreed to write the required letter. However, it was a couple of weeks before I finally actually got it.

Interviewing the Children

I interviewed close to twenty street children, all boys, both during the day and at night. I asked them basic questions, such as how old they were, where they were from, did they have parents, how long had they been on the streets, how did they survive, why were they on the streets, did they go to school, where did they go for help when sick, and what kind of help did they need. Then I talked to quite a few street girls, known as *Setenya Adari*, "girls of the night," commercial sex workers, most of whom did not live on the streets as the boys did but in cheap rented rooms. All these girls were involved in under-age prostitution.

A friend who had a good relationship with the street boys introduced me to a group of eight of them, ranging in age from ten to sixteen. Getting to know them and winning their trust before interviewing them took quite a bit of effort. I took them to a restaurant or a cafe a few times to have a normal conversation. I could see clearly that their physical appearances identified them to society as street children. Most of them wore worn-out flip flops and shabby, dirty shirts and pants. Some had scratched, swollen faces or looked malnourished and starving. Their hairstyles ranged dramatically. The oldest, Aregawi (not his name), who was sixteen, had his curly hair cut in a Mohawk style with a yellow stripe in front. He seemed the most mature and, in fact, the rest saw him as a leader, as a big brother, and also as a father figure. They listened to and respected him probably more than they did their own families.

The bond among the boys in the group is very strong, as if they had been born into the same family. They had given each other nicknames. Their struggles seemed to have brought them together with the common goal of survival. They spend their days looking for food—usually leftover from a restaurant—or for small jobs to earn money. The way they survive on the streets is by sharing, and it's their core value of survival. "If I have bread, I will not eat it by myself, but I will share it with my brothers," Aregawi said. "Likewise, if I am not with them and they have food, they will wait for me before eating. That's how we survive here." (Personal interview, July 2012)

The children's physical conditions were bad due to malnutrition, lack of sleep, and exposure to cold and rain. In severe weather at night they would build campfires and smoke cigarettes to keep warm. Many were addicted to cigarettes. They would roam the city looking for better shelter. They were abused or ignored by the majority of the city's residents.

When they are sleeping on the sidewalk during the day, people walk by them as if the children didn't exist. At night when they are asleep, drunk people pee and spit on them. If they are sleeping or hanging out near a big building, security guards hit them and tell them to leave. Sometimes they get blamed for things they didn't do since they are obvious and



Street children sleeping in an abandoned room in order to avoid the bitter cold in Mekelle City.

defenseless targets of suspicion. They are confused, angry and frustrated. This can prompt some of them to act dangerously and steal money or food.

All the street children have similar stories about their lives, stories of families living in poverty with one or both parents dead from war, disease or HIV/AIDS. Many were abused and rejected by their families until they ran away. Typical is a thirteen-year-old boy I met one night on the streets. He had run away from his home in a small town, where his stepmother had abused him emotionally and physically. Tying his hands behind his back, she made him inhale smoke from a fire where chili peppers were roasting. As he struggled for air, she pushed him into the fire, and he severely burned his lower back. The next day, he ran away to Mekelle City. I asked him if he would ever go back and reconcile with the stepmother. He answered in a sad and resentful tone, "I will never go back there. I would rather stay here and live my life and find something to do." (Personal interview with Ashenafi (not his name), July 2012)



A group of street boys hanging out in Mekelle City.

The abuse and deprivation the boys suffered at home and now suffer on the streets of the city crush any sense of identity or of hope and make them ask if life is worth living. Some turn to drinking alcohol or chewing a stimulant drug called *khat*. They are abandoned by their families and society but have found among themselves friends and ways to live—new families where they are accepted and even loved. It's no wonder that street life is more appealing than home.

Despite the appalling conditions they face and the bleakness of their future, they have not completely given up hope. Many expressed to me a real desire for an education and for a home and family of their own. They only need someone to help them. This was as true for the girls as for the boys.

Most of the homeless girls do not actually live on the streets but in cheap rented rooms. They are called *Setenya Adari*, "girls of the night," or commercial sex workers. They are mostly fifteen to eighteen years old and, to make a living, are engaged in under-age prostitution. In 2002, the Women's Affairs Department of the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs estimated that 90,000 females

were involved in commercial sex work; approximately twenty percent of them were aged between twelve and eighteen years. This number seems to be increasing in urban areas (*Investing in Boys and Girls*, pg 30).

The girls had left their homes for many of the same reasons as the boys did. They were trying to earn money to support themselves, and a few were trying to support their siblings also. Others had been pressured by girls already involved in prostitution to come to the city and make the money they couldn't at home. All were cut off from family support and were outcasts in the city. One girl I interviewed said she and the other girls were often described as "horrible-looking during the day and good-looking during the night." (Personal interview, August 2012) It's not surprising that they would spend the days in their rooms, afraid of being insulted and denounced by society. They were isolated and alienated.

Most of the girls I met and interviewed were part of one of the few support systems available to them, an organization called Wise Up. Wise Up is aimed at expanding HIV/AIDS prevention services among sex workers and their clients. According to field organizer Ato Birhane Kahsay, the organization educates all the young girls on how to use condoms and protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. It also provides the girls a place to take a shower and sleep during the day. At night, however, the girls are not allowed to sleep there and so will be in their rented rooms (if they have them) or out on the streets. (Personal interview, August 2012)

These young girls suffered both physically and psychologically. They were often physically abused by the men who bought their services and were exposed to various diseases, HIV/AIDS being the worst among many. The men treated them like animals, often cursing and spitting on them. Sometimes they would refuse to pay before leaving. A study published in 2011 states that "All the child sex workers admitted that they have been physically or psychologically abused" (Mums for Mums, pg. 23).

Rejection, isolation, and verbal and physical abuse have destroyed the girls, making them feel hopeless and abandoned. They do want to change and not live this way forever, but they feel helpless to make it happen.



Girls at Wise Up having a coffee ceremony with popcorn.

Help for the Children: Where Could it Come From?

Ethiopia has a long and complex history as one of the oldest independent countries in the world. It is also today one of the poorest, devastated by drought and war. In 1974 a communist military junta ended the forty-four-year rule of Emperor Haile Selassie. The country was almost immediately plunged into civil war, which ended only in 1987. A new constitution, signed in 1994, made Ethiopia a federal parliamentary republic in which the Prime Minister was head of government. The first multi-party election took place in 1995, and Ato Meles Zenawi was elected Prime Minister. In May 1998, a border dispute with Eritrea led to the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, which lasted until June 2000 and cost both countries an estimated one million dollars a day along with many killed on both sides. Zenawi's death in 2012 left the country with an interim government until the next elections in 2015.

Given the poor economy and unstable government of the country, who is helping the street children? I knew from my own experience growing up and from people I talked with, that private organizations and regional government agencies were trying to help poor, distressed families and children. I went to talk with these organizations and agencies.

I first interviewed managers of three orphanages and one day care center, all very dedicated people. My main questions for them were: When and why did you open this program? Who do you specifically help? What is their age range? What are your criteria for accepting children? Where do you get financial or other support? What is your capacity? Do you plan to get bigger?

The Daughters of Charity, a Catholic institution, was established almost two decades ago to look after poor and vulnerable children who are half- and full-orphans and are under difficult circumstances. The children, ages twelve to eighteen, are mostly former street children. Currently, the orphanage houses 215 children. Most of its support comes from private donors in Europe.

At Operation Rescue of Ethiopia (ORE), a private children's relief organization, I spoke with Ato Getachew Tesfay, the general manager. ORE was founded in 2000 by two missionary couples from Brazil and Switzerland to help children, from infancy to the age of twelve, who are full-orphans whose families had been affected by HIV/AIDS, and also half-orphans whose families are extremely poor. Currently, the organization has 300 children; in addition, they help sixty blind students with school supplies. The organization depends on sponsors from Europe and America. ORE has a capacity for 500 children, but limited sponsors and inadequate funds keep the number lower. (Personal interview, August 2012)

In 2002, with his own money and a little help from friends, Ato Fikire Assefa established the orphanage called Human Beings Association of Brotherhood (HAB), which he still manages. He started with five street children, and now the number has grown to seventy. HAB supports street children, full- and half-orphans, and children who have extremely poor families. Education is a priority, and all the children attend school and are encouraged to do well academically. Those who do poorly are offered the chance to go to a vocational training school. HAB support comes from private sources in Canada and the United States. To reduce dependency on donors, Ato Fikire Assefa has established his own farm where he grows corn, wheat, and taff (a grain similar to wheat), and keeps cows whose milk is sold in the community.

In 2004 another resident of the city, Ato Tedros Asule, with his own funds and friends' help, founded a day care called Human-to-Human Aid Program. He had a vision to lift up street children and send them back to school or reunite them with their families because he felt it was unfair for the street children to be abandoned by society. He has helped many street children go back to school or obtain a vocational training. The program suffers from lack of funds so Tedros had decided to keep his day care as a temporary safe haven for the street children until they can become independent.

All these managers of private orphanages recognized the problem with the street children as being very severe. During an interview at ORE, Ato Getachew Tesfay, the general manager, said, "The street children face many problems: they starve, they lack shelter, they don't have access to schooling; they are in a very bad situation." In addition, he noted that it was often difficult to take the "street mind" out of the children. By "street mind" he meant that the children get accustomed to the street lifestyle and values, which include smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and chewing *Khat*. (Personal interview, August 2012) Despite the obvious severity of the problem, the managers all lacked adequate resources and funds, most of which come from countries in Europe and the U.S.

I then interviewed the following officials of the Tigray regional government: Ato Zemichael G/medhin, director of the Alliance of Civil Society Organizations of Tigray (ACSOT); Ato Kahasay Gebrekidan, a senior expert responsible for the Capacity Building and Organizing Community Unit of the Tigray Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (TBOLSA); Ato Kiross Redahy, the Process Owner of the Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Unit of TBOLSA; and Ato Daniel Abraham, a senior expert at TBOLSA.

In the interviews I asked these questions: Does the government have enough resources to help street children improve their lives in Mekelle City? What government services are targeted at helping these street children? What are the major causes of street children, and what are possible solutions?

All officials expressed the view that economic and social factors cause children to live on the streets. War, over-population, and unemployment have caused many families to be displaced, broken up, and to live in extreme poverty. Many young children are forced to work on the streets, sometimes until late at night; this affects their academic performances, and they drop out of school. Other families abandon their children simply because they can't feed and care for them. These economic hardships often lead to child abuse in families, which causes many children to leave home. Children unhappy at home are vulnerable to peer pressure from street children, who may describe to them the happier communities formed among those living on the streets. Ato Zemichael, the director of ACSOT, who has been working for the last decade with street children, said, "The last resort for children whose needs couldn't be met at home is the street. There they can beg and do whatever is necessary to survive." He added, "Forty percent of the Tigray population live in poverty and can't feed their families for more than half a year." (Personal interview, August 2012.)



A view of Mekelle City, summer 2012.

Coming Together for the Children

As for solutions, the officials said that the government is doing what it can to help, such as providing grants to extremely poor families and students. They have also created a Community Care Coalition in every *kebele* (district) of the city to reach out to children in need and extremely poor families. However, the government doesn't have resources to even begin to meet the needs of the large number of poor children and families.

Speaking of poverty, Ato Zemichael said, "You can only reduce it but not eliminate it." If the people are poor, by implication the economy is poor too. Therefore the government must first improve the economy by mobilizing resources and implementing the right strategies. Second, the government can't tackle the whole problem on its own since it has limited resources; therefore, it will need to rally public support and aid providers' contributions. (Personal interview, August 2012)

According to senior expert Ato Kahasay Gebrekidan, who has been working for the past three decades with poor and street children, a comprehensive study is needed in order to identify effective interventions. For example, if some children need to reunify with their families, then bring about the reunification. If some children don't have parents, then find somebody to sponsor them. If other children need to continue their education, then enroll them in school. If some children need vocational training, then send them to vocational training school.

Once all of these children are in a better place and making good progress, they will need some type of follow-up counseling. Their traumatizing circumstances and subsequent street life will make it difficult for them to return to a normal life in society. However, these interventions can happen only if there is enough support from the public, aid givers, and the government. (Personal interview, August 2012)

All the managers of orphanages and government officials I interviewed echoed the same message: there is clearly a lack of cooperation and support from the public as well as from aid providers and the government to tackle the issues with street children. If the public, aid providers, the government, and also members of the Ethiopian diaspora living abroad are willing to actively help, then many children's needs can be met and their number reduced.

A Summer of Personal and Professional Research

I hope that can and will happen because street children are a serious problem in Ethiopia. It is very difficult to get current and accurate numbers, but an Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs study estimates that in 2007 the number of children living or working on the street was around 150,000, with about 60,000 living in the capital Addis Ababa (*Investing in Boys and Girls*, pg. 30).

The motivations for this, my first undergraduate research, were both professional and personal. Professionally, I wanted to gain experience and develop skills for my career as a journalist. During this summer I certainly

experienced what it is like to meet and interview a great variety of people in many different settings. I learned what journalism in the real world is like.

The problem of the street children reached me personally. When I visited Ethiopia in the summer of 2011, I recognized that the plight of the street children in Mekelle City had not improved since I left eight years ago. Seeing them brought back my own years of poverty and hardship as a child street vendor, when I would see them living, ragged and hungry, on the streets. Now in my present life, living with my American family and receiving a higher education at UNH, I couldn't forget that rough, young part of my life. I didn't want to forget; I wanted to do something.

Receiving a higher education has made me realize that education is the key to solving or raising awareness of problems like the street children. My studies have taught me how, as a journalist, to give voices to the children and to those who are trying to help them. Street children are not only an issue in Mekelle City; they are a global problem that needs international attention.

The results of my undergraduate research are intended to raise awareness of the issue of street children by the publication of this article and the production of a short documentary film, using the videos, photographs and interviews obtained while in Mekelle City this past summer. For me, my long-term plan is to open a boarding school in Mekelle City that will be dedicated to educating street children and orphans as well as underprivileged children who live in poverty.

First, I want to give thanks to God for his guidance and strength. Second, I want to give thanks to my family for being there for me whenever I needed them. Third, I want to give special thanks to Dr. Antonio Henley, former McNair Scholars Program director; my mentors, Lisa Miller and Eden Fitsum; and Tom Haines for helping me put together my research proposal and guiding me throughout my research. Last but not least, I want to give big thanks to the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for helping me make this happen—I would not have done it without you.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Senior **Merhawi Wells-Bogue** will graduate in May 2013 with a bachelor of arts in English/journalism and a minor in business. He was born in Mekelle City, Ethiopia, and came to the United States at the age of fourteen. His career goal is to be an investigative journalist and filmmaker/videographer, and his summer research project boosted his confidence as an interviewer and researcher. "Everyone in Mekelle City," he said, "was very supportive of my research." Merhawi's advice for researchers is to know well your materials, methodology, and questions before beginning work. "Don't get overwhelmed," he advises. "Do it one step at a time." He plans to invest in the street children by opening a boarding school in his hometown.

Lisa C. Miller is an associate professor in the Department of English and the director of the University of New Hampshire journalism program. She has been teaching at UNH for twenty-four years and specializes in digital storytelling. She had never before mentored an *Inquiry* author but found Merhawi's project very interesting and "a once-in-a-life-time, very challenging chance [for him] to practice his journalism skills . . . He's shown me that our students can tackle difficult projects like this." She feels that "journalists must learn how best to tell stories to people of all ages and backgrounds. Learning to write for *Inquiry* is an excellent way to work on storytelling skills for a specific audience in a specific format."

Merhawi was fortunate to connect again with **Eden Fitsum**, who agreed to be the foreign mentor for his research project. They had become acquainted through a non-governmental organization when Merhawi was a child in Mekelle

City. Mrs. Fitsum is a lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Communications at Mekelle University. She has a bachelor of arts in foreign languages and literature and a master's in journalism and communication. "Merhawi had everything figured out and was very enthusiastic," she said. "I was just there to give comments on procedures and give an idea of where to go, who to ask, and what questions to ask." She called being a foreign mentor "an interesting and great experience."

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