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Street-connectedness through a COVID-19 lens: Exploring media representations of street-connected children to understand their societal positionality

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gsc**Emmy Weatherill** 

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Abstract

The 2017 general comment (GC21) to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on children in street situations, provides a framework of legal guidance for governments developing policies aimed at protecting street-connected children and sets up the rationale for more awareness raising and public education to counter negative and deficit attitudes towards street-connectedness. Within this framework, the media has a role to play in either challenging conceptualisations of street-connected children as out-of-place within the public and predominantly adult domain described by urban streets, or in reinforcing ideological constructions of citizenship and normalised notions of childhood that result in negative stereotypes of these children. GC21 recommends that interventions targeted at street-connected children should be ethically responsible – adopting child rights approaches aimed at using accurate data/evidence that upholds the dignity of children, their personal integrity, and their right to life. As such, these approaches should also extend to how organisations engage with and utilise the media to represent street-connected children. Focusing on media representations of street-connected children during the six pandemic-affected months of February to July 2020, this paper provides a review of the content of the sources to provide an insight into the structural barriers that face street-connected children because of how they are positioned in society, during the pandemic

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and in general, and the extent to which the media reinforces or counters the rescue or removal narratives that can lead to inappropriate intervention responses.

Keywords

COVID-19, GC21 UNCRC, media representation, street-connected

‘Street connections’ describe the relationships, associations, and attachments that individual children form, maintain, and renew as they live and/or work on the street (Thomas de Benitez, 2017). Focusing on connections, we emphasise how children are capable of forging and developing relationships within the interactive space understood as the street, as well as with family and local community members beyond the street (Rizzini et al., 2007). Their resulting street-connectedness is complex, multi-dimensional, individual, and identity forming (Corcoran, 2016), as they grow up within spaces that require them to navigate the political, cultural, and social worlds within which they are becoming and being street-connected. For example, street-connected children are often conceptualised as out-of-place in relation to pre-existing notions about the forms of mobility and movement that are ‘allowed’ within the public and predominantly adult domain described by urban streets (Corcoran, 2016). They are often positioned as delinquent and in need of removal, or as victims in need of adult intervention, rescue, and protection – as Balagopalan (2014) and Beazley and Miller (2015) explain. Localised understandings and perceptions of what it means for a child to be street-connected translate into responses towards these children by politicians, religious centres, and civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as the children’s own families and wider communities.

As the literature describes, there are many reasons why children choose or are impelled to migrate to the street, and the exact combination of motivating factors is specific to each individual (e.g. Asante, 2016; Rahbari, 2016; Reza and Bromfield, 2019; Wakia, 2010). Similarly, a child’s experiences on and engagement with the interactional space we understand to be the street, will depend upon a combination of intersecting factors such as age, gender, specific geographic location, hierarchical structures of power within local communities and undoubtedly local culture, politics, and understandings of who children are and what roles they should inhabit in society (Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021).

Street-connected children’s interactions with the wider community, CSOs, religious communities, trusted adults etc., as well as with peers in similar situations, develop informal markets and networks that enable access to food, income, and shelter (Beazley, 2003; Corcoran et al., 2020; Davies, 2008; Street Invest, 2014–2018). These networks can instil self-confidence and cultural identity, and provide spaces of autonomy and solidarity that protect from stigmatisation and exclude outsiders (e.g. Ayuku et al., 2004; Beazley, 2000). However, membership and maintenance of these networks may involve complex and imperfect systems of reciprocity that are difficult and risky to maintain (Heinonen, 2011; Pearson, 2019). The informal economy is unsalaried, unregulated, lacks security or the ability to protect children from economic shocks such as illness, and can lead to work that is dangerous or age-inappropriate (Pearson, 2019; van Blerk et al., 2014).

As CSOs and other stakeholders working to support communities depending on the informal economy reported at the time, pandemic-related lockdowns and associated curfews considerably limited the support systems street-connected children rely on for survival (Hunter et al., 2021; Street Invest, 2020). The closure of non-essential businesses and markets left the children without the street-based economic and social networks on which they usually depend and limited their

access to food, shelters and drop-in centres, clean water – in addition to the personal protective equipment required to prevent COVID-19 infection (Consortium for Street Children, 2020; Hunter et al., 2021). Extended periods of lockdown therefore further increased the precarity associated with street-connectedness and that of families reliant on informal income-generating activities, increasing the numbers of children migrating to the street.

However, accurate statistics describing the situation of street-connected children – before or during the pandemic – do not exist for many countries. There are increasing efforts to determine the numbers of street-connected children (e.g. Department of Children's Services Mombasa, 2019) in order to: design and attract funding for effective interventions at the practice level, and/or develop programmes and policies at local, regional and national government levels (Consortium for Street Children [CSC], 2015). A key issue in developing accurate statistics is the variety of ways in which street-connectedness is understood and consequently defined. Local perceptions and responses can be reflected in how social policies are drafted and interpreted (UNCRC, 2017) and these are, to some extent, reinforced by how the media represents street-connected children.

Developing knowledge and informing understanding of a particular problem provides evidence with which advocates can lobby governments to respond (CSC, 2015). The general comment (GC21) to the UNCRC Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on children in street situations provides guidance for governments to follow when developing policies aimed at protecting street-connected children. Within this framework, there is the rationale for more awareness raising and public education to counter negative and deficit attitudes towards street-connected children, which spotlights the potential role of the media in either subverting or reinforcing negative stereotypes. GC21 recommends that interventions targeting these children be ethically responsible – adopting child rights approaches aimed at using accurate data/evidence that upholds the dignity of children, their personal integrity, and their right to life (UNCRC, 2017). As such, we argue that these approaches should also extend to how organisations engage with and utilise the media to represent street-connected children.

A cursory exploration through media sources pertaining to street-connected children reveals that they can be used to: highlight the work of CSOs seeking financial support and focusing on their needs (e.g. Karumba, 2016); emphasise negative portrayals of the problem of street-connected children (e.g. Shakil, 2018; Yolisigira, 2019); and showcase political agendas that equate to their removal to clean up a town (e.g. Omulo, 2018; Blomfield, 2016). Consequently, pity or public fear and criminalisation of street-connected children may be fuelled by disproportionate media representations, when responsible journalism could be used to destigmatise street-connectedness (UNCRC, 2017).

To understand the structural barriers that face street-connected children because of how they are positioned in society, and the extent to which the media reinforces or counters the rescue or removal narratives that can lead to inappropriate intervention responses, this paper reviews media coverage of how the pandemic impacted these children between February and July 2020. Rather than focusing on how they experience responses to the pandemic, which has been investigated elsewhere (Edmonds and Macleod, 2021), we are concerned with how CSOs utilise the media for advocacy purposes, how the media represented street-connected children, and the resulting discourse constructed. An exploration of this media coverage presents an opportunity to highlight how street-connected children are positioned in society and how they were (not) included in policy responses to the pandemic, as well as an appreciation of how the media furthers agendas behind such positioning.

Research design

We set out to explore media representations of street-connected children in relation to COVID-19. We wanted to understand the implications that such representations have within the contexts they

inhabit, and how the media was used as an advocacy tool to spotlight wider issues affecting them as well as social policy and project implementation during this snapshot of time. Media content analysis is a clearly defined and discussed methodology (Macnamara, 2005), in which qualitative content analysis examines the relationship between the text and its meaning to an intended audience. Individual media sources are open to interpretation depending on who is reading the text. The analysis therefore should attempt to understand the ways in which the various texts can be understood by different audiences (Macnamara, 2005).

With this in mind, we drew on Braun and Clarke (2006) to develop a framework for coding and categorising the media sources reviewed. We engaged an inductive approach to the thematic analysis. Reflexively examining the language and subject matter chosen by the authors (Braun and Clarke, 2013), we explored how they understood street-connectedness and/or the other issues featured in their writing. We examined how street-connected children were represented by the language used to describe them and the different responses developed to support them during the pandemic.

The initial search and review of the media sources took place in July and August 2020 as part of a Manchester Metropolitan University undergraduate RISE internship programme. We focused on locating and identifying sources published between 1st February 2020 – when media attention began to focus on COVID-19 – and 30th July 2020. Google Chrome's advanced search options enabled a search for sources categorised as 'news' within a specific timescale. Our search terms included different phrases used in the research literature and by CSOs to describe children living and working on the street, as well as the various words we had seen used to describe the virus at the heart of the pandemic. We conducted 16 individual searches for documents that included each of the words shown on the left below combined with each of the words in the list on the right (e.g. 'street child' AND 'C19').

street child	AND	COVID-19
children in street situations		Coronavirus
street-connected		C19
street-involved		Pandemic

We identified 78 English language media sources focused on 19 countries.¹ The full list is included in an open access document that can be viewed here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NWS6SqOC2MfGq2nERGxTF2Zu4i3JxoQp/view?usp=sharing>. To limit the space taken up by listing them in this paper, all cited media sources can be found using this link.

To understand what was happening in individual contexts, we chose to review the content of the media sources country by country. Each source was then categorised according to the specific agenda we perceived to be the motivation for writing it. An inductive analysis is grounded in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021), and in this case framed a lens constructed initially by the search terms we chose to use and eventually by the four agendas we identified in the texts:

1. Highlighting the effects of (responses to) the pandemic on the survival of street-connected children
2. Perception of street-connected children as vectors for COVID-19
3. Commentary and/or critique of official pandemic responses and treatment of street-connected children
4. A call for the government to take action – either to protect, or to clean the streets of, street-connected children

Within these four agendas we identified themes related to topics such as government responses to COVID 19, violence against street-connected children and police roundups, and the children's role in transmitting the virus. These topics or understandings of street-connected children's experiences are not new to the research literature, however, a focus on the media coverage during the pandemic provides additional insight into the policy context and agendas within which the media write about street-connected children, and potentially identify the discourses that need to be addressed when designing advocacy programmes aiming to change public perceptions of street-connectedness. In addition to the three themes identified above, there was also a less evident focus on the centralised inclusion of street-connected children in policy processes leading to focused social support programmes.

Rather than focus on each of the themes in turn, we have chosen to focus on sources from five countries: Kenya ($n=9$), Nigeria ($n=29$), Senegal ($n=9$), India ($n=13$), and Myanmar ($n=3$). There are multiple reasons for this. A focus on individual countries allows us to explore the recent history and/or policy context of each context in more detail, which ensures that we consider children's individual experiences tied to the specific social contexts they inhabit (Aptekar and Stoecklin, 2014; Lucchini and Stoecklin, 2020). The countries we have chosen to include here were represented by a greater number of sources or, in the case of Myanmar, present a unique narrative.

Kenya: Violence, hunger and lobbying local level government for change

Six of the nine media sources focused on Kenya were published by local and national media outlets. They highlight how government COVID-19 responses restricted CSOs' ability to support street-connected children (e.g. Ajiambo, 2020a), street-connected children's ability to support themselves (e.g. Etyang, 2020), and increased violence by police towards street-connected children as a result of these responses (e.g. Ileri, 2020). They also outline the thoughts of local politicians or officials on these children's situation (e.g. Vidiya, 2020). Five sources focused on Nairobi. They highlight challenges created by municipal responses to national COVID-19 guidelines, such as reduced income generation for street-connected children and access to food as restaurants closed, footfall from shoppers decreased, and cashless transfers became the norm (e.g. Ajiambo, 2020a; Vidiya, 2020). Huaxia (2020a) also highlights how lack of official data on street-connected families exacerbated their marginalisation, especially given their potentially increased exposure to the virus because of limited access to water and 'deplorable living conditions'.

The way in which the authors use language is of particular note. Onyatta (2020) uses highly emotive language such as 'plight of the homeless' and 'street urchins'. While he suggests that key stakeholders and members of the public be educated to understand street-connected children's needs and the impact of the pandemic, the language used, such as 'urchin' dehumanises individuals, provoking protective policy approaches based on children as passive subjects in need of protection or as a basis for repressive policy approaches centred upon street-connected children as morally and socially unacceptable in relation to normative understandings of childhood – as discussed in Edmonds (2019) and Kaneva and Corcoran (2021). Language use raises important questions about whose perspectives are evident in media sources and, relatedly, who defines the 'best interests' when interventions are developed.

Vidiya's (2020) 'big read' attempts to represent different perspectives in relation to street-connected children's experiences of pandemic responses, including testimony from: individual children; a virology specialist from Kenyan Medical Research Institute; and, for the majority of the piece, the deputy director for children's affairs. This last testimony emphasises issues of how language is used and how it translates differently across contexts. The deputy director mistakenly – or

purposely – distinguishes ‘street-connected children’ from those who live on the street full-time, describing them as ‘on a mission’, how those in genuine homelessness situations were ‘currently in rehabilitation and rescue centres’, and coronavirus helped the local government to reduce the numbers on the street. Vidija mis-uses census data that 80.3% of children questioned knew the whereabouts of their parents, to mistakenly confirm the official’s assertion that they only come to the streets to make a living and be free.

The solution posed by the official in Vidija (2020) is that the children be removed and parents ‘take responsibility’. This is repeated by another government official in Etyang’s (2020) piece, who aims to ‘flush out all street children and ensure they get back to their homes to ease the operation of the curfew’. Both sources position street-connectedness as an easily fixed condition: blaming parents, overemphasising the role of drug cartels and prostitution rings, and positioning churches and CSOs as being in cahoots with such cartels for financial gain. As such they neglect the complex dimensions of street-connectedness, such as the presence of multiple generations of families living on the street, as Corcoran et al. (2020) discuss in relation to children in Mombasa, Kenya.

Alternatively Sister Winnie Mutukuthe – showcased by Ajiambo (2020a) – problematises language use such as ‘deviant’ and ‘spoiled’ in relation to street-connectedness,

This is the group of people that is mostly rejected because people question why one can’t stay in their homes, forgetting that there are family breakups that are even causing more problems. I’m happy to focus on this group because sometimes they find no love because they are branded as deviant and spoiled. That is why they can’t stay at home. That obviously is not the entire reason for children to be in the street. (Ajiambo, 2020).

She calls for education reform and interventions focused on street-connected children to think long-term and centralise family and deinstitutionalisation. As such, this source shares the work of an organisation in such a way as to highlight the need for funding while also advocating for wider social change and repositioning of street-connected children in society. Similarly, the same author spotlights how structural violence leads to street-connectedness (Ajiambo, 2020b), and the need for government investment in social protection and addressing young people’s unemployment. This second source highlights positive stories of children progressing to successful employment and/or higher education, recognising street-connected children as children and emphasising their individual agency as well as the need to support them.

Nigeria: *Almajiri* and a call to action

One-dimensional objectifications of children as in need of removal or rescue dominate the 29 Nigeria media sources. All but two focused on *almajiri* children – who are sent away to study in residential Quran schools where they are encouraged to beg to pay for their upkeep (Mashema et al., 2018). The term is also used for any child found on the street who does not attend mainstream or secular education (Yusha’u et al., 2013). The *almajiranci* system is widely discussed in local politics and academic literature in relation to a lack of basic education skills development and risk factors of being street-connected, with calls in recent years to abolish the system. In February 2020, the Kano state governor announced plans to ban ‘street begging’ and integrate the *Almajiranci* system with mainstream, state-controlled education to ensure all children have opportunities to ‘continue their studies to secondary schools and beyond’ (Maishanu, 2020). All children not following the new rule should ‘leave the state’ (Maishanu, 2020), positioning street-connected children in Kano on a tenuous footing as the WHO announced the worldwide pandemic.

Kano's commitment to removing the *Almajiri*, despite recommended pandemic responses like a nationwide ban on interstate travels, was a focus of articles such as Mohammed and Maishanu (2020). These articles focused on such decentralised responses to the pandemic and related treatment of the *Almajiri*. They describe how the children were rounded up and sent 'home' to states or countries of birth, being stopped at state borders, and whether they were tested for Coronavirus (e.g. Al-Amin, 2020; Fulani, 2020; Mohammed and Maishanu, 2020). Despite politicians prioritising removal to 'curtail the spread of the virus' (Hassan, 2020), the articles suggest that the decision shows a lack of care and concern for the *Almajiri* and the risks of infection that they and their families face as a result of the repatriation process.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, there is no evidence of any special attention, either by Nigeria's federal or state governments, to the plight of the *Almajiri* children. (Al-Amin, 2020)

In addition, the removal of the children to curtail infection can negatively position them as a nuisance and vectors of infection (Gansler, 2020). This last stance, in reaction to the removal of children to rural areas without testing, is worrying as it reflects similar situations in Ghana (Staalduinen, 2020) and Iran (Stevenson, 2020). Blaming street-connected children detracts attention away from a government's inadequate handling of the virus outbreak or presents an image of taking action through token gestures (Gansler, 2020).

The Nigerian articles were generally critical of the *Almajiranci* system, highlighting the media's role in promoting a political course of action framed within the long-term education and welfare of children sent to Koranic schools (e.g. Gansler, 2020). However, as in Kenya, the proposed solutions fail to acknowledge the complexities of street-connected children's lived experiences. Suggestions include arresting parents who send children to *almajiranci* schools (e.g. Vanguard News, 2020), rounding up children from the street and returning them to families (e.g. Al-Amin, 2020), and combining the *almajiranci* system with mainstream education systems. Two sources note the complexities of dismantling of the *almajiranci* system in terms of cultural change (HassanWuyo, 2020; Iroanusi, 2020). They highlight how proposed plans hide rather than address the issues, and how reform of and investment in the traditional system would be preferable.

Beggars are tragic victims and direct result of a nation failed by its successive governing elites. You can't end begging without ending poverty and illiteracy. (Iroanusi, 2020)

As such they recognise the complexity of the situation and problematise government solutions to clearing children from the street. Six sources present an additional counter narrative around a press release co-authored by a consortium of CSOs calling for government to include the support of *Almajiri* children in local and national policy responses to the pandemic (e.g. Musa and Falaju, 2020). Framed within this call to action, these sources question the children's positioning as pawns within political toing and froing of state governments, highlighting the complexity of the situation and reinforcing how the media could be potentially enlisted to advocate for social change.

Senegal: street-connected children as vectors of infection – collaborative approaches

Senegal, like Nigeria, has a culture of sending children away to Koranic schools that encourage these *talibés* to beg to pay for their education (Zoumanigui, 2016). Six media sources focused on their experiences of the pandemic. AFP (2020) highlights the decline in the *talibés* situation, Jabkhiro (2020) on them being at greater risk of infection and Huaxia (2020b) on the government's

'Zero street children in the context of COVID-19' campaign to return *talibés* and other street-connected children to families or alternative care centres. The role of social services to step up and support the children is a focus for Reuters (2020), while Dogru (2020) focuses on additional support delivered by UNICEF and collaborative approaches to addressing the children's issues.

The discourse of the Senegalese media is one of care and concern, positioning children as 'vulnerable' (Ndjanjo, 2020), in need of protection (Huaxia, 2020b), and living 'tough' or 'difficult' lives (Jabkhiro, 2020). All but one of the sources focus on individuals and/or organisations providing support, constructing children as in need of rescue and these adults as saviours. Ndjanjo (2020) describes plans for 13 educational centres to provide 1500 beds for children during the pandemic and beyond. However, Reuters (2020) inadvertently questions the long-term success of this and other similar approaches highlighting how the centres' rules 'chafe', reflecting observations that simple rescue and removal strategies do not adequately acknowledge the complexity of street-connectedness that authors such as Kaime-Atterhög and Ahlberg (2008) have described.

India: The role of effective identification

Media coverage of India's responses to the pandemic highlights a diversity of approaches reflective of the country's size and population. The articles go some way to explaining the various situations associated with street-connectedness, such as children being homeless, child labourers, victims of trafficking and separated from families (e.g. Reddy 2020; Sowmith, 2020). There is a more prominent focus on the work of CSOs, such as an article on Save the Children's (StC) telethon (India Education Diary Bureau Admin, 2020). A second article describes CHETNA receiving video messages via social media platforms from street-connected children asking for help (The New Indian Express, 2020). Both organisations are not new to documenting their work for media advocacy campaigns, and approach representation of street-connected children as in need of help differently. StC (2020) focuses on efforts to provide Aadhar cards, emphasising the importance of formal identity for access to government services like food parcels during the pandemic, but also for street-connected children to have legal identities in the long-term. This was a major advocacy aim for the organisation pre-pandemic and remains the focus during the pandemic. Although they focus on their work, the StC approach indirectly highlights the need to provide children with tools to help themselves, while Chetna's director describes street-connected children as 'completely dependent upon external help' (The New Indian Express, 2020).

Five sources, published by international news outlets, explicitly focused on how COVID-19 impacted street-connected children, calling for policy making to include them (Griffin, 2020; Gupta and Rosencratz, 2020; Vaid, 2020; Wallen and Singh, 2020). Gupta and Rosencratz (2020), for example, take a rights-based advocacy approach, asking the government to be accountable for 'anaemic policies' that systematically exclude street-connected children from decision-making and making them the most at risk. The sources were generally critical of the government and/or highlighted how restrictions prevented CSOs working effectively.

With the lockdown, several basic services for children . . . were disrupted," said Puja Marwaha, head of CRY. "This has affected children living in multidimensional poverty disproportionately since they are largely dependent on these services to fulfil their rights and entitlements (Vaid, 2020).

A particular critique was directed at the government's expectation that street-connected children return to their families, despite restrictions on travel in many areas (Griffin, 2020). This expectation had negative repercussions such as death as children walked 100s of kilometres to return home

and/or further criminalisation and stigmatisation towards those retaining livelihoods and homes on the street.

One policy that directly targeted street-connected children was the Muskaan operation. Around 4000 children were ‘rescued’ and returned over to families (Srinivas, 2020). Of these, 1121 were tested and sent to healthcare centres if they had COVID. The inclusion of these children in policy responses for their protection is clearly laudable. However, quickly returning ‘missing children’ fixes the problem momentarily during a pandemic but does not consider motivations for migrating to the street. It takes longer than 6 days – the length of the operation – for street-connected children to prepare themselves to return and find a sense of belonging afterwards, and experience tells us that they are likely to return to the street (Corcoran and Wakia, 2013; Kaime-Atterhög and Ahlberg, 2008). Large-scale, short-term processes deny children’s agency and fail to acknowledge the long-term transition approaches favoured for successful reintegration. The sources only mentioning the short-term rescue nature of the operation suggests that CSOs’ missed opportunities to advocate for longer-term follow-up afterwards. Reducing street-connected children to objectified one-dimensional identities as separated from their parents, in need of rescue and return, influences future policy focus on short-term solutions, when long-term planning is required. Such policy responses also fail to recognise families living on the street – often for generations – and suggest a reversal in the advances made for children’s legal situations.

Myanmar: A centralised approach to support

There were three sources focused on Myanmar. Although not a large number in comparison to the countries above, they present a different policy response to COVID-19. Like Senegal, it appears to consider street-connected children’s needs, but this time through a potentially positive rights-based response to protection in line with GC21 recommendations. The sources describe a survey conducted by The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, with the cooperation of local and foreign aid groups in the Yangon and Mandalay regions. The survey aimed to assess the needs of street-connected children and their families before food packages were provided (Kyi Soe, 2020; The Star, 2020). The sources mention plans to extend the project to other areas and describe the survey as part of the government’s ‘long-term goal to build a better future for vulnerable children through child advocacy, protection and prevention’ (The Myanmar Times, 2020). Such a positive focus presents Myanmar’s government as actively addressing the needs of street-connected children and their families in their pandemic responses.²

Representations of street-connectedness through a COVID-19 lens

How street-connected children are represented in the media in relation to COVID-19 reflects particular cultural understandings of street-connectedness and local policy contexts. Our analysis raised three key observations that could be a useful starting point for CSOs and other stakeholders’ thinking around harnessing the power of the media to overcome the stigmatisation of these children – especially shaping and disseminating advocacy messages.

Sustainability and collaboration in policy and practice

The positioning of street-connected children on local, national, and international scales was indicated by the extent to which coverage of government responses to COVID-19 considered their situation. As such, an exploration of the dominant discourses potentially highlights recommendations for policy and/or practice, especially for collaboration between CSOs and authorities at local

levels, and key lessons for organisations hoping to engage the media as part of long-term advocacy goals in line with GC21.

The closure of drop-in centres and street-based outreach programmes in line with official pandemic responses emphasises how street-connected children – as well as the poorest and most vulnerable populations in and around informal settlements – do not always feature in decision-making. The calls to action in sources from Nigeria, Senegal, and India, also suggest street-connected children were either not considered within government policy responses to the pandemic or were scapegoated within decisions that misrepresent them, to meet long-term objectives that fail to develop effective social protection such as ‘cleaning up towns’ or taking down traditional education systems.

Media coverage of specific policies focuses predominantly on the children, rather than their families. Parents are mostly blamed for enabling children to become street-connected and positioned as failing their duty of care. These perspectives make limited recognition of the complexities and multiple deprivations underlying migration to the street or multigenerational street-connectedness (see Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021), inadvertently promoting easy fix solutions. Alternatively, centralised policy approaches to surveying households and providing family support (Myanmar), setting up alternative care centres (Senegal), or showcasing the work of CSOs advocating for better systems of registering the identity of street-connected children and their families (India), suggest policy focused on families and highlight centralised and/or collaborative responses to support during the pandemic. Although, there is a question of how they could have been, and potentially will be, utilised towards long-term policy change: for example delivery of food packages as a result of the Myanmar survey, while necessary during the pandemic, was localised to two areas of the country and is undoubtedly not sustainable in the long term.

The role of language in positioning and representing street-connected children

Discourse highlighting underlying issues surrounding street-connectedness is missing from many of the sources reviewed. Although some critique government responses to the pandemic for failing to meet street-connected children’s needs, few consider structural barriers and portray simplified representations of the children and their families, and one-dimensional understandings of street-connectedness. Children exercise varying degrees of agency in relation to becoming and being street-connected, engaging with and taking ownership of the urban environment and the relationships they enjoy with others (Lucchini, 1999). How such agency is represented, particularly through the language used to describe street-connected children, is indicative of their positioning in society and the degree to which the multiplicity of their experiences is acknowledged.

Similarly, language use in media sources is crucial in constructing imaginaries of street-connected children in the public perception, impacting public support for or against policies. The language used in Kenyan sources for example, versus that used in Myanmar or India paints very different pictures of street-connected children and their roles, responsibility, and mobility in relation to COVID-19 and related policy responses. This language also shapes the perception of street-connected children’s identities, affecting how they may be treated by the public and informing how their needs are addressed. Such issues permeate across policy and practice arenas globally as the language used to describe street-connected children is not consistent across contexts and neither are the circumstances that lead to experiences of street-connectedness (Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021).

Within the context of government responses to the pandemic, and the need to gain extra financial and policy support to save lives, CSOs have engaged with the media through a discourse of rescue and removal that is perceived to attract responses from sympathetic donors and/or policy

makers – or created case studies of the ‘exceptional street child’ to counter deficit stereotypes and address embedded social prejudice. However, such paternalistic representations of street-connected children – which identify them as victims in need of rescuing and individual philanthropists or CSOs as saviours – inevitably involve decision-making without considering the children’s desires and views and removing their right to be heard (UNCRC, 2017). And case studies of the exceptions can lead to unrealistic expectations of them (e.g. Ng et al., 2022).

Language can ‘stigmatise, encourage, or empower’ and the specific terms chosen to refer to a group of children can influence resulting approaches towards them (Thomas de Benitez, 2017: 6). In the long-term, such representations can influence local understandings, interventions of support, or social policy inappropriate to their needs. For example, coverage of rounding children up and transporting them to their families without consideration for whether these homes are safe to be returned to. Therefore, it is essential that locally situated interpretations of language should be developed through an understanding of ‘local socio-cultural systems rather than externally derived socio-cultural assumptions about childhood’ (Edmonds, 2019: 200).

The importance of context and relationships with local media

While it is crucial for media representations of street-connected children to focus on the accountability of the social structures that surround the precarious situations of street-connectedness, rather than laying blame on these children or their parents and/or simplifying the narrative, it is important that these narratives are built from the ground up – ensuring local understandings and interpretations are negotiated. For example, sources from Nigeria, India and Senegal that showcase attempts to hold the state responsible with advocacy messages highlighting the need for policy strategies to consider street-connected children’s needs more carefully.

Interestingly we did not see as much media coverage relating to street-connected children as having a particular role in spreading the virus as we had initially expected. Historically, street-connected children have been the targets of violence and blame (e.g. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 1998). However, although the pandemic has created a melting pot of anxiety, leading to restrictive government responses aimed at curtailing rates of infection, the moral discourse – at least in English language media coverage – has focused elsewhere.

The media has the potential to be a key social actor, with a responsibility towards appropriate representations of marginalised groups – that takes their voices into consideration. While we should be attempting to make children’s agency visible, we must also consider and confront ingrained notions of best interests in relation to ‘situated theories of children’s agency’ – especially when this agency defies certain moral codes about how children should behave and is used to justify essentially corrective social policy approaches disguised as social protection (Edmonds, 2019). As Lucchini and Stoecklin (2020) explain, GC21 provides a legislative framework for governments, but CSOs and advocacy networks have much work to do to ensure the infrastructures are in place to make it happen.

To challenge firmly held views that underlie stigmatisation of street-connected children, collaborative, context specific work is required to understand how to enable rights-based approaches to moving forward (e.g. Ferguson, 2020). Such processes are complex and there is no easy fix, one-size-fits-all solution. Changing perceptions requires developing responsible representations of street-connectedness, recognising the importance of local contexts in supporting children to be heard in policy arenas, and understanding how CSOs can develop long-term advocacy strategies through their relationships and engagement with the media (Ferguson, 2020; Ng et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Although, this article does not provide a detailed overview of the impact of COVID-19 on street-connected children – as other researchers and practitioners have done this effectively (Edmonds and Macleod, 2021; Hunter et al., 2021; Street Invest, 2020) – it does provide an insight into how the media have represented this group of often stigmatised and marginalised children, using the pandemic as an analytical lens. It therefore raises important questions with regards to how CSOs engage with and utilise the media in their advocacy work. While the media is a means of disseminating important information, we must also recognise the different layers inherent to mass media communication as a form of entertainment, as well as its use for education or the promotion or problematisation of political platforms (Morgan and Taylor, 2019). As the sources reviewed highlight, the media plays a key role in showcasing specific discourses that (mis)represent particular groups.

For example, many of the sources reinforced deficit stereotypes directed at street-connected children, especially given how they present sensationalised stories to further often emotive agendas. Such representation of marginalised children is not new (Child Rights International Network, 2018; Cottle, 2006), but without focusing on the broader issues that are inherent to, and often cause street-connectedness, street-connected children are positioned as passive and without agency (Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021). Consequently, media portrayals impact upon the decisions made by policymakers and other key stakeholders with regards to the children's place in society and the extent to which adults stifle or enable their agency and decision-making as experts in their own lives (Child Rights International Network, 2018).

It is therefore important that while CSOs engage with the media to further fundraising and advocacy work, they understand the need for responsible journalism and the development of media representations of street-connected children and street-connectedness that are realistic. The strongest sources were those that showcased collaboration and cross-sectoral working – for example between government officials and CSOs to develop informed meaningful responses to the pandemic. Next steps could showcase the positives of collaborative working, and any key achievements, linking them to policy agendas and highlighting the importance of using GC21 as a lobbying tool to engage local government. Such approaches would necessarily involve the development of effective media strategies by the CSOs and collaborative networks who are advocating for change, and building relationships with journalists to author responsible representations of street-connectedness.

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Notes

1. Sources that described the work of the organisation Street Child, which began as an organisation focused on street-connectedness in Sierra Leone and now focuses on developing schools and education systems were removed as they all focused on the education side of their work rather than on street-connected children specifically. Otherwise, there were no exclusion criteria.
2. We recognise that Myanmar (and formerly Burma) is heavily criticised for government control and censorship of the media (e.g. Human Rights Watch, 2020). We are unable to assume that sources discussed

here are representative of lived realities of all street-connected children in the country, but we are able to explore how they position street-connected children in society and represent them within policy responses to the pandemic.

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