

“For the Sake of God”: Moral Brokerage, Credibility and the Contested Deservingness of Street Beggars in Freetown

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ABSTRACT

This article examines street begging in Freetown as a moral, spatial and epistemic encounter in which material need must become credible before it attracts assistance. Drawing on interviews and field notes involving beggars, traders, religious actors and institutional stakeholders, it combines constructivist grounded theory with standpoint analysis. The four core concepts—moral brokerage, credibility work, the credibility trap and asymmetrical epistemic authority—were generated inductively and subsequently interpreted through theories of social space, capital and intersectionality. The analysis disaggregates gender, age and disability, showing that recognition capital is unevenly distributed: visible impairment, elderly motherhood and the presence of young children make different claims legible while generating distinct risks. It also examines religious and seasonal rhythms, coercive circulation, tensions between begging and trading economies, and the possibility of internal hierarchy and exploitation without romanticising street-level agency. The study argues that deservingness is socially produced through unequal acts of classification and contested access to urban space. It calls for dignified, proportionate assessment, safeguarding and referral systems that connect religious generosity with social support without institutionalising stigma or humiliating claimants.

Keywords: Street begging; moral brokerage; credibility work; deservingness; religious giving; epistemic authority.

INTRODUCTION

Begging is never solely an economic exchange. Money, food, clothing or other resources move between giver and recipient, but the transfer is embedded in judgements about obligation, compassion, sincerity and deservingness. This is especially evident where religious giving forms part of everyday moral life. The beggar does not simply identify material shortage. The beggar must communicate need in a form that can activate another person's willingness or duty to give.

West African scholarship has long recognised this relationship. D'Hondt and Vandewiele (1984) connected the relative social acceptance of almsgiving in parts of West Africa to Islam and traditions of communal solidarity, while also noting criticism of begging. Ogunkan (2011) challenged interpretations that reduce begging itself to an Islamic injunction. He distinguished the obligations of zakat and sadaqah from a religious endorsement of solicitation. This distinction is important: a religion can require generosity without approving every practice through which generosity is requested.

Recent scholarship shifts attention towards the strategic conduct of beggars. Agyemang et al. (2024) identify narrative, bodily and child-related strategies through which street beggars seek advantage in a competitive economy. This is a major advance because it recognises agency and intentionality. Yet strategy alone does not fully explain the encounter. A narrative succeeds only if it enters a shared moral grammar; a bodily sign carries force only if an observer treats it as credible evidence; invocation of God matters only because giver and claimant inhabit, or strategically reference, a field of religious obligation.

Our empirical materials from the Freetown Central Business District support the strategic insight while exposing a deeper problem. Beggars described invoking God or Allah, singing sorrowful songs, narrating past

hardship, appealing to motherhood, approaching selected passers-by and timing solicitation around religious giving. Shopkeepers observed the same practices. Religious actors described obligations to give while worrying about deception, dependency and “genuine” versus “false” cases. Some religious institutions investigated recipients, verified stories or distributed assistance discreetly.

These relationships suggest that street begging involves moral brokerage: the translation of material need into a socially recognisable moral claim and the subsequent interpretation of that claim by people or institutions controlling resources. Brokerage is necessary because suffering does not automatically produce assistance. Need must cross an interpretive distance between the person who lives it and the person who decides whether to respond.

A second grounded concept is credibility work. Beggars arrange language, narrative, bodily evidence, timing, location and demeanour to establish that their need is real, involuntary and worthy of support. Credibility work does not mean that suffering is fabricated. It means that suffering must be communicated. Even an authentic condition requires presentation if it is to become intelligible to a stranger.

A third concept is the credibility trap. Beggars must make suffering visible enough to justify assistance. Yet the more deliberately suffering is narrated, displayed or performed, the easier it becomes for observers to interpret the presentation as manipulation. The same evidence that establishes need can produce suspicion. Silence risks invisibility; persuasive self-presentation risks disbelief.

A fourth concept is asymmetrical epistemic authority. Donors and institutions frequently assume the right to determine whether a beggar’s account is authentic. Possession of resources becomes connected to power over classification. Beggars not only request money; they submit, often instantly and without appeal, to an assessment of whether their lives and claims are believable. The donor can refuse without explanation. The beggar carries the burden of proof.

Jointly, these concepts explain the social production of deservingness. Deservingness is not a fixed property located in a person. It emerges through interaction among need, presentation, moral rules, bodily classifications, prior assumptions and institutional procedures. Van Oorschot (2000) shows that public solidarity is commonly conditional on criteria such as need, control over one’s condition, identity, attitude and reciprocity. The Freetown material shows how these criteria are enacted informally in street encounters and formally in religious verification.

The article therefore retains the central argument that street begging is a moral and epistemic encounter while expanding its empirical and conceptual reach. What is at stake is more than obtaining money. It is the struggle to have suffering recognised as sufficiently real, involuntary and morally compelling to merit a response.

Problem statement

Much literature on begging and religion asks whether religious culture encourages begging, whether almsgiving sustains the practice, or whether beggars strategically exploit religious obligation. These questions are important, but they risk reducing religion either to a cause of begging or to a resource manipulated by beggars.

What remains underdeveloped is the interactional process through which religious obligation becomes actual giving. Donors do not respond automatically. They assess the claimant, sometimes within seconds. Beggars, aware of that assessment, present need through culturally legible signs. Religious institutions may intervene as organised validators, converting private uncertainty into welfare procedures.

A second problem concerns the language of strategy. Terms such as narrative or body “marketing” identify intentional action, but they can inadvertently reproduce donor suspicion by making suffering sound like a commodity designed for sale. The analytical challenge is to recognise presentation without equating presentation with deception. People living genuine hardship still have to select words, signs and moments that make hardship understandable.

A third problem concerns classification. Public and institutional actors repeatedly distinguish disabled from able-bodied, elderly from young, genuine from “corporate,” temporarily unfortunate from habitually dependent, and grateful from demanding. These categories distribute compassion unevenly. Visible disability often receives stronger recognition than homelessness, care burdens, addiction, unemployment or invisible illness.

The central problem is therefore not simply religion and begging, but the social production of deservingness through unequal moral and epistemic encounters. The article asks how material need becomes a claim, how that claim is assessed, how credibility is built or lost, and how those with resources acquire authority to decide whose suffering counts.

Aim and objectives

The article aims to analyse street begging in Freetown as a moral and epistemic encounter. It examines religious language and timing; explores how suffering is made legible through narratives, bodies, documents and social identities; investigates donor suspicion and institutional verification; compares the standpoints of beggars, traders, religious actors and regulatory stakeholders; and develops moral brokerage, credibility work, the credibility trap and asymmetrical epistemic authority as an integrated conceptual framework.

Core argument

The article argues first that begging requires credibility work. Need must be rendered socially intelligible. Stories, bodily signs, age, disability, motherhood, children, documents, songs, religious invocations and location become resources through which suffering is communicated. Presentation is therefore intrinsic to solicitation, not external decoration added to an otherwise self-evident condition.

Second, religious obligation creates opportunity but not certainty. Islam and Christianity generate reasons to give, particularly at specific times, but these obligations are mediated by suspicion and classifications of deservingness. The phrase “for the sake of God” invokes a relationship among claimant, donor and divine witness. It asks the donor to act not solely on the beggar’s social status but on a religiously grounded duty.

Third, visible strategic presentation creates the credibility trap. A blind beggar who sings sorrowfully may increase compassion and invite accusations of manipulation. A person who displays injury makes the body evidentiary but also open to claims of “body marketing.” A detailed story can establish authenticity or provoke disbelief. Credibility work is therefore necessary and self-undermining.

Fourth, the exchanges are epistemically unequal. Donors generally possess the right to judge, while beggars bear the burden of proving. Fricker’s (2007) analysis of epistemic injustice is useful because it directs attention to how power affects credibility. The Freetown case concerns more than whether a speaker receives reduced credibility because of identity. It also concerns the institutionalised right of another person to demand proof before recognising need.

Finally, standpoint analysis exposes what this asymmetry looks like from below. Beggars know the necessity and humiliation of presenting need; traders confront repeated claims and uncertainty; religious actors balance moral duty against limited resources; officials seek administratively legible categories. Comparing these positions does not assume that every claim is true or every suspicion prejudiced. It asks who controls classification and who bears the consequences of error.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Almsgiving, Moral Economy and the Production of Deservingness

Classical moral-economy scholarship provides a starting point. Thompson (1971) showed that economic conduct is judged against popular expectations of legitimate obligation, while Scott (1976) placed subsistence and reciprocity at the centre of peasant economic relations. Although these works arose from different historical settings, both reject the idea that material exchanges operate outside normative expectations.

Street almsgiving is similarly governed by moral expectations. The donor may believe that those with resources owe something to the poor, that religious reward follows generosity, or that refusal should at least be expressed kindly. The beggar may understand giving as religious duty, community responsibility or recognition of shared humanity. Yet moral economy also contains limits: ideas about who should ask, what counts as genuine need and how much dependence is acceptable.

West African scholarship demonstrates this ambiguity directly. D'Hondt and Vandewiele (1984) argue that Islam and traditions of solidarity shaped attitudes towards begging and giving. Ogunkan (2011), however, cautions against conflating Islamic obligation to give with approval of begging. His distinction explains a central tension in Freetown: a donor may condemn solicitation while believing that generosity remains virtuous. Giving and approval need not coincide.

The literature on deservingness further makes clear this conditionality. Van Oorschot (2000) identifies recurring criteria through which publics evaluate welfare recipients: whether need is severe, whether the person controls the condition, whether the person belongs, whether the claimant shows an acceptable attitude, and whether reciprocity exists or can be expected. These criteria appear vividly in street encounters. Disability and old age suggest limited control; polite speech signals attitude; motherhood invokes responsibility and identity; prior work or desire for enterprise suggests reciprocity; visible poverty indicates need.

Deservingness theory, however, often analyses public attitudes towards categories of recipients. The Freetown material brings the analysis to the encounter itself. Categories are produced through speech, bodily observation, documents and repeated interaction. A donor hardly assesses an abstract "disabled person"; the donor sees a wheelchair, listens to a story and decides whether those signs are genuine. Deservingness becomes an interactional accomplishment.

Agyemang et al.'s (2024) analysis of narrative, body and child marketing provides a second conversation. Their work recognises that beggars draw on knowledge of public sympathy to increase returns. The Freetown evidence strongly converges with this claim. Beggars sing, narrate, invoke religious language and position children or impairments within the request. Yet the marketing metaphor requires refinement. A beggar does not possess an ordinary commodity. What is being negotiated is the moral recognisability of suffering and a provisional entitlement to compassion.

The concept of moral brokerage addresses this refinement. A broker translates between domains that do not automatically connect. In street begging, the beggar or accompanying relative translates bodily, domestic or economic hardship into a claim recognisable within religious and communal norms. Religious organisations may become secondary brokers, investigating claims and translating verified need into institutional support. Shopkeepers sometimes become informal brokers by knowing regular beggars or directing assistance.

Credibility work names the practical activity involved. Goffman's (1959) analysis of self-presentation demonstrates that people manage impressions in everyday interaction. The relevance here lies not in suggesting theatrical falsity, but in recognising that social reality becomes intelligible through presentation. A person may truthfully describe hardship while selecting its most persuasive features. The moral encounter depends on this organisation of information.

The credibility trap arises because donors also know that claims are presented strategically. The more competent the presentation, the more it may be interpreted as rehearsed. Hospital cards showing one's need for assistance to buy medicine can function as proof or as instruments "to work on your intelligence." A wheelchair can evidence mobility impairment or be suspected as staged. This is a double bind: the claimant must perform credibility under conditions in which visible performance can reduce credibility.

Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice adds a power dimension. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice lowers a speaker's credibility. Beggars may face such a deficit because poverty, appearance, addiction or repeated solicitation mark them as unreliable. Yet some bodily signs can generate a credibility excess: visible disability may be accepted more readily than invisible hardship. The distribution of credibility is therefore unequal within the begging population.

Standpoint theory strengthens this analysis. Collins (1986) demonstrates how marginal locations disclose classificatory systems from below, while Smith (1987) begins sociology from everyday experience to trace the institutional relations organising it. From the beggar's standpoint, a donor's momentary doubt becomes a recurrent condition of survival. From the donor's standpoint, each request arrives amid limited information and repeated claims. From the institutional standpoint, verification promises fairness but may exclude those unable to supply documents or community recognition.

Spatial and capital theories add a further interpretive layer. Lefebvre's (1991) account of socially produced space directs attention to streets, mosque entrances, church precincts and shopfronts not as neutral backdrops but as livelihood spaces made through repeated use, regulation and contestation. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital helps explain why some signs of hardship can be converted into recognition and material support more readily than others. We use recognition capital to denote the relational value acquired when a body, biography or social identity is publicly legible as deserving. This is not a stable possession: it is granted, withdrawn and converted differently across locations, times and audiences.

An intersectional approach further guards against treating street beggars as a homogeneous category. Gender, age, disability, migration status and caregiving responsibilities do not operate independently; they combine to shape mobility, exposure to harm and the credibility assigned to a claim (Crenshaw, 1989). A visually impaired man may gain recognition through a visible impairment and song while depending on a guide and remaining exposed to forced movement. An older woman may invoke maternal identity and age, whereas a mother with small children may receive sympathy alongside suspicion that children are being instrumentalised. These are different configurations of recognition and constraint rather than a single hierarchy of need.

Constructivist grounded theory is compatible with this approach because it encourages movement from participant expressions and repeated comparisons towards relational concepts rather than testing predetermined variables (Charmaz, 2017). The concepts used here emerged from comparing religious invocations, donor suspicion, bodily classifications, documentary proof and institutional investigation.

The framework therefore consists of five linked moments. Material hardship supplies the lived condition. Moral brokerage translates hardship into a culturally recognisable claim. Credibility work organises the signs through which the claim is presented. Credibility judgement applies ideas of deservingness and authenticity. Resource allocation follows, whether as money, food, counselling, referral or refusal. The credibility trap can interrupt the sequence when persuasive presentation is reclassified as manipulation. Asymmetrical epistemic authority structures the entire process because the power to decide rests mainly with the resource holder.

The gap in the literature is thus a failure to connect economic strategy, religious obligation, deservingness and epistemic classification in one interactional process. This article makes that connection.

METHODOLOGY

The article draws on interviews and field notes involving adult street beggars, shop owners, religious and community actors, and institutional stakeholders in Freetown. The corpus includes men and women, persons with disabilities, migrants, widows, parents, former workers and respondents affected by addiction. This range permits comparison not only between beggars and donors but among claimants whose bodies and biographies carry different forms of moral legibility.

The analytical design combined an inductive grounded-theory procedure with a positional standpoint reading in two sequenced stages. First, line-by-line and focused coding, constant comparison, memo writing and attention to negative cases were used to generate categories from participants' accounts rather than impose a predetermined model (Charmaz, 2017). This inductive stage produced the four core concepts: moral brokerage, credibility work, the credibility trap and asymmetrical epistemic authority. Second, the relationships among those concepts were interpreted deductively through standpoint theory and, as sensitising rather than coding-determining lenses, Bourdieu's theory of capital, Lefebvre's theory of socially produced space and intersectionality. The procedure therefore preserves the grounded status of the concepts while making explicit how positional and spatial theories were used to explain their distribution and consequences.

Initial categories included “God/Allah,” “Friday,” “Ramadan,” “church,” “mosque,” “story,” “body,” “children,” “documents,” “pity,” “fake,” “genuine,” “humiliation,” “verification” and “support.” Comparison showed that these categories revolved around converting suffering into credible claims. Moral brokerage emerged from that relation. The credibility trap developed through comparing beggars’ accounts of presentation with traders’ suspicions about the same practices.

Standpoint analysis compared interpretive positions. Beggars know the necessity of presenting need; donors experience uncertainty about authenticity; religious institutions institutionalise verification; regulatory actors seek administratively actionable distinctions between disability, crime, addiction and public nuisance. These positions were treated as socially produced and unequally empowered.

Analysis was disaggregated wherever participant descriptors permitted comparison by gender, broad age position and physical disability. Rather than count these attributes as isolated variables, the analysis examined their intersections with caregiving, migration and livelihood history. Comparative matrices asked: whose need was quickly recognised; which signs required narrative support; who depended on guides or children for mobility; who was more readily displaced; and how did the same sign generate both sympathy and suspicion? Because the corpus was purposive and qualitative, these comparisons identify patterned meanings and mechanisms, not population prevalence or statistically representative group differences.

Site and time were coded as components of livelihood practice. Accounts were compared across shopfronts, transport and pedestrian corridors, mosque entrances, church services and other high-footfall locations, with attention to Fridays, Ramadan, Sundays and Christian festivals. The analysis also treated Freetown’s heavy rainy season and year-end Christmas period as important temporal contexts because rainfall, shelter, mobility, pedestrian density and charitable behaviour can alter the economy of visibility. The available material is strongest on religious rhythms and does not constitute a continuous twelve-month ethnography; rainy-season and Christmas effects are therefore distinguished as analytically plausible temporal mechanisms requiring longitudinal verification rather than presented as fully observed seasonal estimates. Ethical interpretation required particular caution around disability, children and organised activity. References to groups, guides, relocation or alleged ‘corporate’ begging were not treated as proof of trafficking, coercion or syndicate control. Such accounts were coded as claims about vulnerability, coordination and public suspicion. This protects participants from unsupported criminalisation while ensuring that risks of exploitation are not obscured by an account of agency.

The findings presentation follows this trajectory: each subsection advances an analytical point, presents evidence primarily through a distinct interview quotation, explains what the quotation reveals, evaluates its limits or significance, and links it to the broader argument or succeeding subsection. Respondents are identified only by non-identifying field-note labels and broad social positions. The quotations preserve meaning and speech patterns, with light punctuation added where necessary for readability. Claims about institutional practice are treated as stakeholder accounts rather than independently audited programme records.

FINDINGS

Invoking God as livelihood language

Religious speech appears repeatedly in beggars’ descriptions of practice. A blind male respondent explained:

“I beg in the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most Merciful. I sometimes sing sorrowful songs to get the attention of pedestrians and humanitarian activists” (Beggar 2, blind male).

The point is that invocation, song and attention form one credibility practice. The phrase above places the request within a shared moral order, while the sorrowful song gives emotional form to hardship. Blindness supplies visible evidence, but voice extends the claim beyond what the body alone communicates.

The quotation also reveals the dual character of credibility work. The respondent consciously seeks attention, confirming strategic agency. Yet the need for strategy does not establish deception. It shows that poverty must

be made audible in a crowded city. This movement from religious invocation to organised attention leads to an observer's contrasting interpretation.

A male shop owner recognised the same pattern but framed it more sceptically:

"They choose to pray in the name of God, the most gracious and most Merciful, to attain something from you. Since they know that people in Sierra Leone are religious, calling the name of God or Allah might trigger the minds of anyone they beg to" (Shop Owner 2, male trader).

Beggar and trader agree on the persuasive force of religious language. They differ over its moral meaning. The beggar describes supplication and survival; the trader describes calculated triggering. This divergence demonstrates moral brokerage in action: the same words translate need for one actor and suggest manipulation to another.

"For the sake of God" creates a three-sided moral claim

Religious language does more than attract notice. It reconfigures the exchange by invoking a divine third party. A shopkeeper described a common maternal appeal:

"The elderly women most times beg by saying, 'Help your mama for the sake of God.' Since they are of age, it [is] very difficult to ignore them because everyone has [a] mother and one would [not] like his or her mother to be treated badly on the street" (Shop Owner 6, male trader).

The claim combines two moral identities. "Your mama" asks the listener to recognise an intergenerational relation, while "for the sake of God" places response under divine evaluation. The appeal is powerful because it collapses social distance: the unknown woman becomes symbolically connected to the donor's mother and to religious accountability.

This evidence also shows why deservingness becomes embodied. Age and gender strengthen the claim because elderly motherhood suggests limited control over hardship and an accepted history of care. A younger able-bodied man cannot easily mobilise the same identity. Moral legibility is therefore unequally available across social categories, leading from shared religious grammar to a hierarchy of deserving bodies.

Religious time creates a moral calendar

Giving is temporally structured. A male respondent who begged around Lumley and Wilberforce explained:

"The Muslims give alms to the poor around this area particularly Fridays, Ramadan month or other key occasion, while Christians have their own methods or season [when] they support the poor or destitute" (Beggar 5, male migrant).

The quotation shows practical knowledge of overlapping religious rhythms. Friday and Ramadan are not simply devotional periods. They are predictable windows in which moral obligation is more likely to become a transfer. Christian festivals produce a related seasonal field. Beggars therefore navigate a plural moral calendar rather than one uniform charity economy.

Shopkeepers confirmed the movement generated by this calendar. One reported that beggars "walk in group, especially on Fridays," while positioning themselves at mosque entrances and church services. Religious time reorganises location, donor density and collective circulation. This temporal opportunity, however, also intensifies official and donor concerns that faith is being exploited.

A regulatory stakeholder described the tension:

"In the central district, you see it every Friday. People going to the mosque give generously. It creates hotspots for beggars. While we respect the religious obligation, it makes our job of 'clearing the streets' very difficult because the beggars know exactly where [to go]" (Respondent 39, regulatory stakeholder).

The same Friday practice becomes obligation from the worshipper's standpoint, opportunity from the beggar's standpoint and governance difficulty from the official's standpoint. Moral economy is therefore institutional as well as interpersonal. The religious calendar repeatedly recreates the conditions that enforcement seeks to remove.

Seasonal rhythms reshape the economy of visibility

The religious calendar intersects with weather and commercial time. High-footfall worship periods increase the number of potential donors and make mosque and church entrances more valuable, while Christmas can intensify shopping flows and charitable appeals. By contrast, heavy rain can reduce pedestrian traffic, narrow the number of sheltered solicitation points and make movement especially difficult for older people, wheelchair users, visually impaired people and adults accompanied by children. These mechanisms show that visibility is not continuously available: it is produced through the alignment of bodies, shelter, circulation and donor presence.

The evidence directly establishes Friday, Ramadan and church-related repositioning; it is less complete on rain and Christmas. The latter are therefore best understood as temporal propositions generated by the spatial analysis. A future longitudinal design should revisit the same sites in the dry season, heavy rains, Ramadan and Christmas and compare hours present, movements, displacement incidents, donor flows and daily returns across intersecting demographic positions.

The body functions as evidence

Bodily signs carry particular credibility where verbal claims are distrusted. A shop owner observed:

"Some beggars choose to sit in a wheelchair, handle a crutch and tie their legs or put on black glasses to gain attention in public. It's most times real that these people have problems, but sometimes fake" (Shop Owner 4, male trader).

The quotation converges with Agyemang et al.'s (2024) account of body marketing, but it also discloses an evidentiary dilemma. Wheelchairs, crutches and dark glasses make impairment legible. Yet because the observer knows that visible impairment attracts giving, the sign becomes suspect. The shopkeeper's phrase "most times real" acknowledges genuine disability while preserving the power to classify exceptions as false.

From the standpoint of a disabled woman, the body is not a chosen display but the condition around which survival is organised. Respondent 23 identified illness and disability as the reason she entered the street and described moving from shop to shop with her children. Her body carries visible evidence, but she still faces abuse, removal and inadequate returns. Visible disability may increase relative deservingness without guaranteeing adequate support.

The comparison reveals the credibility trap in embodied form. If impairment is not evident, need may be discounted; if the body is positioned to make impairment evident, presentation may be treated as staging. This double bind becomes sharper for people whose hardship lacks visible signs.

Invisible hardship receives weaker moral recognition

Traders repeatedly separated visibly disabled beggars from apparently able-bodied claimants. One stated:

"We have two types of beggars, probably the handicaps and the corporate beggars. We don't really have issues with the handicap or disability beggars, old people, accident victims and blinds. The ones we are really having issues with are the corporate beggars, the young guys that are out there begging for nothing" (Shop Owner 2, male trader).

The distinction turns bodily appearance into a moral classification. Disability, old age and accident are read as uncontrollable misfortune; youth, cleanliness and physical capacity are read as evidence of choice. The label "corporate beggar" intensifies suspicion by suggesting organised or professional deception.

The classification resembles deservingness criteria identified by van Oorschot (2000), especially control and need. Yet the field material elsewhere shows that able-bodied respondents may lack capital, shelter, family support or viable employment. Such conditions are serious but visually weak. The donor judges a present body without access to the livelihood history behind it. The hierarchy of bodies therefore privileges readily visible suffering and disadvantages need that requires narrative explanation.

Narrative organises causality and involuntariness

Where the body cannot establish the claim, narrative becomes central. A male respondent described his method:

“I use to narrate my past stories in the process of begging. I behave in a sorrowful manner which got the attentions of pedestrians. Calling the name of God is core in my everyday begging” (Beggar 5, male migrant).

His credibility work combines biography, demeanour and religious invocation. The story explains how the present condition arose; sorrow indicates that begging is not embraced without cost; God places the request within moral obligation. Narrative therefore does more than report events. It organises a causal sequence in which misfortune, rather than laziness, produces need.

This presentation also exposes the claimant to the credibility trap. A polished story may be dismissed as rehearsed, while an incoherent account may appear false. The beggar must provide enough detail to establish involuntariness without sounding strategically overprepared. Documentary proof emerges as an attempted solution to this uncertainty.

Documents can authenticate and incriminate at once

A female shop owner described beggars presenting hospital records:

“They use [a] formula in begging by explaining long narrative happenings which are clumsy stories. Most times they will bring out hospital card or documents just to work on your intelligence and for you to help them out financially” (Shop Owner 1, female trader).

The point is that documents do not end interpretation. A hospital card might appear to move the claim from story to objective evidence, but the shopkeeper recasts it as part of the formula. What the claimant offers as verification becomes evidence of strategic manipulation.

This is the credibility trap in documentary form. Donors demand proof, yet proof can be absorbed into suspicion because the donor retains authority over how the document is read. The card has no self-executing power. Its meaning depends on the recipient’s prior view of beggars and the narrative surrounding it. The evidence also reveals epistemic asymmetry. The shopkeeper can call the story “clumsy” and the document manipulative without verifying either. The beggar cannot require the donor to justify disbelief. This unequal distribution of explanatory burden links street-level suspicion to institutional verification.

Children and kinship become credibility resources

Children appear in the field notes as dependants, guides, companions and visible signs of family need. A religious actor stated:

“Children are more involved in begging because society shows more sympathy to children, so they prefer to use children. Also, when they lose their caregivers, the burden of their survival lies on their shoulder” (Christian religious actor, field notes).

The quotation contains two explanations that should not be collapsed. Children may increase adults’ credibility because donors respond sympathetically, but children may also beg because bereavement or household poverty has placed survival responsibilities on them. The phrase “use children” can identify exploitation, family strategy or care arrangement depending on the case.

A blind man's account demonstrates the complexity. His sister guided him to viable locations after his accident ended his transport work. Other disabled respondents were accompanied by children who pushed wheelchairs or navigated streets. The accompanying child is therefore not always a prop added to a claim; the child may perform essential mobility and care labour.

The evidence cautions against interpreting visible kinship only as "child advertisement" (Agyemang et al., 2024). The presence of a child can simultaneously increase sympathy, communicate family responsibility and provide practical assistance. Evaluation requires attention to the relationship rather than inference from appearance alone.

Recognition capital is intersectionally distributed

The evidence does not support a single category called 'the street beggar.' A visually impaired person may possess relatively high recognition capital because impairment is immediately legible, yet may rely on a guide, song or fixed route and face heightened mobility constraints. An older woman can convert age and the culturally resonant identity of 'mama' into recognition, but limited mobility may make forced relocation especially punitive. A mother with small children may make caregiving burdens visible and evoke sympathy, while simultaneously attracting accusations that children are being used strategically. Younger, apparently able-bodied men often have the weakest recognition capital because physical capacity is read as employability, even when homelessness, migration, lack of capital or addiction restrict realistic alternatives.

These differences also reshape coercive circulation—the compelled movement produced by enforcement, trader pressure, weather, crowd control or the loss of a viable pitch. For an older or mobility-impaired person, displacement carries greater physical cost and may sever access to familiar donors, guides and shelter. For a mother with small children, it adds care and safety burdens. For a visually impaired person, movement through traffic and unfamiliar terrain may require assistance. Circulation is therefore not simply evidence of entrepreneurial flexibility; it can be an unequally imposed condition of survival.

The credibility trap structures every mode of proof

Across language, body, narrative, documents and children, the same contradiction recurs. One must show enough suffering to be recognised, but deliberate showing invites accusation. A respondent explained that he used "polite and sorrowful words" and sometimes sang "melodious songs to get the attention of passers-by" (Beggar 6, male petty trader). The method is effective precisely because it is organised; organisation then makes it vulnerable to suspicion.

The trap cannot be escaped by non-performance. A person who remains quiet may be ignored. A person who approaches repeatedly may be called aggressive. A cleanly dressed claimant may appear insufficiently poor; a dirty claimant may be excluded for hygiene. A detailed story may sound fabricated; a brief account may lack credibility. The claimant must navigate contradictory expectations without controlling their interpretation.

This finding extends strategy-based scholarship. Agency remains real, but successful strategy does not dissolve domination. Credibility work is undertaken under conditions set largely by donors, who can change the evidentiary standard from encounter to encounter.

Deservingness classifications organise compassion

The field notes reveal recurring distinctions: disabled versus able-bodied, elderly versus young, genuine versus professional, grateful versus demanding, and involuntarily poor versus lazy. A business respondent expressed the harshest form of this judgement: "It's laziness and nothing else, because there are many jobs or businesses out there" (Shop Owner 2).

The statement treats physical capacity as sufficient evidence of economic opportunity. It eliminates transport costs, capital requirements, homelessness, addiction and labour-market exclusion from consideration. This illustrates how the criterion of control can dominate deservingness judgement. If the claimant is assumed able to avoid need, obligation weakens.

Other traders adopted more qualified positions. One said that giving was a choice and that if he could not give, religious teaching required kind words. Another helped elderly claimants while recognising that many able-bodied persons also lacked support. These differences show that the moral economy is contested. There is no single public consensus, but there are recurrent classificatory templates through which claims are evaluated.

Livelihood pitches are contested and may be informally defended

Repeated movement in groups and concentration around high-yield religious and commercial sites raise the possibility of internal ordering among people who beg. Access to a familiar shopfront, junction or worship entrance may depend on seniority, disability status, kinship, guides, reciprocal understandings or informal zoning; newcomers may be redirected or excluded. The present corpus does not establish stable territorial agreements or permit attribution of control to specific groups. It nevertheless shows why intra-group hierarchy must be analysed rather than assuming equal access to all livelihood sites. Future observation should map arrival times, pitch succession, conflict, mediation and the role of escorts without treating coordination itself as criminality.

Traders and beggars occupy competing informal spatial economies

Trader frustration should not be reduced to arbitrary hostility. Shopkeepers work within narrow commercial margins and depend on unobstructed entrances, customer comfort, hygiene and the rapid circulation of goods and people. Beggars depend on many of the same locations because footfall, shade and repeated contact create the possibility of assistance. The shopfront is therefore simultaneously a business threshold and a livelihood pitch. Requests that feel necessary and morally justified to a claimant may feel repetitive, intrusive or commercially costly to a trader.

This clash does not make humiliation or violent removal legitimate, nor does it make every complaint evidence of prejudice. It shows how two insecure informal economies compete over scarce urban space. A spatially balanced response would replace episodic clearance with negotiated access, unobstructed customer routes, nearby dignified assistance points and referral arrangements developed with traders, persons who beg, disabled people's organisations, religious institutions and social-welfare actors.

Religious institutions act as organised moral brokers

Religious organisations occupy a distinctive middle position between spontaneous giving and state welfare. A Muslim institutional respondent explained:

“We have a welfare committee that investigates cases. If someone is from our community, we prefer to support them at home rather than see them on the streets. For the severely disabled, we arrange for them to be at the mosque entrance rather than the busy street corners, and we ensure they are known to us so we can verify their story” (Respondent 46, Muslim religious actor).

The committee translates religious obligation into procedure. It investigates, relocates support, verifies identity and differentiates forms of need. This can protect dignity and direct resources more effectively than brief street encounters. It also concentrates classificatory power in an institution whose recognition becomes a gateway to assistance.

A Christian organisation described feeding programmes, clinic partnerships, counselling and family connection rather than unrestricted cash. This reflects a different but related brokerage model: need is interpreted, channelled and tied to behavioural or rehabilitative goals. Religion therefore supplies not only motives for giving but infrastructures of assessment.

The strengths and risks are linked. Institutional knowledge can reduce arbitrary suspicion, but community membership may privilege insiders. Documentation requirements may exclude migrants. “Tough love” can turn assistance into discipline. Moral brokerage can humanise allocation or reproduce gatekeeping, depending on how decisions are made and challenged.

Agency coexists with exposure to exploitation

Describing begging as strategic labour must not romanticise it. Dependence on guides, adults who organise children's movements, control over lucrative pitches and allegations of syndicate involvement create possible pathways to coercion, trafficking, confiscation of earnings, sexual exploitation and violence. Women and children may face gendered abuse; persons with disabilities and older adults may be dependent on others for transport, communication or access to money. The field accounts establish vulnerability and suspicion, not the prevalence or structure of organised exploitation networks.

Safeguarding therefore requires case-sensitive inquiry rather than blanket criminalisation. Indicators such as restricted freedom of movement, unexplained control of earnings, threats, debt, unsafe child accompaniment or inability to speak privately should trigger confidential referral and specialist assessment. Immediate food, health care and safe shelter should not be withheld while exploitation is investigated, and enforcement should avoid punishing those who may themselves be controlled.

Compassion and stigma coexist in the same field

Religious and community respondents repeatedly described assistance and humiliation as simultaneous. A Christian actor stated:

“They most times receive compassion from the general population. All I know is that you cannot beg around this part of the world without facing stigma and humiliation. You have to endure to survive” (Christian religious actor, Christ Church area).

The point is that compassion and stigma are not separate environments. They can occur in the same day, street or interaction. A person may receive food from one passer-by and abuse from the next. The economic viability of begging can coexist with intense social degradation.

A senior female pastor offered an even sharper observation: “The people that most time humiliate them are the ones helping them at time” (Shop Owner 11, female religious actor). The donor can move between compassion and contempt because giving does not surrender classificatory superiority. Assistance may even reinforce it: the giver becomes morally generous while retaining the right to judge the recipient.

This coexistence explains why almsgiving cannot be assessed only through the amount transferred. The encounter also distributes dignity. A small gift accompanied by humiliation may relieve immediate hunger while deepening social injury.

The beggar experiences judgement as a recurring condition

From below, donor evaluation is not an occasional philosophical problem. It is repeated exposure. A young male respondent explained:

“Even when talking to some rich men politely, their perceptions are that we are the cause of our current situations or being in the street, and it's their intelligence that made them rich. They used to abuse us and call us all sorts of names” (Beggar 1, young male migrant).

The evidence connects material hierarchy to epistemic hierarchy. Wealth is interpreted as proof of intelligence, while poverty becomes proof of culpability. The donor's social position appears to authorise an explanation of the beggar's life. Politeness, an element of credibility work, does not overcome the prior classification.

This is where standpoint analysis adds value. From the donor's side, refusal may appear as a momentary judgement under uncertainty. From the beggar's side, such judgements accumulate into a durable social identity of failure and deceit. The asymmetry lies not only in who gives money, but in who is authorised to explain whom.

The donor occupies the position of judge

The most structurally significant finding is that charitable exchange assigns different epistemic roles. The beggar states a claim; the donor evaluates it. The donor is not generally required to prove that refusal is justified. The beggar bears the burden of demonstrating authenticity.

A trader stated that giving “is a choice and I do it when I feel like,” while also noting that beggars sometimes addressed him as though he had reserved something for them (Respondent 30, business actor). The statement marks the boundary of obligation: the donor insists on voluntariness, even when the claimant invokes a moral duty. The donor decides whether the claim creates any entitlement.

Institutional proposals can enlarge this authority. A stakeholder called for registration to identify “genuine beggars” against criminals, while another proposed a database recording counselling, syndicate involvement, medical need and public-nuisance status. Administrative coordination may improve referral, but it can also harden provisional street judgements into durable official categories.

Economic inequality is therefore accompanied by epistemic inequality. Those who lack resources must become knowable to those who control them, while resource holders remain comparatively unexamined. This asymmetry frames the discussion that follows.

DISCUSSION

The findings converge with research identifying religious giving as a central dimension of West African begging (D’Hondt & Vandewiele, 1984; Ogunkan, 2011). They also converge with contemporary strategy scholarship. Beggars draw upon religious language, narrative, bodily presentation, children and timing to increase the likelihood of response (Agyemang et al., 2024). The Freetown case, however, shows that these strategies operate inside a contested moral and epistemic field.

The principal theoretical contribution is moral brokerage. Material deprivation does not travel directly into assistance. It passes through interpretation. A beggar translates hardship into the language of God, motherhood, disability, temporary misfortune or family responsibility. The donor then translates those signs into a judgement about authenticity. Religious institutions may add another layer by investigating and verifying.

Moral brokerage extends moral-economy theory. Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) focus on normative expectations governing economic obligations. The Freetown case shows moral economy operating at the micro-interactional level, where the question is not only whether society owes assistance but whether this claimant qualifies. Religious duty supplies a general principle; deservingness judgement individualises it.

The “for the sake of God” appeal reveals this individualisation. It turns a dyadic economic request into a three-sided moral relationship involving beggar, donor and divine witness. The donor may still refuse, but refusal now occurs against a claimed religious obligation. This helps explain why traders describe the invocation as emotionally powerful and potentially manipulative. The phrase contests the donor’s attempt to keep giving purely voluntary.

The second contribution is credibility work. Strategy-oriented scholarship correctly identifies deliberate presentation, but credibility work points up communication rather than market competition. The blind man’s song, the migrant’s narrated past, the elderly woman’s maternal appeal and the hospital card are all attempts to make need knowable. The concept recognises agency without presuming falsity.

The third contribution is the credibility trap. Every mode of evidence contains the possibility of reversal. Religious language can be called exploitation; a visible impairment can be labelled staged; a child can be treated as advertisement; a document can be dismissed as part of a formula; a detailed story can sound rehearsed. The trap explains why improving the quality of evidence does not necessarily resolve distrust. Suspicion can absorb additional proof as evidence of greater sophistication.

This insight develops Agyemang et al.'s (2024) concept of economic strategy. The same action can be both strategic and truthful. A person may deliberately sing because singing produces support and because the suffering narrated is genuine. Intentional presentation does not determine the ontological status of the claim. Analysis should therefore separate strategic communication from fabrication.

The fourth contribution concerns deservingness. Van Oorschot's (2000) criteria appear in embodied and interactional form. Disability and age suggest lack of control; visible deprivation signals need; polite behaviour indicates attitude; family responsibility invokes identity and reciprocity. Yet street judgement is based on incomplete information. A clean body may conceal homelessness; an able body may lack employment or capital; addiction may be treated as chosen even when treatment is unavailable.

The Freetown evidence also shows a credibility hierarchy within the begging population. Visibly disabled and elderly persons often receive a credibility advantage over younger able-bodied claimants. This is hardly an absolute advantage because they still face stigma and violence. It is a relative advantage in moral legibility. Policy that relies heavily on visible disability risks reproducing this hierarchy.

The fifth contribution is epistemic. Fricker's (2007) work helps identify how social identity shapes credibility, but the case also involves authority over the conditions of testimony. The beggar speaks under a burden to prove; the donor listens without a reciprocal burden to explain disbelief. Religious committees and proposed databases can formalise this asymmetry by making assistance conditional on institutional legibility.

Standpoint theory shows how the encounter changes when viewed from below (Collins, 1986; Smith, 1987). Donor suspicion may seem reasonable under uncertainty, especially amid repeated requests and documented exploitation. Yet repeated disbelief becomes a structural condition for people who must seek resources every day. The beggar experiences not one assessment but a succession of miniature trials without stable rules or appeal.

Methodologically, the article demonstrates the value of collecting data from several sides of charitable encounters. If analysis used only beggar narratives, suspicion and verification might be understated. If it used only donor narratives, credibility work could be reduced to deception. Religious and regulatory actors reveal how informal distinctions become organisational categories. Comparison does not eliminate disagreement; it explains how disagreement is socially produced.

Empirically, Freetown adds a religiously plural setting in which Muslim and Christian rhythms overlap. Beggars navigate Fridays, Ramadan, Sundays, Lent, Christmas and Easter. Religious institutions provide food, cash, counselling, health checks and training. At the same time, stakeholders worry that almsgiving encourages repetition. The moral calendar creates recurring opportunity and recurring controversy.

Gender adds another dimension. The elderly woman's appeal activates motherhood; widows and women with children present care burdens; young women may face sexual exploitation and moral suspicion. Maternal identity can increase deservingness while making women's worth dependent on a recognised care role. Men more often confront the expectation that an able body should work. Deservingness is therefore gendered, but not in one direction.

Disability also produces ambivalence. It can make need credible while exposing the person to stigma and expectations of bodily display. A blind person may have to sing and remain visible; a mobility-impaired respondent may be positioned in a wheelchair by relatives. Assistance tied too closely to visible impairment can pressure disabled persons to reproduce a legible image of helplessness rather than support autonomy.

Read through Bourdieu, the credibility hierarchy operates as an unequal distribution of recognition capital: bodily and relational signs acquire value only when recognised within the donor's moral field. Read through Lefebvre, that conversion is spatially organised: a sign becomes more or less effective depending on access to a shopfront, transport corridor or religious entrance and on who can remain there. Intersectionality explains why recognition and spatial access cannot be ranked on one axis. Disability may increase moral legibility

while reducing mobility; motherhood may increase sympathy while heightening surveillance; old age may strengthen deservingness while magnifying the costs of displacement.

This synthesis clarifies the status of the article's concepts. Moral brokerage, credibility work, the credibility trap and asymmetrical epistemic authority are grounded explanatory concepts generated from comparison within the corpus. Recognition capital, socially produced space and intersectionality are interpretive lenses used to explain how those concepts vary across bodies, times and locations. The distinction avoids presenting a deductive theoretical vocabulary as though it emerged verbatim from participants while retaining the explanatory reach of the wider framework.

Policy implications follow. Campaigns telling the public simply not to give underestimate the religious and moral significance of almsgiving. They may frame faith-based generosity as ignorance and provoke resistance. Conversely, unstructured cash giving may relieve immediate hunger without addressing the conditions that return people to the street. The issue is not a binary choice between giving and refusing, but how moral obligation can connect to durable and dignified support.

Trusted referral mechanisms offer one possibility. Mosques, churches, traders and social-welfare actors could direct people towards food, shelter, health care, addiction treatment, accessible training or enterprise support. Religious institutions are useful because they already possess trust and local knowledge. Yet their role should not become unchecked gatekeeping. Criteria should be transparent, plural forms of evidence accepted, and urgent assistance separated from lengthy verification.

Policies should avoid defining deservingness primarily through visible disability. Eligibility must recognise homelessness, care responsibilities, acquired disability, mental distress, addiction, unemployment and lack of family support. Assessment should reconstruct livelihood pathways rather than rely on appearance. The fact that a person can walk or dress cleanly does not establish livelihood viability.

Verification should be proportionate. Requiring extensive proof before food or emergency shelter can reproduce the credibility trap institutionally. Immediate support should follow evident need, while more substantial or long-term programmes can use careful assessment. People should also have a route to correct misclassification. A database that labels someone a "hardcore beggar" or public nuisance without review may convert stigma into administrative permanence.

The quality of the encounter matters alongside the resource delivered. Kind speech, privacy and non-humiliating assessment preserve dignity. Religious actors who distribute discreetly recognise this point. Policy success should therefore include not only movement away from street begging but reduction in the indignity required to obtain survival support.

Finally, moral brokerage should become a bridge rather than a barrier. Religious and community actors can translate lived need to state institutions, while public agencies provide resources beyond the capacity of charity. This arrangement would retain the moral impulse to help without making access dependent on one donor's instantaneous judgement or one institution's unreviewable classification.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is qualitative and does not estimate the prevalence of particular begging strategies, demographic profiles, territorial arrangements or exploitation networks. Participant descriptors enabled analytical comparison by gender, broad age position and disability, but not a fully balanced intersectional sample. The material also captures religious timing more clearly than the complete seasonal cycle. Accordingly, claims about heavy rains, Christmas, internal zoning and organised exploitation are framed as mechanisms and safeguarding concerns supported to different degrees, not as quantified or universally observed findings.

Further research should combine a demographic sampling frame with repeated site observation across the heavy rains, dry season, Ramadan and Christmas. Participatory mapping with women, older people and persons with different impairments could document pitch access, involuntary movement, care arrangements

and conflict. Confidential safeguarding interviews and referral partnerships would be needed to investigate trafficking or control without increasing surveillance or retaliation. Such a design would test the transferability of recognition capital and coercive circulation while preserving the standpoint of those most affected.

CONCLUSION

Street begging in Freetown is an encounter in which material need must become morally and epistemically legible. Beggars use language, stories, bodily signs, religious invocations, children, documents and temporal knowledge to communicate hardship. Donors and institutions interpret those signs through classifications of sincerity, control, identity and deservingness.

Religion opens opportunities for giving but does not settle authenticity. “For the sake of God” activates a shared moral grammar and contests the idea that charity is purely discretionary. Fridays, Ramadan, Sundays and Christian festivals form a plural moral calendar through which opportunity changes over time. The same religious field also generates concern about manipulation and dependency.

Moral brokerage captures the translation from hardship into socially recognisable claims. Credibility work identifies the activity required to make those claims persuasive. The credibility trap captures the paradox that deliberate presentation can increase and diminish believability. Asymmetrical epistemic authority identifies the power embedded in the donor’s and institution’s capacity to classify.

These concepts extend scholarship that interprets begging as economic strategy. Beggars behave strategically, but strategy operates within unequal relations of judgement. A sorrowful song may be calculated and truthful. A hospital card may be evidence even when deliberately displayed. A child may attract sympathy while also providing essential care. Presentation cannot be equated with fabrication.

The article also shows that deservingness is socially produced rather than discovered as a fixed personal quality. Its distribution is intersectional and spatial: visible disability, old age and motherhood may carry stronger recognition capital than unemployment, addiction, homelessness or invisible illness, but the same identities can deepen dependence, surveillance and the costs of coercive circulation. Commercial and religious locations are contested livelihood spaces, and agency within them coexists with the possibility of hierarchy and exploitation.

Between poverty and the gift lies a judgement, and that judgement is made in particular bodies, places and times. Understanding it is central to understanding how street begging works. A just response must address material deprivation, unequal access to urban space, safeguarding risks and the unequal terms on which suffering is required to prove itself.

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