

Street Children: Reasons for Becoming, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms; A Study on Street Children in Nekemte Town

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Abstract

Nowadays, the increasing number of unsupervised children working or/and living on streets has become one of urban social problems, particularly in developing nations. Ethiopia as one of the developing countries with rapid urbanization is also facing rapid increase in the size of street children. The purpose of the study was to investigate the factors that lead children to street, challenges they face on streets and their coping mechanisms with particular reference to street children in Nekemte town; a capital of East Wallega Zone, Oromia National Regional state of Ethiopia. Nekemte as one of the growing large urban centers in Western Ethiopia and due to its strategic location attracts large number of immigrants including street children. The study was qualitative in nature. Data were gathered through interview, focus group discussion and observation. Research informants were selected through snowball and purposive sampling. Twenty children were interviewed and two focus group discussions were held. The size was determined during data collection based on the principle of data saturation. Poverty was found to be the main factor that leads children to street as many children are working on street to support themselves or their families. Besides, abuse and mistreatment at home, harassment at school, urban life attraction, and displacement and peer pressure were also found to be among the causes. Street children face several challenges while working or/and living on urban streets. Difficulty of securing basic necessities of life, abuse by adults including police and older street children, stigma and marginalization, lack of toilet facility and place to bath and extreme weather conditions (cold and hot) were the main challenges they face. The study indicated that street children use both positive and negative coping mechanisms to overcome these challenges. Positive coping strategies include carrying personal belongings of passengers, engaging in various petty businesses, shoe shining and doing errands of persons. The study indicated that most children try to survive engaging in these positive or socially acceptable coping strategies. Street children also resort to negative coping mechanisms when positive coping strategies fail to support children's living, especially to get basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. These strategies include: begging, stealing, selling sex, chewing and drinking alcohol.

Keywords: Reasons • Coping mechanisms • Challenges • Social problems

Introduction

Nowadays, it is very common to see large number of children working or/ and living on streets of towns and cities. The problem of these children has become one of the growing urban social problems of today's world, particularly developing countries [1]. It was indicated that the tremendous increase in unsupervised children either living or/and working on urban streets is one of the growing social problems associated with urbanization [2]. Also pointed out that the existence of street children is very much prevalent in densely populated urban hubs of developing or economically unstable regions, such as countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia. The vast majorities of street children work and live in large urban areas of

developing countries, and they are the reflection of growing social tragedy in the world [3]. A study conducted by Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (1993) asserted that the growing numbers of street children is one of the most serious urban social problems facing Ethiopia today.

The term 'street child' has been defined differently by different authors and research institutions. There is no consensus on the definition of the term among these groups. The most commonly cited definition of street children in academic literature is street child refers to any boy or girl, for whom the street in the widest sense of the word, has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults [4,5]. The definition encompasses all children

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working or/and living on urban streets. Similarly, noted that street children refers to persons below eighteen years, who spend all or most of their time on the street, who maintain minimal or no contact with their families, lack supervision, protection or guidance, which makes them vulnerable to a wide range of health and psychological hazards [6]. This definition indicated that the children must have been observed spending a substantial part of their time on the street.

Literature Review

Review of various literature on street children indicate that these children might fall in to two categories; children on the street and children of the street. The classification is mainly based on their level of contact with families and streets. As stated in, children on the street refer to those engaged in the street but with regular contacts with their families whereas children of the street denotes those who live, work and sleep in the street [7]. The former group lives with family while the latter has no or minimal contact with family. It can also be said that urban streets, for children on the streets, are places of work whereas for children of the streets they are both places of work and residence. Studies indicate that the great majority of street children from the developing world are not homeless. As indicated in many street children, approximately ninety percent work in the street but lives at home [3]. Similarly, Aptekar also stated that the great majority—well over three-quarters and as many as 90% of the children on the streets in various developing countries work on the streets but live at home and are working to earn money for their families. This study which was conducted on street children in Nekemte town includes both groups; children on the street and of the street.

Studies indicate that getting information about street children is a difficult task. It is their working and living condition itself that makes the task so challenging [7]. It should be that the street child population is a mobile one which makes the universe of the street child difficult to determine [8]. It was noted that it is not easy to assess the phenomenon accurately as children of the street are mobile, and move from one area to another in search of better survival opportunities, or because of public assaults (police, city people etc.) [3]. Also asserted that street children are not usually counted, not subject to census, so their numbers are not known, but what is certainly known is that their number is increasing for various reasons.

Due to the aforementioned factors, the number of street children in Ethiopia is also not accurately known [7]. They stated that there are no national figures on the number of street children in Ethiopia [9]. In addition, agree with the absence of comprehensive statistical information on street children in Ethiopia. There are, however, estimates on the size of street children in Ethiopia as indicated in some studies [10]. It is estimated that there are over 600,000 street children in Ethiopia out of which over 100,000 are found on streets of the capital, Addis Ababa. Brhane also noted that on the basis of data from UNICEF and other actively engaged NGOs, there are approximately 500,000-700,000 street youth nationally, and an additional 1 million are at risk for streetism.

There are different causal factors that lead children to work or/and live on the urban streets. Poverty, as indicated in many studies, is found to be the major factor [9]. It is argued that poverty is one of the driving factors for an increasing number of children on the streets.

further describes that in some instances parents or guardians themselves send the children to work on the streets to support their families. As noted children also migrate onto the streets on their own initiative as a result of their unsatisfactory living conditions at home [8]. Similarly, as noted by street children's decisions to leave their homes and migrate to cities are probably based on rational economic calculations of the advantages and disadvantages of remaining within the family networks in their rural areas or migrating [1]. It is further described that the need to improve their life conditions, experience alternative ways of life and to escape from hostile family situations appears to be the predominating factors.

Poverty, however, is not the only determining factor that leads children to streets. If material poverty were the only cause, all children of poor families would end up working or/and living on urban streets which in reality is not the case. In addition to poverty, abuse and mistreatment at home is among factors that lead children to street. A study conducted and revealed that children in Ethiopia are forced go to the streets for reasons, which are associated to economic problems, family discord, death of parents and displacement of families, parental neglect and violence, lack of educational opportunities, and urban life attractions [8,11]. It is also noted that the main factors that drive children to leave their homes are child abuse and neglect following family disintegration, the parents' separation or divorce, the death of a parent, or remarriage. They further explained that after the remarriage of a parent, children are frequently abused and forced to leave the house by the stepfather or mother.

Working or/and living on street exposes children to various problems and challenges which they have to shoulder or confront by their own. Children living on the streets denied their basic human rights as they have no access to food, shelter, education and health care and are exposed to many forms of discrimination and abuse [10]. Brhane indicated that street youth are exposed to situations that make them vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health problems on a day to day basis. According to street children, getting enough fresh and healthy food, clean water, safe shelter, and bathing and toilet facilities and health care is tough [1]? Emebet indicated inadequate nutrition, long working hours and exposure to aversive weather conditions and physical abuse while on the street, endanger their development. The severity of the harsh living conditions is often amplified for young girls who face sexual abuse by adults, rape, unwanted pregnancy and early motherhood. A study conducted by Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (1993) pointed out that children who sleep on the streets and veranda cite their biggest problems as cold and exposure, hunger, and being beaten and having their blankets and money stolen by older boys and adults. The challenge for street children with rural origin is double in a sense that the context in which they live is distinct from their original places [12].

Studies also revealed that social stigma and marginalization are among the most difficult challenges street children face, indicates that street children are marginalized by their societies and are seen as pariahs or outcasts [8]. Argued that street children are mostly neglected and socially stigmatized category of all children [11]. Accordingly, instead of getting the urgent support they would need, they are very frequently perceived by the society and adult citizens as antisocial delinquents, robbers, and petty criminals. That is why they experience almost on daily basis several types of harassments, and

other derogatory practices that raise several moral and legal questions.

Street children use different mechanisms to cope with various challenges they face while working or/and residing on streets [12]. Street children survive through undertaking a wide variety of activities, which mainly take place in the informal sector; they usually do not have a fixed career. In other words, they jump over opportunities based on the nature of the reward or the benefit they draw or do it in combination. Street children also choose a place to spend the night based on its social, security and economic advantages [8].

Children fight for the finest possibilities for labour in the street environment, which means they are commonly seen in places where there is a lot of economic activity, such as market places, taxi stands, train stations, and city centres. Furthermore, competition for acquiring better working places however, is more often regulated by violence. In similar study, it is indicated that in order to protect themselves from violence, street children organize themselves in gangs which serve as a substitute for family.

Street children strive to survive through both socially acceptable and deviant mechanisms. On the street, they frequently survive by begging, stealing or working in the informal sectors in low paying jobs [9].

The purpose of the study was to investigate the factors that lead children to street, challenges they face on streets and their coping mechanisms with particular reference to street children in Nekemte town; a capital of East Wallega Zone, Oromia National Regional State of Ethiopia.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative research method to explore the lived experiences of street children working or/and living on the streets of Nekemte town. As stated “qualitative research claims to describe life worlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” [13,14]. Also asserts that qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Therefore, employing qualitative research helped the researcher to better understand views and real life experiences of these children.

The study is also cross-sectional in that, it was conducted within time from December, 2019 up to March, 2020. Cross-sectional study design as indicated in, takes place at one point in time [15].

Study area

The study was conducted on children working or/and residing on the streets of Nekemte town. Nekemte, the major town in Western Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing urban centers in the country. Besides, the town serves as a junction point where main roads from different zones and regions including Amhara Regional state, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambela Regional States, Addis Ababa and other urban centers are crossing one another. It, thus, has a potential to attract migrants including street children from the surrounding rural vicinities and other urban centers which inspired the researcher to select a study area.

Sampling: Snowball and purposive sampling were utilized in order to select informants for in-depth interview. In order to select informants from the children, snowball sampling was employed. In snowball sampling, we start with a few cases of the type we wish to study and have them lead us to more cases, who, in turn, are expected to lead us to still more cases, and so on [16]. However, purposive sampling was utilized in order to select sample from concerned offices, i.e., based on the researchers’ judgment of who can provide detail information on the issue. When developing a purposive sample, as indicated in researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population [14].

Regarding the size, twenty children (sixteen male and four female, as street children in the study areas are predominantly boys) were interviewed and two group discussion sessions were conducted. Both interviews and FGDs were conducted at their work place. The size was determined based on data saturation. We may stop here if the multiple data sets confirm one other or if no new data emerges [15].

Techniques of data collection: The study employed qualitative data gathering techniques; interview, focus group discussion and observation. As put “the data of qualitative inquiry is most often people’s words and actions, and thus requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behavior” [17].

Sources of data: Both primary and secondary sources were employed in the study.

Primary sources: The primary sources include information collected directly from informants through in-depth interview, focus group discussion and observation.

Secondary sources: These are information obtained through accessing different books, journals, articles relevant to the issue under discussion.

Technique of data analysis: The study employed was thematic analysis. First of all, the data obtained through key informant interviews and FGDs were transcribed and then translated into English from the original language (Afan Oromo). Then, the transcriptions were carefully reviewed for better understanding. After having good comprehension of the whole data through reading and discussion with peers, the researcher organized them into different themes and sub-themes. The researcher, therefore, employed thematic analysis. Finally, the findings were discussed in relation to the findings of previous researchers conducted on the issue.

Results and Discussion

Causes of streetism

There are various reasons or factors that lead children to work or/and live on the street. Interview with informants indicated that poverty, abuse, internal displacement, harassment by teachers at school and search for better living were found to be the reasons that made children to work or reside in the streets [18]. There may be many underlying explanations for why youngsters live on the streets, according to the author. They noted that some leave voluntarily, searching for an adventure or for a way to make a living. Other children are rejected by their family or may feel unwanted due to strained family situation. Others are encouraged by their parents to find work in the city in order to contribute economically to the household.

Interview with sample street children revealed that poverty is main factor for joining the street. Many street children are from impoverished families. For instance, Tolosa said "I am on street to support my family and myself since my parents are too poor." Another informant Monera told my parents could not buy school uniforms and exercise books for me; thus, I have to work on the street to support myself and continue attending my school"

Similarly, findings of previous researches identified poverty as the main pushing factor that lead children to street [3]. Argued that increasing mass poverty stands out as a major factor for the existence of street children. For instance, indicated that children leave their homes to earn a living when their parents are unable to feed them in a decent manner [8,18]. It is noted that children work on the streets in order to contribute to the family budget. That is why it is said that children on the street constitute the largest category of street children.

In Ethiopia, the study conducted on the street children in Awasa City revealed that poverty was found to be one of major factors to push children to move to the street [9].

However, it is crucial to understand that poverty is not the only factor affecting the phenomenon of street children [5]. Many poor children in Addis Ababa do not become street children, implying that poverty is necessary but not sufficient condition that drives many children to the streets. He further indicated that other reasons that have been cited for life on the streets are family problems including mistreatment, lack of family, work demands at home and desire to be with friends. Abuse and neglect by parents is found among the factors that force children to lead street life. According to the study, parental verbal and physical abuse are among the causes that bring children to the streets [8,11]. Domestic abuse, severe treatment by parents, the desire to avoid cruel punishment by stepfathers and moms, teacher's constant verbal and physical harassment, and derision for class passivity were also identified as factors that lead youngsters to join the streets. For instance, Chaltu told that she leaved home to escape frequent nagging and beating by her mother. Besides Bonsa said "My step-father is so cruel, he doesn't like me at all; he beats me; insults me and warns me to leave home frequently, I left home and began street life".

Internal displacement was also found to be among the factors that lead children to street life. One of the informants, Chala, told the following.

I and my parents were displaced from Balojeganfoy of Benishangul Gumuz. Our home was burnt, our properties robbed and we escaped for life. After staying in concentration camp for months here in Nekemte, my parents returned, but I preferred street life rather than returning there.

Some street children, who are from rural origin, join urban street life to escape from rural life challenges. Such children used to think that they can find better jobs and lead relatively decent life in urban areas; but they ended in street life. Similarly, it was indicated that many children believe that larger cities provide more economic chances, making the streets a more appealing alternative to a poverty-stricken rural household; nonetheless, the life they will encounter in the city is often difficult [12,19]. It is also noted that the actual and perceived economic opportunities available in urban areas attract rural children to the city.

Another informant raised harassment by teacher at school as a cause to resort to street life. A sample informant, Badassa, said the following:

My teacher used to harass me frequently telling me that I am lazy and useless. I then decided to stop attending school; when I told my mother about my decision to quit school she beat me and told me to choose one from either leaving home or attending school. I didn't want to go back to school; I left home and started street life".

Challenges street children face

Street children face several challenges while working or/and living on the street [11]. According to the report, children on the streets confront a variety of challenges, including physical and sexual harassment, societal marginalisation, and the loss of their access to basic services such as food, housing, education, and health care. He further noted that street children were exposed to various harmful substances such as alcohol, cigarette, and khat.

Interview and focus group discussion with street children in Nekemte town revealed that extreme weather conditions, attack from police, abuse by older street children, stigma and discrimination by the society, inability to get the basic necessities of life and lack of toilet were among challenges they face [8].

According to the author, the street is a place where youngsters seek freedom and security that they no longer enjoy at home. Unfortunately the street, where they live and work, is prone to other forms of violence. Attack from security personnel (police and military) is serious problem raised by street children, particularly by children of the street (those who live and work on the street). Since the area is under state of emergency when this research was conducted, beating someone found on the street during the night was common. Since these children have no home to go, they are frequently attacked by police or army when found on the street.

Street children are also abused by older street children. Interview with sample street children indicated that, they are frequently forced to give money to older street children and they are also obliged to give up for them when work is found. For instance Talila stated that,

"I am working in bus station, carrying goods for passengers; I must do day by day to sustain myself. However, there is a boy who has worked on the street longer and is also older than me, who frequently frustrates and asks me to give him money; he beats me if I refuse; I must give him because I am afraid for my life".

Street children also face stigma and discrimination from the society. During interview and focus group discussion, street children noted that society perceives them as criminals. For instance Chala said,

"Most people do not trust us; they perceive street children as thieves and are on the street because they do not obey their parents".

Similarly, a study conducted by indicated that street children, in Ethiopia, are generally assumed to be more or less outside the direct guidance, moral inculcation and economic dependence of their parents or adult organized institutions [7]. The study further noted that homeless street boys and girls are usually perceived to be juvenile delinquents, drug abusers, petty thieves, destitute vagrants, dropouts or deviants. The official

government attitude towards street children has been very negative. Street children are considered to be hooligans, vagabonds and prone to commit crimes as a result of which they have been a target of harassment by law enforcement organizations [1].

Lack of access to basic necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter) was identified among the challenges, street children face. They told that most of the time they have to wander on hotels and restaurants begging for food which is mainly leftovers from customers. Tolossa said,

“These days food is so expensive; I cannot afford to buy since the money I get is too low. Thus, I have to beg restaurants to give me leftovers of their customers; most of them give for free; but some sell it with cheap”.

Similarly, indicated that not all street children earn enough money to buy their food, and are reduced to eating leftovers from restaurants, bars and hotels [8].

Lack of toilet and place for bathing or taking shower are among problems raised by street children. Interview with these children indicated that, they use public toilet in Nekemte bus station and hotels for toilet purposes. Sometimes the owners prohibit and even chase them while they go to use toilet facilities in private hotels. Some children noted that, they also use roadsides for toilet purposes, especially during night. For bathing purpose or in order to take shower, these children mainly use public bath rooms and running waters.

Place of sleep is also one of the problems raised by street children, mainly by children of the street. They slept in unfinished structures, businesses, and on the sidewalks.

Coping mechanisms

Street children use different coping strategies to overcome challenges of living and/or working on the street [9]. It is noted that the survival or livelihood strategies of street children involve drawing all sorts of skills, knowledge, labor resources and social networks. Street children center on income-earning activities mainly in the informal sector either as wage employees or self-employment or other illegal means such as begging and carrying luggage.

Similarly, data obtained from interview and focus group discussion with street children indicate that these strategies can be categorized in to: positive and negative coping mechanisms.

Positive coping strategies: Carrying personal belongings of the passengers, engaging in petty business, shoe shining and doing errands of persons [20-23].

For instance, Talila said,

“I work around bus station; I get money by carrying items of passengers; it helps me to buy food and clothing”.

Another sample informant, Monera also told,

“My work is carrying goods for passengers; I use the money to buy food and cloth”

Street children also struggle to survive by engaging in petty business, selling different items (such as cigarettes, gum, soft drinks,

condom, etc) to people. These children do such businesses walking around bus station and bars.

Interview with sample street children also indicated that shoe shining is a good positive coping strategy for those engaged in it. One of the informants, who is a shoe shiner, Ebisa said,

“With the money I get from this work, I am supporting myself and my young sister.”

Negative coping strategies: When positive coping techniques fail to assist children's survival, particularly in obtaining basic requirements such as food, clothing, and shelter, is used. These strategies include: begging, stealing, selling sex, chewing khat and drinking alcohol.

According to data from street children, these children beg money from passers-by and leftover food from hotels and restaurants. Children also steal items of people, especially of passengers, and money from pocket. Female street children reported that they get money for living mainly by selling sex. They wait for customers standing beside road during night. These children noted that, they know the risks but they are using it because they have to eat to live.

Most street children, who were interviewed, responded that they chew khat and drink alcohol. They use it as a coping mechanism to deal with stress, starvation, and extreme weather. Similarly, to dull their feelings of hunger, cold, and psychological anguish, street children made and drank alcoholic concoctions [11].

Conclusion

The increasing number of unsupervised children working and/or living on streets has become a major urban social problem in today's world, especially in developing countries. Literature indicates that Ethiopia is also being confronted by unprecedented increase in the size of these children in different urban centers.

Close examination of the situation of these children is very crucial for different intervention measures designed to address the problems of these children. It is important to assess the factors that lead them to street, challenges they face and how they manage to survive. Clear understanding of these issues help concerned government and non-governmental organizations, practitioners and policy entrepreneurs intended to curb the problem.

One recommended strategy to address the problem is preventing children from resorting to street. This can happen mainly through supporting the impoverished family as many children are on the street to support themselves or their destitute family. As these children are there not only for reasons of poverty, it is also important to establish temporary shelters for children fleeing from family to street. Another important strategy is working on revitalizing indigenous child care institutions such as ‘guddifachaa’ (institutional arrangement for child adoption in the Oromo culture). Concerned agencies should also emphasize on training, economic empowerment and reintegration of these children.

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