

Streetism: The effects and coping mechanism of street children in Gondar City, Ethiopia

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Abstract

As one of the metropolitan cities in Amhara's national regional state, Gondar is being beleaguered by the problem of street children. The present study attempted to highlight the effects of streetism and the coping mechanisms of street children. The qualitative research approach was adopted and data were collected from 15 selected street children. The majority of street children were discovered to be between the ages of 8 and 12 years. Thematic analysis was conducted to further understand the lives of street children. Street children suffer from the burden of having to handle responsibilities at an early age. Thus, the findings of the study illustrate that the issue of street children cannot be viewed as an economic phenomenon alone but as a social and psychological one as well. Consequently, the study highlights that even in settings where street children are standardised, leaving home very early is related to negative outcomes.

Keywords: Administration, coping mechanism, street, streetism;

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1. Introduction

The trickiness of street children is one of the touching problems faced by almost all countries in the world and is rapidly becoming one of the global heroic proportions in an extremely difficult environment wherever they live and work on the streets (UNICEF, 2018). Street children constitute a marginalised group in most societies and are disfigurements of urban civilisation. They are vulnerable to mental, physical, social and health problems and are abused and neglected. Since then, there have been devastating effects on the street children themselves and on the society they belong to. Thus, it leads to pessimism, people being unable to defend their future and a lot of difficulties in having a better life. Due to this, a large number of street children will be involved in theft and petty crime and will be engaged to a greater extent in crime and anti-social activities in society (Hecht, 1998).

The enormous problems faced by street children in recent years have been stated by various scholars at various times and on various philosophical topics (Cénat et al., 2018; Goldblatt et al., 2015; Maposa, 2013). The problems are widely dispersed (psychological, physical and sexual abuse), but for several years they are not included social programmes. They are excluded from the economic, social and political processes. However, only a few institutions are involved in helping them sustain their livelihood. This may lead the future of hopeful children, as well as the coming generation, to uncontrollable bad habits that will have an impact on the political, social and economic conditions in these countries (Kebede, 2015).

Thus, street children are faced with many difficulties, such as their living conditions, suffering from hunger, harassment and physical abuse, and being deprived of basic services, such as education and healthcare. Due to such harsh living and working conditions, they resort to coping mechanisms, such as drug abuse, which are associated with physical and sexual abuse and adversely impacts their physical and mental health (Agnelli, 1986; John, Philip, & Taru, 2019).

Even though the problem of street children is understood as an urban phenomenon, the factors aggravating the problem originate, by and large, in the rural villages. Rural–urban migration to urban towns across the countries of the world (a brief overview of the migration of children) has been documented in a report prepared by Whitehead and Hashim (2005), and is not dominated by a single factor but is caused by a combination of multiple interrelated push and pull factors. It is usually in response to the deterioration of living conditions in rural villages. Most of these children are compelled to work or live on the street to sustain themselves and their families. For many of them, the perception that larger towns offer greater economic opportunities makes the street a more attractive destination compared to a poverty-stricken rural economy (Kopoka, 2000; McAlpine, Henley, Mueller, & Vetter, 2010). However, a life of waiting in the city is often difficult. They often do not have the education and basic skills necessary to deal with the risk factors and cope with adversity. In this context, it is expected that social intervention by the government or non-government organisations would address the problem of the livelihood opportunities of street children.

However, there is no reliable data on the number of street children in Ethiopia because their lives are bounded by mobile and their numbers are growing in urban areas (Zerihun, 2018). Due to a variety of correlated socio-economic problems, there are a large number of children living in extreme poverty in Gondar city. All street children are subject to some form of institutional violence, which interferes with their right to live and to develop a fully safe environment. It often forces them to become street beggars or daily labourers, gangsters,

thieves or delinquents to survive. Street children around the world tend to suffer the consequences of their daily battle for survival in the street context. Such a harsh environment affects all areas of the functioning of children living on the streets. As one category of vulnerable children, instead of going to school, they work on the streets (Boafo-Arthur, 2015).

1.1. Conceptual background

1.1.1. Structuration theory

Children who are living on the streets are actors who struggle to regulate themselves during their livelihood. As a result, structuration theory is more realistic in understanding the factors that shape street children's lives within their society and how they survive on the street. Children, as experienced social actors, have a certain freedom of choice and action to survive in their areas of expertise. Therefore, street children are active agents to show the complexity of skills in their daily life and their daily actions in terms of the time–space dimension (Giddens, 1984).

The importance of structuration theory in this study will contribute to a better understanding of street children's survival strategies in modern social settings. Furthermore, this theory assists in unpacking how social practices link street children as agents to structures that facilitate their journey to maturity with the change of guidelines and resources in the duration of time between various localities. From this discussion, it can be seen that structuration theory will be used to understand the research problem. Hence, this theory looks at the relationships between structures and individual actions to struggle within the structure to survive (Giddens, 1984).

1.2. Purpose of the study

The mechanisms to deal with street children require area-specific and problem-specific approaches. With this background, the present study has been undertaken to examine the effects of streetism and coping mechanisms of street children in Gondar city administration, Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia.

2. Materials and methods

This research used a qualitative research approach to address the research objective. It mainly relies on the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals within their world, and certainty is neither fixed nor single. It seeks to answer questions framed by what and how often a given phenomenon occurs (Astalin, 2013). Thus, it enables a greater degree of understanding to be formulated about the effects of streetism and their coping mechanism. Phenomenology design was found to be the most desirable in this study because it describes the lived experience of street children. To make the research feasible with the available time and resources, the researcher employed a cross-sectional study design.

2.1. Participants

The respondents were selected through random purposive sampling, which was used to deliberately select street children in Gondar city. Using this sampling technique, the researcher obtained the appropriate data from the respondents at the point of data saturation. The data was collected from both secondary and primary sources, such as online publications, reports and unpublished materials, as well as from street children and some key informants using in-depth interviews, respectively. Data were collected from 15 selected street children.

2.2. Data collection

The researcher followed different procedures to collect data from street children and some key informants. Firstly, the qualitative interview guide was prepared in English and it was directly translated into Amharic through the use of simple words. Following that, the researcher made hard copy duplications to collect in-depth interviews and key informants.

2.3. Analysis

The data was analysed and interpreted thematically following different procedures: familiarisation, transcription, organising, coding and themes (Creswell, 2009). Thus, the data collection procedure was used as a strategy for converging data, which is critical for gaining trustworthiness and expanding the interpretations of data that was collected and presented using various methods.

2.4. Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Gondar's Institutional Review Board. A letter of permission was secured from the Department of Sociology. All study participants were informed about the purpose of the study before embarking on it. Informed consent was secured from the study participants before they took part in the study, and the privacy and confidentiality of the study participants were maintained. Respondents had the full right to either take part in the study or not. Any risk associated with the research was minimised, if any, or avoided at all. Also, participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

3. Results

This study explored the effects of streetism and the coping mechanism of street children in Gondar City Administration, Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia. The data is organised according to the targets of the research and the experiences of different stages of the early street children in the study area. The researcher selectively presents the responses of interviewees by quoting them directly and in indented spaces under the topics or themes generated from the analysis.

3.1. Social exclusion

Due to misinterpreting the problems of street children, societies exclude them because they do not maintain hygiene and have lost the value of their existence. Thus, it creates a life full of challenges, while they cannot get help from the society to survive. Furthermore, because of impolite activities and labelling of thieves, street children's exclusion persists, despite the wide social and cultural problems. They are already exposed to carrying a social stigma and do not get any support from the society to survive. In this regard, one participant said the following:

When I was living on the streets, I faced a variety of issues, the most significant of which was social exclusion. The reason I was excluded from society is that I haven't cared about my hygiene. As well, society could not understand why I live on the street. While I faced a variety of problems, insufficient basic needs were significant issues in my life. Also, I was labelled as thieves, picking a pocket, and telephone, so then I couldn't get any help, even leftovers were excluded from their settings.

3.2. Health problems and sexual abuse

Owing to the eating patterns of street children, diverse diseases are facing them since their lives are shaped by leftovers from garbage bins from hotels. There are disadvantaged and live in harsh conditions in society. However, they could not get medical treatment. Beyond the devastating lives, they take enough to be considered thieves. In this regard, one participant said the following:

I went to hotels in search of leftovers. However, the hoteliers chased me away because they saw me as a pickpocket. Yes, my feeding system and eating habits were poor, and I was vulnerable to disease, diarrhoea, and a lack of medical attention.

Also, street children are exposed to sexual abuse on the corners by unknown individuals at night. Frequently, street girl children encounter sexual abuse and are barred by STDs and fistulas. Furthermore, as a result of rape, street girls face unwanted pregnancies, which also lead to unsafe abortions, illnesses and childbirth. There is also detection of homosexual violence, which is a boy's rape perpetrated by an adult man. Experiencing rape as a young child also increases the risk of further victimisation and accumulation of violent experiences for other street children who are going to be gay. In this regard, the key informant said the following:

Due to a lack of shelter, both males and females sleep together on corners, and they are raped at midnight. Because the girls is sleeping in the corner, they are easily raped by adults, and it leads to unwanted pregnancies and STDs. Also, the boy street children are raped and made shocked and excluded by their families and by society in general.

3.3. Petty business

Street children undertake a lot of activities, which mainly happen within the informal sector of petty trading. Children living on the street engage in the multi-informal sectors of petty trade, and they take advantage of the opportunities to get an income every day. They struggle to make money on the street by selling petty products. Also, daily labour is the most accepted source of income, followed by street vendors and others. Therefore, their coping mechanisms are heterogonous, and they do not earn their living in the same way. In this regard, one participant said the following:

Because my mother's survival mechanism was 'begging', I had gotten used to getting by selling gum. For 3 different years, I have had no alternative except the street. Now I'm surviving by working, selling lottery tickets, and washing cars on the street in the piazza. Occasionally, I used to sell drinking water and soft drinks in the bus terminal when the weather was hot.

Street children work on the road for an extended period of time, working as shoe shiners. Nevertheless, all interested street children do not get opportunities due to the shortage of money to buy basic materials. In addition, they work by moving from place to place due to a lack of permanent space. In this regard, one participant said the following:

It's because my parents are working in the mill house and we did not have good enough income to leave home. Then, I started mobile shoeshine because newly arrived street shoe shiners didn't have a permanent working place.

3.4. *Begging and working with blind people*

Some hoteliers need the service of street children and offer them leftovers in return. They deceive them by giving them leftovers in return for doing things like sweeping the toilet, cleaning the tables and cleaning the kitchen. The ages and genders of street children are used to work out their disappointment for people earning money. In this regard, one participant said the following:

I started begging since I couldn't carry things like a bag and a knot. I have even been begging by going on the street and staying in hotels. Yet they need services like sweeping toilets, tables, and kitchen houses. To your surprise, they provide leftovers supported by gender, age, and the friendliness of the streets.

Street children get money by helping visually impaired people on the streets. Children working with blind individuals provide for their daily consumption and help disadvantaged people. They realise needed assistance after assisting the blind on the street. In this regard, a key informant of women and children's affairs said the following:

Children living on the streets help visually impaired people by leading them on busy roads to beg for money. It is a business during which the children get and help those who are blinded because the blind individuals' income is begging. Although they have the assistance of somebody to guide them around, it creates a chance for street children to get money.

3.5. *Delinquent activities*

Street children are more likely to use deviant strategies. They perform criminal activities with gang groups, while street families provide sources of emotional and economic support for street children. Their association with gangs helps them share their experiences. The street children work with the gangs to get their daily consumption. In this regard, one participant said the following:

As is known, resources are limited on street, and some street children are sustained through collaborating with older gangs because street children don't seem to be alleged by people, especially strangers. I am going with them and tell them that I usually search for money in people's pockets at the bus station.

Street children are involved in criminal activities to get their basic daily needs. Indeed, no one protects them on the street, so they form street gangs to provide for their survival. Due to this, they need to survive with different types of doubts in the street. Consequently, the gang could be substituted for parents and family when ties between them are strong. In this regard, a key informant said the following:

Sometimes, street youths commit violence through support by mutual cooperation. Because nobody has been helping them, to do such illegal activities, they mainly concentrate on immediate consumption through sharing anything to keep up their lives. So, they get involved in criminal activities to survive. Besides, they got organised with older gangs that had created a decent relationship with security men.

4. Discussion

The results of the analysis imply that there are different problems for children living on the street in Gondar City Administration. In this regard, majority of the findings of scientific studies on street children conducted so far are both consistent and inconsistent. A study

conducted by Lacey (2007) argues that children living on the streets do not have the cash to access varied medications after they have become sick. However, this study is inconsistent since the findings of the study related to health issues include working conditions, living conditions, eating systems and the bureaucracy of assistance organisations. It implies that the formerly studied finding found that the problem which was confronted in street children was lack of money; yet this study has been antagonised by the health problem.

Moreover, they are continuously exposed to harsh weather conditions like intense sun, rain and cold. The study conducted by Wech (2019) indicated that there are street children who do not have shelter in the city and they sleep on the pipe and in abandoned buildings. Thus, it is consistent with this study because this finding shows that street children sleep on the corners of the roads everywhere and they are easily exposed to many problems; however, he did not mention the problems faced by them because of sleeping on the corners, like STDs like HIV/AIDS, within the city, as they sleep everywhere.

A study by Genemo (2018) argued that children living on the street who survive primarily turn up within the informal sector. They are engaged in various activities that principally take place within the informal sector to earn a living. Similarly, this study is consistent with the above arguments and it found that street children's survival strategies are based on making money on the street since they are not simply passively accepting their life. And, street children's livelihoods in this study are characterised by dependence on incomes usually earned from the informal sector. However, this research is different from the above-mentioned study's findings as street children work with blind people and they are inclined towards illegal actions due to the lack of assistance to survive.

4. Conclusion

From the findings of the study, the following conclusion is warranted: The street could be a source of financial gain for children who live on the street. Children living on the street face sexual abuse, health issues, social exclusion and violence from society and are involved in criminal activities. Moreover, they attempt to make money on the street or through petty trading to survive. They work in a variety of settings and activities to earn money. To survive on the street, they sell gum, stickers, wash cars, do porter work, beg and work with blind adults and delinquents.

A comprehensive approach focused on the transformation of outlooks at the societal level requires a comprehensive approach supported by an increase in the level of education and by national laws in the country as well. Therefore, the study recommends the active participation of decision-makers and academicians in drawing a roadmap of social intervention for addressing the problems that are facing street children.

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Data availability

The data analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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