

Initiation into street, challenges, means of survival and perceived strategies to alleviate its plights among street children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 2019

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Abstract

Background: The life and health of street children is becoming a global concern. There is a wide range of legislation relevant to street children. However, poor design and implementation of policies, strategies and traditional response by most governments in Africa has been subjugated. This made street children defenseless to harassments, child trafficking and health problems.

Methodology: A phenomenological study design was employed to explore difficulties of street life experience and perceived strategies to alleviate them. The study was conducted from January to March 2019. A Time-Space Sampling (TSS) was used to recruit participants. Pre-tested interview guide was used for data collection. Data was analyzed by using framework analysis software. A code book was developed under three themes (Initiation into street life, means of survival and perceived strategies) with different sub-themes and categories.

Results: A total of 103 street children age 10-18 years took part in the study. Complexity of push and pull factors pose to a risk of flee to the street. Street children face widespread challenges i.e. social network fragmentation, child trafficking, harassments and shortage of basic needs. Furthermore, absences of complete and representative data on street children as well as strategies are hardly available. Thus, street children have been considered as felon, out laws and having a mentality of committing crime by both law keeping bodies and the society. These in turn is affecting street children's' acceptance by their community and get legal protection under the law that made them more susceptible to harassments, denial of access to education and health services. To survive, they use different mechanisms including group formation - where, every individual within the group has his or her mandate for collective security, share available resources and vital information that might be useful for the group.

Conclusion: Lack of policies and strategies targeting street children has made them prone to many problems. Therefore, call for different stakeholders in supporting to design and implement clear, case based and contextualized strategic policies to address and prevent plights of street children. Intervention targeting positively perceived street children's proposed strategies has to be considered.

Background

The life and health of street children is becoming a global concern. United Nations Children's Fund has labeled street children as children in difficult circumstances, which represent a minority population that has been under-represented for too long in health research. This is a concern, because street children are at risk of carrying a greater disease burden. Further research on the health risks and health status of street children is also required, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, which carries the greatest disease burden [1].

Due to multiple factors that push children into street and multiple deprivations of street life experience, there is a wide range of legislation relevant to them. However, street children are seldom specifically mentioned, and their rights and issues are not specifically addressed [2].

The traditional response to street children by most governments in Africa and elsewhere has been repression. They do not offer any viable alternative to them. Politicians, policy makers, and urban planners seem to be helpless in their efforts to either resolve the problem or assist street children, and to date, failed to prescribe realistic and concrete solutions. It appears that governments pay lip-service to the idea of improving care for street children [3].

Studies indicate that the problems of street children have been ignored by both the government and the general public, causing a devastating impact on the development of African nations. Government policies that promote liberalization and free market economy are becoming factors contributing to persistent state of poverty, leaving children to be most affected. As a result, families are becoming major causes of problems of street children and schools are becoming centers of violence and crime pertaining to increasing numbers of children joining street life from time to time [3].

Poor design and implementation of policies and strategies make street children vulnerable to physical and sexual harassments and social isolation. Children who spend time on the street are at risk of aggression, hopelessness and drug use [4]. Though street children are hard to count, recent global estimates showed that nearly 150 million street children are living in the urban and semi-urban areas [5, 6]. The number of street children is increasing worldwide for various reasons [6]. Factors related to family loss due to HIV/AIDS, family disruption; social marginalization and poverty have been strongly associated with these marginalized groups of people [5, 6].

Sexual harassment among street children and outsiders were also found to be rampant [7, 8]. The study conducted in Addis Ababa shows that about 46.4% of street children had practiced sexual intercourse in early age. Of this, 32.2% were forcefully raped on the street, while 17.4% started to drive for social connection [7, 9]. Due to refusal of their sexual partners and/ or too young for negotiation of condom use, very few, 14.3% had used condom during sexual intercourse [10, 11].

Poor mental health is another major challenge of street children. Different studies show that street youth experience hopelessness, depressive symptoms, self-harm and suicidal attempt. Suicide attempts were reported across studies by 2% to 23% of street children [7, 10].

Children who live on the streets are difficult to define since they are not homogenous groups, and the way they use the streets varies widely. Rather than trying to arrive at watertight definitions, programmes should be based on a clear, contextualized analysis of the sub-groups of street children. The use of terms that label and stigmatize children should be avoided as much as possible in order to preserve their dignity and generate improved public as well as official's attitude towards them [2]. Programme and policy frameworks should be based on available and most realistic estimates of both on and off-street children. The phenomenon of street life varies with contexts, time and become more complex in many countries. This poses challenges for organizations to design and implement their programmes. Thus, street children sub-group experience is crucial for effective response by broad coalitions of governmental and non-governmental organizations [2].

Therefore, to develop clear and contextualized understanding of street life experiences and relationships among street children are a central point to recommend politicians and policy makers for individual or group based solution. Furthermore, addressing the plight of marginalised group of young people in need to attention and urgent interventions to improve their right, health and wellbeing is imperative. Thus, this qualitative nature of the inquiry, explored street children daily experiences and challenges of street life. In addition, the study aimed to assess the perceived strategies presented by the youth to alleviate and prevent the occurrence of plight against street children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Methods

Study design

A Phenomenological qualitative approach was underpinned to explore the deeper insights of street children's experiences of initiation into street, challenges, means of survival and perceived strategies to alleviate its difficulties.

Sample size

A Time-Space Sampling (TSS) strategy was used to recruit participants into the study, since street children are hard-to-reach population. First, locations were selected randomly from the sampling frame and participants were enrolled with equal probability method. All street children age ranged from 10 to 18 years old were eligible. The initial plan was to conduct 15 in-depth interviews and 5 FGDs. However, recruitment continued until data saturation was reached. Thus, a total of 26 in-depth interviews and 7 FGDs were conducted.

Data Collection

The study used a pre-tested interview guide to ensure that questions were unambiguous for gathering the experiences of street children i.e. initiation into street, challenges, means of survival and anticipated ways to alleviate its challenges. Two supervisors and six certified assessors of middle health professionals were recruited for data collection. All data collectors attended a two-day training programme in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The training focused on the purpose of the study, ethical principles, sampling, interview techniques, how to take field note and audio recording. Data collection was conducted from January to March 2019. Before conducting interview, data collectors explained the purpose of the study to study participants, and all participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential. Data collectors obtained written assent and consent from street children and guardians or non-governmental organizations. All in-depth interviews and FGDs were conducted in Amharic in private place for the purpose of concentration and privacy. FGD participants were categorized into two based on their biological sex; in order to let them disclose their physical and sexual experiences in detail and freely, since these are sensitive issues.

Data collection lasted for an average of 40-60 minutes. Interviews conducted by using tape recorder up to the level of information saturation- where it was determined by redundancy of information in such, adding more participants to the study did not result in obtaining additional perspectives of required information. Data quality was maintained by field supervisors through wrapped up of recorded data to ensure its completeness and clarity.

Data processing and analysis

The field note memos and audio-taped record were transcribed into Amharic and translated into English using a verbatim transcription by data collectors. The translated data were re-checked by the researcher by listening to audio tape records. Transcribed interviews were imported into framework analysis software for analysis. Data analyses were conducted in three stages: In the first stage, an analysis of framework was developed and the code book was organized under three broad themes (initiation into street life, means of survival and perceived strategies to alleviate its challenges), sub-themes and categories after reviewing participants' responses (Table 2). In the second stage, coding was conducted by the researchers through an iteration process and many more elements related to initiation into street life, challenges, means of survival and suggested strategies to alleviate plights of street life were added to framework analysis code book. In the third stage, final themes were named and defined. Finally, results were written by summarizing, interpreting and quoting.

Ethical approval

Ethical clearance was received from Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) review board. Further permissions were obtained from guardians or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are working with street children. Since, the study participants were younger, written assent was taken from study subjects. To compensate participants' time, the researchers provided 50 ETB (1.9 USD) per person. Participation in the study was voluntary and information collected from the study subjects was handled confidentiality.

Results

Demographic characteristics of study participants

A total of 103 (n= 65 male and n= 38 female) of street children (age 10-18 years) took part in the study. A total of 29 (n= 15 male and n=11 female) were interviewed and 77 (n= 50 male and n= 27 female) participated in (FGDs). Of the 103 participants, 38 had never been to school and 60 (58%) of the total were dropped their education whereas, 5 (5%) were into schooling through in and off fashion. Of the total, 40 (39%) of participants were informally "married" to one another to cope the challenges of street life. Thirty-three participants were newly joined to street, while 16 of participants were lived for more than 5 years.

Table: 1, Demographic characteristic of street children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 2019.

Used research tools FGDs	No of participants	Sex		Educational background			Years lived on-street				Schooling Status		Marital status	
		Male	Female	Had never been to school	Primary (1 to 6)	Junior 2ry education (7 & 8)	Newly joined	One year	2-5 yrs	5+ yrs	In	drop	Single	Informally married
Male FGDs														
FGD1	9	9	-	4	3	2	5	2	1	1	-	9	5	4
FGD2	11	11	-	6	4	1	4	5	2	-	1	10	7	4
FGD3	8	8	-	3	5	-	2	3	3	-	-	8	6	2
FGD4	12	12	-	5	6	1	3	6	1	2	1	11	7	5
FGD5	10	10	-	4	5	1	3	4	2	1	-	10	6	4
Female FGDs														
FGD6	8	-	8	5	-	4	3	2	2	1	-	8	5	3
FGD7	10	-	10	6	-	2	4	4	1	1	-	10	6	4
FGD8	9	-	9	6	-	3	3	2	1	3	1	8	6	3
Total	77	50	27	39	5	24	27	28	13	9	-	74	48	29
In-depth interviews														
	26	15	11	15	9	2	6	5	8	7	2	24	15	11
Total	103	65	38	54	14	26	33	33	21	16	5	98	63	40

FGD n= 77 (n= 50 males and n=27 females), In-depth interviews n= 26 (n= 15 males and n= 11 females).

Initiation, challenges, means of survival and perceived strategies to alleviate plight of street life

The framework analysis result findings of both in-depth interviews and FGDs of street children are presented in the table below.

Table: 2, Major thematic areas, sub- themes and categories of in-depth interviews and FGDs of street children in Ethiopia, 2019.

Major thematic areas	Sub-themes and Categories
Theme 1: Initiation into street life	1.1. Pushing factors into street life 1.2. Challenges of living on the street 1.2.1 Lack of social ties and networks 1.2.2 Critical shortage of basic needs 1.2.3 Physical, sexual and verbal harassments 1.2.4 Child trafficking 1.2.5 Available government programs and initiatives to halt the plights
Theme 2: Means of survival and coping mechanisms	2.1. Formation of group life versus collective security 2.1.1. Inter or intra group conflict of interest 2.2 Sharing available resources and vital information 2.2.1 Sex as a means of survival
Theme 3: Street children's perceived strategies of safety and security	3.1. Governmental and non-governmental structure to regulate and protect street children 3.1.1 Separate shelter to spend over the night 3.1.2 Regular health education, health services and life coaching 3.1.3 Controlling body to ensure the safety of street children 3.1.4 Creation of income generating activities for self-help 3.2 Community strengthening as a preventive strategy 3.2.1 Reintegration with families or extended relatives

Theme 1: Initiation into street life

Initiation into street life might be either joining alone or as group. When one joins a street life, he/she will be introduced to the hierarchy of group structure, line of command, power, sex, loyalty, role and responsibilities of the group, since it is the begging of a new life with strangers.

Five of the 7 FGDs discussants reported rather than joining street life as a single person, joining by a group has a great advantage. When you join the street by group, you do not have the problem of socialization with others. You might not face the harassment of first day arrival by other groups or individuals. *“Especially, if you have one or more experienced street children, you will get the information*

how to live on street, how to search for basic needs and safety and security, that is the great group who can survive and protect themselves from any type of harassments' (FGD).

Discussants (5 of 7 FGDs) reported when you flee to street, you don't have anybody who looks after you. You are the one who run for the basic needs like food, shelter and clothing. With new environment, coping challenges of basic needs shortage (food, shelter and cloth) is too difficult. In addition, you are stranger for the area and struggling to live with strangers you might get on street. Participants reported ***"If you joined street life as a single person, your fate is on the hand of strangers you met on street. They have a power over your body and can do what they like. On the first day arrival, you don't know the people whom with you are having sleeping quarter. Most of the time, group sex is common for the new comers. If you reject their idea, you will have beaten up and chased away from that particular place. Thus, the first day of arrival to a particular street is the most difficult one as to our experiences"*** (FGD).

Case study and narrative from interviewees

The fourteen-year street boy interviewee said that he arrived at Addis Ababa around bus station at 6:00 PM. He was looking for shelter and something to eat, while he was looking for shelter the time came to 8:00PM. He said one of street boy told him to sleep with over the night. When he heard this, he was very happy. He gave me bread and took him to the railway building where he has been sleeping. He shared him night cloth and they slept together. ***"Just after an hour, he forced me to have anal sex. I swear to St. merry, he had anal sex with me and continued it over the night. Starting form that day, I lost my confidence to my sexual identity. I was thinking about that from time to time. Really, the first day of joining street life was the most challenge one for me. I hope every new comer experienced this ugly life"*** (interviewee 7).

Concurrently, seven interviewees shared the same experiences.

Case study and narrative from interviewees

A female interviewee pointed that her mother was late and she is the only child they have. Since the death of her mother, her father drank alcohol every day. Later on, her father forced her to have sex. Always he drank alcohol and back to home at night and enforced to have sex with her. ***"Hmmm...forcefully, he had sex with me. This situation left me to psychological trauma. One day, I decided to escape from home to join street life and I fled to street.*** On her first day arrival of Addis Ababa Street, she met one older street boy. He greeted and talked to her. He said, I think you seems new comer to this area and she said yes. He requested her to stay with him and she said where? He said I am street boy and living here under railway building. ***"I said alright, but now I am very hungry, would you give me something to eat? He run away and brought me bread. Then, I decided to be with him. We slept together and he shared me his night cloth and we enjoyed sex over the night. Now, I have been two years on the street. Still, he is my informal husband. To survive, sometimes I am practicing commercial sex with strangers and have a paid sex"***. On the next day, she will back to her informal husband and buy basic needs to share with him. When she had a paid sex they were happy and enjoy their time. Their stomachs become full and ***thought to enjoy***. Then they bought khat and enjoy their day by chewing over the day. ***"Know, I felt the ideal freedom, even though I am selling my flesh to survive and facing many derogatory and abusive words. Even if I am selling my flesh***

to survive, I am psychologically free compared to with the previous time that I faced at home. Imagine, having sex with your father. Hmm.....in my life, I don't forget its psychological pain forever" (interviewee 17). Similarly, two female interviewees reported the same tragedies (interviewees 19, 26).

Reportedly (5 of the 7 FGDs) said getting friends on street seems a great opportunity on first day of arrival. But it has its own consequences, for the newly arrived one. *When you newly joined the street, you meet with the group of street children and they treat you with available basic needs. They gave you bread, night cloth and sleeping quarter which is a great opportunity for new comers. But later on, you might be facing many challenges. Over the night, they enforce to have sex whether anal or vaginal. You know first you will be treated well and later face the hideous life that you couldn't forget in your life" (FGD).*

Twenty-five of the 26 interviewees and 3 of 7 FGDs pointed male and female have the same sleeping quarters, which is the opportunity for group sex. The new arrivals on the particular streets used as sex objectives by older boys as well by guardians. Participants pointed, *"Any sexual relations i.e., group sex, oral, anal and vaginal sex will happen to you. Mostly, such sexual relationships are used as a defense for the new comers. In the case of refusal such sexual advances, the new comers are beaten up and chased away from that area" (interviewees).*

Male discussants (4 of 7) reported, to adapt new socialization and survive street life, you should accept what your seniors said whether it harm you or not. On the first day of arrival you should welcome whether sex, physical or verbal harassment. *"The psychological trauma of post-anal penetration is the most painful one. You may think again and again about the situation. Even you may face mental health problems like hopelessness, depressive symptoms, self-harm, and in the worst circumstances up to suicidal attempt. To be out of this depression, you might be start drugs and get relief of the psychological pain. Gradually, you might be adopting the pain of penetration and form harmonized relation with friends on street. The situation is re-cycling. After you become senior on the street, you may do the same thing on the new arrivals and can't be out of this circuit" (FGD).*

Sub-theme 1.1: Pushing factors into street life

Participants revealed the complexity of push and pull factors that pose a risk of flee to the street. Discussants reported poverty, divorce, separation of parents, death of one or both parents, economic decline, single-parent households, child abuse, neglect, alcohol abuse, school dropout, family size and traditional values were the top factors to flee to street. Nineteen interviewees revealed that death of the family, destruction of extended relatives relation and poverty are the most common factors to flee to street. Due to the above factors, millions of children flee to street and being highly vulnerable to child trafficking, physical and sexual harassments.

Sub-theme 1.2: Challenges of living on the street

Discussants reported when you face any of pushing and/or pulling factors, you can't expect good situation to live with your family. The only chance is escaping to the street to feel the ideal of freedom.

The challenges of being street child separately asked the first day joining street challenges and throughout the street life. Discussants noted, both of the conditions (first day exposure and throughout street life) have their own challenges. ***“ You might be facing many challenges on the day of arrival to a particular street as well throughout your life span of street. The only chance, you have will be living with the sorest condition of street life that you might be face” (interviewees).***

Reportedly, absence of clear and contextualized strategies and policies as well as little attention of government to address and prevent the occurrence of plight against street children are making us highly vulnerable to any kind of harassments and problem of human basic needs (FGD).

Category 1.2.1: Lack of social ties and networks

Five of the 7 FGDs discussants reported starting from the day of flee from home, street children lost social ties and networks with their families and communities where they born. They join an environment where devoid of affection, love, care and comfort. ***“ We are considering ourselves as thrown-away children, where anybody abuse, harass and in extreme cases murder you. We are living in ignored world by our families and communities. We are the most deprived people with no access to family love, care and affection. Nobody looks after you. You don’t have any one to protect you. For whom do you cry?” (FGD).***

Twenty- three interviews pointed street children were found instable to stay in a specific place for a longer period. Due to this, lack proper social ties and networks common. ***“ We are alone (no father or mother) who care for you. If you try to have healthy social networks with the community, the entire of the society hate you, due to our dirty living style”, (interviewees).*** They said street children are using different substances to temporarily mask their problems and relived from its pain. Thus, they are more experienced with different substances. ***“You feel hopelessness, your current and future life is dark. We cry out for help but from where? There is no one in our side. At times we feel lonely; we suffer from lack of sleep, anxiety, isolation and face mood depression. To avoid such conditions, we use local alcohol, glue, hashish and Khat” (FGD).***

Category 1.2.2: Critical shortage of daily basic needs

Twenty-one interviewees and 3 of 7 FGDs discussants reported street children are young people who are living in ignored tragedy with the shortage of basic needs. As one human being, street children need basic needs from their biological families to have healthy life, but in our case, we are responsible to look for. ***“ At this age, we are conciliating our schooling and forced to engaging our-selves in begging, collecting materials from the garbage. You are the only one who acts as father or mother to be responsible for the daily basic needs. Furthermore, we are welcoming any type of violence (physical, verbal and sexual) either from the community or among ourselves, while looking for basic needs (FGD).*** All discussants and (23 of 26, 88% interviewees) agreed the most challenge of living on street is lack of basic needs. ***“ The experience of street life appeared harder than the most you expected (interviewees).***

Sub- theme 1.2.3: Physical, sexual and verbal harassments

Five FGDs discussants and 19 of 26 interviewees reported street children are living in the world, where they are forced for early sexual initiation, multiple sexual partners, group sex, either of homo or heterosexual intercourses. This situation exposes them for health problems i.e. HIV/STIs, hepatitis, its psychological trauma and other health related problems. Most of street children imitate early sexual intercourse before flee to street, where there is abusive families or extended families force them and be a main reason to flee. Others forced to have sex either anal or vaginal on the first day of arrival of street or in their life span of street. New arrivals are prone to sexual abuse and exploitation by older street boys, group of street children or watchmen to secure protection in advance. In the case of refusal, they have beaten up and chased away. Participants pointed "***While living on the street, both male and female faces similar physical and sexual violence. Either of male or female have the fate of sexual harassment and which is the worst one in the first day of initiation into street life. The other most intricacy of the first day arrival, street children were facing either anal or vaginal sex with the street boy or guardians. Both male and female will face this ugly life for the purpose of future protection. You will stay in a same sleeping quarter (under railway building, veranda etc...), where forced for anal and vaginal penetration. Such unwilling sexual intercourses are rampant among us or watchmen. Most of male participants have reported as post-anal penetration painful psychological trauma is common. When you become experienced, you can do the same thing to the new comers, if you don't afraid of your God***" (FGD).

Anybody can beat you if you resist any violence. Due to this, engaging in unprotected sex with strangers is common, where condom use is vested under the interest of strangers. If he or she refused condom use, we have forced to engage in unprotected sex. Our intention is on the money rather than protected or unprotected sex. Furthermore, we are living in ignored world, where there is no any policy that protect street child from any harassments. Due to this, physical and sexual violence including beating, rape, group and forced sex are common on the streets (Interviewees).

Category 1.2.4: Child trafficking

Even though description of the root causes for child trafficking is too difficult, millions of street children have been experiencing it at least once in their life time. Street children are vulnerable to child trafficking due to poverty, domestic violence, family ignorance and illiteracy. Five of FGDs discussants reported street child trafficking has occurred within the city or out of the city for child labor or sex. People need you for cheap uncompensated labor force. "***We are highly vulnerable for trafficking. The trafficking encompasses within the city (Addis Ababa) or other cities/towns where cheap labor force or sexual exploitation are common*** (FGD).

Two of the 26 interviews reported street children have limited education or illiteracy and poor socio-cultural factors which made them vulnerable to trafficking. A fifteen-year boy interviewee reported "***Me and my friend came from Harargeh (east part of the country). One day, two females came and have taken us to their home. We arrived home and immediately they offer us to shower and clothes to change. Then, they forced us to have sex. I have been there for three days and run away from there. But my friend is still with them***" (interviewees). Similarly, interviewees (11/26) shared the same tragedies (interviewees).

Category 1.2.5: Available government programs and initiatives to halt the plights of street children

African governments are incapacitated and slow to address the difficulties of street children. Today governments are increasingly taking ruthless and crooked steps to support and solve problems of street children. Such uncoordinated traditional response by most of African governments and elsewhere has been lagging to solve problems of street children.

Even though there are policies and strategies targeting women and children, complete and representative data on street children as well as strategies particular to street children are hardly available. Thus, street children have been considered as felon, out laws and having a mentality of committing crime by both law keeping bodies as well as the society. This in turn is affecting street children to be accepted by their community and get the legal protection under the law.

Discussants pointed, ***“We are human beings with no legal protection and forgotten groups by the government. The police always harass, beat and jail us without any evidence because they don’t think of us as a normal person with legal rights. If someone among us goes to prison with small crime or just with suspicion, it will be difficult to get someone to bell him out. No one cares or trusts us. We stay in prison for weeks or months whether we do crime or not. We are just people with no legal protection”*** (FGD).

Most of interviewees (19 of the 26) reported, ***“Government doesn’t know us. We hear things over media about street children but none have the intention of doing practical things on street children. They just talk what they feel and for the sake of their job; they don’t even know a bit about street life. You know it from their discussion. On the other hand, police is our enemy. If something happens, we are their first option and victims of their ruthless beating. They beat us like dogs. We are just bunch of criminals in their eyes; who happened to be out laws and just hate being legal. How can we think that the government knows us, while their people treat us like animals? It’s ridiculous! The society is better. At least, we hustle and make our daily living because they let us. There are good people who help and provide us with different things”*** (Interviewees).

Most of discussants (5 of the 7 FGDs) reported absence of clear and contextualized strategies and policies as well as little attention of government to address and prevent the occurrence of difficulties of street children are making them more and more vulnerable to harassments, denial of access to education and health services.

Theme 2: Means of survival and coping mechanisms

Pushing and pulling factors like poverty, death of family and social exclusion forcing more children to work on the street and enabling them to take an active role in informal work to sustain the street life. Six of FGDs discussants and 17 of 26 interviewees reported living in street environment places them at special risks of harassment, violence and aggressive behavior that put them under negative influences. To resist such actions, most of street children form small groups to counteract the negative influences. They are extremely aware of the problematic and often dangerous environment in which they reside, they tend

to be strict in their practices, encouraging children to respect to participate in collective security. They have obsessive concern about troubles and remind their group members to be lookout for situations that might lead to conflict. New comers should have taken advice at the first time to join the group.

Sub-theme 2.1: Formation of group life and collective security

Six of focus group discussants and (16 of 26, 62%) of interviewees pointed physical and sexual exploitation are common harassment on the street. To cope with such a harsh lifestyle, street children form a group which enable them mutual support and protection with a strong sense of companionship within the group. They have their own group norm with a code of the streets.

Street children are governing interpersonal behavior and violence through, informal rules. The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by the street-oriented ways. Everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. ***“Street world is characterized by miserable deprivation, subjected to physical, verbal and sexual abuse, and victims of violence. We are forming a group and try to resist any violence over the night in the form of group security. We have a group norm which leaded by one of brilliant and older one. Through forming group security, we protect ourselves from violence and harassments. Within the group, there is sometimes intrapersonal violence, most likely by the older street children”*** (FGD).

Category 2.1.1: Inter or intra group conflict of interest

Discussants 5 of the 7 FGD participants said most of the time, the group might be dysfunction and disperse its members. Many things are uncertain about how long we are living and we believe we may die due to violence among ourselves or by violent strangers at any time. They accept this fate and living on the border. Anybody can intimidate you; we try to counteract of the intimidation. During this time, you don't know what will happen on you. ***We discourage the violence as a primary solution of resolving disputes and encourage the group members to accept nonviolence behavior. But, if the negotiation goes down, every group member runs for self-defense. Many of us much more concerned about the threat of our norms. If somebody, threat the norm fighting within the group is common. Even though the nonviolent orientation rarely overcomes the impulse to strike back in an encounter, it may lead to certain confusion and lead to a profound violence among the group. Hence, the member of the group strives to go for bad action against each other*** (FGD).

Female discussants (2/7 FGD) reported females are mimicking the male and try to have their own version of manhood. ***“When you act as manhood, you get respect and will be recognized by the group members. We try to achieve this in the ways that established by the boys and doing what the male street child do i.e. using abusive language and to be recognized person to actively participate in resolving disputes within the group or between the groups”*** (FGD).

Five of the 7 FGDs discussants pointed conflict among female street children exists due to the assessment of beauty girl within the group i.e. which girl in a group is the most beauty and competition over boyfriends within the group or from other groups. ***“A main cause of conflict within the group is he says, she says roomer. Usually one girl might be said something negative about somebody in a group, behind that person. The negative say will back to the person talked about. In such essence this might be led to group gossiping in which it can be the main reason for the group violence”*** (FGD).

Almost all of FGD discussants reported factors that increase risk of group violence behavior are a complex interaction or combination of factors leads to an increased risk of violent behavior. The factors like previous aggressive behavior, being victim of physical or sexual abuse, competition for the cute girl, drug use and he/she said roomer about somebody within or between the group/s are the most leading factors of violence within or between the groups. Due to this, the group member will be dispersed and look for another group to join.

Sub-theme 2.2: .Sharing available resources and vital information

All of FGDs respondents noted everybody within the group has his/her responsibility to look for daily basic needs. Every individual within the group has his or her mandate. Some of the individuals participate in manual work, scavenging through garbage, begging whereas, female might be taking the responsibility to act as sex worker and bring the money for the group. ***“Sharing resources and information is our fundamental activity. We have our own subculture which gave us group identity. The group has its own rule to welcome newcomers to the group with the mandate of orienting survival skills and socializing the new comers to the group. We offer information for the new comers. New arrivals advised means of survival and as streets are full of drugs and violence. By any means, the group develop their own means of survive and self-support”*** (FGD).

The 17 of 26, (65%) of interviewees pointed ***to survive this harsh world, we are engaging ourselves in all kind of activities that bring money. At this age, we are engaging ourselves in shining of shoes, pushing trucks and gathering and carrying it to the dumpsite, sell rubber bags at the market, scavenging garbage and engaging in paid sex. To survive on street, you engage yourself in any type of activities”*** (Interviewees).

Category 2.2.1 Sex as a means of Survival

All FGDs discussants and 22 of the 26 interviewees' respondents pointed most of street children turn to prostitution in order to survive. Both of male and female are highly at risk of participating unwillingness sex to survive. Where, unprotected sex with strangers made them vulnerable to health problems and early unwanted pregnancies. ***“To survive, we engage our selves in prostitution. Prostitution is the main income generating activity for our informal wife. If you see the streets over the night, it was congregated with many young women. Most of them are our informal wife acting as prostitution ladies and seeking for paid sex. When she back to act as a wife, we share the money and expense for our basic needs. If she***

has informal husband within the group, her husband is the one who share the money with her. If the group face lack of daily basic needs, her husband is responsible to buy food for that day (FGDs).

Homo sexual activities are common among boys. If survival is very tense, boys forced to have paid sex. Sometimes boys engage themselves in homo sexual intercourse, due to immediate need of basic needs. ***“With outsiders homo-sexual is common, if other means of survival are unsuccessful. Our intention is on the money rather than protected or unprotected homo sexual activities. But, psychological pain of post anal sex was the most challenging one to categorize your sexual identity” (Interviewees).***

Theme 3: Street children’s perceived strategies of safety and security

By most of governments in Africa and elsewhere the response to street children problems has been subjugated. Politicians, policy makers, and urban planners seem to be helpless in their efforts to either resolve the problem or assist street children. They do not offer any viable alternative and failed to set down realistic and concrete solutions). This qualitative inquiry explored street children perceived strategies that help to develop clear and contextualized understanding of street life and addressing the plight of this marginalised group in need to attention and to recommend policy makers and urban planners for urgent interventions to alleviate and prevent the occurrence of plights against street children.

Twenty-two of 26 interviewees and 3/7 FGD reported street children are confronting by a large number of problems. Growing up in a dangerous environment area incur them risky people. They are living in the world where their rights are always compromised. ***“ We haven’t access to health, education and daily basic needs that are fundamental for human beings” (Interviewees).***

All of FGDs and (25 of the 26, 96%) of interviewees reported the problem of street children is depending on individual situations. In fact, their problem is sometimes individualized, depending on personal history that made him/her flee to street and personal status while living on street. ***“ Hence, the care of street children must be effective through addressing personal situation through categorizing similar problems and addressing the categorized problems holistically. To do this, studying child profile and categorizing similar profiles and attempting to solve strategically is imperative. To do this, better understanding of children living and growing up on the streets is essential. In such ways, key institutions or individuals understand the structural causes of our situations and easily mitigate our problems case by case” (FGD***

Sub-theme 3.1: Governmental and non-governmental structure to regulate and protect street children

Category 3.1.1: Separate shelter to spend over the night

Six of the 7 FGD discussants reported whatever the reason, being a street child means going hungry, sleeping in insalubrious places, facing violence and sometimes becoming an expiatory victim. Street environment offer no protection to street children from any type of harassments and suffer of cold and rain since there is no safe sleeping quarter. The mainstreams of street children are living in conditions of

severe deprivation and unsafe environment which place them at all kinds of health risks. The majority of focus group discussants reported “ ***We are living in harsh environment and with no shelter, where male and female share the same sleeping quarters. This situation amplifies sexual violence among us and community. We are looking for help for the provision of separate and safe night shelter***” (FGD).

Twenty-three of the 26 interviewees pointed lack of night shelter on the street is providing an enabling environment for prostitutes, where older street child, night guardians/watchmen forcibly engage in unprotected sex. “ ***We are begging for multi-cultural approach practices that might be amenable for the provision of night shelter for us. It benefits potentially to reduce the risk of harassments, cold and rain that we are suffering from***”.

Category 3.1.2: Regular health education, access to health services and life coaching

Nineteen of 26 interviewees reported regular health education, access to health services and life coaching are necessary to make street children healthy, educated and happy living. The health of street children is strongly compromised from day to day. “ ***We Street children do not have access to sanitary facilities that made us often dirty and infested with fleas. Due to lack of hygiene, we are exposed to different diseases*** (Interviewees).

Five of the 7 FGD and (21 of 26, 81%) of interviewees pointed poor living styles have negative impact not only on their physical and psychological development, but also their cultural and economic development. “ ***We street children, are looking for any organizations or individuals, who make our education reality and who can help us to access health services and able to coach our living styles. If we are aware of the ways of infection transmissions, we recognize them and protect ourselves in our life span of streets***” (FGD).

Category 3.1.3: Controlling body to ensure safety and security of street children

Six of the 7 FGDs and (24 of the 26, 92%) participants highlighted since street children are marginalized group of young peoples, they are often victims of discrimination and face sexual and physical violence on a daily basis fashion. Community members have prejudices that stigmatize them as street children. Consequently, they are facing dangerous of street life.

“ ***Nobody stand behind us to look after or protect our rights. Anybody came and abuse you physically or sexually. If it is possible, we are requesting for controlling body that can ensure our safety here on streets. Generally, we are requesting government or non-government organization, for protection services of street child. We are looking for any organizations or individuals who can ensure our right and possibly reduce our vulnerability level and able to live in the freedom***” (Interviewees and FGD).

Category 3.1.4: Creation of income generating activities (IGAs) for self-help

The majority (interviewees n=19) and all FGDs of study participants were highly interested to the IGAs for self-help. Discussants reported street children working conditions are more hazardous and less likely to be protected by the employment legislation, since we are participating in informal sectors of activities.

Twenty-four of the 26, 92% of interviewees reported ***“We are looking for local authorities or international organizations support to establish micro-enterprise to able us self-help, where the government ensure safety working environment with protected employment legislations. Every day, we participate in informal sector activities where the employer abuse you and even paid uncompensated payment and sometimes refuse to reimburse of the activities you have did”***. Six of the seven FGD discussants reported; to ensure self-help of street children, creating small micro-enterprises need to be given access to capital finance operations and upgrading of their equipment by the government to generate self help by local and international actors.

Sub-theme 3.2: Community strengthening as preventative strategy

Almost all (24 of the 26, 92%) of interviewees preferred preventive strategies within the community in advance prior to flee. Preventive strategies within the community are a main concern to minimize the magnitude of street children on the street. They noted preventive strategies can address the main reason of flee from home before being a reason of flee. ***“For our most of street children, the main reasons of flee to street are material and financial problems, abusive family like step mother or father, poverty and inability to schooling are the factors lie behind the departure of us to street (interviewees).***

Six of FGDs said if the government body and community members detect their problems timely and monitor through social welfare within the community, they might not be on street today. Reported they need funded and fully mainstreamed social welfare programmes in the community, who can early detect the vulnerable child and able to take measurements. ***You know, if there are such services for vulnerable children in the community, it is possible to address the root cause and our complex challenges that made us street boy or girl. Even, this can be addressed by the religious and community leaders where they can do reality of our schooling materials and advising our abusive families to not do abusive actions”*** (FGD). Similarly, most (23 of the 26, 88%) of interviewees were perceived preventive strategy as a main solution.

Case study and narrative from interviewees

Fourteen-year old female interviewee reported ***“My father was late. After a year, my mother married another person. My step father made me always farming and denied me to schooling. With this hard work, nobody care about me. That is why, I joined street life. Thus, if the community members responsibly, advocate the right of vulnerable child and mobilize the community for our rights and schooling materials as well as encouraging us to speak out our problems in the community, definitely they can prevent the suffer we are facing here on street (interviewee 25).*** Most (21 of the 26, 81%) of interviewees and four of focus group discussants reported the same tragedy in their life experiences.

Category 3.2.1: Reintegration with families or extended relatives

Eighteen of 26, 69% interviewees and (4 of the 7 FGDs) of discussants were denied the value of reintegration. They said returning back to the abusive families is not good option. They pointed reunite with the families where you are vulnerable and victim for neglect, abusive domestic violence either by step

mother or father, hard work and shortage of food is not a good option. Among the total participants only (8 of 26, 31%) (Male n=5 and female n=3) interviewees and (2 of the 7) focus group participants agreed positively the value of reintegration. Even though they have agreed on the reintegration with the families or extended families, they highlighted that it should be with the legal background and the families should agree to nonviolent behavior and promise to schooling with the presence of witness. ***“ Ideally, reintegration is a good solution. However, if your families do the same thing as previous reasons of flee, it hasn't sense. Due to this, during reintegration, our families should promise us nonviolence behavior and provision of schooling materials as well enough food”.***

Discussion

This study provided an occasion to gaze at initiation into street life, challenges, means of survival and perceived strategies' to alleviate plights of street life in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The study revealed that the complexity of push and pull factors that pose a risk of flee to the street. Of these factors participants reported poverty, divorce, separation of parents, death of one or both parents, economic decline, single-parent households, child abuse; neglect, alcohol abuse, school dropout, family size and traditional values were the top factors. Similarly, the study conducted in Ethiopia and Sudan shows that prior hardships i.e. death of family, war, destruction of extended relative relationship, denied to basic needs, sexual and physical harassments are imminent factors influencing children into street life [7, 12].

The report of global child protection services shows that difference and diversity are poorly tolerated and leading to neglect and abandonment of children in many cultures. Existing social norms and cultural attitudes towards children often allow abuses of children's right to care and protection. Furthermore, conflict, disasters, food insecurity do to climate change, social exclusion, violence, lack of access to education, exploitative and hazardous child work, migration and urbanization are major predisposing factors to initiation of street life [2].

It revealed that both of first days exposure to street life and throughout the span of street life has its own challenges. They are facing the challenges of critical lack of basic needs, shelter and any type of harassments i.e. verbal, physical or sexual abuse. Sexual relations i.e. group sex, oral, anal and vaginal sex are common harassments among street children or with the community. Mostly, such sexual relationships are used as a defense for the new comers and means of survivals. In the case of refusal of such sexual advances, the new comers are beaten up and chased away from that area. This study finding is consistent with the study conducted in Malawi and Ethiopia [6, 7]. This finding shows that social network fragmentations from biological families and communities and critical shortage of daily basic needs, sexual harassment where both male and female faces similar sexual violence and child trafficking are identified as the main challenges of street children. In line to this finding, the study conducted in Kenya and Ethiopia shows street children are facing similar tragedies [7, 13].

This study revealed, street children are living in the world where they are facing day to day sexual, verbal and physical harassments. Due to this, they are forced for early sexual initiation, multiple sexual partners, group sex i.e. homo or heterosexual that leads to early pregnancy, health problems and psychological trauma. Particularly, new arrivals are prone to sexual abuse and exploitation by older street boys, group of street children or watchmen to secure their protection in advance. Thus, both male and female street children are highly at risk of sexual violence. Concurrently, the study conducted in Ethiopia shows that about 27.5% of street children practiced sexual intercourse in their life time, of which 44.6% and 75% had begun sexual intercourse before the age of fifteen and had had multiple sexual partners, respectively [8].

This study shows that both forced and unprotected sexes were common among street children due to low negotiation capacity of condom use and influences from sexual partners. Willingness for rampant sexual activities serves them as a main source of income to quench their immediate need of food and shelter; their intention is just getting money than worrying for protected or unprotected sex. Similar study conducted in Ethiopia shows that about 32.3% were raped forcefully, 49.7% had conducted survival sex, while 14% of street children had used condom [8, 11].

This study revealed that street child trafficking is a prominent challenge that occurs either within or out of city for uncompensated child labor or sex. Limited education or illiteracy and poor socio-cultural background are major factors for vulnerability of child trafficking. Report from street children indicates that house detention and enforced sex with strangers or free exploitation of labor are usually their fate after trafficking. Concomitantly, the report of international programme on the elimination of child labor shows that in Kathmandu, ambitious lies and fake promises to either the children or their parents are ways of winning their heart for trafficking. As a result, at least fourteen street children were forced to child trafficking for the purpose of domestic child labour, where their working conditions at the first distention was unsafe both psychologically and physically. The majority of them did not get enough food or decent place to sleep and paid uncompensated payment [14].

The finding shows that street children organize in small groups in order to endure the hostility of street life through socialization, sharing vital information and resources for survival- where every individual within the group has his or her mandate. Sharing tasks within a group is mandatory where some participate in manual work, scavenging through garbage as well as begging. Whereas, females might be taking the responsibility of having commercial sex and give that money to the group because sharing resources and information is fundamental in their subculture. Alongside of this finding, the study conducted in Tanzania shows that street children have high sexual risk taking intentions to survive [15]. Additionally, study from Bangladesh shows that the survival means of street children found to be quite atypical- where they would involve in unpaid manual, non-domestic works in different marginal occupations (e.g. begging, street vending, remnants and edibles picking from dustbins, prostitution, selling flowers on the roads to the passerby etc.). They live their life with daily earned money, food from street food vendors by stealing or begging from hotels or restaurants [9, 10].

This study shows that street children perceived positively the value of separate shelter, creating income generating activities, regular health education and life coaching, controlling body for safety and right and prevention strategies within the community are perceived strategies to solve the street children challenges. Similarly, most of studies recommend similar strategies to alleviate the challenges of street children [11, 13, 16]. Whereas, this finding revealed that some of study participants were denied the value of reintegration strategy. In contrary of this, dozens of researchers are recommended the reintegration strategy as a possible solution [8, 17, 18].

Conclusion

The study has explored the street children experiences of initiation into street life, challenges, and means of survival as well as perceived strategies to alleviate the street life difficulties. Participants revealed the complexity of push and pull factors pretense the risk of flee to street. They are facing challenges of social networking fragmentations, child trafficking, sexual and physical harassments and critical shortage of daily basic needs. As a means of survival, street children are using available opportunities through forming small groups- where, every individual within each group has his/her mandate for collective security, sharing available resources and vital information that might be useful. Factors i.e. previous aggressive behavior, being victim of physical or sexual, competition of getting the cute girl and drug use behaviors are the main cause of conflict within or among groups. Creation of income generating activities, shelter, pro-assessing and supporting vulnerable child, controlling body for safety and security, regular health education, access to health services and life coaching are positively perceived strategies to alleviate the difficulties of street life. However, most of study participants were denied the value of reintegration strategy. Even though, few participants have agreed to reintegration with their families, preconditions were put on enforcing legal background to nonviolent behavior of families as well as promise to allow schooling.

Recommendations

Call for different stakeholders in supporting to design and implement sub-group case based clear and contextualized strategies and policies to address and prevent the occurrence of plight against street children. Addressing the plight of marginalised group of young people in need to attention and urgent interventions to improve their right, health and wellbeing should be considered. Risk reduction programmes targeting street children should be launched through multi-cultural perspectives and involving government, nongovernment organizations, community and parent engagements. Particularly, focusing on positively perceived proposed strategies i.e. IGAs, shelter, assessing and supporting vulnerable child in community, safety and security controlling body, regular health education, access to health services and life coaching should be taken in to consideration.

Limitations Of The Study

This study employed only street children-where organizations or guardians who are working with this marginalized people were not considered.

Abbreviations

ETB: Ethiopian Birr, EPHI: Ethiopian Public Health Institute, FGD: Focus Group Discussion, IGA: Income Generating Activities NGO: Non Governmental Organization, OVC: Orphan and Vulnerable Children

Declarations

Availability of data and materials

The materials and data shall be obtained upon request to the author

Author contribution

Ayana C. was the only person who conducted this research from inception of idea to the design and analysis of the study and manuscript preparation.

Ethics approval of assent and consent to participate

Ethical clearance was received from Ethiopian Public Health Institute. A formal letter was written to all concerned authorities and permission was secured at all levels. Since the study participants were younger, written assent was taken from study subjects and consent was taken from guardians or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are working with. To compensate participants' time, the researchers provided 50 ETB (1.9 USD) per person.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Competing interests

The author declare that he has no competing interests

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