

Why Children Leave their Homes for the Streets? The Case of Harare

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Abstract- This study is part of a broad research that sought to establish the counseling needs of adolescent street kids and in Harare Central Business District. This paper looks at the major causes that lead to children leaving their homes for the streets. A representative sample was drawn which comprised of 40 street kids who were receiving some assistance from four non-governmental organizations and 8 officials from the organizations. A qualitative descriptive survey was used to guide the methodology. Data was collected using questionnaires and structured interviews for officials and the street kids respectively. Qualitative data with descriptive statistics was used in the presentation and analysis of data. The results showed that children were forced into the streets by factors that included social factors connected with the breakdown of the family structure, economic factors that included poverty and unemployment. The study recommended that non-governmental organizations must get to the root cause of the problem instead of just treating the symptoms of the problem as what is currently happening. It was also recommended that there was need for the organizations to involve the street children in finding solutions to their problems.

Index Terms- street kids, non- governmental organisations, counselling, counselling needs

I. INTRODUCTION

Children who live in the streets survive outside the confines of the home where there are parents who provide nurturing and guidance. It is unusual and out of the norm for a child below the age of majority to be found living alone fending for himself or herself. The phenomenon of children living in the streets is a recent one in Zimbabwe. It surfaced only after the advent of independence. According to Muchini and Nyandiya-Bundy(1991) municipal by-laws were so ruthlessly applied that they would not tolerate the slightest signs of loitering which is characteristic of street kids. In support Grier (1996) states that in Zimbabwe during the colonial era, it was impossible for children to work in the streets as the municipal by-laws restricted this and were strictly and brutally enforced. This was a time when there was a lot of repression and suppression of the indigenous people such that they were forbade to be found at certain places like the city centre unless they were on duty. The City of Harare has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of adolescent street children in the last few years. This paper explores the major causes of this phenomenon.

1.2 The Research Question

What are the major causes that make children leave their homes for the streets?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of street kids

Research distinguishes between two different groups of street children. The classification is basically based on the degree of contact between the child and his or her family. The two categories comprise of children “of” the streets who have completely lost contact with their families and relatives. These ones sleep and depend entirely on the streets. Children “on” the streets are those who are still maintaining contact with their families. Children “on” the streets can be divided further into those who come into the streets daily to beg and do odd jobs going back to their families at the end of their day and those who work in the streets and periodically visit their families (Rurevo and Bourdillon, 2003).

The Child Protection and Adoption Act (1996) of Zimbabwe considers children less than eighteen years in two categories: a child and a young person. A child is considered to be any person under the age of sixteen years and includes an infant. A young person is considered to be any person who has attained the age of sixteen but has not attained the age of eighteen years. In this study the term child is going to be considered as any person who has not attained the age eighteen, it will therefore include a young person.

The concept ‘street children’ and/or ‘street kid’ according to Michaleon (2006) encompasses any child or adolescent under the age of eighteen who works and/or lives in the street alone or with his or her family or asylum seekers who are technically homeless and without support. In Zimbabwe the phenomenon of asylum seekers who come in large numbers was last experienced during the times when there was instability in Mozambique in the 1980s. This group of children is not included in the present study.

However, in the present study the concepts of ‘street children’ or ‘street kids’ are used to mean the same as was adopted by Rialp (1991) at The Inter-Non Governmental Organisation Conference in Switzerland which regarded them as,

“...boys and girls who have not yet reached adulthood for whom the street has become their habitual abode and/or source of livelihood and who are inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults.”

The concept and the definition will apply to both categories of children discussed above. In the context of this study “boys and girls who have not yet reached adulthood” mean those children who have not yet attained the age of eighteen, which is the legal age of majority in Zimbabwe. When under the age of eighteen children are therefore legally considered to be minors and should be dependent on adults for most of their needs. These adults could be parents, relatives or other people who can legally be responsible for the needs of these children.

2.1. Why do children leave their homes?

The phenomenon of children living in the streets implies neglect on the part of parents or guardians of these children who are found in the streets. The following sections discuss the major reasons why children migrate from their homes into urban streets.

2.1.1. The issue of neglect according to Zimbabwean law

The Zimbabwe’s Children’s Protection and Adoption Act (1996) identifies the following as acts of neglect or ill-treatment of children;

- (a) Fail to provide or pay for adequate food, clothing and/or lodging.
- (b) Fail to provide or pay for dental, medical or surgical aid or other effective remedial care necessary for his/her health.
- (c) Left the child in the care of another person and thereafter shown inadequate interest in the wellbeing of that child
- (d) Failed to provide adequate supervision of that child.

The Children’s Protection and Adoption Act under subsection 10 also stipulates that causing any child to beg or accompany an adult while that person begs is an offence and act of negligence.

There are a number of factors that lead children to leave their homes to make the streets their places of abode. The factors can be put into three classes which are economic, social and psychological.

2.1.2. Economic factors.

In a study of children living in the streets in Kenya, Gichuru (1993) concluded that the children in the streets of Nairobi and any other city in Kenya had their origin basically from poverty. Michaleon (2006) in a study on street children in Greece, Germany and United Kingdom found that children in the streets were mostly those who were from socially and disadvantaged families, neighbor-hoods and societies marked by unemployment, poverty, crime and violence. It was when parents and/or guardians failed to provide for the children under their charge that forced the children to go and work in the streets. If the parents had the means to provide for their children there would be very few reasons that led children to go to live in the streets. Gichuru (1993) in Kenya, further said that some children came to the city as refugees to escape from poverty in rural areas in search of means to supplement family incomes with but often without the consent of their parents. When they came into the city usually these children expected to find work easily but the

situation in most times did not turn up to be like that as they failed to find the work.

Kanjii (1996) studied of children living in the streets and found out that children in the South and Eastern African region engaged in economic activities and faced the consequence disadvantage in terms of school attendance and performance. The children engaged in diverse activities like petty commerce (often working long hours for adults), begging, washing cars, scavenging and shoe-shinning. Kanjii (1996) went on to say that these were the children who were visible in the streets and that there was another group of children who were invisible but who were in the same category. These were children who worked as domestic servants in the case of girls and boys who worked in garages as car washers and in sweatshops.

In many countries especially in developing countries it had been difficult to get employment when one had limited skills which were characteristic of street children. Black (1993) agreed when he said that the recent history of recession and structural adjustment in many countries was making a combination of economic and social factors which had recently tended to precipitate and drive children out of school and into the world of work. These structural adjustment programmes had had a tendency in most instances of reducing the labour force in organizations thereby making many people redundant. When people were made redundant the ones who suffered most were children. In order to supplement the family income after being made redundant Myers and Boyden (1998) found that in Ethiopia almost without exception the children were on the streets to make money for their own and for the family. The study reported that 67% of the street kids reported that they had both parents who were alive and were living with them. This was what this study considered as children on the streets. The study also found out that 76% reported that they were in the streets to make money.

2.1.3. Social factors

The changing structure of our society was making it hard for families to keep on providing for their families in the manner they were used to. Black (1993) noted that high fertility, extremely rapid urbanization followed by a lowered Gross Domestic Product and the effects of adjustments had combined to create a new poverty characterized by family fragmentation, lawlessness and squalor. The rapid urbanization was a result of adoption by most traditional economies of the western production models. The western production models required that labour be near the production plants. Asiachi (1986) in support of the movement of labour to central places where production would be occurring said that urban migration, which was an almost inevitable consequence of industrialization and development, tended to result in what has been called the ‘industrialisation’ of the family. This was the response that the family to adapt to the phenomena of industrialization. In some cases the father who in some cases provided labour to industry had to be away from home for a considerable period of time. This had led to the breaking down of families which in turn placed the burden of raising the family on the shoulders of the mother. Asiachi (1986) in a study found that 75% of the street kids in Kenya came from single mothers and broken families.

When families have broken it is the child who suffers most. In some instances children were left in the care and custody of step-mothers who in most cases seriously ill-treated children who were not theirs. Among the children who were in the streets of Harare more than 60% had fled from the ill-treatment by their step-mothers (Dhemba 2005). In Zimbabwe Raviro and Bourdillon (2003) concurred and said when families were sucked into poverty the income from children becomes more important for their livelihood of such families. This in a way was promoting child labour.

The breaking down of traditional way of life giving way to western type has meant the abandoning of the communal way of life where the extended family would chip in when there were problems. Gichuru (1993) reiterated that individualism had taken over from the traditional communal way of life where the community as a whole was responsible for the upbringing of the young in a collective way. In the case now where the emphasis was on individual prosperity where people do not care much about the welfare of other people not directly related to them. Supporting this assertion Chatterjee (1992) stated that industrialization had brought with it 'nuclearisation' of the family where one was only concerned with those who are directly related to him. This meant in cases where there were broken families and orphans they had no-one to look after them and they ended up in the streets. Swart-Kruger (1996) was concerned about this moral erosion of values and care which had to a great extent, been the cause of the neglect of children who ended up in the streets.

When the husband died in most African societies the wife did not have rights to continue occupying land she used with her husband. Kanjii (1996) alluded to this when he said customary law in most parts of Africa excluded women from owning land in their own right and the city offered a means of independent survival after becoming a widow or marital separation. However due to the generally lower education and skills level and high dependency ratios, female headed households tended to have fewer income earning opportunities and to be overrepresented among the poorest although there are exceptions.

In a study of street children in Tanzania, Munyacho (1992) found that nearly one third of the households were headed by women. The phenomenon of single mothers was a result of a combination of social and economic factors, including the increasing employment of women outside the home. It was also connected to the impact of rapid urbanization and unfamiliarity lifestyle on family ties and conjugal life.

2.1.4. Psychological factors

There are individual characteristics in the children that lead some children to leave their homes to come to the streets while other siblings stayed in the home. Munyacho (1992) noted that some children in the streets had fled from problems at their homes to come to the streets where they made their own rules. These were children who generally hated following rules. When they were on their own, away from the discipline of their parents they fought and snatched things from each other. For many street children, that jungle discipline was preferable to the harshness of the homes from where they came from (Baker, 1998).

Some children lacked the resilience to follow rules and regulations at home and school. Raviro and Bourdillon (2003) found that among the street kids in their study sample some came from homes where they had failed to cope with the discipline required from them. One child in a family of six children for instance took to the streets while the other five remained at home. Thus issues of tolerance to stress and personal disposition of each individual child are said to be important in determining which among the siblings took to the streets. It is a matter as much as character and personality as it is of fate and environment (Vittachi, 1989.)

The present study looked at the factors that forced children to leave their homes to make the streets as their homes or a platform to earn a living as identifying factors for counseling. While previous studies mainly focused on finding out why street kids came to the streets in other countries like Kenya, Ethiopia and Nigeria no study had been conducted in Zimbabwe. this study focused on exploring the key drivers that forced the street kids to leave their homes where they had grown up to come and make the streets of Harare their places of abode.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design. This method was used as the researchers felt it was the most ideal for the study. The descriptive survey research designs are defined by their methodical collection of standardized information from any representative sample of the population (Christensen, 1994). In addition, this research design suits the context under which the present study was taken as the survey represents a probe into a given state of affairs that exists at a given time. The sample comprised of ten randomly selected children from each of the four purposively selected organizations that deal with street children. The organizations were selected due to their visibility in dealing with street children. The children were selected by dividing the children who were present on the day the researchers visited into two groups of boys and girls and then randomly picking five children from each group who would participate in the research. The sample of those who work with children was purposively selected so that at each of the four organizations one participant came from the administration and the other came from field workers. These deal directly with the street children. Questionnaires were administered to the officials while the street children were interviewed. In order to ensure obtaining reliable and valid results a pilot study of the questionnaire and the interview guide was conducted at SOS Children's Home in Waterfall, Harare. SOS Children's Home keeps children who will have been identified by the Ministry of Social Services in the streets to be too young and are then kept in a family like setting. Qualitative data analysis with descriptive statistics was used to present and analyse the data.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Demographic data

Table 1. Response Rate

Group	Proposed	Actual Number
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	Number	
Organisation Officials	8	8
Street Children	40	40
Total	48	48

All the questionnaires given to officials were completed and collected on the day interviews with street children were being carried out. All the street children identified to participate in the interview responded to all questions asked by the researchers.

Table 2. Children’s Reasons for Leaving Home

Reasons For Leaving Home	Male	Female	Total
Ill-treatment by stepmother	6	16	22
Both parents deceased	5	3	8
Came to look for work in Harare	11	5	16
Parents could not afford rent	8	4	12
Came to look for relatives and failed to locate them	6	3	9
Grandparents were failing to support	7	2	9
There was no food at home	8	6	14
Chased away by parents	1	7	8
Parents were too strict	3	1	4

Most of the children left their homes due to the ill-treatment by step-mothers which show the reasons of maintaining families

Table 4. Whether Parents are still alive

Parents existence status	Male	Female	Total
All are alive	3	1	4
Mother died	6	18	24
Father died	1	3	4
Both Parents died	5	3	8
Total	15	25	40

The results showed when a mother passed away the chances of children being ill-treated and then resorting to the streets were quite high. The death of a father did not play a very significant part as the least number of children among the groups were in that category. Girls were the ones who were affected by the death of a mother.

V. DISCUSSION

Research results showed that social factors were crucial drivers of children from their homes into the streets. 22 out of 40 (55%) reported that they fled their homes due to ill treatment by their step-mothers. The research results concurred with those of Asiachi (1986) who found that 75% of the street children in Kenya came from single or broken families. In the study only 4 out of 40 (10%) of the children said they had both parents alive. These had been driven into the streets by lack of proper accommodation or failure to raise rent. Broken families are the ones that usually created step mothers who ill-treated children

intact. The other reasons that were cited by most children were mostly economic as they was need to come and look for work, that there was no food at home and failure to pay rent by their parents thus leading the children to take to the streets. Very few reported that they were in the streets because their parents were too strict or that they had been chased away by their parents. These were mostly children who were being taken care of at Shelter Trust.

Table 3. Organisation Officials’ Perceptions on why Children leave their Homes

Reason	Number
Lack of food at home	3
Having no money to pay rent	1
Having no one to stay with after death of parents	6
Ill treatment by guardians	6
Coming to look for work	3
Disliking rules at home	1

Most of the officials were of the opinion that children are driven into the streets mostly by death of parents. When the parents die at times the guardians are not able to treat the orphans well as a result they run away to areas they are safer. Only one thought the harsh rules at home would lead a child to leave his/her home to come and live in the streets.

from the previous marriage of the husband. Organisation officials 8 out of 8 (100%) also reported that guardians ill-treated children leading the children to resort to the streets to find refuge. The research results point out that the loss of a mother was the major determinant of whether a child would find him or herself in the streets or not. Girls were the ones who were most affected by the loss of a mother as in this study 18 out of 25 (72%) of the girl street children had mothers who had died. In comparison only 4 out of 40 (10%) had fathers who had died and also the same percentage had both parents alive. This confirmed Asiachi’s (1986) findings which had indicated that most of the street children were from broken families. Economic hardships were the main drivers of children into the streets. 16 out of 40 (35%) said they had come to the city to look for work, 14 out of 40 (35%) gave the reason of lack of food at home while 12 out of 40 (30%) gave the reason of the problem of rent. 50% of officials also were of the opinion that the children were in the streets due to economic reasons as they had come to look for work and that there was no food at home. This was in line with the findings of Michaleon (2006) in Greece who found that that most of the

children in the streets were from disadvantaged families marked by poverty and unemployment. Very few children 4 out of 40 had run away from their homes due to the strict rules at their homes. Even organization officials one cited strict rules as possible reasons why children could leave their homes to come to the streets showing that this was not a major reason that forced children. This contradicted Baker (1998) who found out that some children detested the strict discipline at home and preferred the rules of the jungle that operated in the streets. In this research this group comprised of a very small percentage though it was significant.

The results show that there was a need for a combined effort by the whole community in order to address the issues that led children to leave their homes for the streets. The economic factors called for the central government and the corporate sector to revamp the economy so that more jobs are created and unemployment is reduced. The social factors called for the community to focus on the treatment of orphans especially when there were girls under the care of step mothers as they were at higher risks of being ill-treated ending up in the streets. Advocacy and community conscientisation has to be vigorously undertaken so that every member in community played a role in identifying at risk children.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) There is need for the communities to be conscientised on the type of people who are at high risk of being maltreated and leading them to resort to living in the streets.

(ii) Children from broken families especially those who do not have mothers needed to be put under social surveillance to detect early signs of ill-treatment.

(iii) There is need for advocacy campaigns to be conducted so as to enlighten the communities on the plight of street children.

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