The Lived experiences of Street Children in Gondar town, the case of Arada Sub-City.
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Abstract

**Introduction:** Globally, the problem of children living on the street is prominent. Living on the street created interrelated and extended challenges worldwide. In Ethiopia, the problem became pandemic and more than 130,000 street children are living in different cities; out of which about 3500 are found in Amhara region.

**Objective:** This study was aimed at exploring the lived experiences of street children in Gondar town, Arada sub-city.

**Methods:** The Research was employed Qualitative, exploratory design. Using purposive and snowball sampling technique, data were collected, through in-depth interviews and field notes from 20 boys and 4 girls. FGD and key informant interview also conducted with community and concerned bodies. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data.

**Results:** The result indicated that children on the street are leading a transitory life subjected to life threatening hazardous situations by the community, security bodies and by themselves. This led to scared life; deprived of basic necessities and exploitations. The effect of these all turned their life to involve in addiction, criminal activities and become prisoner.

**Conclusion:** Children living on the street are suffering from multi faceted problems resulting to hunger, instability, abuse, sickness and violence.

**Key words:** Street children, lived experience, Gondar

**Introduction**

It was in the 1980’s the term “street” child was developed to refer “...any girl or boy for whom the street has become his/her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood and who is inadequately protected or supervised by responsible adults.”

United Nation also reported that there are 270 million street children worldwide that is increasing everyday. In the same vein, as estimated by UNICEF, the number of children living and working on the streets is increasing rapidly worldwide. For instance, there are 11 million street children in India and 130,000 in Punjab. A report on the data of street children also indicated that 40 million street children in south America, 25 million in Eastern and western Europe, 25 million in Asia and 10 million in Africa.(As cited in Abdullah et al, 2014). It is reported that there are about 250,000 children living on the streets of south Africa.

According to UNICEF “The exact number of street children is impossible to quantify, but the figure almost certainly runs in to tens of millions across the world. It is likely that the numbers are increasing.”

Children are the siblings to the wider human capital that any country demands. Even though there are conventions on the rights of children, many children are living in worst conditions of street life. This neglect worldwide weakened to prioritize proper implementation of efforts and interventions focusing on street children developmental policies.

Street life paralyzes the whole development of a child from early ages as it is full of difficulties and risks. Besides to the deprivation of basic necessities, street children are vulnerable to the problems of lacking nutrition, hygiene and basic well being amenities.

The phenomenon of street children has become a major social problem with serious implications to development. It is estimated that about 1.4 million street children are leading their life on the streets of Pakistan. As social services are unbalanced with the demands of street children, the
increasing number reflect poverty of one’s country, particularly many street children in Pakistan urban cities are practicing begging, robbery and prostitution. Factors related to the prevalence of street children underlines the issue of peer pressure, domestic violence, war, and rural to urban migration (smaller land holding in the rural areas).

Other studies also indicated that street children are victims of mental health challenges like depression, distress, addiction and aggression. These resulted from the life style they had living on the streets. Children living on the streets are engaged in risky sexual behaviors and unprotected sex. Rape and unwanted pregnancies are also challenges of street girls. These all increased their risk to sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV/AIDS.

Children with parents of abusing alcohol, being neglected or treated differently by the parent, missing home and with extreme aggressive behavior tend to leave home. Other studies pointed out that habitual lying, pretending, repeated quarreling and reflecting anti-social behavior put the life of street children at risk that worsens the attitude of the public to support them. These range of problems and smoking cigarettes (shared among their groups) discourage the community to extend their hands to raise street children in to self help patterns and reintegrating to their families.

In various studies, it is noted that education, life skill trainings and wider work opportunities have dramatically improved the life of street children. Nevertheless, street children are suffering from limited educational opportunities, lack of health care services and social supports. The rise of population and urbanization as well as the economic deterioration of a country caused to the overwhelming number and exposure of children to street life. In this manner, avoiding the sense of dependency street children developed as a culture should be stopped to reduce the number and risks of street life.

Street children’s life received very little attention by the surrounding community as they perceive the children as anti-social groups and criminals. This in turn developed exclusion and abandonment instead of safeguarding.

Regarding the strategies to deal with the issue of possible interventions; it encompasses prevention, protection and reintegration which are very crucial approaches to identify the rooted pushing and pulling factors and to sustainably reduce the problems of streetism. In the realm of community based programs, creating informal employment opportunities and develop social accountability are key aspects. Most importantly, the multifaceted challenges and future consequences of street life should get focus in the minds of street children themselves and giving them the opportunity to take part in decisions towards the solutions of their problems is found fundamental.

Materials and Methods
To collect pertinent data on the lived experiences of street children, qualitative research was conducted. By using Purposive and snow ball sampling techniques, data was collected from 24 in-depth interviews, 3 focus group discussions with the community and 2 key informants from selected sectors respectively. To infer meaningful interpretations, thematic analysis was used and the identified themes were: reasons for street life, experiences of being a street child, challenges faced, social bond and possible interventions.

Discussions
Theme one: Reasons for a street life
Common drivers of children to a street life are abuse (physical & sexual), i.e. domestic violence, neglect of parents and poverty status. These situations in turn caused street children, to develop health risk behaviors; far from education and health care facilities.

A Female interviewee who was seventeen years old came from Dembia woreda.; she has been living on the street for one year and two months. Her father killed one of his friends due to the disagreement created between them in their shared business work. Then her father disappeared and later on he was killed by the brother of his friend. As her mother was illiterate and didn’t have any income generating activity to manage five children, she decided to lead her life on the street. She
expressed as “the main reason that leads my life to the street is poverty, if my father had had enough revenue, he wouldn’t fight with his friend. Because of his fight, we also lost him unexpectedly. I am the second for the family; when my father died, my elder brother went to another place withdrawing his education. Our mother could not take care for our needs. Next to my mother I am expected to carry all the terrible responsibilities of our needy home including taking care of my younger sisters and one brother. Thus I drop out from school and come to Gondar to lead my life on the street.”

Another boy speaker who was 15 years old was born in Dabat; his mother died when he was ten years old. Since then he has been living with his stepmother in awful conditions for two years, deprived of hunger, clothing and unable to cover educational costs. He also left home and lived with his uncle for 3 months. Meanwhile he went to Dabat market place and started stealing phone, money and anything important. He was sleeping under the shelters of the market place. One day when the market community becomes aware of his bad activities, they beat him cruelly and pushed to disappear from that place. Then, he directly went to Gondar and joined street life around Arada. As it is articulated by the street boy, the reasons for choosing a street life were deprivation of basic necessities and amenities, parental neglect and abuse.

Theme two: Experiences of being a street child

The world is not considered as a safe place for street children at their sense of hope is negatively distorted and experienced common life instability. Previous studies have also noted that street children exhibit low self esteem, suicidal ideation, emotional disturbances, hopelessness and inferiority feelings (as cited in My burg C., et al, 2015).

A Female interviewee said “I am 16 years old, since I am on the street with my weak mother, I was expected to work some things for her support. I am selling some goods like; lemon, cigarette, gum, biscuit, chocolate, and others. One day, when I come back from Piassa in the evening time, one drunker asked me cigarette and I gave to him, but when I asked the money, he throw the lighter on my face. I always cry from my experience of payment refusal from male customers,……. I am facing health problems like cough, inflammation and itching on my skin . I neither washed my body nor change my clothes. Street boys attempt to rape repeatedly but I managed to escape. The ups and downs to cope with our street life are very problematic. Taking care of my mother`s sickness made me to work less and earn nil. Now I am bored, became hopeless and thinking of going to Arab if I can get money.”

Street children mostly eat bread and stay the whole day. They beg anything to drink from cafeterias and collect water by plastic highland from construction areas. When they get food leftover from restaurants, they call each other, sit anywhere and eat in group. Some of the respondents said that they developed smoking and other bad habits. They looked for other smokers to beg a piece of cigarettes and they smoke sharing with their friends. Street children had a precarious life moving from one place to another searching for food, drinks, and money. Most of the time they didn`t wash either their cloth or their body; a street girl said “mostly we don`t wash, but on the eve of big holidays, we washed our body & clothe going to `keha wonz`”

They sleep on the verandah of shops; experience hazardous working conditions with low wage, cheating and abuse. When they get money, instead of saving it, they are robbed by other street workers. They involve in stealing others` belongings, exhibit aggressive behavior, and quarrelling with others too. They are not attending school, experienced personal problems, lack of capabilities/skills, harassment, violence, social exclusion, health problems, migration and even death. When they get sick, they don’t go to health care services. To cope up street life, street children experienced sleeping long time, begging, stealing (being prisoner), substance abuse, digging garbage areas, carrying loads, and suicide. The society does not show familiarity and connectedness to the street children. Responsible bodies also do not take possible measures to tackle the problems of streetism and street children.

Theme three: Challenges faced
Children living on the street are experiencing vulnerabilities to various problems that tend to harsh consequences including suicide, considering death the only exit from street life. The challenges of many street children are through striving for survival. These challenges classified as external and internal: stigma, social exclusion and identity crisis respectively. The respondents revealed that they are suffering from lack of food, shelter, clothing, sanitation problems, lack of education, insecurity, and lack of emotional support, drug addiction and sexual abuse. Besides, they expressed that they are living bearing some sickness like malnutrition, cough, skin itching, diarrhea, headache, common cold, depression, and different from boy streets girls encountered menstrual related problems, rape, unintended pregnancy, STI and unsafe abortion.

As sourly expressed by female street child “street life is like hell, we are traumatized by the severe challenges we lived. I advise other girls not to think of street life”. Another street boy also stated that “I adapted street life badly. This life pushed me to engage in unlawful practices like engagement in criminal activities and gambling that put my life into many risks; but I couldn’t get out of it. Even though street life is dangerous; I am addicted to the freedom and the lifestyle.”

Another interviewee also talked about his friend’s case “One of our street boy faced terrible problems as he couldn’t cope up street life. When he first joined us, he was with good physical and mental status. After six months, he became sick, misbehave and nervous. Now he felt unsafe, hopeless, frightened, demonstrating unconsciousness (mentally ill). He is no more with us.”

Theme Four: social bond

Lack of social power and bond pushed street children to involve in destructive circumstances like engagement in criminal activities, joining gangsters (street adults).

Most of the street children reported that the society hates their dirt living and couldn’t support their needs. Because of this, street children are not staying in specific places for a long period of time, instability from one place to another is seen searching for social ties with others. Lack of social relation and exclusion disempowered them and even when they carry people’s luggage, they are paid the low wage. They are also bullied by policemen, and entered to destructive situations.

As one of the street boys replied he joined theft activities because his emotions are threatened by the society and felt scared. He said “We have social ties with dogs, rather than people. We get the love & union from dogs that we lost from people”. The mistreatment he and his group received resulted in the development of harsh relation to the society and become identified criminal actors. He was a prisoner for three times because of robbery; the bond he created when he was in the police station and the relative safety of street life considered as a good part of prison life.

Theme Five: Possible Interventions

Working on skill development works with street children and empowering mothers to income generating activities through trainings and parental care/care giver programs contributed a lot in protecting children to street life.

A male speaker articulated that there are many pushing factors rather than working on prevention or intervention. In his on-street stay for three years, he met various government officials took different information about street children without result. He expressed sourly, his hopeless status on the country, and become addicted to smoking and drug. He underlined interventions are necessary to decrease the incidence of the problem and the challenged life street children faced every day. Grouping them to income generating activities by providing seed money like for car washing/parking, carry loads with pushcart and short term vocational trainings in sewing and construction activities are the lists forwarded by him as possible interventions.

A social worker who works in the kebele responded that the issue of street children is complex to solve within a short period of time and by the support of the government only. It is the responsibility of families, community, non-governmental and governmental organizations. He also indicated that the shortage of budget to help the street children in income generating activities and the management of collateral issues to the credit they request. However, one nongovernmental organization bought 30 boxes for shoe shining activity; considered as a way out of the street children’s problems.
According to the respondents to reverse or improve the life of street children, institutional support from concerned bodies is nix. They hope to do well in the future if they get support. For girls reintegrating with their families and getting into good marriage is considered as possible interventions. Nonetheless, it is generally concluded that the route of intervention, particularly to strengthen the children to take responsibilities of their own life and become independent, any responsible body should promote school-going & working street children, awareness on the problems of street life, access to informal job opportunities, skill and saving trainings, increasing the attachment of surrounding community to street children and returning children to their families.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

Street children have experienced countless problems. They lived a transitory lifestyle which is full of lack of necessities like food, shelter, clothing, health care, safety and education. Their right to work and earn money is also distorted by harassment, abuse and violence. They are living in inhuman conditions with the complex nature of streetism suffering from hunger, deprivations, isolation, stigma, loneliness. They are intimidated with neglect, mistreatment, and abuse. They reached to the conclusion of giving no value to life, preferred death.

To alleviate their problems, practical and meaningful measures didn’t take place neither by the government nor by the community. It is recommended that protection, prevention and the provision of appropriate intervention programs starting from family is mandatory. Institutions should focus to this phenomenon by giving immediate attention to the root source of the problem as well as in rehabilitation/reintegration activities socially, economically, physically, and psychologically.

**References**