

Street Life in Pakistan: Causes and Challenges

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Abstract: This paper unveils the experiences of street life in Pakistan from an emic perspective. It reveals some of the complexities and potential risks to the children living on streets. The research was conducted in Islamabad-Rawalpindi and data was collected through a survey and in-depth interviews from boys aged between 7-18 years. The paper illustrates that children who escaped insecure and unfriendly environment at home were in turn exposed to insecurity, abuse and harassment in the public spaces. Yet, the findings show that despite the various problems encountered on the streets the respondents asserted on having a sense of agency. To reduce and overcome the vulnerability of the street children and to ensure their inclusion in the society the research recommends that the phenomenon requires serious attention which should be in interdisciplinary ways with interventions at multiple levels. Combined efforts are required on part of government, anti-poverty programmes and civil society. Importantly while designing policies and programmes for the street children special consideration should be given to their lived experiences and they should be considered as individuals with agency.

Key words: Street children • Causes • Problems • Experiences

INTRODUCTION

The trend in the World population of children (0-9 years old) has increased from 27% in 1955 to 43% in 2005 [1]. Research highlights that living on the street may be a phase in the life cycle of a large percentage of poor children round the world [2]. The United Nations estimates around 100 to 140 million street children worldwide. Out of these only 20 million children live on the street around the clock without their families. In South America at least 40 million, in Asia 25 million, in Africa 10 million and in Eastern and Western Europe approximately 25 million children and youth live on the street [3]. South Asia is home to the largest number of street children in the world [4].

Pakistan has been reported to have 10 million child workers between the age 10-15 many of whom work in fisheries, mines and kiln [5]. Though official figures for street children are not available in Pakistan according to Society for the protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) there are 1.5 million street children in Pakistan [6]. The situation is especially dire in large cities like

Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta. Karachi is home to more than 10,000 children living on streets, Lahore is estimated to have more than 70000 street children and Peshawar is reported to have 5000 street children [7]. The numbers in Rawalpindi and Quetta are 3000 and 2500 respectively [8].

Previous research on street children shows that the society's perception about 'street children' is not very optimistic [9] and people have feelings of empathy towards them [10]. Children living on streets are often looked down upon and considered useless and are deprived of even basic necessities of life including health care and education [11]. Also, narratives of street children tend to oscillate between the portrayal of them as either victims or deviant. The deficient conditions of street life are emphasized and these are differentiated from others who are considered normal.

This study is an attempt to explore the phenomenon of street children in the context of Pakistan where the numbers are increasing rapidly. In the current socio-political scenario in Pakistan where the country is fighting to combat terrorism and extremism the phenomenon of

street children poses a serious challenge. Children have been exposed to worst forms of abuse and violence leaving adverse physical and psychological affects. More recently children have been reported to have been engaged in terrorist activities including suicide bombing [12-13]. According to reports issued by the UN and some NGOs Pakistan has been one of the worse-hit countries of child soldiering. This was specially witnessed in Swat Valley which is located at a distance of 160 kilometers from Islamabad city.

Taking this as a point of departure, this paper calls for considering the real life experiences of the children instead of mere analysis of the characteristics of street life. The paper seeks to determine the major causes which expel children from homes and some of the challenges they may face. The term “street children” is used to refer to those children who work on street, they may or may not sleep on the street. The paper ask; who are street children, why are they on street? What are the major problems they face? How do they understand their lives in relation to the wider society? What strategies do they use to survive on street? This analysis will also respond to the criticism on earlier studies for focusing on streets ignoring the actual behavior of the children in the wider context where they live [9]. It may also help to clarify the interconnection between street children and child soldiering and the negative impacts produced by child soldiering in Pakistan.

Who Are Street Children and Why Are They on Streets?: The term ‘street children’ is used to refer to the children who live or spend a significant amount on the streets of urban areas to fend themselves or their families through various occupations. The concept was first used by Henry Mayhew in 1851 however it became common after United Nations year of the child in 1979 [14-15]. Children may be begging or working on the streets while living at home or some of them may never return home every night but may still have contact with family members or may have no contact at all [16-17]. Street children may be engaged in selling flowers, garbage picking and polishing shoes. Children may also act as petty criminals, commercial sex workers among others [18].

According to Inter-NGO Programme for Street Children and Street Youth, street children are “those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word : i.e., unoccupied dwelling, wasteland etc) more than their family income has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection supervision, or direction from responsible adults” [19, p. 15]. The United Nations defines street children as “any child for whom the street

(in the widest sense of the word including unoccupied dwelling, waste, land etc) has become his or her habitual abode or source of livelihood and who is without adequate protection” [9, p. 149]. For Save the Children a “street child is any minor who is without a permanent home or adequate protection” [20, p. 268]. United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [21] has differentiated between children of the street-those for whom the street has become home - and children on the street-those who maintain contact with families.

The different categories of street children common across the globe include children sent by parents but living with their families, children belonging to street families, those born on streets, migrated children and children with disabilities. It has been argued that street children have minimum contact with their families and are usually left alone without adult care [11]. However, research across the globe shows that labeling children as abandoned and homeless is not often true, most children are in contact with their families but work on street [22]. In Columbia Felsman [23] found that 61% of children had close contact with their families, In Latin America 80-90% of the children have contact with their families [22, 24]. In South Africa Donald and Swart-Kruger [25] claimed that 90% of the young people working on the streets return home at night [22].

Despite the large volume of work on street children over the last few decades it is still not clear as to why they exist in some cultures and not in others [26]. The phenomenon has been researched both in the context of developing countries and in economically advanced countries. Much of the work on street children during the 1980s has focused on the style of street life, characteristics of street children in terms of their use of public spaces and their links with family and public institutions. Children’s narratives of homes have also been researched previously. Currently debates on street children both in academia and policy making tend to examine the lives of children on street in the light of general analysis of poverty, social exclusion, coping strategies, vulnerability and resilience in adversity [9]. However, children’s perceptions about their lives on street remains under researched in academia especially in the context of Pakistan.

Previous research around the globe has highlighted the risks encountered by children on the streets. Some of the problems faced by the children on the streets have been reported to be issues regarding physical health and hygiene, drug use, sexual and physical abuse. Children are reported to sleep under bridges, in doorways, public

spaces [4, 28]. Street children are often believed to be inadequately clothed, fed or loved and are more likely to fall victims to drug dealers, who turn them into addicts [28-29]. These children are often involved in various antisocial activities, including theft (e.g pick-pocketing) and they are exploited by employers [11]. Street children are also reported to be victimized in many ways. They are beaten by police, sexually assaulted, even murdered as has been reported in Latin America where four children were killed a day [30, 31].

Several factors have been reported to be responsible for the prevalence of street children worldwide and the most prominent among these is believed to be poverty [32-34]. Evans (2004) states that poverty greatly constraints family's ability to provide a healthy living for their children. This forces children onto the streets to work to increase family income and to maximize the purchasing power of existing income by reducing family size [33]. Even if causes other than material poverty are quoted economic deprivation remains the major focus for intervention [35].

Besides poverty many other reasons associated with the presence of street children may include disharmony, inappropriate behavior of parents, poor parenting, conflict, insecurity and abusive relationships at home, broken families, the desire to find work and as a result of becoming displaced or orphaned [28, 29, 36, 37]. Other causes highlighted for the rapid increase in the phenomenon of street children are believed to be, use of drugs, death of parents, urbanization, famine and war [22, 33]. A study of Columbian street children found that 36% of the street children had left home due to extreme poverty 27% due to family disintegration, 20% due to physical abuse and 10% for the search of adventure [31, 38]. Aptekar [10] found that 48% of the street children in Cali Columbia were on the street for financial reasons. 32% were there due to abuse at home [31]. In study conducted in Africa it was found that 60% of the street children were on street due to family disharmony or due to being orphaned or displaced. In the context of Tanzania punishment from parents was determined to be one of the major reasons for children to leave home [22].

The Research Context: Islamabad is the capital city of Pakistan and has a population of about 2 million [39]. It is considered a symbolic centre of the nation and a modernist city contrasting from other cities of Pakistan and is believed to be the only truly Pakistani city since it was built after independence it was not inherited like the other cities. Rawalpindi is a city in the Potohar region of northern Punjab located at a distance of 14 kilometers

from Islamabad. It is one of the most populous urban areas of Pakistan. Islamabad and Rawalpindi are also known as twin cities. The physical infrastructure of Islamabad open roads, spacious houses contrast it with pot-holed roads overcrowded buildings on the Rawalpindi side [40]. However, the spaces of both the cities are open for street children. Whether it is the posh area of F- 10 Markaz, F-7 Markaz, premises close to the secretariat and prime Minister House like Blue Area or its the commercial areas of Rawalpindi street children can be easily seen and the numbers are increasing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this paper was collected during January –March 2014 and August-October 2014 in Islamabad using mixed methods. The use of mixed method was to ensure that besides providing an overview of the lives of street children, a more in-depth analysis of their experiences on the streets could also be determined [33]. For the qualitative part of the study two voluntary researchers were assigned the task to observe the street children in selected sites in Islamabad Rawalpindi at different times of the day. The researchers selected a point where street children were more likely to be found and watched as the children moved around and interacted among each other and passerby for 3-4 hours at a time. The researchers also followed the children around the area. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 children selected through purposive sampling method. The interviews were 40-60 minutes duration each. During the interviews open ended questions were asked and the respondents were given the chance to speak about their experiences of street life with minimum interruption. This allowed the children to narrate those events which they considered significant.

In the light of the qualitative data a questionnaire was developed for a researcher administered survey. Data was collected from 80 respondents selected through convenient sampling method. Structured interview schedule consisting of both close and open ended questionnaire was used to collect the quantitative data. The questionnaire had 50 questions on socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents including family, education, health. The causes of being on the street were asked, the problems faced on the streets. The interviews took 20-30 minutes to be completed.

The majority of the respondents were found in commercial areas of the city. Children from three sites i.e. Blue Area, G-9 Markaz and Commercial market were selected for quantitative part of the research. While four

sites including Blue Area, G-9 Markaz, Commercial market, I -9 Markaz and Rawalpindi Saddar were selected for the qualitative part of the study. Female children were not included in the survey and interviews due to limited number of female children in the selected areas and the unwillingness of those who were approached for the interviews.

The interviews were taken while the children were on the streets. Some of them demanded incentives for their time which was fulfilled by the researchers. Standard guidelines on ethical engagements with vulnerable children were observed and verbal consent was taken from all the children [41]. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality of the children. The analysis of the quantitative data was done using averages and percentages. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data.

Experiences of Children on Streets

Demographic Information of the Street Children: The street children interviewed during this study were a mixture of local and Afghan children and spoke different languages including Pashto, Saraiki, Punjabi and Urdu. The majority of these were settled in the Katchi Abadis like in Bari Imam, H-9, in Golra Sharif and in areas in the periphery of Rawalpindi. The age of the respondents ranged from 7 years to 18 years and the majority (68.8%) of them was illiterate. Only 18.8% street children had attended school up to primary level and 8.8% had dropped out of school at middle level. None of the children were attending school at the time of the interview.

Categories of the Street Children: The results of this study indicate that majority (78.4%) of the street children lived with their families and came on the streets for work. According to the data 21.6% street children lived independently on the streets. However, these children too reported to have occasional contacts with their families who lived in rural areas of the contrary.

Further, the study shows that some of the street children belonged to street families. The close association of some of the respondents with families on the street was also evident from the fact that majority of the street children reported intimate relatives were on the streets. Some 18.8% respondents in the age group (8-10) reported that the occupation of their mothers' was begging too and they had been on the streets almost since they were quite young. Almost 40% reported that their brothers were on street while 15.1% reported their cousins to be on the

streets. 32.5% of the respondents stated that their friends were on streets. None of the children interviewed reported to be born on street or to have any disability.

Causes of Leaving Home: The majority of the respondents who participated in both the qualitative and quantitative study stated that they were on street for economic gains more specifically with the hope to be able to support the family and to have personal income. The data shows that 93% respondents were on the streets to increase their family income while 95% children were on the streets for earning personally. This clearly depicts the agency of the street children. Figure 1 indicates that 83% were on street because their family was unable to support them.

Similar findings were evident during the in-depth interviews where the respondents were of the view that there was extreme poverty at home which compelled these children to leave home for work. The in-depth interviews with children belonging to age group 11-18 also show that the ability to be able to earn had great importance in the children's lives. They constantly commented on the immense change the money earned on the streets had brought in their lives. As the young Hamad who worked in a convenience store stated "We used to have very little to eat at home and I didn't feel like even playing with friends when my stomach was empty but now at least I don't fear to go hungry anymore, I get to eat even if it is little". Similarly, Qazi explained "I no longer have to make excuses when I go home late, when my mother interrogates I tell her that I am out to earn not to have fun".

These excerpts clearly demonstrate though the initiative to work had not improved the lives of the children as such yet they were struggling to keep going. Importantly, the act of gaining independent income had brought change in relations of power where the children seemed to have gained new agency after their work on streets and access to money. They were aware that they could negotiate with their family members with logical reasoning. Importantly, the asserted on having agency of their own as is evident from the fact that Qazi no longer allows her mother to interrupt in his personal life and gives her a message that he is no longer willing to be controlled.

The Figure (1) shows that other causes for the children to leave home were physical abuse (stated by 28.8% of the children) and verbal abuse (16.3% respondents) at home. However since abuse was not believed to be a major reason for leaving home as is clear

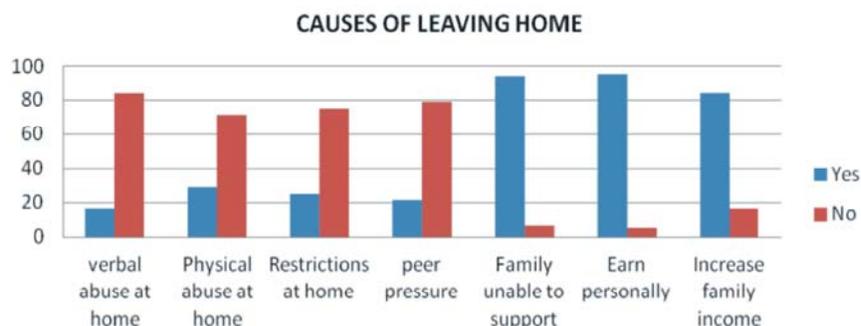


Fig 1: Causes of leaving home

Source: Survey

from the fact that 71.2% and 83.8% responded replied in negative for physical and verbal abuse respectively. Peer pressure (43.8%) and restrictions at home (25%) were some other causes of leaving home. All these causes are directly or indirectly related to poverty and deprivation in the family leading to unequal distribution of wealth, facilities and opportunities. This ultimately leads to consequences where children have to leave for street life.

The data indicates that not all children on street were necessarily from economically poor background, the study illustrates that the families of the majority of street children (65%) were involved in some sort of income generation activities for living. In the context of Bangladesh Conticini and Hulme [33] have argued that poverty is not necessarily the only means for migration since the children on street are not necessarily from economically disadvantaged areas and streets are not necessarily contributing to improve their economy. They state that breakdown of social relationships is the cause of child migration to streets. This they believe is because for children the insecurity they feel at home is central than the economic instability. Though it may be true in the context of Bangladesh, however, the findings of this research show that the insecure environment at home too was related to economic insecurities.

Besides, the prevalence of street children does not necessarily indicate that families are breaking up. The majority of the children who participated in this research lived with their families and came on the streets for work. During the in-depth interviews the children spoke of how their relations with the parents and siblings had changed after they had started earning for themselves. This indicates that families are not breaking up but people have started to live in different ways.

In addition, the children who participated in the survey reported that the environment at home was not always insecure and instable. The data illustrates 57.5%

respondents reported there were no major issues between their parents at home and 50% street children (age group 7-10) reported that the behavior of their parents was affectionate towards them. Only 18.8% reported harsh behavior from their parents.

Since the age of children naturally requires the desire to play, conflict between work and play is an important element which has been highlighted as a possible reason for children to leave homes and to migrate to streets [22]. This element was especially evident from the qualitative aspect of the study when the children had the chance to speak up about their lives and how they felt about street life. The data shows that the younger children (between 7-10) had their own interpretation of play and enjoyment. When interrogated if they were involved in games for example, their answers depict that they were not necessarily under pressure for work at all times.

The in-depth interviews depict that children (between age group 7-10) connected work and play to make life easier for them. For example Asif who was involved in rag picking explained that he often searched for rags along with other boys and as they moved around they also had fun together. Riaz who polished shoes in the busy market of I-9 stated that whenever he was tired and bored he would pack his box leave it near the vendor who sits on the road and would go off along with his friends. Akhtar stated, "I enjoy this liberty of being on my own.....doing whatever I want to do."

This explains that these children do not regret being on the streets. They had no complains either from the parents or from the government and they attributed their condition to destiny. They considered their present circumstances as a series of struggles for a better future. However some of them deeply felt the inability to attend school. Nevertheless, the majority of the children had little hope in education. One boy gave examples of how his cousins were all educated and were still searching for

employment. He was of the view that if education earned through hard work cannot earn them a living they were better off not being educated. "I do not go hungry that is something that matters" he claimed.

The finding that street children are involved in drugs has been reported by previous research and it has also been cited as an important factor that forces children on streets [10, 19, 42, 41]. According to a study in Brazil 80% street children have been reported to use drugs [43]. Often the younger street children are believed to consume inhalants while the older ones cocaine, alcohol, hasish [31]. In the context of Pakistan previous research has shown that 56% children were addicted to hasish [4].

The quantitative part of this study found that 32% of the elder group of children (14-18) reported to be smoking hasish prior to leaving home and they did not necessarily state use of drug as a cause of leaving home. None of them reported to have access to alcohol. In order to determine if the use of drugs by parents could be a cause of drug addiction among street children and could compel children to leave home they were asked if there were drug addicts in their families. It was found that the fathers of only 8.8% children were drug addicts against 91.2% who were not. This shows that parental addiction is not necessarily related with children being addicts and leaving home for drugs.

The qualitative data depicts that often there were no big problems at home that pushed these children to work on the streets. Some of the street children stated that they were on the street simply because life back home was boring and controlled. They reported that they were constantly forced to act according to the wishes of the family. For example, Irfan explained that even though he had little to do his parents made him stay at home and he was forbidden to talk to his friends. He exclaimed that there was often little to eat and he was asked to do unpleasant work like fixing the roof during rainy seasons, fetching water from the tube well and so on. According to children like Irfan, life on street meant escape from the unpleasant memories of home. Importantly, the children cherished the sense of independence they had gained after being on the streets without parental supervision.

Similarly sense of independence was also confirmed in the quantitative data. Though the children reported that what urged them to migrate to street was to increase family income but later findings show that the money earned by the children was spent on food, shelter, drugs, bribing police etc they did not contribute to the family

income as such. Seen in this way it was really the desire to live independent life which pushed these children on streets. Better economic opportunity was only a way to achieve this goal [33].

Employment Status of the Street Children: The findings of this study show that majority of the street children were engaged in various kinds of unskilled, unorganized and unsafe labor. Among the respondents 22.5% were engaged in picking rag/scrap the majority of whom were Afghan children. 23% of the children were engaged in casual labor and 5% reported to be involved in carrying loads on cart which is very tough labor. During the in-depth interviews one of the street child, who was 12 years old explained that he often visited super stores and requested them for casual work. He stated that the work was very hard but due to lack of education, skills and vulnerable age he had no choice but to earn his living in this way.

The data shows that 13.8% cases (in the age group 7-10) reported their engagement in shoe polishing and the same number was reported in vending goods. 16.3% reported begging as their profession and 10% were engaged in washing cars.

Since the children were not involved in any formally organized jobs as indicated above their earning was very low. The majority (52.5% in the age group 11-15) reported their earning to be less than 100 rupees per day while 23.8% street children (age group 7-8) reported their daily income less than 50 rupees. Only 23.8% respondents (age group 16-18) were earning more than 100 rupees per day.

The daily working hours of the children varied since they were involved in different kinds of unskilled jobs. Data shows that 3.8% reported their working hours from 3 to 6 hours, 15% reported 6 to 8 hours and 70% reported their working hour 8 to 10 hours per day. 11.3% respondents reported more than 10 hours of work in a day.

During the in-depth interviews children were asked how they felt about their work on the streets. The major complain was the low wages they earned. Those involved in casual work reported it was hard to find work and that they were paid very little for hard work like lifting. The majority were aware that their work was of little worth but they believed it was better than begging and going hungry. This is again a point where the children's agency becomes evident. They preferred to work even on low wages to keep life going.

During the qualitative observations one of the researcher reported that a man in a car was approached by a disabled boy of around 12-14 years old who was selling newspapers on the traffic signal. The man looking at the boy handed over some money out of his car window and refused to take the newspaper and started to drive off as the signal opened. The boy instantly threw the money back in the car as it passed by. This act of the child shows his refusal of charity and his strong assertion that he was there to earn for himself.

Nevertheless, there were also children who were involved in illicit methods of earning and were involved in activities like petty theft from shops. None of the participants openly reported to be involved in criminal activities like sale of drugs. However, this is not to say that such children were not involved in such activities at all. During the qualitative interviews the respondents admitted to have been often come across the police for theft and small scale robbery. The younger boys reported to have been involved in theft stealing food from shops while the older boys were involved in more confrontational crimes such as pick-pocketing and robberies [31]. A boy explained an incident in the following words.

“uummm, no I don’t do such work(referring to stealing) ... uhhh ... but (a brief smile) ... one may have to do for living.... Perhaps... sometimes though.... But Never for tried to harm anyone....

During the in-depth interviews and observations the researchers felt that the children behaved in a very mechanical way. Whether it was discussion on abuse, harassment and crimes as discussed above the children took things very casually and gave very blunt answers. For example when asked about his involvement in any

criminal activities one boy in the older age groups (14-18) explained “its hard to put your hands on it (drugs)... once you get hold of it (drugs)... there is not much hassle.... The worse thing that can happen to you is being caught up by police and ‘being in’ (in prison) for a couple of days Well if you are smart enough you can take care of it by taking care of the police officer (by bribing him).”

In the excerpts above both the boys were selective in their use of words. In the first one the boys wants to convey the message that he was not a professionals but he had no choice since he too had to make living. In the second excerpt the boy indirectly talks about the consequences of being involved in the sale of drugs but he does not personalize it. Both elaborated on the consequences of such acts in the form of being in contact with police which often resulted in victimization and spending the hard earned money to bribe the police. This also indicates that though the children seemed to have escaped poverty, work and violence at home however, these children found themselves in conditions no better than those they escape.

Problems Faced on the Streets: Several issues were reported by the respondents of this study about the life on streets. The data (Figure 2) shows that verbal abuse was encountered by 72.5% children, physical abuse by 51.3% children and physical injury was experienced by 75% children working/living on the streets. The latter two also lead to health issues which were reported by the children. The main reason for the physical abuse was the vulnerable age of the respondents which exposed them. While physical injury was often the result of hazardous and rough work without care and preventive measures.

Further, 76.3% of the children (age group 11-18) reported they were facing illness and health problems mainly due to lack of proper care and unhygienic working

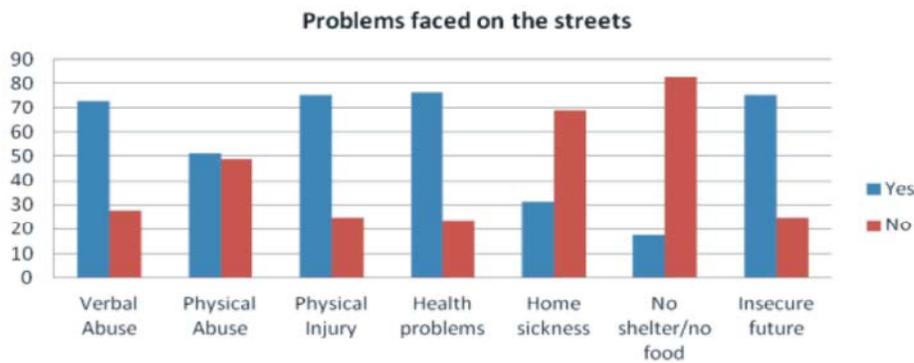


Fig. 2: Problems faced on the streets
Source: Survey

conditions. The lack of medical care and poor economic backgrounds also add to the situation. Nevertheless, none of the respondents reported to be suffering from mental instability and were emotionally well (23, 31, 44).

Lack of shelter (17.5%) and home sickness (31.2%) were other issues reported by the respondents. These were predominantly those who were living without their families or having occasional contact with family. Insecure future and hopelessness was reported by 75.0% children and the majority of these children belonged to older age group (16-18). Lack of education, lack of adequate skill and inadequate parental supervision are some of the reasons which may lead to low self-esteem among the youth. This was also portrayed in the in-depth interviews. The older children were not very optimistic about their future. They stated that no matter how hard they worked they were not very hopeful about their future. Nevertheless, some stated they looked forward to open their own shops one day. Others said though they may not be able to change their lives dramatically but that they will try to secure better future for the next generation. The desire to be respected was very much on the mind of all the children.

The in-depth interviews also depicted the difficulties of working in the streets and the sense of vulnerability encountered by the children. The major issue which was raised during the in-depth interviews (age group 16-18) was exploitation of the children. Some of the children reported abuse from police while others reported abuse from public in general while doing routine activities like picking rags. This was especially true from the children in Islamabad. "They (the police) often tell us to go away while we try to clean cars on the traffic light or in the parking." Akram a street child interviewed in Rawalpindi reported. Some of the children in the elder group (14-18) discussed sexual abuse of younger children by other older street children or public in general in the public spaces. Ahad exclaimed, "they (referring to the younger children) are more likely to become victims (of sexual violence) since they can't say no." The younger children did not talk about such violence as such. However, their silence may be due to shame or fear.

Nevertheless, despite such marginalization the children's agency was clearly evident in two ways; first the majority of the children (age group 11-18) asserted that they were not forced on the street by their parents. This is against previous research which depicts that parents are the ones to send children to the street for work [45]. The children were the ones to take this decision and their decisions were endorsed by their parents since there was no alternative they could provide.

Second, as cited above the majority used the money earned on the streets on their own food and living. Only few actually contributed to the family income even though they did live with their families. These findings corroborate with previous research on agency of the street children [41]. The ability to be able to spend one's income gives an immense sense of independence to children who have been accustomed to poverty and deprivation at home. This is the main reason that the majority of the street children (86%) were content with their lives on the street since the sudden sense of independence and access to income was very meaningful for them.

In addition to gaining a sense of individual identity through earning working and being in groups also created experiences of their own in terms of network groups and hierarchies [19] which in turn provided the children with a collective identity and reference group [46]. The majority of the street children reported to operate in groups and this was observed and reported to be a major strength for the children. As a group they also try to take care of other needs such as food [31]. Being in groups also protected the children from other street children and from others. The children considered the friendship they had developed on the street as their strength [10, 23, 31].

The qualitative data shows that, despite the deprivation faced by the street children belonging to younger age group referred to the positive aspects of life on the street and considered it as an escape from the problems at home [22, 24, 41]. Nevertheless, as explained above for the older group of children who had been on the streets for quite some time the reality was more apparent and as a consequence they were not very optimistic about their future. This may be because with age they had come to know the hardships street life entails and the damage to their career and health [41]. The children's ability to skillfully deal with their daily chores without any complains was worth appreciating.

It was stated above that some of the children in the older group (14-18) were involved in criminal activities. Only 10% of the participants who participated in the survey reported to be drug addicts. This is against previous literature which indicates that 80% of the street children are addicted to drugs including cocaine and glue resulting in severe health issues [14]. The qualitative data shows that six respondents in the older age group reported to be involved in smoking. During the in-depth interviews some of the respondents explained that they had got addicted after they started working on the streets. These children associated smoking with status and pleasure. They explained smoking along with friends at the end of a long day was relaxing and cool.

The in-depth interviews also depicted that the children interviewed did not have access to any services (i.e. shelter provided by government, health facilities, educational facilities, welfare services from charity organizations). Neither did the children who lived on their own have any assistance with reuniting with their family members [17].

The majority of the children interviewed for this research did not report to be supervised by any group as such (gangs/extremist mafia etc). This means that all street children are not necessarily connected with extremist groups. It also indicates that street children living with their parents and having contact with them are less likely to be involved in such activities.

Limitations of the Study: This study was based on a short survey and limited number of in-depth interviews. To get more intimate understanding of the lives of the street children the study could have benefited from ethnographic study which could have offered rich information about the experiences of the children on the street [17, 47].

The researchers were not able to interview the parents of the street children who participated in research. The reason being the children were not comfortable in disclosing information about their families. This information would have been useful to understand the context of the children for example the support mechanism available to children for their physical, emotional and moral development. It could have provided information on the circumstances at home which lead children to leave homes [45].

The researchers were also not able to include female children in this survey due to limited number of female in the areas which were selected for the survey and interviews and the unwillingness of those who were available to participate. This would have been important since research shows that both male and female children are visible on the streets around the globe though male children are in majority [48].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings depict that the phenomenon of street children poses a complex social challenge. Clearly there can be multiple reasons embedded in contextual realities which compel children to work on the streets [49-50]. Such factors can be both societal (including economic circumstances) and these can be individual/personal [46]. The paper illustrated that poverty and unmet expectations were some of the factors that motivated children to leave

home and turn to the streets for living. The children exposed themselves to the life on the streets in search of access to income generating activities and with the hope of a better life. However, they were exposed to various forms of abuse, harassment and insecurity at the hands of employers, police and public in general. The study reveals that the potential risks to the children on the streets cannot be ignored which is very significant for the contemporary discourses on the health and safety of youth. Nevertheless, the data also highlights that while public space marginalizes children it also gives them a sense of inclusion where they get to earn for themselves and more importantly they are able to spend the earning on themselves which gives them a sense of agency and empowerment [46].

It was outlined in the introduction that an important aspect related to street children that continues to be an emerging issue in the context of Pakistan is the problem of child soldering. The children on the streets have been reported to have been used by gangs and extremist groups for suicide attacks and to have been used as couriers across the country [5]. Street children have also been reported to be victims to commercial sexual exploitation. Though the street children interviewed during this study did not open up about their involvement with gangs and extremist groups yet this paper does not rule out the possibility that such a connection could exist. To dig out such information would perhaps the need to be an insider in order to gain the trust of the respondents. However, in the light of the findings of this study the researcher would argue that it is unfair to label all street children as extremists and associated with gangs and mafias. As the data shows the presence of children on streets could be due to multiple reasons.

Since there are multiple reasons which lead children to the streets so prevention requires to think about this phenomenon in interdisciplinary ways with interventions at multiple levels [42]. There is urgent need to take some potential variables including extremist organizations, street gangs and corrupted police into account. In the presence of such variables there is the possibility that the efficiency of policy recommendations (e.g. providing shelter service or supporting poor families) could be reduced. In the context of Pakistan though organizations like Azad Foundation are working on various aspects of the street children, however to improve the quality of life of these children there is urgent need to work collectively. In this regards it is imperative that all stakeholders including the civil society, families of children and others work collectively to address the issue.

In particular prompt response is needed from development organizations working on anti poverty programmes, government and policy makers to address the needs of the street children. The anti-poverty programmes need to focus on designing strategies for improving the lives of the street children and in particular health and education services should be provided to them. Immediate actions need to be taken for the rehabilitation of the children already on the streets by establishing support systems. For example, shelter services could be provided to such children and instead of focusing on mere welfare skills trainings could be arranged to engage them in productive and sustainable ways of living.

Importantly, measures should be taken to prevent more children from turning to the streets. In this regards strategies should be made to support the poor families from which these street children come from. This will play an important role in reducing the number of children who migrate to the streets due to poor economic conditions. Finally, it is suggested that for successful intervention of such programmes the participation of children is mandatory [41].

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