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A Qualitative Exploration of Abuse among Street Children: Nature, Practices and Dysfunctional Laws



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Abstract: *The purpose of the study is to discover the abuse among street children and the socioeconomic factors that push kids into a life on the streets and, social and legal insight from street children from densely populated areas of Islamabad such as G-9 Markaz, I-8 Markaz, Rawal town, and Mehar-Abadi. Data collected from 30 street children, parents, and some government officials indicate that poverty, lack of education, Afghan migration, family troubles and economic position, and peer influence are the main factors of street children becoming involved in social evils and sexual activities. They were subjected to multiple types of abuse, such as verbal, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse besides being talented, their surroundings limited their ability. There is a dire need to establish strategies that should be based on ground realities to protect street children from neglect, abuse, and exploitation..*

Keyword:

Street children,
child abuse,
exploitation,
child trafficking,
child rights,
substance abuse,
child protection system.

Introduction

Street children phenomenon is a global interest through which millions of youngsters worldwide live and work on the streets. There are around 1.2 million children on the streets of Pakistan's major cities and urban settlements which form the country's largest social group (Tufail, 2005). Therefore, many children are forced by their parents to engage in street labour. There is term "street children" relates to those on the street who play an important part in their lives and serve as a point of reference (De Benitez, 2007).

According to the United Nations (2000), street children are any boys or girls for whom the street becomes a source of income, and who are ineffectively supervised and protected by adults (UNICEF, 2000). Street children are facing several problems in their respective social, cultural and economic setups. Among these difficulties, the topic of abuse appears as a key concern, impacting their quality of life and hopes for a bright future. Despite infrequent attention from researchers and policymakers, there is still a dearth of comprehensive understanding of the occurrence, primary drivers, and complicated

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dynamics of abuse in the lives of street children. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the nature and extent of abuse experienced by street children.

The growth of street children is increasing as the flow of time and their problems are universal. There is a need to bring these children into the mainstream of the society. The migration of street children in urban slums and shantytowns increases the number of children and youth (Jacobson, [1990](#)). From different studies, the question arises as to why these situations are emerging in which more than 50% of children of the population are facing various susceptibilities in developing countries like Pakistan. The current economic crisis of Pakistan not only gives rise to a lot of environmental and physical stresses. Precisely, children are highly exposed to these unpredictable situations. They face neglect of their basic rights. This study also examines the socio-economic factors that cause abuse. There are certain factors which force the child into different behaviours such as mistreatment, and indifferent parental behaviour that can also create substantial and long-term harm to the child's personality. Many societies witnessed an invasion of children ending up on the streets due to unkind attitudes of their parents, poverty and family breakup (Khan et al., [2019](#)).

This study explores the types of abuse faced by the children on the streets, these types are unknown to the local people because their main emphasis is on sexual abuse. These sorts of child abuse are not reported in Pakistan or other nations for a variety of reasons. Child labour, child prostitution, child trafficking, and child sexual abuse are major concerns in most South Asian nations, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Bangladesh (Venkateswarlu, et al., [2003](#)). Uncontrolled price increases, rising unemployment, and the economic crisis have created a climate in which parents have begun to lose their self-control, become angry, and abuse

their children severely. Brutal or immoral treatment of children, such as neglect, beating, or involvement in sex acts is known as abuse in a broader sense (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current Encyclopedic Edition, 1992).

The current study is an attempt to explore the social and legal insight of street children. These children coexist on the streets with millions of adults, many of whom see them as creeps and tiny criminals. They are a vulnerable and marginalized part of society, their potential should not be discouraged since they have talent that should be used positively to bring them back into the mainstream of social life (Shabbir & Anwar, [2007](#)). Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, has a population of roughly 2 million people; street children are visible, and their numbers are growing (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics,). Despite extensive research over the last few decades, it is still unclear why street children appear in some societies but not others.

Literature review

A great deal of previous research on street children has provided insight into their phenomenon. Some children are fed up with parental restrictions and a strict environment at home and look up to a more independent atmosphere. The street is, therefore, a permissive space allowing freedom to everyone (Rizzini & Butler, [2003](#)). There is no and perhaps cannot be, a clear definition of street children," says Abebe Trans-Cultural Psychosocial Institute Addis Abeba University Ethiopia's Amsterdam and Behailu, who has extensively worked on the subject (Aptekar, [2000](#)).

In the 1980s, terms like "on, of, or in" the street were popular for defining street children, but in today's research, three broad approaches to definition are visible: first, approval of development of UNICEF's "on and of" the street classifications, second, substitute terms or definitions, and third, rejection of the term

"young people on the street" as a social issue (De Benitez, 2007). According to Tufail, "the term street children signify to comprise street working children, who may keep strong relationships with their families, and street-living children, who have very limited or no contact with their families and have no or transitory shelter without reliable employment" (Tufail, 2005).

The study's goal was to look into the factors that led to them becoming street children. Price (1989) investigated the causes, which could include poverty, family dysfunction, illiteracy, and so forth. Such causes not only push minors to the streets but also have a negative impact on their personalities, making them vulnerable to abuse. The majority of street children leave home to live or work on the street to avoid neglect, dysfunctional families, physical violence, sexual abuse or out of a desire for freedom, rather than because of socioeconomic concerns (Price, 1989).

On the streets, these children were subjected to various forms of abuse such as neglect, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. A kid might be exposed to one or more of these forms of abuse at any moment. Abuse happens when a kid's fundamental requirements for affection, concentration, approval, stability, and safety are not met due to failure or neglect on the part of his or her parents or caretakers. Emotional abuse also takes place when those in charge of the welfare of kids are unable to meet and are unaware of their children's emotional and developmental needs (Iqbal, 2012). According to Schmitt (1986), children who have been physically abused are frequently young children. In the meantime, corporal punishment is common in our society (Schmitt, 1986).

According to many research, Africa has the highest rate of sensual abuse in infancy (34%), Europe has the lowest incidence rate (9%), and America and Asia range between 10% and 24% (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009). According to Gharaibeh and Hoeman street children endure more sexual abuse at work and

are more vulnerable to sexual assault because they are powerless and economically disadvantaged. According to a review of the literature, numerous research demonstrates that females are more vulnerable to sexual assault than boys (Gharaibeh & Hoeman, 2003). Blumenthal (2015) discovered in his research that adolescent neglect by parents is the most common sort of child ill-treatment inside the home sphere around the world. The failure to provide a kid with the required care and protection is referred to as child neglect (Blumenthal, 2015).

Multiple studies have indicated that in Pakistan, a high proportion of children are subjected to physical abuse or assault. According to a 2005 Save the Children and UNICEF study, assault on children is an unaccepted and unavoidable component of South Asian communities, and it is well understood as a result of shame, humiliation, and guilt. Despite being a guarantor to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and related treaties and protocols, Pakistan ranks fifth among countries with a bleak picture of children, as kids continue to face abuse, anarchy, and denial of essential rights (Rasool et al., 2021).

Pakistani provinces tend to be more active and developed in terms of children's rights than the Federal State. Anees and Zarina Jillani also talk about provincial laws. According to them, the Punjab Children Act 1952 and the Sindh Children Act 1955 were probably the first child-related laws that made an attempt to include child-friendly principles into legislation (Jillan & Jillani, 2000). Pakistan's constitution is the top national legislation, and it guarantees basic rights to all citizens, including children (Articles 8-28). The Constitution contains explicit bans on torture and the abolition of all types of exploitation (Article 3). According to Article 25(1) of the Pakistani Constitution, "all citizens are equal before the law and have equal protection of the law." However, there are several laws and constitutions in Pakistan for the

rights of children, as well as many monies in their names, but these youngsters are still denied their rights. According to Article 38, it is the role of the state to provide basic requirements (food, clothes, education, housing, and medical care) for all people, including children, who are unable to earn a living due to disease, disability, or unemployment. However, Pakistan's economy is currently mired in low growth, high unemployment, and high inflation, as well as plummeting investment and a deteriorating external balance position (Younus, Chachar, & Mian, 2018).

Methodology

The present study emphasises the exploration of abuse among street children in Islamabad, Pakistan. This research is phenomenological in nature, employing qualitative research methods and relying heavily on field data collecting. The observation is utilized as a method for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample size of 30 street children, 10 parents, 4 lawyers, 2 police officers, and one FIA officer. Purposive sampling is one of the data collection techniques employed. Data collection from a large population is quite tough. Snowball sampling is another technique utilized. The study was conducted in the selected areas such as I-8 Markaz, Mehar Abadi, G-9 Markaz and Rawal Town where children were interviewed with the assistance of various NGOs and schools. The age range of those interviewed spanned from 10 to 18 years.

Prior to completing the interviews, the researcher clarified the study's objectives and ensured all participants that their information would be kept confidential. The researcher got formal approval and verbal consent from the study participants. All in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were performed in Urdu language in a private setting to ensure concentration and privacy. Two focus group discussions were arranged, one with street children and the other with the general public.

All the FGDs lasted an average of 45–60 minutes. The field notes and audiotape were transcribed into Urdu language and then directly translated into the English language. The researcher rechecked the translated data by listening to audio tape recordings. Then thematic coding was used to evaluate the subjective information collected. The researcher examines collective experiences and individual perspectives to better understand the nature of abuse experienced by children on the streets of Islamabad.

Results and Discussion

The current study attempted to investigate abuse among street children. The street children interviewed during this study were a mixture of Afghan and local children and spoke different languages including Persian, Pashto, Punjabi and Urdu. The majority of these were settled in the Katchi-Abadi like Mehar-Abadi, Rawal Town and in areas outside of Rawalpindi. According to the study, just 5 of the respondents were female, while the remaining 25 were male, owing to the fact that boys can go anywhere at any time. In line with the previous debate, the majority of respondents (70%) had fled Afghanistan due to conflict, while 30% were discovered to be locals.

This study also revealed that the majority of the kids were illiterate, however some were literate. Only 50% of street children had completed elementary school, 10% had dropped out at the intermediate level, and 40% were illiterate out of a total population of 30. Some of them were enrolled in street schools run by non-governmental organizations in Rawal Town, I-8 Markaz, and Mehar Abadi. This research also indicated that many street children did not have access to sufficient housing, with most respondents living in or sharing rental dwellings and tents, while orphans were also discovered among the respondents. The study looks at their parents' occupations and discovers that the majority of them were beggars, garbage pickers, and labourers.

Nature of abuse and determinants

According to the findings, a substantial number of children were confronting hunger and poverty as a result of displacement and migration, either with their families or alone and with their friends. While others were runaways who fled their homes due to abuse, poverty, unsatisfactory relationships with family members, or a desire for freedom. The majority of them were involved in scavenging, begging, working as a helper, and selling small items; however, one cannot ignore the fact of sexual, physical, and emotional/psychological exploitation associated with street life, as the study shows that 76% of children experienced physical abuse, 87% experienced verbal abuse, 26% experienced sexual assault, and 33% experienced emotional/psychological abuse. These sorts of child abuse are plainly harmful to children's physical and mental well-being. Although these categories differ from child to child, when abuse occurs, it reflects a community's failure to safeguard its children.

Local perception of child abuse

Study reveals that street children encounter more abuse due to their perception of themselves. Making sex and child sexual abuse a social taboo is also another reason that makes the lives of victims difficult. Social taboos are acts or things which are sinful and immoral. Religion plays a very significant part in it. In the society under study, talking about sex and sexual activities is taboo. Respondents reported that “talking about child abuse and especially sexual abuse is a taboo subject we do not like talking openly about things which are socially and morally prohibited in our culture”. Due to this, cases of child abuse are not reported and the number of cases is increasing day by day. One of the respondents said that

“our society did not consider physical, verbal, and psychological abuses as an abuse. They think that only sexual assault is abuse. Because they also

humiliate, exploit and discriminate street children verbally, physically and emotionally”.

Role of the general public towards victimized children

Because of the taboo, these perpetrators remain outside. Islamabad has an 85% literacy rate, however many people keep their mouths shut and do not accuse the perpetrators. However, as a result of many awareness programs and the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Act 2020, people are now in support of harshly penalizing the culprits. Because street children spend the majority of their time on the streets, it is the obligation of society to create a child-friendly environment. Studies reveal that many general public were of the view that as responsible citizens, we can all identify areas or boundaries where children are in greater danger of abuse. Report the incident to the nearest police station and provide personalized care to street children who have been exploited through mediation, counselling, informal education, and other practical efforts. Other tasks for society as a whole include preventing abuse among street children, helping such victims, creating a supportive environment, building trust, and vocational training.

Judicial system

This study also discloses the laws related to child protection in Islamabad. This study reveals that the issue of street children has been mostly ignored in Pakistan in recent years. In fact, neither the development nor any one rule directly addresses the subject of child safety. Although in Pakistan the first child protection plan was drafted in 2009, it has still to be employed. ICT police conduct many operations to reduce child beggars and create a special force that rescues children from the beggary mafia. In 2021, a campaign was started against the safety and protection of street children by the SSP investigation of capital police, they worked on beggars and ignored the other aspects of streetism

like abuse. The study also shows that a significant number of street children were sold to the Gulf States for camel jockeys which is illegal. There is a need for a proper shelter home for street children which provides them with food, shelter and security. As initiated in Peshawar, the project is initiated by Pakistan

Tehreek-e-Insaf-led government known as “Zamang kor” means our homes. Its aim is to collect all the homeless children under one roof where they can live, study, play and feel free from the burdens of begging and street life. Unfortunately in Islamabad, there is no such shelter.

Role of NGOs in spreading education

Street children are frequently from low-income homes and are forced to live on the streets owing to a lack of resources. They are particularly vulnerable to abuse because they lack basic protection and resources. Some of the NGOs of Islamabad play a vital role in improving the development of street children. Few of them working on providing education to these vulnerable children, and some of them were raising their voices for their rights and protection. These organizations are voluntary and are perceived to be motivated by compassion, promoting sustainable implementation of their policies and achieving positive results. They have emerged as key players in various social development programs. They provide free books, uniforms, bags, education and incentives to attract these children towards education. Their parents forced them to earn money to feed their family instead of education so it is necessary to first educate and give awareness to parents about the importance of education. Many parents are careless and irresponsible towards their children, particularly fathers. Their economic conditions are really bad without any backup system and they have to work for everything for their survival.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, children are pressured by their guardians to work at an early age. Aside from their work, they were involved in a variety of other hidden activities and some children are forced to do these activities. However, poverty is the primary source of stress for children. As a result of their bad economic circumstances, they have no alternative but to seek for themselves on the street, where they face verbal, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse on a daily basis. The Afghan refugees have no access to conventional schooling, and they begin picking garbage at an early age. This research revealed that a large number of street children survived on the streets of Islamabad, including both "on the street" and "off the street" children. Among these children, there is another type of child which revealed during the interviews, the “illegitimate child”. These youngsters faced more challenges than other street children regarding their identity and social status.

Physical and verbal abuse is widespread among street children, and they are not safe from those who are supposed to protect them. The street is where these children learn many crimes such as stealing, prostitution, and drug use. Child trafficking is another form of abuse which is widespread in our country, street children are more exposed to this form of abuse because neither their parents nor anybody else is looking after them. These tiny beings are tremendously gifted, but they are underappreciated and lack a platform to show their inherent abilities. These findings reveal the miserable conditions of street children. To address these difficulties, states must firmly implement strategies that are grounded in the realities of street children. To safeguard children from neglect, abuse, and exploitation, a healthy atmosphere should be provided in which the child can live life fearlessly.

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