

VICTIMISATION AMONGST STREET CHILDREN IN SUDAN AND ETHIOPIA: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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The phenomenon of street children has become an integral feature of the urban landscape in many parts of the world. In most third world cities, they are the shadowy presence that fill the background of daily life, doing odd jobs, scavenging for food, begging and stealing.

The term "street child" is too broad to embrace the varieties of children who throng the streets of the cities in the developing world (and cities in the developed world as well). The UNICEF typology of street children is a broadly accepted categorising system which identifies three types of street children. The first is children on the street; these children are economically engaged in street life, but have regular and continuing links with their families. Indeed, they are frequently major contributors to their family income. They are often found working in the street during the day, returning to their family home at night. The second category, children of the street, live, eat and sleep in the street. Such children are not only economically engaged in street life, but are also socially centred on the street. The street may be regarded as their main home. The third category is the abandoned child. This child lives and works on the street and has absolutely no supporter or provider beyond him or herself. Contrary to popular opinion, this category of child has generally been found over a wide variety of locations to account for only a very small percentage of the street child population.

Street children are perhaps the most vulnerable group in any society. They have few advocates, can wield no political strength, and regardless of official views, are generally regarded by low level officials at best as nuisances to be tolerated, and at the worst as little more than vermin. The general public is also likely to have a low opinion of street children due to the latter's perceived laziness and involvement in crime. The excesses in the treatment of street children in some Latin American countries, which have included murder and systematic torture and assaults, bear horrific testimony to this. Children in general are regarded as being in need of protection from abuse, but the nature of the lives of street children exposes them to an almost unimaginable potential for exploitation, often by agents of the state who are in positions of authority. They are often a source of embarrassment to governments seeking to portray a modern image, their very presence acting as a reminder of disintegrating social conditions. Working children exist on the fringes of the economy. They work for long hours for the bare minimum pay, often in dangerous conditions. The very vulnerability and marginality of the lives of street children magnifies the effects of any form of victimisation. In a situation where

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achieving a subsistence income is a daily struggle, any diminution of that income, or any circumstances that diminishes the potential to earn an income, must be viewed with extreme gravity. Whilst, therefore, the amounts involved in theft for example from a street child may be trivial in the particular context of a marginal life on the street, the effects of theft may be little short of catastrophic.

This paper describes research conducted in 1990 in Khartoum, Sudan and in 1992 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The work reported here is preliminary and descriptive in character. It is preliminary in the sense that it is still on-going, being an element of a larger project looking at the causes of child displacement and street children, and the nature of their lives. It is descriptive because the issue of victimisation is itself an element of the broader process that characterises the street child's life.

The data from Sudan reported here is from a larger study in Khartoum which involved an extensive series of in-depth interviews with 80 street children, usually on the street, or in drop in centres in Khartoum. Whilst addressing more general issues, questions were also included which addressed the nature and extent of victimisation; these questions were open ended, allowing children to describe their experiences, and yielded essentially qualitative rather than quantitative data. The work reported from Ethiopia is drawn from a survey of 1,000 street children, which investigated their migrational, familial, economic and socio-demographic history and circumstances of initiation into street life in the capital city, Addis Ababa and three regional towns -Nazareth, Mekele and Bahir Dar. This study has collected extensive qualitative and quantitative data about the nature of street life, and the experiences of street children. A section of this study focussed on issues related to victimisation. A sub sample of 60 children (28 male, 32 female) in Addis Ababa are reported here who have been interviewed in greater depth about their experience of victimisation, with a view to the construction of a case study series. In both Sudan and Ethiopia, interviews were conducted through interpreters.

Collecting information from street children is not easy. They are highly suspicious of adults, and the nature of their lives, being essentially public, makes the gathering of any kind of sensitive information difficult. Structured sampling techniques, or other forms of methodological sophistication are difficult if not impossible to organise given the chaotic lives of the children. We have taken the view that it is more important to establish a sense of trust between the children and the researchers, and to spend time being seen by them as not threatening, rather than to develop what may in reality be spuriously sophisticated sampling procedures. The nature of work of this kind makes data collection an essentially emergent process, yielding reliable qualitative information from extensive interview and case study material. More quantitative data has been collected, but is of doubtful utility when dealing with potentially sensitive issues. The involvement of Europeans in this work has, in our opinion, made the children more open and willing to talk than they might have been in the presence of only a national. The presence of a European is taken as an indication that assurances of confidentiality will be kept, and that there is no hidden official involvement in the work. The development of a trusting rapport between interviewer and interviewee is of crucial importance. When dealing with sensitive issues such as rape, prostitution, assault and theft, very little information will be forthcoming from the child unless he or she trusts that

this will have no adverse consequences for him/her. We were careful at all times to try and maximise such a degree of trust.

The street children in Khartoum are almost exclusively boys. The model age range from our data is from 12 - 14, with an average age of 13.07 years. Eighty-five percent of Sudanese street children were born outside of Khartoum, and over 50 percent had travelled to Khartoum unaccompanied by family from rural areas. In contrast, boys and girls are present amongst Ethiopian street children in a ratio of about 70:30. The age range of Ethiopian children interviewed is from 10 to 17, with an average of 14.1. Most children were born in Addis Ababa, or came from urban backgrounds in Ethiopia, in contrast to the rural backgrounds of the Sudanese boys. Related to this, whilst many Sudanese street children can be described as children of the street, most Ethiopian street children are children on the street, living with their families.

Below we look at the summaries of the data collected in the main areas of victimisation of street children in Sudan and Ethiopia under a number of headings.

Sexual assault

As mentioned already, the street children in Khartoum are almost exclusively boys. Nevertheless, the fear of sexual assault (mainly by other street boys) is very real, particularly among younger boys. The collection of quantitative data on the incidence or nature of sexual assaults amongst these boys is both very difficult and problematic. Any reference to this problem, given the present strongly Islamic regime in Sudan, may reinforce existing negative stereotypes and lead to even greater victimisation of these children by the authorities. The childrens' own accounts, however, are rich sources of information about this sensitive issue and do give grounds for concern. By contrast, in Ethiopia, there is no evidence of sexual victimisation of street boys by older boys or by anyone else. This may be due to the widespread incidence and acceptance of heterosexual prostitution which provides a more conventional outlet for sexual gratification. However, widespread evidence does emerge of sexual victimisation of street girls in Ethiopia, mainly by street boys. Of the 32 interviewed, 21 girls had been sexually attacked. Those girls who were not attacked were either too young (that is, not sexually mature), already pregnant or had a child with them. Thus, one can conclude that sexually mature street girls are subject to a high risk of sexual attack.

Of the 21 girls who were sexually attacked 21 (or 37.5 percent of the total sample) reported having been raped. For many girls, this had occurred a number of times, the perpetrators usually being a group of drunken street boys. The average age of the girls' first experience of rape is 14.25 years.

Of the total of 32 girls, 7 had been pregnant. One of these was due to rape, one was due to prostitution, two to legitimate marriages (traditional type early marriages) and three were due to relationships where the girl was taken in as "wife" by an older boy. In all three of these latter cases, the boy severed contact with the girl when she became pregnant. The average age for these seven girls becoming pregnant is 15.8 years.

Sexual solicitation occurs widely. Twenty-two of the 32 girls had been asked to act as prostitutes either by bar owners (most bars in Addis Ababa employ a number of girls to work for them as "bar ladies". Their function is to serve, to encourage

customers to drink and to be prostitutes at the convenience of the customers willing to pay), or by private individuals requesting their services. The 10 girls not solicited were either sexually immature or had a child.

Within the context of the hardships of street life, prostitution is in our view a form of victimisation. On the basis of the interviews reported here, an estimated 40 - 50 percent of street girls resort to prostitution at some point. Protection is rarely taken against AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy.

The result of such experiences is that the greatest expressed fear of street girls is rape. Once a girl becomes sexually mature, she is subject to the threat of rape. The risk increases greatly at night, and to avoid this they must be in some form of shelter by nightfall, which effectively imposes a nightfall curfew on sexually mature street girls.

Theft

Theft is an ever present feature of street life. Of the 64 children interviewed in depth in Ethiopia asked about theft, 44 (or 69 percent) reported having had things stolen from them. For the younger, more vulnerable, children this seems to be a regular (daily) occurrence. The risk of theft is such that children develop strategies to avoid carrying money on their person. They may pay rent in advance (many street children, particularly girls, sleep in the relative security and comfort of rooms or houses which are let for a small fee), or leave their money with someone they trust. The most likely offender is an older street person. There is another sense in which street children may be robbed - through non-payment of work done. The majority of the children interviewed in depth in Addis Ababa reported having been cheated out of earnings. Most children to whom this had happened reported it happening "frequently". Typical work carried out by street children is working on taxis (shouting for customers and collecting fares), shining shoes, washing or minding cars, carrying goods. From the above, it is clear that there is widespread exploitation of working children. They are the most vulnerable sector of the labour force and this fact is frequently abused by those making use of their services. In the face of this abuse the children are, largely, helpless (the exception being the widespread practice of tyre-slashing and window-slashing by taxi boys who have been cheated). The Sudanese situation appears to be broadly comparable.

Beatings

Not only are the street children subject to robbery on the street. They are also subject to assaults and beatings. Few children escape beatings. In Addis Ababa, 26 of the 28 boys reported having been beaten on the street. For girls, the most likely cause of a beating is when they refuse sex to boys. Another common reason is for resisting when people (usually older street boys) demand money from them. For boys, the beatings are a regular occurrence, happening a number of times a week for 15 of the 26 boys interviewed in depth in Addis Ababa. These beatings are often very serious. Broken bones and stabbings are very common, even in this relatively small sample. No less than 7 of the 28 boys interviewed had been stabbed. The most common reasons for beatings amongst street boys are: a) while being robbed; b) during fighting between gangs; c) by police.

As in many countries, the police are often responsible for the beatings which street children receive. In Ethiopia, the police of the previous regime (the Derg, ousted in May 1991) were responsible for savage and brutal treatment of street children. The almost universal hatred and fear of police of the Derg regime among Ethiopian street children is fuelled by experiences of rape, beatings, theft and the practice of "rounding up" vagrants to work on state farms. Amongst the relatively small number of interviews reported here, there are a number of explicit examples of torture. These include beatings with sticks, resulting in lost teeth, severe bruising, fractured skull, stabbings, electric shocks applied to the feet.

During the early life of the present regime, harsh methods were adopted to control crime by the victorious Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In an effort to establish civil order and control crime, the EPRDF shot thieves on sight, for example, and their bodies were left on display. Anecdotal accounts suggest that it is reasonable to assume that some street children were shot in this way. The situation has now stabilised considerably, however, and the Ethiopian authorities are introducing a civilian police force to take over duties from the army. There is much less evidence of ill treatment now from the EPRDF: indeed, most street girls report that they can count on protection from the soldiers. It is too early to tell for the police force. In contrast many Sudanese street boys report very favourable contact with the Sudanese police, and there are a number of accounts of the police acting in a very positive manner towards street children. They appear to provide a measure of protection for street children, and this is evidenced by the fact that children choose to sleep outside police stations.

Security

Perhaps a most fundamental quality of street childrens' vulnerability (and, thus, victimisation), relates to their being outside of adult or family protection. They lack security and support. It might be imagined that a fundamental requirement of a sense of security and psychological well-being relates to safety of night shelter. Sudanese children were asked how safe they thought their place of sleeping was - some 41 percent judged their sleeping place unsafe. Children in Ethiopia experience similar feelings of insecurity. Amongst girls in particular, there is widespread fear of being out after dark. A large number of boys interviewed also had cause to fear the night time or moving outside the area of the city they knew; that is, there exists a widespread and generalised fear of theft and assault. Perhaps more than anything else, this infringement on feelings of safety and security amongst street children illustrates their vulnerability and the harshness of the life they lead.

To conclude, the lives of street children are, therefore, at one level bleak. Theft and assault are the principle direct forms of victimisation street children suffer. Sexual assault and, therefore, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, are a perennial source of worry for Ethiopian street girls. In the main, the principle agents of victimisation are older children, mainly boys, who exploit the vulnerabilities of age, situation and sex and this presumably reflects opportunity. However, to survive on the street, the children must be resilient, and in contrast to the negative account of street life which a focus on victimisation inevitably gives, the street also offers children positive qualities. One is the opportunity to improve their condition by their own efforts, through earning an income, however small. Furthermore, sometimes

that income is used not only to buy food and necessities, but also to pay school fees to buy education. Another important quality of street life is the sense of freedom the child has. Rehabilitation initiatives to help children often place constraints on this freedom, rather than approaching children in their own terms, which is one important reason for their limited success.

