Characteristics of Street Children

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Critically Discuss the Specific Nature of Street Children. Explain How Their Characteristics are Different from Urban Poverty in General.

Introduction

Street children are one of the most vulnerable groups of urban poor. They face difficulties while living in the streets, and they also develop their own ways to overcome such difficulties. They have some common characteristics with the urban poor in general, but they still have their own different characteristics that distinguish them from other urban poor groups.

This paper will present the characteristics of street children as a group of urban poor and will identify the differences between street children and the urban poor in general. It is divided into two main sections. The first section will talk about definitions of street children, causes of this phenomenon, and some of street children's characteristics. The second section will discuss how street children's characteristics are different from those of the urban poor in general. Then, conclusions will be drawn.

Street Children

Definition

There are many definitions for street children, but the definition introduced by Inter-NGO Programme (cited in UNCHS, 2000, p.73) covers important dimensions:

Any girl or boy … for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults

There are two groups of street children. The first group is 'Children of the street', which refers to children who are homeless, and streets in urban areas are their source of livelihood, where they sleep and live. The second group is 'Children on the street', who work and live on the streets in the daytime but return back home at night where they sleep, although some of them sleep occasionally on the streets (UNCHS, 2000). Nevertheless, there is no clear distinction between the two groups as they often differ from their common definition: some 'children of the street' may still have links with their families and some 'children on the street' often sleep on the street (UNICEF, 2001).

Causes

There are two main causes of the phenomenon of street children. The first is the economic stress and poor conditions that families face due to industrialization and urbanization. The second cause is changes in the traditional family structure, especially when women became the main contributor to households' economies (Patel, 1990; Le Roux and Smith, 1998; Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). Nevertheless, poverty cannot stand alone as the only reason behind the phenomenon of street children, as a comparative research conducted on street children and working children in

Characteristics of Street Children

Written by Abdelfatah Ibrahim

Brazil shows that the per capital household income of families of street children is higher than that of working children's families (Rizzini et al., 1994).

Characteristics

Street children face difficulties in providing themselves with good sources of food, clean drinking water, health care services, toilets and bath facilities, and adequate shelter. They also suffer from absence of parental protection and security due to the missing connection with their families. In addition, there is a lack of any kind of moral and emotional support (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999).

Regarding gender representation, the majority of street children are boys (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999; Le Roux and Smith, 1998). Females are less represented owing to cultural sanctions: girls are more controlled by their families. Moreover, when they escape from their families, they either work as servants for a family or are caught by pimps; it is particularly because they are more subject to abuse than boys on the streets that they prefer any other place than the streets (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999).

The average age at which street children start living on the streets is between 9 and 12 years old, and they keep living on the streets until they reach the age of 15 to 16. When they became older they start to look for stable jobs with better wages (Rizzini et al., 1994).

As for culture, morals and traditions, street children usually are not concerned about culture and morals, owing to being away from their family since childhood. Lugalla and Mbwambo (1999, p.332) described street children as "… not only homeless or roofless, but they are also culturally rootless".

Regarding their health conditions, street children are subject to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV due to unprotected sexual behaviours among them and also because of casual sexual relationships. Girls who offer sex in exchange for security and shelter cannot oppose any unsafe sexual behaviour because of their weak position (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). This is unlike the urban poor in general who tend to live a normal life with only one partner, which helps control the transmission of sexual diseases: the urban poor are not forced to practice unsafe sexual behaviours like street children.

In terms of social networks, children who do not have ties with their families form peer groups. These peer groups play the role of family and are a source of solidarity, economic and emotional support for their members. Each group has a leader who is obeyed by group members, reflecting how well organized they are (Le Roux and Smith, 1998; Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999).

Street children are subject to dangerous and illegal activities such as drug dealing, crime, theft and gang activities (UNCHS, 2000). However, many of them also undertake legal economic activities such as parking, car washing, baggage loading and others (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999).

In terms of security, some of them depend on peer groups to provide them with security and protection. Girls are different from boys in forming their security groups. Girls group usually have an older girl who has a sexual relation with a boy or a guard who provides them with protection in return (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999).

Comparison Between Different Characteristics of Street Children and Urban Poverty

In order to compare different characteristics between street children and the urban poor in general, six factors will be employed. These factors will be related to poor and vulnerable conditions that characterize each group and how each group manages to live in such conditions.

1. Shelter

Street children usually do not have a permanent place to sleep. Many of them sleep in the streets or on pavements

Characteristics of Street Children

Written by Abdelfatah Ibrahim

near shops and malls, while others prefer sleeping at bus terminals, railways platforms, under bridges and by cinemas (Patel, 1990; Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). Meanwhile, some girls prefer spending their nights with security guards due to being vulnerable and subject to abuse if they spent their nights on the streets (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). So, they try to find a suitable place to sleep according to their surrounding circumstances (UNICEF, 2002).

Meanwhile, many urban poor live in very poor quality housing known as slums where people do not have access to one or all of these services: drinking water, sanitation and electricity. Nevertheless – for example in India- some slums are legally accepted and recognized by the government, and provided with these services (Loughhead et al., 2001).

It could be argued that despite the poor conditions of slums, they provide a permanent place to live in, and are more secure than living in the streets like street children. However, slum dwellers need to pay for rent, electricity and water while street children do not need to pay for any of these services, which would reduce the financial burden on them.

2. Income

Street children work as car-parking boys, car washers, guards for the cars, shoe shiners and baggage loaders. Some older girls exchange sex for money (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). Some of them rely on selling goods and begging in traffic for making an income. Others are involved in illegal work like drug dealing (UNICEF, 2002). In order to secure their daily basic needs, they set up a system whereby each group has a zone where they undertake their activities to avoid any kind of competition for the available resources (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). On the other hand, slum dwellers are involved in the informal sector as a source of generating income that represents an acceptable alternative to the formal sector. However, the informal sector has some disadvantages that affect the poor, such as absence of social insurance and vulnerability to economic shocks (Baker, 2008).

It could be argued that despite street children seeming more vulnerable than the urban poor in general, they can manage to afford their daily life needs due to being very well organized. For example, they know worshipping places and times so they can go there at prayer time in order to gain money or food. They are also aware of religious festivals and celebrations, as these days bring them good sources of income. They also use tourist sites and NGOs as a good source for survival. However, being chased by police and state authorities hinders their activities (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999; UNICEF, 2002).

3. Infrastructure Amenities

Some street children use seawater for washing, while others use public bathrooms. Sometimes they use leaking water from public pipes or use public water kiosks to fulfil their needs for drinking water. However, they are harassed either by people or by police. Some use public and railway toilets while others use pavements, parks and the seaside (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999; Patel, 1990).

Slum dwellers also suffer meeting their needs for water. Interviews conducted with slum dwellers in India show the extent of this suffering. People who have money can pay to install water taps or buy water, while those who cannot afford that bring water from public taps, police stations and leaking pipes. Some others bring water from houses where they work (Bapat and Agarwal, 2003).

It can be noticed that both groups do suffer to access to drinking and washing water, but street children suffer more because of being chased by the police and not being accepted by society. So, both groups are using similar ways to access water, but street children are not accepted in doing so, while the slum dwellers can do the same freely. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged and legalized that slum dwellers have the right to civic facilities in some cities (Patel, 1990).

4. Social Network

Characteristics of Street Children

Written by Abdelfatah Ibrahim

As mentioned earlier, street children depend on peer groups as their social network for their protection, support and solidarity. The urban poor in general also set up a sort of social network that provides them with means of support, especially economic support and solidarity (Burns, 2007).

5. Health Care

Besides being subject to HIV/Aids (Lockhart, 2008; Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999) street children are also exposing to other type of diseases because of the harsh environment where they live. As for treatment, it depends on how much money street children can afford when one of them becomes sick. If they have money, they go to the chemist to buy medicine, especially if they have some knowledge about medicines, but if they do not have money, they wait until their bodies heal naturally (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999). Some of them also receive support from their friends during illness (Patel, 1990). Whereas, urban poor people who are living in slums are subject to other infectious diseases such as tuberculosis due to the unhealthy environment and overcrowding, but they have no access to health services (Loughhead et al., 2001). However, they have alternatives to finance their needs through possibility of savings, access to loans, borrowing, and they also may consider selling some assets (Collins et al, 2009) and this money can be used to access to health care services.

6. Assets

Some of the urban poor have assets that help them to overcome difficult living conditions. One of the most important assets is having a house where they live, regardless of its condition. The Esther case study (Schlyter, 2001) is an example of an urban poor family that has different assets, including having a house and renting out part to lodgers, having a sewing machine, and also having two of her children contributing to the household economy.

Street children do not have this kind of assets that the urban poor have. They own nothing except the clothes they wear and what they earn from work during the day (Patel, 1990). It seems that the only asset street children have is being healthy, so they can manage to generate income to cover their daily needs. Girls are different from boys in this regard, as they consider their bodies their assets when they sell sex in return for money and protection.

Conclusion

Different characteristics of street children have been presented in this paper. Some characteristics of street children were compared with the characteristics of the urban poor in order to highlight the differences and similarities.

In conclusion, although many of the characteristics of street children are different from those of the urban poor, they have one thing in common, which is benefiting from the places where they live. Despite the harsh conditions both groups live in, they make good use of the surrounding environment to survive. In other words, slums are the source of livelihood, social networks and shelter for their dwellers (Burns, 2007). Similarly, street children do benefit from the streets as a source of generating income, as a large number of street children who still have ties with their families contribute to the income of their families (Rizzini, 1994). Thus, it would be recommended to consider the advantages of slums and streets for their residents, besides the disadvantages, in future research in order to gather a holistic image that would help to address these phenomena in the appropriate way.

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Characteristics of Street Children

Written by Abdelfatah Ibrahim

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