Self-reliance: A response to early childhood trauma among street children

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 05 September 2020

Received in rev. form 16 Oct. 2020

Accepted 18 October 2020

Keywords:

Family, Street Children, Reliance

JEL Classification:

I3

ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which family environment influences children's behavior and how an evening of parents serves as a platform for rehabilitating the family environment, preventing and decreasing street children's number. This descriptive study intends to create awareness of the prevention and reintegration of street children. Researchers purposively selected 58 respondents: 40 street children, 12 parents, and 6 local leaders. Data were collected through interviews, storytelling, and focus group discussions and qualitatively analyzed using content analysis. Results revealed domestic violence, identity crisis, born from sex workers, children abuse, poor parenting, and poverty to be factors contributing to street children as emphasized by 100% of children, 87% of local leaders, and 67% of parents. Street children can only be controlled if major stressors that push them to develop self-reliance are socially and economically addressed. It was revealed that the Evening of Parents is a platform of family transformation to successfully prevent and rehabilitate street children focusing on parents' responsibilities towards children's wellbeing and better future.

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Introduction

Street children have widely become a serious problem hindering socio-economic development. Despite efforts of Government of Rwanda to education for all and provided a platform where each child experiences the goodness and values of families care and love, children accuse parents to be predecessors of socializing anti-values (Lawrence & Sarah, 2015; Amahoro Builders report, 2017). Domestic violence, adultery, sex workers, poverty, alcoholism, irresponsible parents, drug abusers continue to spoil family environment increasing the number of street children.

The tenacity of the problem of street children defies the right of children and parents' responsibilities. Reintegration of street children requires a deep analysis at different levels (families, local communities and decision makers) of internal and external stressors that push them to develop self-reliance as a response to their socio-emotional pains. The absent bond of parents-children, the father or unknown father, step father/mother, lack of basic needs, domestic violence, identity crisis, child abuse and abuse of caretakers are major stressors. The research is motivated by the need of understanding negative effects of dysfunctional families on children's behavior and the contribution of evening of parents in restoring conducive family environment.

Therefore, the leading questions are:

- i. *How does family environment influence children's behavior?*
- ii. *How can evening of parents serve as a platform of rehabilitating family environment and decreasing the phenomenon of street children?*

For a deep understanding and contribution to the problem under discussion, 58 respondents were purposively selected and the following hypotheses were tested.

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H1: Family environment influences children's behavior.

H2: Evening of parents is a platform of rehabilitating family environment and decreasing the number of street children.

This study organizes as follows. A literature review is built on theoretical background and empirical studies. Following this section, a research and methodology will be introduced. Subsequently, discussions and conclusions will be highlighted.

Literature Review

Different studies conducted as well as theories related to the study were reviewed. Literature review turns around the theoretical background, conceptual framework and empirical review.

Theoretical background

The section presents theories on which the research was grounded. They are namely socialization, attachment and resilience theories.

Socialization theory

Socialization can be defined as a range of practices by which children internalize values of the social system. It is made to conform and create new perspective to adopt and adapt to changes. Higher level of parents' involvement in children development guarantees social-emotional security of children's competency (Flouri et al, 2010; Froyen et al, 2013). Children considered as asocial being at every early age are transformed into fully social adults firstly by parents and secondary by environment. Nevertheless, unfavorable family environment socializes children with anti-values instead of values (Halarambos & Holborn, 2018). Adversities that are part of this process have potential to disrupt or challenge adaptive functioning and development of children and this has a long-lasting impact on childhood and adulthood (Obradovic, Shaffer & Masten, 2012).

The conception of social-economic transformation that leads to an increase of ability over time with the goal of achieving a realistic outcome by the end of childhood and brings the core of development is changing over age. The change is not haphazard, not temporary and not easily reversible (Schaffer, 2006). Family and environment engrain children in a solid foundation, provide emotional support, help regulate intimate affections, give sense of human species reproduction and provides social identity to its members (Lawrence & Sarah, 2015). Family is the main pillar of human development; it performs several essential functions for the society (Amato, 2012, Cutas & Smajdor, 2017).

Attachment theory

It is through repeated interactions with parents that children learn values and get a strong basic foundation for their future lives (Obradovic, Shaffer & Masten, 2012). This prior consideration gives to them a sense of security and provides a psychological resource which facilitates exploration of new opportunities, develop autonomy and well-being (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). In the context of children born in unhealthy family environment, they consume parent's behaviors that unpave their ways to socio-emotional integration. This family dysfunction affects their holistic development and increases their vulnerability (Marito & Evan, 2008; MINEDUC, 2011). In such situation, children are exposed to various misbehaviors and trauma that increase constantly huge consequences.

Parents' ability to perceive, interpret and react promptly to their children's social and emotional development needed for their relationships is not acquired; their lives are jeopardized. A secure relationship in families fosters not only positive development outcomes but also influences the quality of future relationships with peers and partners (Ijzendoorn, 2012). The bond of parent-child is a basic foundation that assists children to (i) adjust their emotions in stressful situations, (ii) explore their environment with confidence, and (iii) foster their cognitive, emotional and language development (Zautra, Hall & Murray, 2010; WHO, 2014).

Children who are only secured and attached to their parents are predisposed to display positive social behaviors. Therefore, unpleasant and disorganized family environment forces children to become prematurely responsible to the extent of running out of their homes to the street as an alternative solution. When parents are available and appropriately responsive to their children's social integration needs, social and emotional security pose a solid base (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Resilience theory

Being resilient requires competence and decisions to take risks for better solutions to an existing problem (Ungar, 2012; Luthar, 2013; Masten, 2013). Ungar uses the concepts of context and culture to define resilience theory. It is agreed that children are not born with it, it is not a special quality that only some children have; resilience is a result of interaction between children and their environment (Masten, 2013; Luthar et al, 2015). Most of theories make a clear statement that risk and protective factors are not bipolar. Using example of child adoption explains the bipolarity of risk and protective factors (Flauri, Tzavidis & Kallis, 2010; Masten, 2011; Rutter, 2013). The key element of resilience theory is to identify protective factors present in respective families of street children, in schools they previously attended if there is any and in communities.

Conceptual framework

Figure 1: Street children trajectory

Conceptual framework presents the trajectory as well as causes of street children. It is a result of dysfunctional families which lead children to look for alternative solutions and adopt street life. Dysfunction families and sexual workers lead families to poverty and make children lack positive socialization. Identity crisis is also a major cause of developing self-reliance and ending up with street life.

Empirical Review

Street children phenomenon has been a concern of many writers due to its magnitude causes and consequences. Chinyai (2017) conducted a study on psycho-social challenges faced by street children in Zimbabwe. Data were collected through interviews with 12 respondents and thematic analysis was used to qualitatively analyze data. The results revealed that street children face many challenges such as lack of shelter, food, sanitation, violence, sexual exploitation, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, discrimination and mental health problems. For surviving, they are engaged in different activities among others menial jobs, begging, scavenging and stealing.

Hum et al. (2018) carried out a research on Street Children's Problem in Getting Education: Economic and Parental Factors in Kendari (Indonesia). Researchers interacted with 67 respondents (35 street children and 32 parents) purposively selected. Data were collected through questionnaire and interview and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results indicated that children in Kendari adopt street life due to financial and family problems which make them unable to get education tuition fees and thus lead them to school dropout.

Hai (2014) in his paper entitled problems faced by street children: A study on some selected places in Dhaka city (Bangladesh) qualitatively analyzed their situation using 74 respondents. Poverty, insecurity, powerless and inadequate institutional support make worse their living conditions who in turn undergo various sufferings to survive and deprived from their rights. They are involved in jobs that are underpaid as a survival mode and which make their life threatened. They develop misbehavior and anti-values as a coping mechanism to avoid or approach those who have made them suffer.

Woan et al. (2013) carried out a research on the health status of street children and youth in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review of the literature. They quantitatively analyzed 108 articles and revealed that due to unhealthier youth living conditions, they are more exposed to diseases, infections and problems of reproductive health. The well-being of street children and their vulnerability to chronic diseases and cognitive deficits have been overlooked.

Research and Methodology

The study is a descriptive research which used a qualitative approach through storytelling, individual interview and focus group discussion (Neuman, 2011; Babbie & Mouton, 2010).

Table 1: Sample size

Respondents' categories	Number
Street children	40
Parents	12
Local leaders	6
TOTAL	58

Judgmental sampling was used to select 58 respondents that include 15 street children rehabilitated and reintegrated in their respective families and schooling, 11 street children who are still in the process of reeducation, 14 street children who are still in the street, 12 parents of those vulnerable children and 6 local leaders (Kitchin & Tate, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). From the above-mentioned population, major stressors that are children's push factors to the street were identified by all groups and individuals. In search for solution to family stressors, children develop self-reliance, find out their own way of living, behaving that release them from parents and caregivers' power and control. In most cases, children misbehavior is originated from their family environment. Data were qualitatively analyzed using content analysis to systematically categorize, classify and summarize data (Babbie & Mouton, 2010; Kitchin & Tate, 2013). In presenting respondents' ideas, unreal names were given for confidentiality purpose.

Findings

Discussion and analysis of collected data was based on attachment and resilience theories. According to various authors, attachment is the emotional bond of infants to parents or care givers. It is a pattern of emotional and behavioral interaction that develops over time especially in contexts where infants express a need for attention, comfort, support and security. Self-reliance is a response to negative context and experiences that have potentially disrupted children and causing a mal adaptation to the context (Obradovic, Shaffer & Masten, 2012).

A child and his mother's stories

Born in every challenging situation of poverty, the mother was a sex worker. After she got unwanted pregnancy, she decided to marry one of her clients because she was convinced that she could not continue to do her business. Her husband was not previously informed about the situation. Few months later, a baby boy was born and the mother persuaded the husband to be the father. The situation became heavy; domestic violence took place and all the time the husband could come home in the evening and did not want to hear the baby's voice. When Popi cried, the mother was asked to get out of the room with the baby and it was a house of single room. The situation was not settled till the time the little boy was five years and aware of it. No one could tell him why he was the cause of family conflict and the confusing situation persisted. He was beaten many times, slept outside with his mother. Tired of being a problem between parents, when he was eight years, he decided to leave home and joined the street. He is sixteen years and has spent eight years in the street. He calls himself a primary school graduate in the street. The mother is the only one to know the story but she does not know the biological father of the boy. She assumed that her husband is the father but he is not. Popi stated that *'Even if my mother told me that her husband is my father, I do not believe her. He is my step- father. I do not know who my father is.'*

From the target group of 40 street children, 57% have same stories that differ only in details. Shameful, early childhood stories threaten children's identity. It is a total disaster when they discover it themselves. Mistreated, rejected and denied fatherhood, children are chocked to realize that they are the source of family conflict while they are innocents. Children's misbehavior is a reaction to family stressors and identify crisis that marred their childhood.

Attachment theories and critical family environment analysis

Socio-cultural attachment of infants to their parents' environment generates emotional bond of children to parents or caregivers. It is described as a pattern of emotional and behavioral interaction that develop over time especially in contexts where children express a need for attention, comfort, support and security. According to the attachment theory, an individual who is cared for in a responsive and consistent manner develops the expectation that others will be available and supportive when needed (Hennighouse, 2010; Ainswirth et al., 2015; Lawrence & Sarah, 2015). During focus group discussion, 12 parents who participated in the study revealed that their background has been an ambush to their children's education. They said that *'we cannot give what we did not receive.'* Children born in such environment do not enjoy the presence of parents as they torture, victimize and abuse them. Thus, the meaning of family is negatively pigeonholed. It is very hard to reeducate children that have been socialized into a cruel family which victimizes them.

During group discussion, 94% of parents revealed other causes of street children which are grounded on unplanned children and poverty. They divert them from parents' responsibilities and make children get an alternative solution which is getting out of home. The sustainability of social transformation of street children may only be responsible when parents and care givers come to understand, adopt and adapt integrative strategies to family healing. When children grow up in a conflicting environment, their future is threatened. Consequently, the situation puts the whole nation into insecurity as confirmed by 100% of children, 87% of local leaders and 67% of parents. Poverty is another major cause of street children stated second and emphasized by 89% of parents, 75% of local leaders and 56% of street children.

Attachment theories and children affection

The affection of children born from different fathers and living with their mum is endangered. The mother herself has an emotional problem as stated. Joe's mother declared that:

From a disorganized and dysfunctional family, I gave birth to four children from three different fathers. I was emotionally wounded. Upset, my children were victimized by that situation. I failed to nourish and assist them emotionally. I found myself alone as all my children adopted street life.

Attachment theory defines parent-child bond as reciprocal affection based on children's need for safety, security and protection. The gap of being four children from three fathers generates an emotional shame and socializes children with anti-values at early age. The insecure attachment patterns compromise the exploration and achievement of self-confidence (Ainsworth et al., 2015). One of the reasons that pushed them to the street is the behavior of parents; his mother and the three husbands. The critical situation where sex workers have same meaning with family is dominant. Mothers assume to get money from a husband to take care of her children. What is the meaning of family? asked one of respondents in group discussion.

There has been a contradiction where the definition of family was vague. Starting with one-week cohabitation was defined as family even if there was no single official agreement. It socializes children with unethical values, sex worker, drug abuse and alcoholism. Keg, a 13 years boy said: *'I was born when my mum was 16 years and she was in primary 6 and I failed to know my mum and my dad because I grew up with my grand mum'*. This means the core meaning of attachment established between children and parents in the first few years of life was absent as the young boy was hanging since the day he was born and left to his grand mum. The strength of attachment theory is that it gives meaning to child life circle and stability. The lack of parents-children attachment distresses the adulthood and impacts adulthood; it is a threat to the community (Holmes, 2014). The family disorder affects children's well-being and competency. Children born in unhealthy and disruptive situation are either frustrated or go wrongly into the same direction with what produced their struggles. They develop violence to revenge families and community and consider them as origin of their traumatic situation. Others make it an opportunity to build a strong decision that sound to come out of their struggles and independently construct their own life (Shean, 2015). In the analyzed case, the situation is still confusing. There is no clear decision of the child and he is still under identity crisis accusing the family and community. On the other hand, parents do not acknowledge their responsibilities to their children's behaviors but local leaders emphasize that both sides (children and parents) have hand in and attribute the big responsibility to parents.

Resilience theory in the context of street children

Resilience is simultaneously a quality of individual personality, consciousness and environment that shape character (Ungar, 2011b). The theory helps to understand and analyze street children's response to their harsh environment due to their families' risk factors. Some of them have shown relatively good outcome despite having experienced serious stresses and adversities. Among 15 street children rehabilitated and reintegrated in their respective families and schooling, 80% perform better in class and prove to be competent like others who grew up in favorable life conditions. One the other hand, 20% have failed to cope up with their past traumatic memories and affected their school performance.

It is important to specify that street children's resilience is viewed as a process and an outcome. In contrast, once street children have developed coping skills towards their families, their parents had different reactions to their rehabilitation and reintegration. Using resilience theory in this research provides a deep analysis of information regarding the potentiality of families. Significant psychological, educational, social and emotional outcomes have been observed once families improve protective factors. Street children considerable positive changes are not only initiated to rehabilitate their childhood but also their future family functioning and society (Shean, 2015). Resilience theory is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior.

Risks factors

Street children experience cumulative risks such as poor and alcoholic parents where domestic violence culminate, born from sex workers, missing loving environment, not being able to know their identity, caregivers that fail to tell them their family stories and/or their fathers, their relatives are also street children and addicted to drug abuse. Forty street children who participated in the study accumulated more than four risks. Giad started that:

Born from a sex worker, I was abandoned by my mother and left to my grand mum who was old and poor. After her death, the care taker took me and left me to someone's gate. The owner took me to orphanage. My real mother visited me and told me that she is my aunt. At 8 years, the care taker visited me at the orphanage and told me the whole scenario of my life. Since then, I developed misbehavior and decided to leave the place and joined the street.

Various theorists label such context to be worse than single risk. Multiple risks have a cumulative effect, reducing qualities of engagement and enhancing disruptiveness (Masten, 2011; Rutter, 2013). Families that are supposed to guarantee protective factors to children have turned into being risk factors. Lack of identity has a negative connotation and implication as it does not only affect victimized children but also future generation.

Protective factors

Not yet mature, street children are not able to understand their environment and identify protective factors that may serve as a breakdown of their incomprehension and stressors. When protective factors are present and identified, children develop resilience which is the ability to effectively cope with adversities. Street children who participated in the study (100%) confirmed having lacked protective factors from their families and decided to leave and develop a sense of self-reliance. Not only children but also parents and local leaders pointed out that lack of conductive family environment is the root cause of street children. Thus, street children need to be assisted by specialists in counseling/therapy to successfully start the healing process and reintegration. In case of street

children sampled, stressors from their respective families continue to lower their competences and defy their reintegration in schools and families.

Even if some families struggle to meet their children's physical needs because of poverty, this may not be the primary factor that lead children to adopt street lifestyle. There are very poor parents who have been able to successfully protect, love and educate their children. The attachment parent-child was very strong and family environment had protective factors that lessened the effect of poverty on their children as confirmed by parents and local leaders.

Among fifteen reintegrated children, the process has been quick and successful for eight children because in their families protective factors were developed. Parents were trained on substantial parenting, preventing, resolving and managing family conflicts (Easterbrooks et al., 2011). Moreover, parents attended counseling sessions as a preparation to the reintegration of their children. On the other hand, seven children were unsuccessfully reintegrated as their families were not prepared to receive them; protective factors were not well adjusted. Reintegration was positive to families that were conscious and ready to guide, orient and re-socialize their children. Street children acquired the capacity to effectively cope with internal and external stressors of their vulnerabilities from the whole community in general and their families in particular. Deliberately, parents, children and the community need to be part of positive change.

Nevertheless, this dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation with the context of significant adversities of street children is possible but cannot completely fill the gap. Reeducation is imperative to avoid double victimization firstly by innate families and secondly by extended families or the community where they are being rehabilitated (Luthar et al., 2015). To embark on this dynamic process of adaptation, family, community and children have to jointly play a major role. If this adaptive contextualization is not possible and tentative solution are oriented to one player, street children phenomenon will continue to increase. One of the best strategies to deal with the increase of street children phenomenon is to strengthen Home-Grown Solution, Evening of parents that is still latent in the community as stated by 100% of parents and 65% of local leaders. Evening of parents is a potential platform of dealing with family reorganization and reeducation that would reinforce community values.

Evening of parents: a platform of increasing protective factors in family settings

Evening of parents is a Home-Grown Solution among others. It started in 2010 initiated by National Women Council (NWC) as 'Evening of Women'. Women would meet, discuss and find out solutions to their crucial problems. Successful stories from 'Evening of Women' inspired the NWC to transform it into evening of parents where parents meet, discuss and find out solutions to their fundamental problems. Evening of parents is potential to deal with family reorganization and reeducation process that reinforce community values. The idea behind the creation of this platform is to develop a good relationship among family members, prevent, reeducate, restore and resolve family and community conflicts peacefully as well as children's education (National Women Council, 2013; MIGEPROF, 2016). Evening of parents is a cornerstone which builds a healthy family environment, develops and makes each one of the community accountable and responsible. It is an opportunity to share productive ideas and improve families' responsibilities in a well-known round table environment of the cell. It is a tool of community transformation; a platform of family conflicts resolution and management as stated by local leaders and parents during interviews.

Furthermore, evening of parents can play a role of being an external regulator or controller to families that are still in domestic violence, sexual immorality, sex workers, single parenthood, poverty, illiterate parents, divorced families, giving birth to many children and drunker parents. It can also be an opportunity to create protective factors in the community and stimulate resilience among children born in unhealthy family environment. It is the best strategy to assess all risk factors and develop protective factors in community that would help prevent and control the phenomenon of street children as indicated by parents in group discussion and reinforced by local leaders during interviews. During evening of parents, they learn from others' experiences that may face same problems but are responsible of their children's education and behaviors. Evening of parents has an objective to strengthen social relationship and increase the trustworthy in community.

One family relationship is improved, management of poverty becomes easier and this would be a starting point of eradicating street children and posing a solid foundation of a community and a nation. The mismatch between family unity versus division, compassion versus stressors, socialization values versus anti values would not have a place in a community where evening of parents is successfully taking place as confirmed by local leaders during interview. For constructive change of behavior, the community plays an important role. The outcomes of resilience theory are seen in adulthood but they are prepared during childhood (Rutter, 2013). Developing an inclusive social and economic transformation of families and local communities through evening of parents would bring tremendous changes in Rwandan families towards mastering street children.

Evening of parents would reduce factors that disturb, absorb the social system and develop coping skills of family members. Families would remain attractive places to stay and enjoy the compassion, friendship, responsibility, self-organization, increase the capacity for learning and adaptation and maintaining strong family system. It is the responsibility of families and the community to correctly blueprint family settings that would successfully achieve its functions to secure children's environment and reduce the phenomenon of street children. Change may occur as a result of internal commitment of family members and other external factors such as policies, programs that local communities to provide meaningful ways of resources and living conditions.

Conclusions

The study attracts the attention of stakeholders on the issue of street children and the consequences related to it. It presents street children's push factors and suggests ways which can be used to successfully address them in all its angles. The study was grounded on attachment and resilience theories. It has been proved that family attachment (children-parents) and meeting children's needs and rights constitute a fundamental key of addressing street children. The phenomenon is multifaceted. It is a combination of family, social, economic and political factors. Victims of family dysfunction, street children still have rights to be loved, know and live with their parents, have an identity, being educated and health care. They are a big challenge to family and national security. Whom to blame? All children are born equal; it is the society with its inequalities that render them unequal. Despite the fact that children are hardest hit by messy of domestic violence and abuse, little attention has been paid to the measurement of protecting them. Children experience adversities and socialize with traumatic situations at tender age. It was found that parents-children environment influences children's behaviors. Family cohesion and stability, secure attachment, normal cognitive development, effective schools, self-efficacy, having a positive mentor and role models are major protective factors. They constitute basic resources, opportunities and experiences that nurture the development of adaptive systems. In contrast, domestic violence, identity crisis, born from sex workers, children abuse, poor parenting and poverty have been pointed out to be risk factors which push children to leave their families. Being incapable to find out another good alternative of escaping, they become resilient at tender age and adopt street lifestyle.

The two formulated research hypotheses were confirmed. The results confirmed the first hypothesis which states that family environment influences children's behavior. Domestic violence, lack of identity, born from sex workers, children abuse, poor parenting and poverty were identified to be the main causes which pushed children to leave their families and adopt street life style. This has been emphasized by 100% of children, 87% of local leaders and 67% of parents. Poverty is another major cause of street children stated second by 89% of parents, 75% of local leaders and 56% of street children. The second research hypothesis which states that evening of parents is a platform of rehabilitating family environment and decreasing the number of street children was also confirmed the results. Respondents focused on strengthening evening of parents which is still latent in the community as highlighted by 100% of parents and 65% of local leaders. Evening of parents is potential to deal with family reorganization and reeducation process that would reinforce community values.

Suggestions and recommendations to address the issue are provided. Considering the long-lasting consequences of street children, different levels involved in children's education and family care needs to put more attention on how to build a strong family foundation. Once well cared for, they become active players of the world in general and their nation in particular. Street children should not be forced to leave streets. There is a need of approaching them and hear about problems which pushed them to the street as well as getting solution collaboratively. Effective communication is a best strategy to use so that they may not quit street and return back. Tackling the problem of street children is still a complex situation that requires a network of different organs involved in family and community development. Prostitution and sex work, poverty and drug abuse, domestic violence and parents' irresponsibility are hindering children's education and their rights are violated. More efforts should be put on sensitising parents and awakening their attention on developing family protective factors rather than dealing with consequences of street children. Different agents involved need to work jointly and understand the magnitude of the problem. It does not only affect families but also national socio-economic development. Children are future country's human resources who need to be well prepared and trained to contribute to social and economic development. Once cared on, they become developmental opportunities rather than a threat.

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