

Determinants leading children to street : A case study approach

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Received: 21.01.2014; Accepted: 14.05.2014

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■ **ABSTRACT** : The paper aimed to determine the causative factors leading children to street and to investigate their daily life experiences. The study was based upon 160 street children (9-12 years) equally distributed over gender. Data were collected by administering a self-structured 'Interview schedule' for in-depth understanding of their daily life experiences. The sample was selected from various crowded places viz., railway station, bus depots, traffic lights, markets places, temples, etc. using a snowball sampling technique. One of the criteria for sample selection was that the street children should be home based. The reasons for being a street child are varied and sometimes a mix of the 'push and pull' factors. The children were experiencing different forms of abuse and neglect in varying frequencies and intensities from their parents and police personnel. Based on their daily life experiences, seven children who were experiencing such type of abuses in higher intensities were taken up for in-depth understanding of their daily life experiences. The analysis of the study indicated that majority of the children came to street seeing the prospect of income to help in the family finances as being insisted upon by their parents.

■ **KEY WORDS**: Abuse, Causal factors, Magnitude, Street children

■ **HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER** : Sharmila, Khwairakpam and Kaur, Sukhminder (2014). Determinants leading children to street : A case study approach. *Asian J. Home Sci.*, 9 (1) : 290-294.

Children are living on the streets everywhere in the world. A lot of debate in media has focused primarily on the street children (Jenemark and Kejerfors, 2006). Street children are often a product of massive migration from rural areas. These children are now an integral part of the urban scene. Problems of street children are many and very disturbing. These children lead hazardous lives, sometimes working at odd jobs and scavenging or begging for food. These living conditions are more or less the same in all the urban resettlement colonies and slums in all metropolitan cities. The reality of street child is the naked and vicious face of poverty, sickness and exploitation. The tragedy is that those who bear it are themselves innocent, lonely and frightened young children (Anandraj, 2007). India has the largest number of street children in the world. Proportion of street children is increasing rapidly in all the metropolitan cities in India. With a population of 1.22 billion people, there are 11 million street children in India - the highest number in the world. However, independent figures estimate that the number is approximately 20 million (<http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/07/19/314515/study-india-street-kids-face-abuse/>).

India has an estimated one million or more street children in each of the following cities: New Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai. It is more common for street children to be male and the average age is fourteen (Naik *et al.*, 2011). Children end up on the streets for a number of reasons, many of which are rooted in family instability and poverty. Many of the children left their homes to flee domestic violence, abusive relatives or neglectful families. Others have done so because their families live in severe-economic distress, either in rural villages or city slums and are unable to care for them. It is not uncommon that parents in extreme poverty will encourage older children to leave home to find 'work,' which may include street vending, begging, selling scrap materials for recycling etc (www.thestreetchildproject.org/causes-effects/). Deb and Mitra (2002) also disclosed that the factors which mostly pushed children to street, railway platforms include influence of step-parents, family disintegration, gender bias of parents, effect of poverty and or unemployment, deviant behavior of

parents, parental carelessness and environmental influence. In order to understand the factors which lead children to accept the street life the study was planned with an objective to understand the holistic view and in-depth knowledge about their family, causative factors, activities performed, problems and the daily life experiences of street children.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

Location

The study was conducted in various locations of Ludhiana city viz., railway station, bus depots, bus stops, traffic lights, market places, temples and other crowded places.

Sample:

The sample comprised of 160 home based street children (9-12 years) equally distributed over gender was purposively selected using snowball sampling technique. Based on their daily life experiences 7 children who were experiencing abuses in higher intensities were taken up for in-depth understanding of their problems.

Tools:

A self-structured personal information sheet was used to document the causal factors leading children to street, activities performed by them and to determine the nature and magnitude of abuse experienced by them in different situations.

Detailed case studies of seven selected street children are highlighted below:

Case 1:

Sushil Kumar aged 11 years is the first offspring among 4 children of Hemant and Kamala. The family hails from Samastipur, Bihar. Six months ago his grandfather died due to oral cancer, they sold all the property for his medical treatment but could not save him. His parents are illiterate and are not involved in professional work. They were debt ridden so they came to Ludhiana, Punjab where some of their relatives were already residing. But his two sisters (youngest) are still in Bihar with his maternal aunt, waiting for the family to settle down in Ludhiana. Sushil Kumar and his brother were brought along with parents with the intention that they could help out parents in searching and earning their livelihood. They currently reside in *Chhoti Haibowal*. His father now works as a labourer in a construction site nearby. While in Bihar his father stayed away from home most of the time because he roams places to places to sell bed sheet. Mother currently stays at home looking after household chores but is searching to work as a domestic helper. The family is surviving on Rs. 4000/ month income earned by his father. Sushil Kumar accompanied by his younger brother comes to the street seeing the prospect of income to help in

the family finances as their father insists them to go out for help. The brothers earn about Rs. 50-60 daily by begging and rag picking. They collect plastic bags, bottles, carton boxes, papers etc. and bring home the rags collected and his mother sells that to someone who comes to collect the rags. It costs around Rs. 5-7/kg depending on the things they collected. His father was very loving and caring until they came to Ludhiana but these days he is always frustrated and keeps scolding to work harder and earn more. He is used to alcohol occasionally but smokes and chews *Gutka* all the time. The reason for his grandfather's death was also due to excessive chewing of *Paan* and *Gutka* which lead to oral cancer. Sushil Kumar is worried that the same might happen to his father as well because his father's *Gutka* consumption has increased after coming to Ludhiana. His father was unable to bear the stress of bringing up his children also took to drinking and sometimes gets involved into a fight with his mother and also spill upon the children without any reason. One night his father came drunk and started beating his mother, Sushil Kumar thought he would help out his mother so he came to protect her on the process his father beat him with a rod lying nearby. He got bruises on his back which stayed for a week. This often happens with his mother whenever his father comes home drunk. So his brother is very scared of their father. Sushil Kumar would stay in the street from 11 am to 6/7 pm working and begging. While on work they sometimes get food free from temple or from the shopkeeper. Sushil Kumar studied upto class I while they were in Bihar and he loved to go to school. He can write his name in English and Hindi. He dreams of becoming a policeman, groomed in uniform. He fantasizes police work and gun shots. He would like to go back to Bihar and continue his studies if their family financial condition improves.

Case 2:

Omkumar is a 12 year old talkative boy staying in Jagraon Bridge, Near 5 No. division, Civil Lines, Ludhiana. His family migrated from Madhya Pradesh long time ago while he was very young. He has one younger brother and three younger sisters. Both his parents are illiterate. Father works as masonry, mother as domestic helper. He comes to street seeing the prospect of income and to get freedom from father. His parents want him to go to school and had enrolled him in a Government school but he has no interest in study. He makes garlands in flower shops near *Durga Mata Mandir*. For each garland made, he is paid Rs. 3. He earns about 50-80 rupees/day from garland making. He comes to the street early in the morning and goes back home late in the evening. Most of the days he eats lunch outside near the *Durga Mata Mandir*, from the offerings in the temple. He avoids going home because he gets scolding from father for not attending school and not staying at home and help looking after younger siblings. His mother (Madhu) also reported that Omkumar

is the naughtiest child in the family. Being the eldest child his father expects him to be more responsible of the family and study till matriculation since both the parents never got the chance to study. But he is never into study and look to staying away from school. He would often run away from home. He has a gang of friends whom he met at the flower shop. The gang sometimes smokes in group and take *Gutka*. He does not like the taste but he feels smoking is the sign of maturity and he likes that feeling. Omkumar also owns a mobile phone which he purchased from the money he earned. His parents are not aware that he owns a mobile phone but his siblings know that. He also likes going to market area just to enjoy the crowd. When he grows up he wants to be a driver and travel different places. He loves his mother because she is caring and does not scold as much as his father. Once he had a fight with his father and didn't return home for 2 days and he stayed at his friends place. His father came in search of him and scolded and bit him very badly and severely. Since that day he got so scared of his father that he always returns home even if he does not wish to. He also had met with an accident once. He was hit by a car and got few scratches on knees and arms. He likes cricket and sometimes plays while on the streets.

Case 3:

Sushmita is a 10 year old girl whose parents have migrated from Rajasthan. Her parents are illiterate and working as street vendor. She is the second child among 4 siblings in the family. Her elder brother stays in Delhi and is working as a shoe shiner. She has no interest in begging or selling things in the roadside but her stepmother would harass her and "if you do not earn, then what you will eat" forced her to beg. She got married at the age of 6years to Rajesh who was 11 years then, but she is staying with her parents till now. Her husband and in-laws stay in Delhi. Rajesh is a street vendor (sell ornaments) in Sarojini market, Delhi and comes to meet her sometimes. She is so excited to go to her in-laws place and waiting to attain the age of 14/15 years to go to his place thinking that she will get rid of her stepmother. She is treated well when her father is around but her stepmother behaves very differently when he is not there. She is scolded badly and thrashed physically if she stays idle even for few minutes. But the treatment is different with her 2 younger stepsisters. They would play and eat while Sushmita would be doing household chores. She would be scolded even for her sisters' wrongdoing, they would make noise, eat and litter things and she would be the one to clean up. She is also criticized for whatever she does. Her stepsisters pose being nice to her. She washes clothes, utensils, cleans house and cooks simple food like *roti*, rice and *dal*. Sometimes, she even thought of running away from home and go to Delhi to her brother's place but she does not know how to reach there. Sushmita narrated an incident when she was having fever and unable to eat but still she had to

perform household chores though she was excused to stay away from street work. She spends most of the time in street begging and has no time to play but she loves playing *Gulli Danda* and kite flying. But most of the time she ends up looking after younger siblings because her parents have to work. She has also reported of being abused verbally (scolding and sometimes threatening) by police on the roadside and she has to experience this often. They were chased away and scolded but not abused physically. However, policeman treated differently to adults like her parents. They would be asked to give money as a fine for working and making crowd on the street. Therefore, Sushmita does not like coming to street and she dreams of becoming a housewife and look after the family without working in the street and without any harassment from anyone.

Case 4:

Khusboo is a girl child of 9 years old residing in the outskirts of Ludhiana city. She grew up in an abusive family where she repeatedly saw her drunken father beating her mother. She has one elder sister who is physically challenged and stays at home all the time. Khusboo is the sole earner of the family because her father expired 3 years back and her mother who was working in the brick kiln abandoned them after 1years of her father's death. She rarely speaks about her parents and does not know where they are from, nor does she want to talk about her mother. She is taking care of her sister and does not allow her to work. She usually comes to street along with her neighbour whom she called her aunt and some other children of her age and beg, she makes about Rs. 40-60/day from begging, enough to feed themselves. Earlier she used to come alone before this aunt came from Delhi 7 months back only. Khusboo was bullied by some of the street boys who do not allow her to beg on their street saying that it was their area. Once they even snatched her money so she get scared of coming alone but now she feels safe because she is with someone who is elder to her. She loves to study, so in the morning she goes to one of her seniors in the locality who is studying in class V and learns to write her name. She aspires to go for further studies and become a nurse. She has to walk for around 6-7 km daily and work up to 4 pm just to feed herself and her sister. She has met with several accidents and got bruises and bleeding many a times but she does not have proper clothes and footwear to save herself from injuries while walking a long distance. She also complains of policeman who asked them not to stay in the street and beg. If they continue then the policeman call them together and beat with stick and ask them to stay in one corner of the roadside and let them go after sometime. This usually happens whenever there is a special occasions such as *Durga puja*, Diwali, or any other gatherings in the city.

Case 5:

Deepak, 10 years, is engaged in ragpicking. He has 2 elder sisters and 2 younger brothers, none of them are studying. His father, Shekhar, works as a vegetable vendor. They migrated to Ludhiana one year back, but his grandparents are still staying in Bihar. His father used to sell bed sheets and lived out of the station for six months or more at a stretch when they were in Bihar. They came to Ludhiana hoping to search for a better job and stay together. But his father could not get a better job so he ended up selling vegetables. Deepak came for work with his friends along with his two younger brothers; his sisters however, help out in household activities. His father is alcoholic and comes home in the evening in an inebriated condition and beats his mother without any reasons. Sometimes, he even beats them and starts scolding again if they cry. Because of the alcoholic nature of his father, Deepak does not want to return home. He doesn't want to be at home if his father is also there. He gets scolded for not going for work, his father keep saying "he alone can't feed everyone in the family", so he has to come and collect rags. He collects around 5-6 kg rags per day and sells it at the rate of Rs. 5/kg and Deepak reported that at the occasion of *Kisan mela* or any other gatherings in the city, they could collect a lot of rags. He also reported that he has met with several minor accidents while going on ragpicking. He narrated an incident when he stumbled upon a piece of glass sustaining wound which led to bleeding because he was hit by a bike but the person drove away without showing any concern. He was taken to a nearby hospital by some of the people who were around with his siblings and friends and was given first aid. But his father does not have any idea about the accident because his father never bothered even after seeing the wounds so he doesn't feel necessary to tell him. Deepak spends most of the time with his friends, he feels relaxed and happy being with friends. They play, eat and work together. Once they saw some of the elders eating *Gutka* so they tried once thinking that it's a sign of maturity. But they did not like the taste so they never had again. Deepak wants to stay far away from his father so sometimes he even gets a feeling of running away from home.

Case 6:

Prakash Thapa is a 10 years old boy migrated from Nepal in search of better earning and living. He is the third son among the four children born to his illiterate parents. Prakash was abused physically (slapped and punched) at home by his jobless drunken father. He is the most outspoken person in the family, he can't tolerate his father's behaviour so he often had a fight. His father always drinks in the evening and beats his mother for no reason he would even beat her for not cooking tasty meal. His father would spend whole day doing nothing and ask for money to drink by the afternoon and if she does not give him he would start beating. Prakash's

two brothers are staying in Kathmandu working in a restaurant; they send money and help the family. But his father does not bother about the family matters. So Prakash decided to leave home and came to Ludhiana year back. His mother helped him to come to India, he talks to his mother once a week and intends to help his brothers and sister by earning money and support his family. He came to Ludhiana along with 5 other boys from Nepal with the help of one of the uncles from his locality who provided them space to stay. Prakash sells coconut and popcorn in and around the Inter State Bus Terminal (ISBT) Ludhiana and earns about Rs. 110-150 a day. He stays in a room shared with three other boys from Nepal. His uncle collects money from them daily and gives them a salary of Rs. 2000/month out of which he sends Rs. 1000 to his mother monthly. He likes to work in the bus stand area instead of going to other places because he gets more customers there than roadside. He would like to stay here forever, he doesn't want to go back home. Prakash visits his hometown during *Holi* festival or new year and sometimes on special occasions. It was November 2012 he visited for his sister's wedding. Sometimes he misses home when sick and not in good health. However, his friends and uncle provide the care he needs. He never attended school but wants to study. He feels that education can help him prosper and flourish in life. He wants to open a mobile shop when he grows up and use new gadgets.

Case 7:

Sonu is a 12 years old boy native of Uttar Pradesh. He was 6 years old when his mother eloped with another man. Since then he never saw his mother again. His father unable to bear the stress of bringing up his children took to drinking. In this drunken state he beats the children frequently. Gradually, Sonu took to staying away from school, he studied up to class I. His father died of liver cirrhosis 7 months back, they stayed for one month under the custody of their maternal aunt in Uttar Pradesh. She was rude and mean to them, unable to take any more thrashings or humiliations from his aunt, he came to Ludhiana 6 months ago with his 4 years old sister and his uncle who is a sweeper in Ludhiana railway station. His uncle abandoned him after a few weeks. Since then he has been staying in the streets of Ferozepur road. He made some good friends in the roadside with whom he spends most of the time. Sonu and his sister would stay with his friends and their family. They have been supportive on their lonely life. He also reported that it was all because of them that they could survive till now. He starts begging early in the morning and takes his younger sister along with him. He also collects waste plastic and bottles whenever he gets time. Sonu reported that unknown people are better than the relatives because of what he experienced from his uncle. People on the street interact warmly and give alms sometimes. He does not have any problem with the policeman

instead he would interact warmly with them, but he does not have any future plan.

Conclusion:

The reasons why children are pushed on to street are linked to the difficult circumstances that so many families face. The safety net from the family and community is failing for street children. Children came to street due to varied reasons which includes prospect of income, alcoholic nature of father, lack of support from parents, abusive behaviour of parents, broken family, parental unemployment or because of no residence and they were found to be involved in various income yielding activities such as street vending, rag picking, begging, cleaning cars, street singing, shoe shinning or performing multi-task activities in order to help the family financially. Mostly they are robbed of their childhood. Poverty is also a part of the story in developing countries, where children are obliged to work or beg on the streets instead of going to school. Life on street exposes children to different exploitive and life threatening situations. Majority of the children experienced abuse from their parents. They also face problems with police personnel in some or the other way such as advised against begging, interrogated, chased away, humiliated, punished physically etc. while performing street work. During their lives, they are viewed either as a nuisance or a burden on the family. Some are fortunate enough to come in contact with welfare agencies, but majority are still in expectation that their living condition

might improve (Mitra and Deb, 2004).

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