

Transnationality of Child Poverty: the Case of Iranian and Afghan Street Children in Tehran

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ABSTRACT--- *Half of Iran's street children live in the country's capital, Tehran. Street children spend the day and part of the night in the streets and engage in informal economic activities. They experience abuse, violence and psychological distress in public spaces. The street child issue in Iran is a transnational issue; according to official reports, up to half of street children are Afghans refugees' and migrants' children whose exposure to economic and cultural hardship and stereotyping is related to child poverty. This study provides a review of literature on street children's demographics and situation in Tehran, and the relation between child poverty and Afghan inhabitants' social and economic situation. I suggest that local approaches to resolve the street child issue have failed because child poverty in Iran is a transnational problem.*

Keywords--- Migration, refugees, street children, transnationality, violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations *street children* are defined as children under eighteen years of age, who work on the streets; take refuge on the streets during the day, but return to some form of family at night; or children who permanently live on the street without a family network. Street children are at risk of abuse, exploitation and vigilante or police violence; but the most vulnerable are those who actually sleep and live on the streets, hiding under bridges, in gutters, and in railway stations (UNESCO, 2016).

The phenomenon of street children is a common aspect of a few big Iranian cities, especially the capital city. They are seen almost everywhere and any time in the capital city, begging, selling cheap goods, playing musical instruments, or simply wandering around and playing with their playmates. In Tehran, due to heavy car traffic and long traffic light waiting time, street child vendors usually stand at the cross-sections to beg or sell goods to the waiting car drivers and passengers. Presence of these children is mostly ignored by most inhabitants of the city and authorities alike, unless there are special short-term 'purging' projects planned to take street children to centres run by the State Welfare Organization¹. These projects, however, have so far failed to effectively address the issue of street children and child labour, and reduce the number of street children in the capital city.

Street children have different ethnic backgrounds. Official reports have suggested that almost seventy percent of street children in Iran might be foreign residents' or migrants' children, especially Afghans (Young Journalists' Club, 2013); same numbers are suggested by other studies (e.g. Moradi et al., 2015, also suggest 73.3 percent of Tehran's street children are foreign citizens, Afghans being the most prevalent group).

In this paper, a systematic review was conducted on the available research papers published online on Iranian Scientific Database², and on official news articles and reports on Iran's street children. An overview of what has been done in research and practice to address the issue is provided. In order to further clarify the transnational character of the problem of child poverty, the connection between Afghan migrants' situation in Iran and street children/child labour issue is discussed.

2. METHOD

In this article a systematic review on the literature on street children and child labourers in Iran is conducted. To do so, I have explored in the online Iranian Scientific Information Database (SID) in July 2016. This database is the biggest bank of Farsi and English articles, research projects, seminars etc. in Iran and the prominent source of online search especially for literature in Farsi in Iranian Academia in all scientific disciplines.

The SID database is run by the state Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research.³ I looked up the keywords *child labourer* and *street children* in the article titles and keywords of the articles in the database. For the latter, 14 articles were found, from which 12 included the full-text articles; for the former, 18 articles emerged, from which 13 had the full-text article available. The 25 articles with available full-text file dated between years 2002 and 2015. An early observation made on the number of articles suggested that that street children and child labour in Iran are under-studied. It is also important to note that from 25 articles, 6 were medical studies (including reports of tests and epidemiology of HIV, Hepatitis, and other medical conditions on street children and child labourers), 3 were review and bibliographical articles, and 1 article was theoretical; the other 15 articles were research or review articles emphasizing on child labour

and street children as a social and economic problem with prominent emphasis on bio-psycho-social consequences. These papers used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods and approaches such as surveys, interviews, secondary data analysis and case studies. This group of papers was used as the primary resource in this article. But due to the small number of research papers, articles published in Iranian online media, mostly official news agencies and official reports were also used.

3. STREET CHILDREN'S DEMOGRAPHICS AND DAILY LIFE

There has not been substantial study done on the issues of child labour and street children in Iran. Most studies conducted by Iranian official organizations have a highly quantitative nature. This is despite the fact that the last census of street children in the capital city Tehran in 2010 reported that the number of street children in the capital city reaches to thirteen thousand (Mardomsalari, 2014). However, this number excludes child labourers engaged in labours performed in spaces other than streets. The number of child labourers in the country (including street children who work on the streets) has been estimated to be two million (Seyed Joudaki, 2016).

Findings from the State Welfare Organization's quantitative study on street children in 2014 have revealed that children around 10 years of age constituted the largest number of street children. Street children are engaged in different kinds of street labours; they are usually active as vendors (2.73 percent), transportation and errand agents (6.8 percent), sidewalk musical instrument players (6.4 percent), collectors of waste and bread (6.9 percent), beggars (7.5 percent); 9 percent of these children who are active in these so called *conventional* labours, also might occasionally do prostitution and drug dealing; while 2 percent of all street children are mainly active in prostitution, drug trafficking and pickpocketing activities (Jamalpour, 2014).

Most street children (76.8 percent) spend the nights in parents or relatives' houses; 21 percent however, sleep on the streets alone or with friends in shared or public spaces; some might find spaces in shelters or at work. This group receive the least amount of care from their family members (Jamnews, 2014).

About one-third of children on the streets of Tehran (31 percent) have reported a history of leaving home which reveals the existing problems and disputes in the family and its effect on children's lifecourse and wellbeing. In gender and age groups, there is no difference in terms of rates of leaving/escaping from home, but Iranian children's rate of leaving home (36.9 percent) is significantly higher than Afghan children (21.4 percent). 23.9 percent of children have reported experience of physical abuse by their family members (Jamnews, 2014).

It is also reported by the Iranian State Welfare Organization that the families of street children often live in economic hardship. Unemployed or low-incomed heads of household (often men), low levels of participation of women in the household economy, having a large family, and general family poverty, divorce, low levels of education (among parents and children alike), and different forms of violence in the house are among underlying factors that contribute to children's ending up in the streets (Jamalpour, 2014; Ahmadkhani et al., 2002; Vameghi et al., 2011). Most studies also put emphasis on urban poverty as the most important factor affecting children's life course and the rise of street child issue (Afshani et al., 2012).

Imani and Nercissians's (2012) qualitative work is one of the rare qualitative studies that looks at the street children's lives beyond the prominent discourse of victimhood; this study reveals that street children refer to their activities such as begging on the streets as *work*, and compete in the streets with other street children to earn more money and to maintain a *territory* to keep their business running. They use different strategies to raise sympathy in their clients to increase their income. They also help other people whom they perceive to be poorer than themselves (especially the elderly), and trick their parents by spending some of the earned money in video game clubs.

4. STREET CHILDREN AND HEALTH RISKS

Ghasemzade (2003) has reported prevalence of many health risks and physical problems among street children, among which the most prevalent were ear and throat (64 percent of street children), skin (61 percent) and mouth and teeth (61 percent) problems/illnesses. Besides the physical problems, street children are prone to many sorts of violence (psychological, verbal, physical, economic and sexual). According to Iranian State Welfare Organization, 27.4 percent of street children have reported verbal and physical violence perpetrated by police officers; 26.6 have reported physical violence by peers; and 16.2 have reported verbal and physical violence by inhabitants of the city (Jamnews, 2014).

State Welfare Organization has reported that 21 percent of street children are sexually active; and 5.6 percent have experienced sexual violence⁵. Other studies had reported a higher number (e.g. Ahmadkhani et al. (2002) had reported that 22.5 percent of girls and 19.6 percent of boys get sexually abused). The average age of onset of sexual violence differs based on gender (Jamnews, 2014). Sexual abuse is significantly higher for female street children than male children; from all children who have reported sexual abuse, 75.2 percent are female (Jamnews, 2014). Other studies show that 50 percent of female street children who have run away or have left parental homes (with an average age of 16), have to resort to prostitution to be able to provide their basic survival needs (Ardalan et al., 2002); this makes them highly vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse. Sexually abused street children are also at risk of turning in to prostitution as their primary street activity (Ghahfarkhi et al., 2011). Street children are thus also not only at risk of sexual violence but also vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases. While HIV is not on rise in contemporary Iran, the transmission trends has changed in the last decade as sexual transmission is growing and becoming one of the prominent modes of

transmission (Rishe, 2015). At the moment, street children are one of the most vulnerable groups to this trend as they lack care and supervision and are prone to high degree of sexual abuse. This situation is also worsened because of the lack of formal sexual education to adolescents (Roudsari et al., 2013).

Regarding alcohol and drug use, it is reported that 17.3 percent of all street children have used alcohol at least once in their lifetime and 23 percent of street children have used drugs, alcohol or cigarettes (Jamnews, 2014).

Age of onset for drug use among street children is also low; 56 percent of children have started using drugs before the age of 14; smoking, alcohol and drugs' use get significantly higher and more prevalent as the street children grow older (close to 15 to 18 years). Many street children also have had a history of addiction to drugs in their families (addicted parents mainly). 42.8 percent of street children have reported having an addicted father, and 36.9 have reported having had an addicted friend (Jamnews, 2014).

5. STREET CHILDREN AND EDUCATION

The latest available data on street children's access to education in 2014 suggest that 34 percent of street children attend schools, 40 percent of them had gone to school but have stopped attending schools and 24 percent, have never entered schools (ISNA, 2014).

Street children in Iran might not have access to education, depending on their nationality and citizenship status, family income and parents' education. Until 2016, children without a valid identification card were not allowed to attend schools in Iran. As a result, many migrant families, especially illegal migrants who did not have proper documentation of their residence status in Iran were deprived of Education. This would have applied not only to the children of unregistered Afghans, but also to certain Iranian children who did not have national identification cards (Landinfo, 2012). This regulation has reportedly changed since Iranian authorities have recognized Afghan children's right to education in 2015 (Tasnim, 2016). There is still no research or academic data available on the situation of street and labour children after this recognition; but hopes have risen for them to receive formal education. There still is evidence showing that the problem of education for Afghan children is not resolved (e.g. Aljazeera (2016) have reported that authorities try to close local community schools for undocumented Afghan refugees in 2016).

Parents' education also affects both female and male children's lifecourse; the higher the education levels of the parents, the more street children are inclined to continue going to school (Shahraki and Ghaderi, 2015). An interesting finding by Shahraki and Ghaderi (2015) about the gender differences of education trends in the lifecourse of labour and street children is that boys are more inclined to study in their own age group; meaning that if they are in their own age group, they have more interest in pursuing studies than girls; while if they are separated from their age group,⁶ they show lower interest than girls in studies and tend to drop out of school and seek work. This age group affect was not reported for girls.

6. AFGHAN CHILDREN IN THE STREETS OF TEHRAN

Iran is host to the largest and longest staying foreign refugee population in the world. This population includes mostly Iraqi and especially Afghan refugees. There are more than three million Afghan refugees living in Iran (Tabnak, 2010). In the previous three decades Iran has been host to an average refugee population of over five million refugees. These statistics however usually do not include or underestimate the undocumented and illegal migrants. The Afghans and Iraqis' presence in Iran was primarily rooted in the inflow of over 2.6 million Afghan refugees following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and 1.2 million Iraqi refugee inflow from Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the 1990-1991 Gulf War (Vafa, 2006). Refugees in Iran numbered approximately 4.5 million at the peak of their presence in 1991-92 (out of a global 17.5 million), 1.9 million in 1998 (out of a global 13.5 million), 3.2 million by the end of 2001, and 985,000 by the end of 2004 (out of a global refugee total of 9.7 million). To date, these numbers have remained largely unchanged (Vafa, 2006).

Afghans are subject to severe cultural and ethnic stereotyping; it suffices to say that the word 'Afghan' is sometimes used as a swear word in the capital city. Norwegian organization Laninfo's⁷ report on Afghan immigrants in Iran in 2012 reported that there is a broad consensus that Afghans are subject to widespread and systematic discrimination in Iran. For example, in order to prevent Afghans from disturbing Iranian customers, there are space/time allocations provided. Some schools have separate *shifts* for Afghan children. Some Afghans attend schools run by aid organisations or by members of the Afghan community. They also reported that The Iranian authorities routinely forcibly return Afghans to Afghanistan irrespective of their period of residence and whether other family members are staying in Iran. UNHCR has claimed that the Iranian authorities are reticent about deporting women and children (Landinfo, 2012).

Studies on children and labourer rights in Iran's Afghan population are also rare. One study has addressed the rights of the child according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which (Iran) is a party. Iran adhered to the Convention in September 1991, and ratified it on July 13, 1994 (LOC, n.d.). This study has compared the rights of Iranian and Afghan child labourers and shows that although the convention rights of both groups have not been realized, Afghan enjoy even less rights than Iranian children (Zand and Rahimi, 2011).

There is hardly any report or research on child poverty and street children in Iran that does not emphasize on the adverse conditions of Afghan migrants and its effects on this phenomenon.⁸ Adverse economic conditions, unemployment, no

access to formal education and lack of social rights might pressure Afghan families in Iran to put their children on the streets to be alternative sources of financial help to the household (Jamnews, 2014).

7. POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS: STATE AND NGO'S

Street children are usually approached by the social workers of the State Welfare Organization and/or the police force; unlike the police forces' forcible approach to the street children, the social workers (on behalf of State Welfare Organization) gain children's trust and work with the municipalities, by whom street children are registered. Children are then removed from the streets by the police and with the help of the social workers. After this, Iranian citizens' children are mostly returned back to their families (parents or guardians are summoned to take their children away with them) and foreign nationals' children are referred to State Welfare Organization to later work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find their families. Punitive approach is adopted towards the foreigners whose children are taken in to custody. The State Welfare Organization has very limited space and capacity to take care of street children, so the cycle continues as many children end up in the streets after being returned to their families (Soleimani and Hajiani, 2014).

Some other state organizations and charity institutions such as *Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation*⁹ (Jamnews, 2013) which works on charitable projects, might get involved in helping the street children independently; but there are different approaches in different organizations (punitive, charitable, or simply organizing approaches); thus the involved parties do not conduct coordinated work.

There are very few non-profit organizations such as *The Society for Defending of Street and Labour Children*¹⁰ and *Society for Protecting the Right of the Child*¹¹ are also active in social work, support and research related activities with the street children. However, their authority and help capacity is extremely limited relative to the huge number of street children, and there seems to be little dialogue and connection between these organizations and state organizations' activities.

There is also not a specific state organization responsible for following up on children's condition after returning them to their families (Vameghi, 2006), nor is there effective division of responsibilities between public and private institutions to provide an organized approach towards street children.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article is merely an entry point to the discussion of child poverty as a transnational problem. Although there are some reports about children poverty in Iran by international human rights organizations, there have not been substantial academic and empirical studies conducted on street children in Iran. Available literature at the moment mostly includes demographics and statistics and street children's health or health related behaviours. Although the notion of *urban poverty* gets repeated in the literature on Iranian street children (e.g. Shahabadi, hajizade, Akbari, 2009; Hoseini, 2005) as an important underlying factor, research conclusions are repetitive and suggestions usually include local and family initiatives to take care of children rather than offering structural analysis of the dynamics of labour market, welfare, urban problems such as the infamous housing market in the capital and patterns of discrimination by the state or people. Davarpanah, Raghfar and Nakhaii (2010) show that more than 80 percent of children in poverty are those who live in families with a male head of household working in the private sector. Due to economic mismanagement and institutional inefficiencies of the Iranian economy, the country's economy is oil-based and projects of privatization of economy has not advanced (Habibi, 2008); jobs in the private sector are highly unreliable and positions are precarious. Unemployment is a major problem and the rate is still in double digits (Habibi, 2008). These conditions affect the middle and especially the lower class families, of which Afghans from a large group.

Another issue that is highly emphasized in the existing reports and research is the problems connected to foreign immigrants and refugees in Iran, especially Afghan legal and illegal migrants. It can be concluded that the street children issue has strong connections with the foreign immigrants' situation in Iran, and is much more prevalent among immigrant populations. While Afghan immigrants' population in Iran is estimated to be three million in the whole country (Farnews, 2016; Koepke, 2011), and the population of Afghans in/around the capital city is estimated to be around 840 thousand (Sarzaminnews, 2012), more than half of street children in the capital city are Afghan children¹² (Young Journalists' Club, 2013; Moradi et al., 2015).

The existing approaches towards child poverty have failed mostly due to a localized and micro level approach to a problem that surpasses Iran's political geography. The street child issue in Iran is a transnational issue. The significant number of Afghan (legal and illegal) refugees and immigrants in the capital city, the widespread social discriminations against them, especially in the job market and their exposure to cultural stereotyping and lack of legal rights is related to the children's poverty, decades of unrest and political intervention by the West in Afghanistan have created a socially and economically unreliable context for Afghan migrants to return to; for which those lowest in the social hierarchies (such as children and women) pay the highest price.

9. NOTES

¹ State Welfare Organization's website: <http://behzisti.ir/Modules/ShowFramework.aspx?TemporaryTempID=538>

² The database has hundreds of thousands of research articles, the web address is <http://en.journals.sid.ir/>

³ Website of Academic Canter for Education, Culture and Research: <http://www.acecr.ac.ir/>

⁴ The word choice by the source; prostitution and drug dealing have been called non-conventional.

⁵ The report on sexual activity is highly vague and incomprehensive. Since the studied group are children under the age of 18, the difference between sexual activity (e.g. genital play with peers) and sexual violence needs clarification. Such clarification is lacking in the resources.

⁶ In Iranian pre-university education system, in case of failing a whole level of education, the student is degraded and put in a lower level, thus sharing the class with younger pupils.

⁷ Landinfo organization's website: <http://www.landinfo.com/>

⁸ For a collection of reports in English refer to <http://gvnet.com/streetchildren/Iran.htm>

⁹ This foundation's website: <http://www.emdad.ir/>

¹⁰ This organization's website: <http://jamiatdefaa.org/index.php/english-version>

¹¹ This organization's website: <http://www.irsprc.org/main/en/>

¹² 840 thousand Afghan inhabitants' population makes up to ten percent of the whole population of the capital city of Iran.

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