Psychosocial factor of being street children in Rwanda

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the reason why Rwanda still has street children despite a number of existing strategies against this phenomenon. Fourteen individual interviews were conducted. They included ten boys hosted in the “Enfants de Dieu” centre, who were former Street children; and four girls who were still living in the street and who were about to be recruited in one of the centres. Participants were aged between 10 and 14. The informed consent was obtained from all participants in agreement with their supposed responsible surrogates from the “Enfants de Dieu” centre as per the age of the participants. Findings revealed that poverty, lack of food, family priorities, family violence, and lack of shelter, deprivation of studies and inadequate upbringining of the children were said to be influencing the persistence of the phenomenon of street children in Rwanda. More effort to cover the children’s basic needs as well as the effective support for their studies may be possible solutions to successfully face the persisting phenomenon of street children. It also would be good to provide parents with training on effective children upbringing in terms of the effectiveness of parental affection and in terms of guidance for children.

Keywords: Street children, Psychosocial, Rwanda

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of street children is a world problem and over tens of millions of street children are found across the world [1]. Rwanda considers street children as a category of children in need of special protection [2]. It also considers street children as one of the categories of vulnerable children [3]. With strong commitment to the child’s right protection, the Rwanda Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion set up a National Integrated Child Rights Policy and its strategic plan [4].

Recognizing the existence of street children, Rwanda has created different public transit centres for ex street...
children around the country. These include “Enfant de Dieu” Center in Gasabo District of Kigali City, Gitagata center in Bugesera District of Eastern Province, and Iwawa training centre in Rutsiro District of the Western Province. Non Governmental centres for ex street children do exist also to care for street end ex street children (see for example Intiganda centre, Nyampinga centre, both in the Southern Province). However, the Rwanda policy on child protection aims to care for each child in own or adoptive family and not in the street [4]. Despite this commitment by the Government of Rwanda and its efforts to put an end to the problem of street children, street children still exist in Rwanda. The number of street children was around 7,000 in Rwanda [5]. The number of children living and working on the street of the capital city of Rwanda, Kigali, was estimated at 3,000 [2]. The interest of this study is to look at the persisting phenomenon of street children in Rwanda despite efforts that are made in the area of child’s right protection by taking care of every child in a family.

2. Methods

2.1. Population and case selection

The report presented in the present paper is based on interview sessions involving 14 street children located in Kigali. These children include ten boys and four girls. These boys were the new recruited of “Enfants de Dieu” centre; thus former street children. For them to be included in the study, they first had to have lived at least one year in the street but also to be recruited at the time of the interviews held with them. All the boys fulfilled the criteria to take part in the interviews. It should be noted that “Enfants de Dieu” centre only hosts boys and therefore, for gender balance purposes, girls were taken from the streets in Kigali city for the present study. The interviews with the four girls were held in the streets where they were still living. Access to them in the streets was facilitated by a staff member in charge of recruitment with the assistance of one former street child who are both from “Enfants de Dieu” centre.

The fourteen cases - ten boys and four girls- were aged between 10 and 14 years. The characteristics of interviewees are presented in an anonymous way using codes in letters to identify them. In order to validate results from the interviews with the fourteen (ex) street children, further interview with two key Informants from” Intiganda” centre located in the Southern Province of Rwanda was organised.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants code</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Province of origin</th>
<th>Parents’ status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NG</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Orphan of both parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KE</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Non Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HP</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Non Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Father Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Divorced Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KF</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Unknown Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Orphan of both parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kigali city</td>
<td>Non Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Orphan of both parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BN</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Non Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Orphan of both parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MG</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kigali city</td>
<td>Non Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPC</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewees are from all the 4 provinces of Rwanda and Kigali City. They include orphans and non orphans as well. The boys dominate this population as this is a general situation for street children elsewhere around the world [6].

2.2. Research approach
The interviews with ten boys were conducted in the “Enfants de Dieu” Centre where they were living and still live as former street children. As regards the girls, the strategy to interview them was to meet them in the streets where they were living at the time of interviews. Individual interview was organised for each case. Furthermore, participants voluntarily accepted to take part in the interviews. The informed consent was obtained from all of them in agreement with their supposed responsible surrogates from the mentioned centre because of the age of the participants. The interviews with fourteen street children took place in August 2012 while the interviews with key informant were conducted in October 2013. The fourteen interviews with street children and two interviews with two key informants were conducted in the local language, i.e. Kinyarwanda and recorded.

2.3. Analysis techniques

The records were transcribed and data were translated from Kinyarwanda into English. Interviews were read several times both in Kinyarwanda and in English and, this was of paramount importance in identifying themes. The data analysis was based on the general inductive model that aims to give direction to raw data and make sense to them [7]. The analysis was as well inspired by the “basic interpretative research” [8] which helps in the understanding of the inferred meaning given by the participants about the phenomenon of the street children. The identification of themes and subthemes in what is expressed by participants [9], [10] was also carried out. It consisted in the location of the points of view and of the narrations as they were given by the participants, in response to the question relating to factors influencing and leading to the situation of street children and to the strategies that can help to effectively address this phenomenon [11].

The process of coding was conducted. Every line, paragraph and section of the text was coded in a specific way. During the coding process, the definition continued to be challenged and some new codes were developed when their properties were not fitting the existing codes. There was a move between the data and the analysis (see [12]; [9]; [13]; [14]) and the aim of this was to develop fully overarching categories for each individual group code. Throughout the analysis, the categories were refined and sub-categories were compared and combined into broader dimensions. For the purposes of rigour during the analysis of the data and to improve the credibility of the results, interviews were given to a collaborator for blind parallel coding check [15]. The process continued until no new code was emerging.

3. Results

3.1. Reasons behind the long lasting situation of street children in Rwanda despite many strategies in place

3.1.1. Socio-economic factors

Interviews report showed that poverty, lack of food, and deprivation of studies were identified by young interviewees to be influencing the decision of leaving home and this was raised up to the extent of ten cases out of fourteen and ten cases out of fourteen and in eight cases out of fourteen respectively. *When I reached the age to start primary school, my grandfather died. I stayed with my uncle and because of poverty; he didn’t even provide me with school uniform to go at school. The neighbours and local authorities tried to give me some clothes but I also needed money for studies*. From the key informants, socio-economic causes leading to the situation of being street children include poverty/ hunger and lack of shelter.

3.1.2 Psycho-social causes

Other most dominant factors influencing the persistence of the phenomenon are the prioritizations within families and violence. These factors were identified in ten cases out of fourteen and in nine cases out of fourteen respectively. *I didn’t get opportunity to study because Dad forced us to cultivate telling that Hize Perezida (meaning: “only His Excellency the President can feel the sweetness of studies!”) (HP). Most of the time, I was beaten and forced in works beyond my physical capacity (CNN). My uncle was careless; he wouldn’t assume his responsibilities as a parent or give advice to children. Even when the child was caught stealing, he was beaten by both the community and him* (NA). *My parents always fought with each other. When I was only ten years old, I*
started understanding that there might be a better place than our home and I deserved it. That place is street. When I reached the street, I didn’t find any place to sleep and went back home. By that time the hunger, conflicts, and other problems in my family made me decide to definitively leave and never come back. I started smoking, drinking alcohol, and consuming other drugs (MG). It is not the first time that I have come to street. After the death of her parents, I was received by my aunt’s family. During two years I spent in this family, I didn’t get any affection, care or convenient upbringing. My duties were the same as of a servant. This is the reason why I didn’t study until I decided to come to become a street child. After three months in street, I was received by Nyampinga centre and after one year in this centre, I was reintegrated in the above family. I once again faced so much mistreatment (physical violence, lack of food, etc). Thus, I took the decision to go back to street (TA). According to key informants, psychosocio causes behind being street children are misunderstandings/conflict in the families, absence of both or one of the parents because of death or imprisonment of the one of the parents), and lack of necessary care in the family.

3.2. Strategies which can be used to effectively address the phenomenon of street children in Rwanda

3.2.1. Effective Psychological support

Street children need effective psychological support from adults. I don’t like being in street but life there is better than in my family. I wish I could find someone to care for me, help me study stop drug consumption and provide me with food. I am sure I can leave street life (HP). If we were given what we need we should leave street. I beg the Government of Rwanda to help us study and facilitate us in this. It could be helpful if they took into account what makes children leave their homes and search for durable solutions (ID).

3.2.2. Parent education on children care

Parents should be taught about proper upbringing of their children. Parents should be taught how they can provide proper upbringing to their children and give birth to children they are able to care for (KE)...parents need to be counselled so that they can bring up their children efficiently and try to satisfy their basic needs (ID). Educate the parents about convenient upbringing, care and affection, follow-up of the street children and about satisfying all their basic needs especially studies (RPC). The only possible way (for ending the life of the street) is to give me what I missed: school, care and parenthood. If each of these was available, I can go there (NG). Key informants suggest that the parents must be sensitized in order to give them appropriate upbringing and they should be redirected to their responsibility. They also should be helped to effectively fight poverty.

3.2.3. Fight against family violence (domestic violence)

Participants suggested that the fight against violence committed against women and children (RPC). The participants themselves find that the street children phenomenon is challenging and that it needs strong strategies. “The street children phenomenon will remain a big challenge that requires strong strategies, (RPC).

4. Discussion

3.1. Reasons why there still exist street children in Rwanda despite many strategies in place

3.1.1. Socio-economic factors related to poverty

Poverty leads to lack of food and to the deprivation of studies and this was identified to influence the children’s decision to leave their homes. Previous studies on street children pointed poverty in families as a cause behind the situation of street children ([16]; [6]). In a previous report, children indentified access to education, closes, school materials, food, shelter, and security as important tools to put an end to this situation [3]. The present research confirms the same needs for former street children as expressed to be the causes of going to street.

3.1.2 Psycho-social causes
The prioritization within the families with regard to activities to be carried out such as making the children look after the cows instead of sending them to school, violence, misunderstandings/conflicts in the families, absence of both or one of the parents because of death or imprisonment, and lack of necessary care in the family are mentioned by participants and key informants to be factors influencing the persistence of the phenomenon of street children. Violence in families and family conflicts affect children and the exposure to violence is seen as a child abuse [17]. The increasing marital conflict [18] seems to have particular influence on street children in Rwanda. Causes or main root of being street children are influenced by the impact of being orphans [6].

3.2. Strategies to more effectively address the phenomenon of street children in Rwanda

3.2.1. Effective Psychological support

Street children need effective psychological support from adults. The traditional family and extended family structures suffered from the genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994 [4]. A community based support for children should help prevent the street migration [6].

3.2.2. Parent education on children care

Parents should be taught about their responsibility of children upbringing. Key informants suggest that the parents must be sensitized in order to give them good upbringing and they should be redirected to their responsibility. When there is lack of adult control over children, the latter end up misbehaving because there is nobody else to manage them [18]. Neglect on dependant family such as children is also qualified as a form of behavioural abuse [19].

3.2.3. Fight against family/domestic violence

Participants suggest the fight against violence committed against women and children. Children exposed to domestic violence have risk of behavioural problems [20]; [21]. Violence in families is seen as a child abuse [17]. It is a kind of parental irresponsibility and even egoism because they make their children live in a situation that should be prevented by the parents. Street child seems to be a challenge in terms of eradicating it for some participants. The participant themselves find that the street children phenomenon is a challenge that requires strong strategies to address.

5. Conclusion

From this qualitative study, present factors of being street children in Rwanda are not different from causes of that phenomenon found elsewhere around the world [16]. However, in the current context of Rwanda, the traditional family structure and functioning decline following the 1994 genocide, its economic and psychosocial consequences and the increasing marital conflict have particular influence on street children in Rwanda. Socio-economic factors related to poverty, lack of food, lack of shelter, and deprivation of studies and psycho-social aspects such as violence, misunderstanding/conflicts in the families, absence of the parents, and lack of necessary care in the family are mentioned by the participants and key informants to be the factors influencing the persistence of the phenomenon of street children in Rwanda. Strategies including effective Psychological support, parent redirection to their responsibility and the fight against family/domestic violence would be helpful in facing the problem of street children. More effort to satisfy the children’s basic needs as well as the effective support for their studies may be possible solutions to successfully address the persisting phenomenon of street children. It also would be good to provide parents with training on effective children upbringing in the areas such as the effectiveness of parental affection and in terms of guidance for children.

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