



Street Children in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria: Br Beyond Economic Reason

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Abstract

THE PHENOMENON OF street children has become a global problem. There are as *many reasons for being on the street as there are street children*. In Nigeria, as in many developing countries, there is a general belief amongst scholars that children “abandon” their families and migrate to the street because of economic poverty. These scholars argue that children whose basic material needs cannot be met within the household move to the street. This paper examines this argument through the analysis of detailed empirical research with street children in Akwa Ibom State, South-South, Nigeria. It found that social factors such as the belief in child witchcraft lie behind most street migration and, in particular, that moves to the street are closely associated with violence to, and abuse of, children within the household and local community. These findings are consistent with the wider literature on street migration from other countries. The paper suggested that in Nigeria, those who seek to reduce the flow of children to the streets need to focus on social policy, especially on how to reduce the excessive control and emotional, physical and sexual violence that occurs in some households. Economic growth and reductions in income poverty will be helpful, but they will not be sufficient to reduce street migration by children in Akwa Ibom State in particular and Nigeria generally.

Key words: Street children; Akwa Ibom state; Nigeria; Beyond economic reason; Economic poverty; Poor households

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INTRODUCTION

There is a well saying that children are the pillars of any society. They are often taken as the hope and inspiration for the future building of the nation. This hope binds their rights to be brought up in a positive environment. But unfortunately there are many children in the world who have become synonymous with social deprivation at its worst and Nigeria is not an exception (CWIN, 2002).

Children living in street situations are an increasing phenomenon in developing countries (Panter-Brick, 2002; Pare, 2003) and economically advanced countries (Bradbury, Jenkins et al., 2000; Bustamante, 1999; Solito, 1994). Amongst the world’s one billion children suffering from deprivation of basic needs (Gordon et al., 2003), these children are highly likely to experience “absolute poverty” (Bartlett et al., 1999). Once on the street their living experience can be viewed as a condition of both severe and chronic poverty. The plight of girls in street situations is a special concern (Barker & Knaul, 2000).

Many types of programme attempt to assist children in street situations—“street children”, “hard to reach children”, “working children”, “children in need of special protection” or “specially disadvantaged children”. However, their high spatial mobility, independence and suspicion of adults means that attempts to provide support and reintegration are problematic and often unsuccessful (Black, 1993; Blanc, 1994). Commonly, policymakers and social activists have prioritized preventing or reducing child migration to the streets and this has led to a research focus on

the causes of children leaving their families and moving to the streets.

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of why children in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria “move to the street”. According to a recent official study some 700,000 children are living on the streets in the country’s main cities (Nte, 2012). It frames this analysis within broader discourses concerning the nature of poverty. In particular, it distinguishes between economic (income/consumption) and other dimensions of poverty and uses both objective and subjective assessments of poverty. Underpinning the study is a belief that development action is not simply about the provision of basic needs or minimum incomes but about raising people’s (including children’s) ability to access and convert livelihood assets (human, social, physical, natural and financial) into desired beings, doings and becoming.

By adopting a more holistic and multidimensional view of poverty, and utilizing the findings of extended qualitative research methods, we argue that in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria most children move to the street not simply because of economic (income, consumption or material) shortfalls as is commonly assumed. Rather, it is the abuse of human rights, especially in terms of physical violence, and the breakdown of trust within households especially, the belief on child witchcraft that leads children to move to the street. This is very much in line with earlier groundbreaking work on the subject (i.e. Aptekar, 1988) and stresses the need to better understand the magnitude, incidence and consequences of domestic violence against children.

The perception of street living children held by the general public, policy makers and many social scientists in Nigeria is filtered through, and conditioned by, a “dominant narrative” (Roe, 1999) which posits that children are on the street because their parents or guardians cannot meet the household’s basic material needs. The role played by violence within the household and the strength of the social bonds built by children on the street are too often ignored by commentators on this “problem” in Nigeria. This analysis indicates that policies and actions to reduce street migration by children in the country will need to drop the assumption that material poverty is the main cause and tackle the more contentious issues of emotional, physical and sexual violence. Hence, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of why children in Nigeria move to the street.

1. THE CONCEPT OF STREET CHILDREN

Like every other social fact, the definition of the concept of Street Children tends to defy any universal one. The term “street children” was first used by Henry Mayhew in 1851 when he wrote his “London Labour and the London Poor,” although it only came into general use following

the United Nations year of the child in 1979. Prior to this, street children were referred to as homeless, abandoned or runaways.

The most commonly used definition today comes from UNICEF (Lusk, 1989) and distinguishes two groups: “children on the streets,” and “children of the streets.” This distinction derived largely from experiences with street children in Latin America (Ennew, 1994). When researchers speak of children “on the streets” they are referring to those children who spend much of their time in the street environment, often working. Their focus in life is still the home. A few attend school, most return home at the end of each working day and still have a sense of belonging to the community in which their family home is situated. A large majority of them maintain some continuing relationship with their families (Swart-Kruger & Donald, 1994; Muchinni, 1994).

These are the children whose family support-base has been increasingly weakened and, so must share responsibility for family survival by working on the city streets and market places. The home ceases to be the locus of education or socialization, play, and daily life. Family relationships may be deteriorating, but they certainly exist (Tacon, 1985, in Ennew, 1994). Many will send some of their spare income to their families. In some cases, they may not be permitted access to their house until an income quota has been met (Lusk et al., 1989).

Children “of the streets” are those for whom the streets have become a home; it is their primary environment for working, playing, sleeping and growing up. They are much smaller in number, and are socialized outside the school and the family. They have a few conventional contacts with adults, and are often described as being positively adapted and entrepreneurial, despite their difficult conditions (Aptekar, 1988a).

Most authors define street children according to just two characteristics: presence in the street, and a lack of contact with the family.

Street children are those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word: i.e. unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults (Inter-NGO Programme, 1983, in Ennew, 1994, p.14).

For the purpose of this paper, Street Children are those children under the age of eighteen who spend most of their lives on the street. There are those who live permanently on the Street—“Children of the Street” (Lugalla, 1995). This group of children subsists by living and earning their “living

Street Children are characterized by loneliness on the street, shelterless, loss of parental contacts, loss of parental protection, love and care, and most often exponentially squalid (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1995). Another interesting reality is that Street Children share the streets with millions of adults, many of whom regard them as

nuisances, if not as dangerous mini-criminals. The bottom line, therefore, is that despite the different thresholds and bundling they employ, almost all societies share common views of childhood. While this assertion seems overreaching, it is certainly true that a common notion is shared by communities, states, liberal democracies, most international aid agencies and the United Nations.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Along with the general concern for the rights and welfare of children is another growing international concern about the increasing number of street and working children in both developed and developing countries. Concern about these children and the broader category of children in especially difficult Circumstances (CEDCs) was particularly highlighted by UNICEF in the 1980s. The United Nations Centre for Human Rights has estimated that by the end of this century there will be almost 250 million more urban children in the five to 19 year old range cohort than there were in the mid 1980s, and that more than 90% of these will be living in developing nations. It is likely that many of these children will live on the streets. Despite this awareness, the problem of street children has continued to grow, raising concern amongst international organizations, community leaders, professionals, the business sector and the government, hence it becomes needful to research on this issue.

In doing justice to the study, two research questions were generated to further guide the study: What are the nature and dynamics of the political economy of Street Children in Nigeria? Is child migration to the street in Akwa Ibom State purely because economic reason?

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE CAUSES OF STREET MIGRATION

Until recently, many studies have identified economic poverty as the main, and sometimes the only, cause leading children in developing countries to migrate to the street (Alexandrescu, 1996; Peacock, 1994; Schepers-Hughes & Hoffman, 1998). Economic poverty has been presented both as a direct and indirect factor that “pushes” children onto the street. It is argued that children move out of the household as a direct coping strategy, to diversify the household’s portfolio of income generating activities, and that, at the same time, economic poverty leads to stresses and tensions within the household, that become an indirect cause of street migration (CSC, 2001). Indeed, UNICEF (2002) has declared the failure to reduce income inequality among and within households as a missed opportunity for tackling the causes of poverty and street migration for children.

Such arguments have been taken up very strongly in Nigeria where most studies see economic poverty

and/or economic shocks (such as land erosion, floods, financial shocks and especially the shortage of food) as the main reason why children move to the street (Nte & Eke, 2012). Low incomes in rural areas, it is argued, compel children to migrate to urban centers to mitigate their material hardships and contribute to household earnings. Ekpenyong (2011) postulates that in rural areas household food insecurity leads to elder children abandoning the household. Indeed, economic factors are seen as the driving force behind street migration, and “the influx of migration could be stopped... only through massive economic poverty alleviation interventions” (Ekpenyong, 2011). Even if reasons other than material poverty are quoted, economic deprivation remains the primary focus for intervention (White, 2002), and the non-material elements necessary for a holistic vision of child poverty (Minujin, Vandemoortele, & Delamonica, 2002) are not recognized as a priority for policy and action.

We argue here that economic conditions and shocks are only a limited part of the explanation for migration to city streets by children and that analysts and policy makers have so far missed the opportunity of significantly engaging with a growing body of literature that shows the decisive role played by non economic factors in children’s decision to migrate to the street.

According to Moser (1998), capturing the multidimensional aspects of the changing socio-economic well-being of poor people including children, requires the recognition of empowerment processes. From the empirical literature on the topic, key researchers can be identified who have argued for less economic analyses and for a deeper examination of family life. In particular, Felsman (1989) found that 97% of his sample of Colombian children in street situations had actively abandoned their households due to a non-conducive family environment. Further, street life helped in the development of children’s resilience and street living children had better mental health than their counterparts in families. Aptekar (1988) found that children in street situations were emotionally intact in their intellectual functioning, and achieved high levels of self-management. Veale (1992) compared children in street situations in Sudan and Ireland, considering their different backgrounds, social-demographic characteristics and the processes of their street life involvement. In both cases, she found that street life was a rational choice when considering alternative options and risks. De Oliveira et al. (1992) showed that 65% of Brazilian children in street situations defined themselves as “good persons” with positive aspirations for the future. Furthermore, Monteiro et al. (1998) have found that children in street situations develop strong characteristics of initiative and positive identity while Lugalla and Mbwambo (1999) found that Tanzanian street living children are highly organised in groups of peers who share resources, strategies, assets and care. Chawla (2002) reports that

the interaction of children in street situations, within neighbourhoods and street communities, is the keystone for understanding the growth of impressive ethical behaviours and that street life fosters the development of “cultural richness”. According to Baker (2000), the street network of friendships can reduce the real and perceived feeling of vulnerability and social exclusion, and raise the well-being of children in street situations. This is achieved mainly through the development of a “collective identity” and “feeling of belonging” that give the child the opportunity to be an active player within this urban sub-culture (Lucchini, 1996a).

These empirical studies reveal the importance of non-economic factors in children’s decisions to migrate and stay on the streets and indicate that street life not only involves vulnerability processes but also processes of empowerment through which children exercise their personal agency and develop innovative coping behaviours.

In consequence, reducing economic poverty is, at best, only a partial solution to the problem of “run away” children. Low income and material poverty can lead some children onto the street, but it usually will not break household ties (Blanc, 1994). In such circumstances children should be considered as members of a “multi-spatial household” (Tacoli, 1999) with “mobile livelihoods” (Olwig & Sørensen, 2001; Stepputat & Sørensen, 2001). Such children regularly return to their household to share income and maintain social relationships. In the Nigerian context, they do not define themselves as children in street situations because their assets and affections are still shared with other household members. While the process of street migration involves the interaction of both “push” and “pull” factors, the analysis that follows focuses on “push” factors. This is because the emotional bond between children and parents or guardians and other household members can only be broken if the adult-child relation collapses (Veale, 1992). In other words, children tend to maintain and protect the “natural” status of being under the supervision of adults (usually parents) unless push factors weaken or damage the relationship (Masud et al., 1997), leading to the breaking of household ties. The parallel feeling of empowerment and freedom experienced when running away makes street life attractive. Issues such as the social bonding that children experience on the street, the formation of urban sub-cultures, the evolution of their self-perception are of significance in understanding the attachment that children develop to the street and the difficulties they face in reintegrating into their former households. These complex interactions of push and pull factors can keep or even entrap children on the street. But to a large extent they are subordinate to the initial breakdown of household ties which, make these “pull” factors of prime importance in understanding why migration occurs. Overall, the stress of economic poverty

serves as a push factor, making migration more likely in Nigeria, but we argue it plays a secondary role in comparison to the role that social relationships play in the family and on the street.

4. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

As earlier studies have established, the research methods commonly used to investigate children in street situations can lead to inaccurate data and unreliable conclusions (Connolly & Ennew, 1996; Ennew & Milne, 1996; Lucchini, 1996b; Panter-Brick & Smith, 2000). Until recently, studies on migration processes have tended to focus on quantitative, survey data collection and interpretation rather than on the experiences of those involved in the migratory process (Zhang, 1999). In particular, when investigating children in street situations, conventional survey-based quantitative approaches do not seem suitable because they are unable to create a trust relationship between the interviewer and child. This is an important constraint, especially given the suspicion children in street situations commonly have for adults. As a result, qualitative research methods should take priority.

This study draws on field research conducted in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria from September 2012 to June 2013 with 93 children in street situations. This involved 62 boys and 31 girls, with estimated ages ranging from four to eighteen years. Moreover, eight boys and eight girls volunteered as members for two advisory groups responsible for reviewing all parts of the field research, undertaking some of the interviews, facilitating group discussions and suggesting changes in the research process.

In this study, we also used a combination of observation and document materials for data gathering, which are valuable sources of data about social research. On the part of observation, one of the researchers participated in the activities of rehabilitation of Street Children organized by Indigenous Women International—A Non Governmental Organisation as a resource person in Akwa Ibom State.

A child in a street situation was defined as a child who provides for his/her daily basic needs without the support of the household or other guardians, and who actively finds on the street his/her main caregivers.

While the focus of the research was Uyo, Akwa Ibom State rapid field work was also undertaken in the cities of Calaber, cross River State, Port Harcourt, and Yenagoa Bayelsa State, all in Nigeria, to check the relevance of data collected in Uyo Akwa Ibom State to other cities and to gain a broader picture of the nature of child migration. The timing of research was “around the clock” including both day-time and night-time working children and seeking to capture data about all of their activities and relationships.

The main methodological constraint encountered was the impossibility of adopting sampling procedures to ensure that the relatively small group of interviewees represented the composition of the larger population of children in street situations in Uyo. The exact or even the approximate characteristics (gender, age, area of origin) of the reference population are unknown, as is common for such studies (Connolly & Ennew, 1996; Ennew & Milne, 1996).

A number of key stakeholders working at different levels with children in street situations were also interviewed as well as 30 families in the villages of Akwa Ibom State. It provided an opportunity to investigate the reasons that adults and children in the village believed had led to some children leaving their households to migrate to the street while others had not.

5. THE STREET CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is the largest black African country with, according to a recent census, a population of about 150 million people. It is said that every fourth African is a Nigerian. It has been estimated that there are about 300 million children less than 15 years of ages in Africa, representing almost half of Africa's population on the Street. There are no known statistics for street children in Nigeria, but it is known that children of under 18 years of age made up nearly 48% of the estimated country's populations of 120 million in 1996 (World Bank). This estimate remains undiminished with the passage of years and associated increase in Nigeria's population. Massive corruption coupled with legendary mismanagement of natural resources has made the provision of social amenities impossible in Nigeria. Not exempted is the faithful provision of compulsory education to Nigerian children. The United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported in May 2005 that over 7.3 million Nigerian children of school age were not in schools. This ugly trend has its own social consequences, one of which is the spiralling proportion of street urchins in the major towns and cities of Nigeria.

Two different categories of street children are found in Nigeria. There are those who live and work on the street (children of the street) and those who work on the streets full or part time, but return to their homes each night (children in the street). The point of demarcation is often nebulous, as both categories of children meet and interact on the streets and it is often easier for children in the street to fully graduate to children in the street. The two categories constitute the leprous arms of the same alarming social problem that most times lead to the production of adult social delinquents in the form of the "alright sir boys" or "area boys", armed robbers and so on. The social menace constituted by the area boys to businesses and the civil society remains one that

has defied logic and solution. They use persuasive and often coercive tactics to demand for money and are often involved in petty and sometimes violent crimes. The phenomenon of street children has transcended the urban exception, being both an urban and rural phenomenon in present day Nigeria. While it might be difficult to assume a reflective figure for the dimension of this problem, suffice it to say that the phenomenon was rare in the mid eighties. There was an "estimated" 8000 of them by the early 1990s. By 1999, children were reported in over a hundred street locations in Lagos alone. The problem, rather than abating, is worsened by the persisting social climate of poverty subsisting in ignorance and political mismanagement. Furthermore, a current estimate puts the number of children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS in Nigeria at around 700,000. This is another potent source of street children as such children have no tangible social provisions to tackle their needs.

6. ECONOMIC POVERTY AND STREET MIGRATION

Until recently, many studies have identified economic poverty as the main, and sometimes the only, cause leading children in developing countries to migrate to the street (Alexandrescu, 1996; Peacock, 1994; Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman, 1998). Economic poverty has been presented both as a direct and indirect factor that pushes children onto the street. It is argued that children move out of the household as a direct coping strategy, to diversify the household's portfolio of income generating activities, and that, at the same time, economic poverty leads to stresses and tensions within the household, that become an indirect cause of street migration (CSC, 2001). Such arguments have been taken up very strongly in Nigeria where most studies see economic poverty and/or economic shocks (such as land erosion, floods, financial shocks and especially the shortage of food) as the main reason why children move to the street (Ahmed & Adeb, 1998; ARISE, 2001; BSAF, 1998).

We argue here that economic conditions and shocks are only a limited part of the explanation for migration to city streets by children and that analysts and policy makers have so far missed the opportunity of significantly engaging with a growing body of literature that shows the decisive role played by non economic factors in children's decision to migrate to the street.

From the empirical literature on the topic, key researchers can be identified who have argued for less economic analyses and for a deeper examination of family life. In particular, Felsman (1989) found that 97% of his sample of Colombian children in street situations had actively abandoned their households due to a non-conducive family environment. Further, street

life helped in the development of children's resilience and street living children had better mental health than their counterparts in families. Aptekar (1988) found that children in street situations were emotionally intact in their intellectual functioning, and achieved high levels of self-management. Veale (1992) compared children in street situations in Sudan and Ireland, considering their different backgrounds, social-demographic characteristics and the processes of their street life involvement. In both cases, she found that street life was a rational choice when considering alternative options and risks.

In our study of street children in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, we found out that street life results mainly from family breakdown and many take to the streets for refuge. As indicated by the interview conducted with street children in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, the majority (39%) of the children interviewed lived with either a step-mother or a step-father. Nearly 24% (23.9%) reported that they lived with relatives. These were orphans who did not have any parents to care for them. Nearly 37% of the children came from single-parent families. Of these thirty per cent lived with single mothers, while 6.5% lived with their fathers. There were no children who lived with both parents. The results confirm that street children exist along a continuum of varying degrees of connection with their families. After sleeping at home and on the streets, the child may finally choose the streets when conditions at home were no longer supportive as result of poverty, loss of a parent or guardian. In same vine, in a study by **Alessandro Conticini and David Hulme on street children in Bangladesh (2006)**, it was found out that, for children, the feeling of insecurity they experience before migrating to the street is central to their migrating to the street and not confined to the economic sphere of their life (see also Bruijn & Van Dijk, 1999). There are several arguments showing that the role of economic factors in child migration in Nigeria, and elsewhere is exaggerated. First, if income/consumption poverty drove children to the street one would expect many more millions of children to be living on the pavements. The number of children living on the street is only a tiny proportion of total children living below the poverty line in the country. This implies, that economic poverty alone cannot explain why some children have abandoned their families and others have not.

Second, not all of the children living on the street of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State are from economically poor households. When considering the per capita expenditure of households, children living on the street have a variety of economic backgrounds ranging from severely poor households to well-off households. Only 48% of children interviewed were from poor and severely poor households. 26% and 16% respectively were from borderline and non-poor households.

The results attained by this method were corroborated by Nte and Eke's (2012) methodology for identifying the extreme poor, poor and non poor in rural Nigeria. Children's households were ranked in terms of two qualitative indicators: the occupation of the main income provider and the quality of housing. According to Nte and Eke, the percentage of households in extreme poverty is highest for agricultural wage labourers, fishermen and non-agricultural labourers. Progressively better conditions are observed for petty traders, industrial workers, tenant farmers, owner farmers and formal sector employed or service holders. Housing is another indicator that strongly reflects the economic status of the household (metal sheets) and (built with permanent materials such as cement or brick). The survey data about these factors at the time that children moved to the streets and identifies their poverty status by Nte and Eke (2012) criteria. Households classified as extremely poor live in one room thatch and have a main income provider who is an agricultural wage labourer, fisherman or non-agricultural labourer. Twenty three percent of children interviewed come from households with these characteristics. A further 30 percent of children come from households classified as poor. Importantly, a significant minority of children do not come from extreme poor or poor households. Twenty eight percent and 16% of children were respectively from borderline and non-poor households. Both methods indicate that a significant minority of children on the street do not come from households that can be considered poor in economic terms. This implies that economic poverty, in many cases, is not the main factor in explaining why children migrate to the street.

If economic factors were the prime reason for street migration, one would expect to observe a higher number of children coming from districts considered economically disadvantaged. However, there is no significant association between the mobility rank (MR), which indicates the districts from which our sample of children originate, and the ranking of Nigeria districts according to Nte's (2012) Income Poverty Index (IPI).

The majority of children interviewed living on the street come from the low or moderate IPI ranks. If economic poverty were the main factor behind street migration one would expect a more significant overlap between being a child in street situation and coming from the poorest districts.

Fourth, if material poverty and economic hardship were the main causes of street migration, one would expect children to move to situations where they can most rapidly improve their economic position and security, while most children reported that the street was an economic environment that satisfied their basic needs, they also reported that it was not the best economic environment they could have chosen. As explained by Ime (14 year old boy), a newcomer to the street:

“Once I left home I could have gone to stay with my parents and live with them because we have a big house and my both parents have good job. However, life with them is not the type of life I want to live. Look at me with one eye, I was maimed by my father when I was five because I was accused of being a witch. Here in Uyo I could have gone to a relative’s house but I preferred freedom, living with friends on the street... The street gives me enough lentils to survive but I could have had more living facilities with my relatives, but what I seek now is to enjoy life with my friends and have security”. I don’t trust adults any more and I don’t want to be accused of being a witch or beaten by them for no reasons.

Arguably, once left their home, children pay at least as much attention, and probably more, to the development of social relationships as they do to economic opportunities. In turn, supportive social networks can improve (in most cases unintentionally) children’s access to better economic opportunities in the future. They constantly seek to reduce their emotional vulnerability by developing social connections and friendships, rather than pursuing purely economic opportunities. In addition, as reported by social workers, even when the drop in centers for children in street situations provide them with food, shelter and a basic income, many children “run away” and return to the street. Arguably, children who stay at drop in centers are those who have found protective security through building social relationships at the centers. As indicated, the basic needs satisfaction provided by formal institutions or foster care, do not stop children from returning to the street. Once survival and basic earnings are secured, children in street situations choose their living environment in terms of trust relations and physical/emotional security rather than economic factors.

Furthermore, when children report economic reasons as the cause for abandoning home, these often hide deeper factors. In particular, a number of children reported that the process of leaving home was driven by the desire to earn money (i.e. “economic reasons”) but later explained that economic independence was seen as a way of gaining freedom from excessive control or abuse (by parents and others). Consequently, the ultimate cause for migration was not economic poverty but the desire to have more personal freedom. Better economic opportunities were only a means of achieving this goal.

Related to this point there is a concluding methodological issue to note. Many studies investigating why children move to the streets are conducted through quantitative one-off surveys and questionnaires. This indirectly favors the reporting of economic causes as the main factor for leaving home. A number of children reported that they presented economic poverty as the cause of street migration because this was what adults and informal education programs taught. Indeed, they indicated that they provided stereotyped and normative

answers to one-off questionnaires rather than disclosing the actual reasons. In this study, the level of trust developed between child and researcher had strong implications for the reliability and depth of data gathered. Most street children in Uyo and else ways have often lost trust in adults, and, questioning a child on personal matters, such as their departure from home, is simply not appropriate when there is not an established relationship between child and researcher. The genuine causes of migration are personal traumas, which children only reveal to people whom they trust. Economic factors are easier to report, especially when the interviewer is an unknown adult. They are more impersonal, usually meet the needs and preferences of the interviewer and are less likely to lead to follow up questions of a personal and/or distressing nature.

One-off surveys are poor methods of research if used on their own (Ennew & Plateau, 2004) and they are likely to produce inaccurate data on why children move to the street. Children involved in domestic physical and sexual abuse commonly feel responsible for those abuses, believing that they had somehow instilled in their perpetrators the desire to use violence against them. Thus, some informants reported feeling ashamed of revealing the deep causes for their migration. It is easier to fall back on economic poverty as the “cause”. As Mfoniso, a 15 old boy, reported after three months of trust sharing with the researcher:

I did not leave home for poverty, I left home because when I was seven, my step-mother accuse me of witches and as such I was not able to inspire love and affection from her. I was ashamed to tell you before. When I say I’m on the street because my family was poor people look at me and I inspire sympathy from them. They nod saying they knew that poverty was the cause and then they give me coins. But if I say that I’m on the street because I was accused of being a witch, people blame me saying I was not a good boy and run away from me.

As argued by Felsman (1989) in his research in Colombia, as a part of the process of constructing a new identity on the street, and of learning how to present oneself to other children, a child must learn collectively articulated experiences which include reconstructing the reasons he/she is on the street.

Research in Indonesia and North America shows that children are familiar with each other’s stories, and have learnt “socially approved vocabularies” in order to express their situations and reasons for going onto the street (Visano, 1990; Beazley 2003). In most of the cases reported here it was observed that children initially presented their predicaments with accounts felt to be suitable for the researchers and that flagged up reasons known to promote sympathy from adults. In doing so, children themselves are contributors to the dominant narrative acting out an expected social role. Widespread violations of children’s rights are taking place on a daily basis in Akwa Ibom State due to the belief in child

“witches”. Experience has shown that suspected “witches” are either abandoned by their parents/guardians, taken to the forest and slaughtered, bathed in acid, burned alive, poisoned to death with a local poison berry, buried alive, drowned or imprisoned and tortured in churches in order to extract a “confession. These factors lead to extremely high rates of child abandonment throughout Akwa Ibom State. There are countless children sleeping in bushes, abandoned buildings or on the street.

CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, there is a prevailing belief that children live in street situations because of economic poverty and hence, they abandon their families because they are unable to satisfy their most basic needs within the domestic environment. Moving on to the street improves their access to income, food, clothing and other essential goods and reduces the economic strains on their households and families (by reducing their dependency ratios). This is an attractive account but, as we have shown, it exaggerates the role that economic poverty plays in the process of street migration. A significant minority of children in street situations in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria come from non-poor (in economic terms) households, and, when they develop a trusting relationship with a researcher, explain their “move” in terms of other factors. Overriding amongst these factors is the belief in child “witches” which in turn leads to occurrence of violence - excessive control, emotional violence, physical violence and abandonment. Most children interviewed reported suffering violence in their household during the year before they moved to the street. The personal accounts of children provided traumatic evidence of extreme and cruel treatment by parents, stepparents, relatives and others. In many cases relatives and neighbours knew of the abuses being imposed on children but made no effort to intervene.

Children distinguished between fair punishment, meted out by adults as part of the process of bringing children up properly and, unfair punishment, when violence is applied but it is not part of the legitimate “bringing up” process. The qualitative evidence indicated that children accepted relatively high levels of “fair” punishment but that when “unfair” punishment occurred this led to the breakdown of trust in adults and made migration to the street both more attractive and more probable.

We can sum up our findings and their policy implications briefly. Children move out of households to live on the street in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria not mainly because of economic poverty (a lack of access to food, income and basic needs) but because of domestic violence and the breakdown of trust in the adult members of their household (and community). The

policy implications of this finding are reflective. Rather than trying to help children off the street, and assuming that economic growth and reduced income poverty will stop the gush of new children to the street, it suggests that policies to reduce street migration should focus on reducing the abuse of, and violence against children. Social policy, rather than economic policy, must take the lead. For Nigerian society, this is an altogether less comfortable understanding of why children move to the street, and what needs to be done, than that provided by the overriding account.

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