

Delayed Psychological Cognition and Social Incompetency of Children Exposed to Child Labor Hardship in Iran

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Abstract - Street children otherwise known as working children, whose early developmental needs are not met may develop severe and irrevocable psychological and cognitive harm, in addition to social incompetency. The irreducible needs of children dictates that the minimal requirements of a child's healthy development must include nutritional food intake; shelter, safety, education, developmentally appropriate experiences, and cultural continuity. In recent years and due to current political and social climate, Iran has experienced an exponential increase in the number of "Street Children", labeling them as "Children of Labor". These children, who are the youngest victims of such calamities, consequently lack proper developmental milestones, which may lead to traumatic experiences and developmental delays. In addition to a life of child labor and living on the streets, these children experience trauma such as psychological, social calamity, and emotional distress. Street children live a life of fear of being harmed, incapacitated, arrested by the police and exposed to brutality, victimized by other homeless on the streets, being subjected to abuse, and contracting infectious diseases. They are concerned about loneliness, not having a normal family life, and being unloved. Furthermore, Children of Labor do not receive a formal education, which deprives them from learning and developing necessary skills for social competency and capabilities. Furthermore, these children are exposed to social ridicule and stigma of being a child labor, which adversely impacts their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence. A comparative study by Canagarajah and Nielsen in 2001, attempted to understand causality of these children's predicament, and to influence governmental policy, in order to promote school enrollment of at-risk African children. The same study also concluded that living on the streets and working hard labor impacts street children's health and social competency, consequently preventing them from becoming functioning members of the society. The Street Children of Iran are forgotten and ignored by the government and society at large. Meticulously, this study will show that being exposed to hardship and labor in critical periods of early developmental stages will have adverse long term and irreversible effects on a child's physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. This qualitative study is conducted on the premises of closely following 20 street children ages 5 to 15, who are currently working as "Child Labors" in Iran. Moreover, through qualitative research methods, the study will explore in details their day to day experiences revealing the harmful influences these children continuously face and battle in order to simply survive one day a time. The study aims to explore the cause, effect, and the existing correlational variables of street children's demise and long-term impact of such influences.

Keywords - Street children, child labor, delayed cognition, social incompetency, living on the streets.

INTRODUCTION

Street children, whose early developmental basic needs are not met such as formal education may later develop psychological, cognitive, and social in-competencies. Receiving a formal education is instrumental in children's development of cognition, reasoning, and overall perception. Consequently, lack of education may affect a child's cognition and later lead to social incompetency, and delayed psychosocial ability (Nurrenbern, 2001). According to Le Roux & Smith, "street children fear being harmed, incapacitated, arrested (most report being subjected to police intimidation or brutality), and getting sick. They also are concerned about loneliness and being unloved." (Le Roux & Smith, p 2, 1998). Another complexity these children face is that lack of education deprives them from learning and developing necessary skills for social competency and capabilities. Recently, a comparative study on child labor in Africa was conducted in an attempt to understand causality, and to influence policy, in order to promote the school enrollment of at-risk African children (Canagarajah & Nielsen, 2001). Other research analyzing the effects of child labors on overall health of street children showed that lack of education is problematic for street children (Salary, 1384). While they are forced to work in their critical period of life they would miss the stages of normative development. Indeed, early childhood healthy development will lead to a higher cognitive abilities and intelligence, and lack of such premises may lead to sub-standard intelligence. One article written on long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes indicated that early childhood education program effect the cognitive development of children (Barnett, 1995).

Definition: The labeling of "Street children" is used in different context, which could refer to children of labor, homeless children, children working during school hours, or street children. According to UNICEF's website (2014), children too young to work or engaged in work practices that is compromising to their physical and mental health are labeled under these nomenclature. The nature of street children type or the exact definition may be up for discussion; however, one fact remains unchanged, and that is the alarming rise in the number of these children. The latest numbers published by *the Christian Science Monitor* (2014) reveals that at least one quarter of world' children are engaged in some form of child labor (as quoted by Susan Gunn, an International Labor Organization, a Geneva based organization). Increased global poverty, civil war, political unrest, and economic down fall are major contributors to this rise making children victimized and vulnerable to hardship and deprivation (Christian Science Monitor, Web, 2014) . Based on UNICEF's latest estimated number, there are nearly 150 millions of these children ages 5-14 worldwide that fall to this demise performing labor or activities detrimental to their overall development. This alarming figure, calculates to one in four child between the ages of 5-14 (categorized by gender, residence, and household income) as either living on the street or exposed to dangerous elements and teratogens.

Street children of Iran: It is incumbent to clarify the differences and the nature of what is considered to be a child of labor. Further investigation into the exact definition of "Street Children" of Iran, showed there are several different categories of child labor. According

to author's research, Iranian street children may come from an array of family structure, dynamics, and background. For the purpose of this paper, these children are divided into the following groupings:

1. Category A - Children, who live with family, yet work as child labor during the day divided by:
 - a. Born in Iran, but are considered to be illegal immigrants, this category is considered to be illegal since they do not have an Iranian residency nor do they have citizenship.
2. Category B - Children, who do not live with family or family members, but reside with a group labor supervisor:
 - a. Majority of this classification are children, who are natural born Iranian; however, their parents have sold them into child labor or have been abandoned by parents or family members.
 - b. Someone other than by a family member holds custody of this type of street children, which is a form of illegal guardianship.
3. Category C - Children, who do not qualify under either of the above categorization such as run away, orphans, or abandoned.

The focus of this paper is on category A, which comprises of children, who are born into immigrant families currently living in Iran. These children do live at a residence that has at least one parent sharing custody. They are forced to hold menial jobs for the purpose of their family's financial sustainability since their parent's illegal status prevents them from seeking employment. UNICEF (2014) estimates the average age of female and male street children in Iran to be 10 and 13 respectfully, averaging 11 years of age using Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). This indicator covers children 5 to 17 containing questions that address type of work and hours of labor per day (UNICEF, Reference year, 2000)

METHODOLOGY

The research set out to investigate the correlation between street children's lack of normative childhood development and correlation to psychological cognition and social incompetency. The researcher determined the study to be a descriptive, non-experimental, and qualitative investigation. As discussed previously, a child of labor is defined as living in poverty, working as peddler, and not getting a formal education. The head of Iran's statistics and ICT department of education ministry says, "There are 141 thousand children between the ages 6 and 11 who are not attending schools in Iran." (Harna, 2013). Some sources believe the statistic given by the Iranian government is grossly underestimated, which makes this type of research crucially needed. Therefore, this topic was chosen in order to gain empirical and scientific data on a subject that has received very little attention in Iran, in addition to bringing global awareness to a dire situation of these children, and to encourage intervention programs and international advocacy. In order to obtain such results, the study was carried out between December 2013 and March 2014 with a sample of 15 street children between the ages of 5 to 15 years old, who were currently working during the day missing school and other normal childhood's activities. The methodology to obtain the data was based on a structured questionnaire containing closed and open ended questions utilizing risk & resiliency

theory categories (VanBreda, A., 2001) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid. The categories included: Child, family, and community characteristics.

Population and Sample - The selection of participants was based on a population of street children, who frequently worked in a particular neighborhood in Tehran, Iran known for children of labor. Sample children were randomly selected between the ages of 5 and 15 years of age. The exclusion criteria was based on the fact that the sample population must be between the set age limits, and currently working on the street.

Data Collection

No manipulation or control of variables, no randomization, and no treatment was applied prior to the data being collected. Sessions were set up in a one-on-one interview fashion as the researcher asked the questions and children answered directly. Audio taping the sessions helped the research assistant in understanding some of the answers, which were ambiguous or not clearly defined. Some of the answers children gave were at times incoherent which were dubbed as lacking clarity.

RESULTS

Specific Results – Research by Salary revealed that 56 percent of children engaged in child labor are illiterate as well as 61 percent show signs of speech problems (1384). This lack of formal education is due to the fact that these children relinquish education for the sake of earning an income to help their family financial survival. Even those, who receive a minimum education via NGOs, are not allowed to practice or do homework, which makes their earning inefficient (Canagarajah & Nielsen, 2001). The children participating in this study showed sign of speech and articulating their answers efficiency combined with a lack of understanding of questions or were unable to fully express their thoughts. Data collected in this study showed that some of participating children receive one hour a day of off side schooling. These pseudo classrooms are offered by non-profit, non-governmental agencies, who only serve in minimum capacity; however, children mistake these classrooms as proper schooling. Also, their understanding of friendship is completely unparalleled of what children of the same age group possess. They considered their co-workers as their friends. They believe that they are enrolled in an actual school; therefore, they Children shared a distorted understanding of friendship (often co-workers are considered as friends or playmates).

Unanticipated Results – The analysis of the questions given by children revealed that all participants have illegal status with most being immigrants from Afghanistan. Although, some were born in Iran, due their parents' illegal status, children were not granted citizenship. Prior to the study, it was anticipated that due to the fact that working on the streets is dangerous (Christian Science Monitor, Web, 2014) majority of children may be male; however, the study revealed that there was equal number of girls and boys as child laborer. *Type of work was similar in both male and female not differentiating on gender role expectations as Female child labor did not necessary portrayed domestic duties or sibling care. Older children interviewed predicted that most likely they would continue street work and were hoping to have their own ring of child labor once given the chance.*

Almost all children regardless of age have difficulty expressing feelings or articulating answers regarding emotions.

Significant Findings – Further analysis of the data showed that level of cognition in all participants below grade level. Majority having difficulty understanding the questions, which required further expansion of the meaning of the question; however this may have been due to anxiety, delayed language, or certain learning disability issues.

DISCUSSION

Street children experience trauma such as psychological, social calamity, and emotional distress. Research indicated that maltreatment of street children is related with increasing risk of variety of problematic behavior. Children of labor are prone to depression and anxiety, developing Post Traumatic Disorder (PTSD), consumption of alcohol and drug, personality disorders, psychotic disorders, eating disorders, aggressive behavior, cognitive problems, sexual dysfunctions, obesity, suicide attempts, criminal activities, and prostitution (Maciel, et al., 2012). In addition, lack of economic and social development opportunities for these children may lead not only to physical issues, but many children are at risk for mental and social abuse, and neglect (Babae, n.d).

In Iran, a minimum 7 million of the population lives below the poverty, while children, who are the most vulnerable citizens do not have health insurance or access to mental health care (Babae, nd). The increase in Iran's street children in the recent years has become a social phenomenon. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of scientific research in this area, but the unofficial reports indicate that there may be an approximate 20,000 street children just living in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Professional criminals use street children for gang of robbers and drug dealers, so their chance to hold decent jobs is low and lack of educational opportunities compromises their chance to ever learn beside other children (Ahmadikhoie, 1383). Street children are in dire situations of social vulnerability especially in poor countries, and these social damages distinct them from other children.

Furthermore, street children, who have to work, will miss their period of basic needs development such as formation of skills, resiliency, playing, and having relationship with friends. Children of labor, who work like adults will miss their critical period of childhood that could later lead to forming irreversible defects in the developmental process (Salary, 1384). Reviewing previous research showed that chronologically, children involved in child labor often seem to have a less mature cognition and social perception than that of their peers. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that they are deprived of required nutrition and normal life activities, which may lead to certain cognitive or emotional dysfunction (Le Roux & Smith, 1998). Lack of formal education deprives street children from learning and developing necessary skills for social competency and capabilities. Even in case of some limited literacy opportunity such as attending occasional school, their lack of attention span and attentiveness in the classroom due to extreme fatigue, physical, and mental exhaustion is counterproductive to their learning (Canagarajah & Nielsen, 2001). One of the irreducible right of a child is to receive basic education. Street children are deprived from this basic right, and the living condition they are forced to endure greatly impacts their critical period of life

(Demartoto, 2012). According to investigation of Barnet (1995), “age at entry to or years of experience in child care during the preschool years influenced the reading and math achievement of children at ages five and six” (p3, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Economic and social development requires considering not only the physical issues of street children, but also their mental and emotional well being, who are at risk of mental and social abuse and neglect especially in Iran (Babae, n.d). Moreover, street children are in situations of social vulnerability especially in poor countries, these social damages distinct them from other children. The longer this deprivation lasts, the greater the risk of mental dysfunction would be (Le Roux & Smith, 1998). This research study established a correlation between the existence of numerous risk factors to psychological cognition, and social incompetency of children exposed to child labor hardship in Iran. Furthermore, findings mirrored a certain degree of lack of grade level cognition and lack of social competency in children, who are exposed to hardship. Responses among participants to questions posed in the interviews were consistent and similar to findings in the literature review reflecting the validity of data collected along with inter-rater reliability of the study itself. Data collected showed that overwhelmingly, children of labor have a confused understanding of the concept of regular school, playmates, and friendship. They also have difficulty expressing thoughts and discussing goals and dreams for their future.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the above research, participants’ grasp of Farsi language idioms interfered with some children’s ability to fully express themselves; therefore, not being able to clearly answer some of the questions. Due to the fact that the study revealed all of the participants were children of immigrant families, it is recommended that future studies be conducted on the street children, who hold legal Iranian citizenship. The purpose of such study would be to provide comparative measures since children born into Iranian families might not show as severe as cognitive malfunction as the participants in this study did. In addition, the study revealed that there are numerous challenges associated with conducting research with street children as their location changes and it makes it difficult for the researcher to follow up with the subjects; however, future studies are imperative to securing a solution to the demise of these children.

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