

STREET CHILDREN IN BUTWAL MUNICIPALITY: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

There is ever existence of homeless, poor, orphaned, abandoned and working children in the world. In the traditional societies, those children were absorbed by the extended family or other are said to be 'street children'. Street children are the products of so called modern, social and economic systems. Unless the systems are revised properly, the problem of street children would remain as it is. Nevertheless, they have a right to safety, shelter, and the other basic necessities of life. Therefore, state and development parlers need to show obligations to design and implement relevant and functional forms of interventions. This article looks at the situations of street children in Butwal municipality and presents a short glimpse of the problem.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The phenomenon of street children is unabated in some places, while it is emerging in other places where it was unknown so far. Traditional societies absorbed this problem by the extension of family or other social networks. Street children are the products of modern socio-economic and socio-political structures. The phenomenon of street children was documented for the first time in 1848, when Lord Ashley recorded more than 30,000 "naked, dirty, roaming lawless and deserted children", in and around London (Wikipedia, 2014). Alan Ball (1996) in the introduction to his History of Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia 1918-1930 states 'Orphaned and abandoned children have been a source of misery from earliest times. By 1922 there were at least 7 million homeless children in Russia as a result of nearly a decade of devastation from World War I and the Russian Civil War. UNICEF's estimation made in 1989 indicated that there were a hundred million children growing up in urban streets worldwide. Over the course of fourteen years, those numbers have remained the same (UNICEF, 2004). Recently, UNICEF claimed this figures as high as 100-150 million where South America is announced to occupy half the amount and Asia about thirty million. According to a survey conducted by Child Welfare Society (CWS) for UNICEF in 1996, Nepal had about 30000 street children and among, them, 26000 were identified as "children on the street" and 3700 as "children of the street"

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(UNICEF and Child Welfare Society, 1996). It is a challenging problem in Nepal and there is no proper record of them. It is roughly estimated that Kathmandu alone have most of them however the distribution is throughout the urbanized cities of the country.

On the one hand, over the past few decades, the speed of urbanization and standard of living of people in Butwal municipality has been raised even if the existence of political instability is higher. On the other hand, appearance of unexpected poor children struggling for survival in the streets, sleeping on makeshift, cardboard, necked streets and mattresses are also increasing. This problem has directly raised some pertinent questions that who are those children? What are the causes that forced them to come to the streets? What will be the possible consequences? And how can these problems are solved?

The objective of this study is to compile and consolidate available information about street children in Butwal municipality, in order to facilitate the development of a long-term national and municipal strategy aimed at promoting, protecting and fulfilling their rights. The article tries to carry out the real situations of street children in Butwal municipality and presents a sort glimpse of the problem.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study is based on the information collected from the street children in Butwal municipality. A detail survey was conducted to collect relevant data and information. Direct contacts with the street children were made initially on the street centers, market places, bus park and stations of those locations. Different qualitative as well as quantitative tools were applied to collect information of them. Major tools used in the study were interviews and field observations designed to investigate the situation of street children in Butwal municipality. FGDs with children and their parents were also conducted whenever possible.

A total 72 street children were contacted and 68 children were interviewed in different places of Butwal municipality ranged from 6 year to 18 years. Among them 62 were boys and 6 were girls, 47 percent were from schedule caste, about 20 percent were not identified and 20 percent were from ethnic groups. Nearly half (48.5%) of the 68 street children interviewed were children “of the street”, who worked and slept on the streets. Forty-one percent (41.2%) of the street children had homes to go to at night.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Despite being very visible to the naked eye, street children are not an easy population to be studied, understood and described as such. Each street child’s history is found as a unique blend of several elements, the main causes those forced the children go to the street and its impact on him and society as

well are common. The causes and consequences of children on the street has been conceptualised as shown in diagram. In the conceptual diagram, the street child is placed at the centre. The outer row of arrows in the circle shows the different causes that force the children bring in the street and the inner row of circles shows the consequences of the child in the street which further force to remain the child in street with vulnerable life. The study first attempts to define the street children, then attempts to trace out the causes and consequences of this problem and finally propose the possible public policies to solve the problem of street child.

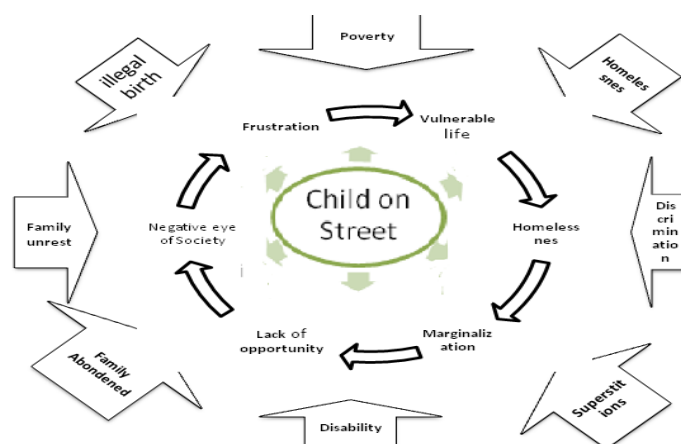


Fig: Causes and consequences of a child on street

DEFINITION OF THE STREET CHILDRENS

Generally the term 'street children' is used to refer to children who work and sleep in the streets. Such children may or may not necessarily be adequately supervised or directed by responsible adults and include the two co-existing categories referred to by UNICEF (2004) as those “on the street” and those “of the street”. Children “on the street” make their working or begging on the street and return home at night. They maintain contact with their families. On the other hand, children “of the street” are homeless children who live and sleep in the streets in urban areas. They are on their own, living with other street children or homeless adult. This distinction is important since “children on the street” have families and homes to go to at night, whereas “children of the street” live on the streets and probably lack parental, support. Street children can be classified according to their age, sex, race, social class and their experiences during their life time. While the distinction between children “on the street” and “of the street” has been useful. Some overlaps between the two may still remain. Some children “of the street” may have been abandoned and rejected by their families while others may have left their families due to

prevailing circumstances. Muchini (1994) has noted that there are “children of the street” who maintain links with family members while others have totally severed family connections. Some “children of the street” may visit their mothers staying with “step-fathers” once in a while or may visit other relatives and, return to their street homes. Children classified as “on the street” include those in the grey area, who sometimes sleep on the streets and sometimes sleep at home. This category also includes those staying with distant relatives and those who stay with employers. To wear away the gray area UNICEF further differentiates these children in three different categories as children who work and hang out on the streets, children on the streets who work on the street but have home to go at night and children of the street who live on the street without family support. Similarly, USAID has divided street children into four categories as

- Child on the Street: Have home and parental care
- Child of Street family: May have parent but no home
- Child of the Street: No home and parental contact
- Street child in institutional care: No parent but having relatives or institutional care.

These definitions are made on the basis of some categorization as to their origin, characteristics, social networks, and so on. The first attempt to provide a consensual definition of street children was made by the Inter NGO Program for Street Children and Street Youth in 1983 where they defined street children as those children for whom the street more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults (Ennew, 1994). So many terms used to indicate the street children can be found in earlier references to underprivileged children in Nepal such as *garib* (poor), *anath* (orphan), *asahaya* (guardian less), *magnate* (beggars), *Khate* (the rag pickers) and *bewarise* (abandoned, Neglected). Although these terms have overlapping meanings and the categories are not exclusive. Each also refers to a particular set of characteristics of street children. Children with following characteristics depending on the degree of contact with their families were considered as street 'children' as children who survives in the street, has little or no family contact, has no adult care, involves in various antisocial activities including thieving, pick pocketing, basic needs unsatisfied, begs or is subject to exploitation as a laborer, lives either alone or with those in similar positions and works as a *khate* (slang for garbage, rag or plastic picker).

STATE OF STREET CHILDREN IN BUTWAL MUNICIPALITY

Counting of street children is so complex and the results are often uncertain. All figures about street children should be treated with caution.

Given the ever changing nature of the phenomenon, it should be taken as flows rather than stocks concept. Continuous research would be needed to quantify the actual levels in different areas. These problems should not delay and intervention is urgent even though street children are few in number because early interventions are more likely to prevent the problem from increasing in the future.

Most were staying with at least one biological parent while others were staying with members of the extended family. Nearly 11 percent children did not answer whether they slept on the streets or at their homes. The last group represented the grey area between the two categories of children “on and of” the street. This group represented children who were likely to become children “of the street” should home conditions deteriorate. Most of them were from displaced poor family background around slums and squatters in riverside. Most of them had lost at least one of their parents and the living parent had a second marriage. Most of the street children (62.3%) reported that they bought their own food using their income. Slightly over eighteen percent (18.2%) ate waste from restaurants and container, and 15.1 percent ate from home. Many children “on” the street and those who slept both at home and on the streets also bought their own food. Thus, street children were mainly meeting their own food requirements through the purchase from their own earnings or through scavenging.

Most street children found in Butwal municipality are engaged in rag picking in which boys and girls as young as 6 years old sift through garbage in order to collect recyclable materials. The children usually get up before first light and carry their heavy loads in a large bag over their shoulders. Rag-pickers could be seen alongside dogs, searching through garbage heaps on their hands and knees. Other common jobs were collecting firewood, street vending, working in hotels, begging, prostitution and domestic labor. A number of very young children and babies were “used” by parents and adults to elicit sympathy and obtain money by begging at major street intersections and in busy shopping areas and passengers of buses. Babies were “hired” out to child street beggars while the mothers remained somewhere in the vicinity and would earn money for this “hiring out” of babies. Very young children below the ages of 6/7 years were sent out onto the streets by their mothers. She would in turn watch over them from a distance. These children would give to their mothers the money donated by the public.

MAJOR CAUSAL FACTORS

Children end up to the streets for a multitude of reasons. Some had lost their parents during civil war, natural catastrophes, and other calamities while others fled from abusive homes or escaped to the streets because their poverty-stricken families were unable to feed them. Children

did not go to the street themselves. They had usually come to the streets because of violence or extreme poverty at home. Natural disasters, displacement were other causes to leave their homes. Physical and mental disability was other cause. The cause might be anything; life was not easy for street children. Many of the street children who had run away from their home have had done so because they were beaten or sexually abused.

Poverty was the primary cause of the street children crisis. Poverty dumps a crowd of problems onto a child. Not only these problems caused immediate suffering, they also work against to keep the child poor throughout his/her life. Street children in Nepal might be homeless because their families were homeless due to poverty or migration, or because they had been abandoned, get lost or have run away. It was not unusual to see whole families living on the sidewalks of Butwal, squatters on riverside or rows of individual children sleeping around bus station, temple, street or garage. Poverty dumps a crowd of problems onto a child. Not only have these problems caused immediate sufferings they also keep the child poor throughout his /her life. In order to survive, a poor child in street will probably be forced to sacrifice education and training.

Not all materially deprived children become disconnected from the family; the quality of family relationships plays a fundamental role. In our society females are often discriminated against male. The problem is more severe in poor and conservative society. The girls carry liability of dowry and leave the family home after marriage; parents may prefer to have male children. Many female babies were aborted, abandoned or deliberately neglected and underfed simply because they are girls. Gender discrimination is particularly evident in education where boys are more likely to attend school and to do so for more years. The traditional place of the woman is in the home and many parents and children consider education for girls to be a waste of time, especially when the child can instead be working or performing domestic chores. Child marriage is another way by which girls are disadvantaged. While material hardship is a major factor in putting children at high risk, carelessness of family also matters a lot. Each street child's history is found as a unique blend of several elements. Main causes those forced the children go to the street were:

- Natural
 - Natural disaster
- Displacement
- Health Physical
 - Disability
 - Mental Disorder
- Social/Culture
 - Breakdown of homes or family
 - Family unrest

- Physical exploitation -Second marriage of the mother
- Sexual abuse -Forced child marriage
- Political -Domestic violence
 - Domestic violence -Gender Discrimination
 - War -Family abandoned
- Economic -Illegal child birth
 - Extreme Poverty -Suspected to be witches that
 - Unemployment bring bad luck to family

A careful analysis of the street children phenomenon reflects a number of immediate, underlying and basic causes. Available literature on street children in Nepal from academic presentations, journal articles, books by researchers and situational analysis and survey reports, show a plethora of causal factors. The phenomenon of street children in all societies seems to be a social institution with basic social, economic and environmental causes. It appears to have basic causes in the polity, the economy and other basic social factors such as public social policies about employment, housing and land ownership. Street children cited a number of reasons for being in the streets. These include earning, migration and displacement, income, being orphaned, abuse by stepfathers/stepmothers, relatives, inadequate care by parents or guardians and peer pressure.

CONSEQUENCES OF STREET CHILDREN

A review of the literature reveals that most of the studies implicate street children in various acts of deviance. The life of the street children is so gloomy that with the little money they make from the street based jobs. Street children live a marginalized life, commonly resorting to begging, pick pocketing, cleaning car windows, theft and prostitution to support them. They were extremely vulnerable to abuse and the girls are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse and sexual exploitations. Unsanitary conditions breed illnesses and diseases like tuberculosis, skin diseases, malnutrition and HIV/AIDS. Street children's involvement in begging, prostitution, drug abuse and various types of theft was widely documented. Their exploitation and coercion into deviant activities by older children, gang members or adult criminals was also a reality. The longer they remain in the streets, the greater the possibility that they would be drawn into the web of illegal activities. When legitimate means of supporting themselves become unavailable, illegitimate activities provide a means of support (Chetty, 1997). Many of the street children who have run away from home have done so because they were beaten, mistreated or abused. Tragically, their homelessness could lead to further abuse through

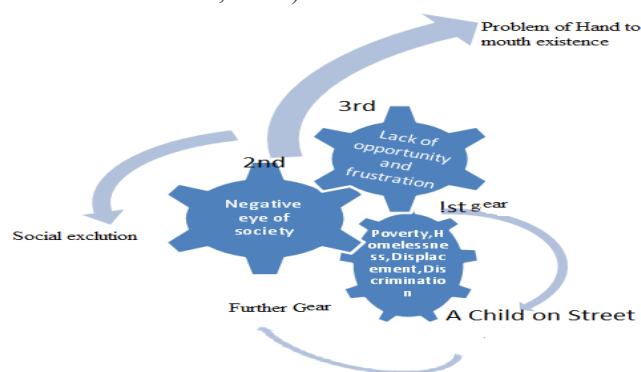
exploitative child labor and prostitution. Not only does abuse rob runaway children of their material security, it also leaves them emotionally disfigured. To aggravate matters, children often felt guilty and blame themselves for their mistreatment.

Lack of Health care and chronic diseases, and poor health was a chronic problem for street children. Street children live and work amidst garbage, animals and open sewers. They were exposed and susceptible to disease, Most street children had not been vaccinated at all. Child laborers suffered from exhaustion, injury, exposure to dangerous chemical and muscle. Nutrition, medical treatment, hygiene and reproductive health, education were far from them. The streets offer little protection, leaving the children vulnerable to dangerous predators.

Due to lack or no access to basic education and skill training, street children have little opportunity of improving their life and escaping this harsh cycle of hand-to-mouth existence. The public view of homeless children in many places is often negative. Very few advocates speak up for them and few of them had family members or concerned people willing to intervene on their behalf.

As a result of their terrible experiences, street children mature at early age and become aggressive. There was a deep susceptibility for the desire for someone to care for them. They will tend to create their own argot and engaged in petty theft and prostitution.

Figure 2: A conceptual diagram showing the harsh cycle of hand-to-mouth existence and exclusion of street children (adopted from Bhusal, 2014)



Source: Adopted From Bhusal (2014).

Above diagram shows the harsh cycle of hand-to-mouth existence and exclusion of the street children. It shows how children are thrown to the street by poverty, homelessness, discrimination. Displacement and once they reach the street the interlocking factors of

opportunity, lack and negative eye of society further gear to throw them far from opportunity and society so that they have to face hand to mouth problem as well as social exclusion. Once on the street, children and girls are vulnerable and at risk to all forms of abuse, exploitation and discrimination. This further endangers their life, physical health and psychological well-being, as well as putting them at risk of being criminalized for petty theft, involvement in commercial sex, and detainment by law enforcement agencies.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT STREET CHILDREN

The notion that street children are prone to criminality and socially unacceptable behavior is one of the dominant popular conceptions in urban society today. The following are some of the public opinions obtained from the survey which was conducted at Butwal municipality regarding their conception of the *khates* (popularly used term to indicate street children) and how they have affected other children and the society:

- The number of street children (*Khates*) is increasing every year in Butwal municipality
- Theft, burglary, pick pocketing, snatching are all increasing in our Society with the increase in the number of *Khates*.
- They sleep wherever they want and hence cause problems for the pedestrians, shopkeepers, and tourists.
- Other children learn obscene language, and dirty habits from the *khates*.
- *Khates* destroy plants, damage signboards, break street lights, and disturb the neighborhood at night by quarreling and fighting with each other.
- If there are too many *khates*, there could be lack of security in the Society.
- A child on street is a satire for human civilization and development.
- The main responsibility goes on government to solve the problem of homelessness.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of street children continues to be an integral feature of the urban landscape in many parts of the world. And the increasing tendency of the street children is found among highly vulnerable families and communities, struggling to overcome with growing economic inequality. The situation, which is associated with

high level of poverty and social inequality, can be considered as a potential cause for the increasing and alarming number of street children. The dire phenomenon signals the need for social development and poverty reduction policies to improve the situation in the community at large, and to prevent more young people from becoming marginalized. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) asserts that States Parties should recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. During the last decade, there has been much serious discussion on the issue of the street children phenomenon and children's rights among researchers, academicians and advocates from different fields.

Intervening in people's livelihood, even with the best of intentions, is always a complex, tricky and highly sensitive issue. Since, street children are individuals who have specific life stories and experiences, the programs and policies must be carefully designed to meet the needs of a group of children, within a certain set of circumstances. They cannot simply be lumped into one big category and expected to respond according to a certain type of program or policy. It is critical for practitioners to learn from the successes and failures that have occurred in other places and to understand the techniques that have been proven to help children recover from past. Different categories have been proposed by different literature regarding the policy approaches practiced in different situation in the past to the treatment of street children: the correctional approach and preventive approach model, and rehabilitative approach and preventive approach model, and the outreach approach and preventive approach model.

The street children issue can best be addressed through preventive programs and policies that will strike at its social and economic causes. Special protection measures are also needed to increase development opportunities for young persons' currently suffering the hardships of street life. Focusing only on assistance is just as ineffective and can even make the problem worse, by increasing the child's dependence on charity and destroying its incentive to leave the street. The right kind of program is one that will help young participants strengthen their connections with family, society, and the community. Lobbying and advocacy can make the voices of street children heard, by producing changes in policies and laws that affect their life. The impact and sustainability of NGO programs can be increased by networking and cooperating with municipalities and local services in developing initiatives geared to a broad range of vulnerable groups.

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