

Substance Use as One Camouflage: Evidence from Street Children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Substance use among street children is increasing alarmingly. It creates catastrophic social illness and severely affects the well-being of children. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the concealment and reasons for substance abuse as a means of escaping from immediate problems experienced among street children in Addis Ababa. This research employed phenomenological qualitative research. Data was collected from a total of 132 participants who were purposively selected from street children in Addis Ababa. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select 132 participants in the study. The data collection was collected from street children through observation, focus group discussion (FGD), and interviews. And finally analyzed thematically. The major findings of the study revealed that street children in Addis Ababa often practice substance use especially “Mastish” or sniffing glue to forget traumatic experiences and get camouflaged to get out of physical and psychological pain. This substance abuse alienates these children from society and as most of them indicate they develop separate multitudes. As per the finding, the investigator recommends that intervention and rehabilitation projects should be implemented by governmental and non-governmental bodies to support these children. Educational institutions should also make their community engagement activities to let children get out of the problem.

Keywords: Substance use, Drug abuse, Streetism, Escape, Hide, Mastish

Introduction

Concern over the lives and health of street children is spreading throughout the world (Ayana & Amsale, 2018). Substance abuse occurs in all segments of society, which results in poor health conditions, accidents, intoxication, violent crime, theft, and the like. Most studies indicated that adolescents are the furthestmost vulnerable age groups

to substance abuse-related problems as possible victims (Nath et al., 2022). UN sources indicated that there are about 150 million street children worldwide. As it is heralded in Ayenew et al. (2020), there are 150,000 street children in Ethiopia, of which 60,000 are found in Addis Ababa. Other sources estimate about 100,000 street children in Addis Ababa.

A growing number of children are forced into the streets as a result of the shifting dynamics between family and society, leading them to adopt new lifestyles. The structure and organization of the family have been profoundly impacted by global social and economic changes, as has the entire social system (Andrioni, 2018).

According to DSM 5, substance-related disorders embrace different types of drugs such as alcohol, caffeine, hallucinogens, inhalants, stimulants, and other (or unknown) substances. Individuals with lower levels of self-control may be particularly predisposed to develop substance use disorders (DSM 5, 2013).

Children who flee to the street due to different factors are being perpetrated by different natural and human-made problems. Street children are vulnerable to different problems including deprivation of basic needs fulfillment such as lack of food, health care, shelter, and the like (Osmani, & Hassain, 2020).

As indicated by the World Health Organization, between 25 and 90 % of street children use drugs (cited in Ayenew et al., 2020). Although these numbers are forward-looking, there is conjecture that there are more street children who use drugs. Afar of the hardships and other challenges, no comprehensive study has been done on the use of drugs by street children in Addis Ababa.

DSM 5 foreshadowed that the indispensable feature of a substance use disorder is a cluster of cognitive, behavioral, and physiological symptoms demonstrating that the individual continues using the substance despite significant substance-related

problems (American Psychiatrists Association, 2013). So, it is important to study how far engaged are street children in substance use whilst they feel that there are problems due to the drugs they abuse. This similar source specified as recurrent substance use may fail to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or home. Though street children are not grouped as they have obligations, substance use could make them refrain from social interactions.

Different sources (such as Deressa & Azazh, 2011; Mulatu & Bezabh, 2022; Tesfahun et al., 2013) have shown that “*psychological factors, social factors, academic factors, environmental factors, and lack of interventional regulation significantly predict substance abuse*”. But the case is assumed as it could be different among street children. There are various reasons or causes which lead children to substance abuse. Ayenew et al. (2020) indicated that siblings and mothers have crucial roles in determining the substance use behavior of children.

Objectives

The main purpose of this study was to investigate self-hiding and immediate problem-escaping (forgetting) reasons for substance use among street children in Addis Ababa.

Specific objectives:

- To identify the prevalence or situation of substance use among street children in Addis Ababa.
- To figure out the reasons that trigger substance use among street children in Addis Ababa.

Research Methods

Setting

The study was conducted in Addis Ababa. Arada, Gulele, KolfeKeraniyo, Addis Ketema, and Bole are the sub-cities included in the study. According to various literature such as GOAL, (2023), there are more than 100,000 street children in Addis Ababa.

Research Design

This investigation is qualitative research. The design of this study was phenomenological.

Population, Sample, and Sampling

The population of the study refers to street children who have experience of substance use in Addis Ababa. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select 132 participants of the study. The sample size was determined as per the highways (streets') number of students where most of them were in Megenagna, Mexico, Piasa, Arat Kilo, and Addis Ketema (around Bus Station).

Data Gathering Instruments

Data were collected using observation, focus group discussion (FGD), and interviews with street children who were selected as participants. The observation was done simply to see what is going on around the street where children are living. A total of 67 structured interviews were done by the investigator with assistants. The remaining 65 respondents were part of the 9 FGD sessions done with an average of seven members of the guided Focus Group Discussions. Observations were conducted in Arat Kilo, Piasa, Megenagna, Stadium, and Mexico squares using a checklist. The observations were supported with audio and video records

Methods of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. The records repeatedly listened and the notes which were taken from the fieldwork were thoroughly read so that major themes were formed. Amharic and Affan Oromoo transcriptions were made, and English interpretations of findings were presented.

Ethical Considerations

So far as the ethical considerations are concerned, the investigator has done the different Activities. The researcher participants have given their willingness to be respondents of the study, and the purpose of the study was communicated to them ahead. In addition, to protect respondents from psychological detriment, the investigator used anonymity. Videos and pictures which were taken with permission are made blurred and unidentifiable. Generally, appropriate ethical provisions of APA are applied in the investigation.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants

SN	Variable	Category	F	%
1	Gender	Male	93	70.5
		Female	39	29.5
		Total	132	100
2	Age	Below 7 years old	6	4.5
		7-11 years old	85	64.4
		11-18 years old	41	31.1
		Total	132	100

Source: Study survey (2023)

As indicated above, higher numbers of the participants were males since the proportion of males was also higher in the study area. Most participants (64.4%) were between

seven to eleven age ranges. Most children leave home and move to the street due to family dysfunction such as step-parenthood, poverty, death of parents, and more.

Drug use conditions

The vast majority of street children consume two or more types of drugs. The most frequently consumed drugs were cigarettes, Khat, and Mastish. However, at times when they get money to buy, they take in other inhalant drugs too.

In the leading reasons for consuming drugs, participants mentioned the following. The first reason is to forget the pain of hunger and chilly weather. The second main reason is to get the courage to do what they want to do.

Secondary data sources indicated that the condition of substance use is very serious in Addis Ababa (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nEc14E17S0>)

One of the respondents in the FGD stated the following:

“አሁን አንተ ሱስ የምትለው (referring to the discussion facilitator) ለእኛ ብዙ ነገር ነው.... አ.ሳ. (አለ አደል) ... የተፈጥሮን ብርድ እና ዝናብ፤ የሰውን ግልምጫ እና የዚፓ (the work they use to indicate police) የዚፓን ማሳደድ የምንሸውደው በዚህ በመደበኛዎችን ነው....”

Another participant has shown that he used drugs to commit pity crimes in the rainy season and got imprisoned so that he would not suffer from rain, mud, and flood.

“... በተለይ ከረምት ሱሱ ብርድና ረሀብ እንዲያስማህ ያደርጋል... በተለይ በዝናብ ወቅት ንዳና ስለማይመች... ወንጀል ሰርቶ መታሰርን እና ከረምቱን እስር ቤት ማሳለፍ እንመርጣለን፤ ለዚያ ድፍረት ይሆነናል፤ ወንጀለኛ ሆነን አይደለም ግን ቢቃ አማራጭ ስታጣ ታደርገዋለህ፤ እንዲያውም የንዳና ልጅ ሰው እንደ ሚያስበው ሌባ እና ከፉ አይደለም... ቢቃ ህይወት ናት እንዲህ ያረገች?...”

The above Amharic response in quotes indicates that street children practice substance use to escape from the cold weather. The other bold reason is the impoverishment of getting food and avoiding the agony of hunger. Moreover, street children are engaged in substance abuse to escape from the heavy rain during the rainy season by committing crimes and being imprisoned.

Challenges

Drug abuse affects children in various ways. The first challenge is its impact on children's health. The drug makes them to be poor in their health. The second consequence is that drug leads to commit crime. It was indicated that they are exposed to sexual abuse stating that there are females who gave birth in the street after sexual abuse.

In addition to the challenges that children face, the problems create complications for society and even for the country at large. Street children are victims of streetism due to marginalization and stereotypes from residents in the country. According to the participants of the study, the scanty view of society compelled street children to create their community (as a street children community).

At times those street children consume “Masitish” or sniffing glue, and they show stereotyped movements with less body control. During that time when they approach people for begging from those who pass by the street, individuals respond in a ridiculing manner. This creates a gap due to conceiving that the community is ruthless to them. This leads to helplessness and hopelessness.

The aforementioned challenges are a few of the defies that street children face due to drug abuse. Further study can be done in taking proactive and intervention measures.

Desire to Get Out of Drug Abuse

In the interest of getting out of such a problem, most street children are willing to work. They have interests in positive change, but the case is not as simple as one speaks or narrates. One of the participants indicated the following.

“ማንኛውም ህፃን የጎዳና ህይወትን ፈልጎ የሚኖር የለም ግን ለፖለቲካ ምናምን ተብሎ ሊወሰዱን ሲሉ የማንስማማው መለወጥ ሳንፈልግ ቀርተን አደለም፤ ከዚህ በፊት የሄዱ ልጆች ነበሩ ሰልጥነው ወጡ ተባለ ግን ማንም ዞሮ አላያቸውም ቢቃ ወደ ጎዳና ተመለሱ... ገባህ...?”

The respondent indicated that it is not their choice to be on the street. They would be glad if they got a genuine change that could happen in their lives.

The major findings of the study exposed that street children in Addis Ababa often practice substance use especially “Mastish” to forget traumatic daily experiences and hiding themselves in the drug. It was found that street children are using “Mastish” and other drugs to get out of physical and psychological pain. As the repeatedly raised point “... *wuchi enidemaderachin... sinitekemew birid ayisemanim...*” Substance abuse is alienating these children from society and as most of them indicate they build a separated multitude of children on the street.

Street children who have an addiction to sniffing glue indicated that they forget the pain pertaining to frost, neglect weather, neglect, and other pressures when they consume the drug. In addition, they mentioned that they got relief from hunger by using drugs.

Discussion

Similar to the study conducted by Ayana and Amsale (2018), street children are defenseless to a diversity of problems such as physical, psychological, and sexual exploitation as well as social isolation. This is very true and high when there is drug abuse.

Unlike the statements or findings in Ayenew et al. (2020) who stated as 25-90% of street children were immersed in substance use, the finding of this investigation has shown that the number is greater and the case is worse.

Despite the reason that most street children are not living with their parents, parental substance use background was also raised as one of the reasons why they are engaged in substance use. This is similar to the study by Ayenew et al. (2020) who indicated that siblings and mothers have crucial roles in determining the substance use behavior

of children. The study of Alebachew et al. (2019) shared the above causes. However, in this study, the major reasons were disguising psychological harm and forgetting the traumatic pains of hunger and cold weather.

In Mulatu and Bezabh (2022), it was indicated that alcohol, khat, and tobacco are the most commonly abused substances. In this study, it was found that street children are practicing substance abuse of Khat, Tobacco, and Mastish.

Conclusion

The number of street children in Addis Ababa is increasing alarmingly. As “*Mumps on Goiter*”, these street children are addicted to drug abuse which affects their health (physical, psychological, and social adjustment too). The increasing number of children has become a manifestation of social illness.

This study revealed that street children in Addis Ababa are engaged in substance use as a camouflage of self-hiding and a mechanism of escaping hardships. In addition, the study showed that street children practice substance use to relieve themselves from environmental and physiological traumatic experiences.

Street children often feel that they are neglected and abandoned by the community and government. This is why they are engaged in substance use publicly.

Recommendation

- ✎ As per the findings, the investigator recommends that intervention and rehabilitation should be done by government and non-governmental bodies in support of these children.
- ✎ Education institutions should also make their community engagement works to be exercised to avoid this challenge.

- ✎ The individual and group-based support system should be designed, and intervention shall begin while children are on the street. Much work should be done on family functioning.
- ✎ Further study should be conducted, and project-based support should be provided to street children.

Limitations of the study

The study is limited to those highways in a few selected sub-cities. So, it is difficult to generalize. The investigator believes that a mixed methods design will bring additional findings since this study is from a segment of the population of street children. This study does not include the causes that made children come to the street.

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