

# Assessing the Life of Street Children in North Wollo Zone Urban Areas: The Case of Woldia Town, Ethiopia

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## **Abstract**

*The main objective of this article is to investigate the life of street children in North Wollo zone urban areas particularly in Woldia town. The study employed qualitative approach and used expert and purposive sampling techniques to select respondents. Relevant data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The study finding showed that poverty, death of parents, family breakdown, parental exploitation, conflict with parent, work seeking, peer pressure, and mental problems are major causes for street life in the study area. The other main causes are displacement due to ethnic conflict, the presence of many children in a family, disobedient of children and hopelessness. The study result also revealed that verbal and physical abuse, difficulty to access food, getting in to accidents, psychological disturbance, immersing in various addictions, facing discrimination due to COVID-19, the presence of low work opportunity and police harassment are the main challenges that the street children have encountered in the town. The findings identified that carrying luggage, engaging in shoeshine, involve in street vending, begging and gambling are the main strategies to cope up the above mentioned adversities. It seems possible to conclude that the street children have led miserable life in the study town. To minimize and alleviate these problems the concerned bodies should work on changing the socio-economic life of street children in the town.*

**Key words:** causes, challenges, street children, survival strategies, Woldia town.

## **Introduction**

The problem of street children has become a pressing problem in Urban Ethiopia in general and Woldia town in particular. The majority of these children are living in conditions of severe deprivation which place them at both physical and psychological risk. Inadequate nutrition, long working hours and exposure to aversive weather conditions and physical abuse while on the street, endanger their development (Heinonen, 2000; Yitbarik, 2012). The severity of the

harsh living conditions is often amplified for young girls who face sexual abuse by adults, rape, unwanted pregnancy and early motherhood (Kebede, 2015; Melaku, 2014; Chimdessa, Olayemi & Akpa, 2017). It is categorical that the street life becomes miserable for most people especially the children who have lived a long time in it.

Ethiopian culture dictates a strong child work ethic, both in rural and urban areas. In rural areas there is no concept of early and late childhood; children are given some responsibility at the age of five or six. At this age, they involve in shoo birds, baboons off and herd cattle with older siblings. As they grow older, they are trained in the culturally appropriate sex roles: girls go into the kitchen to help their mothers and boys go out to the field for outdoor work like herding the cattle and helping their fathers with the farm work. Similarly, in the city children, especially those from families of lower socio-economic status engage in different jobs to help with the household chores and generate incomes to support their families, feed and clothe themselves and pay their school fees. Often the jobs these children undertake are tiring and risky both physically and psychologically. In the similar sense, Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, & de Muynck, (2004) argued that parental exploitation is a leading factor that make children to join the street lives.

The combination of poverty and strong work requirements for children make a conducive environment for the economic exploitation of Ethiopian children. One manifestation of child labor in the cities and major towns is streetism. Different groups of children are observed on the streets of Woldia and other major cities. These include those who beg from pedestrians and drivers on sidewalks and at traffic lights: those who sit in the corners or walk on the streets undertaking different types of jobs such as shoe shinning, street vending, providing change to small vehicle drivers, selling snacks, washing and watching cars, and carrying goods. Depending on the kind of jobs available in the town, children also engage in other types of jobs. For example, in Woldia there are a lot of children engaged in carrying commodities on various parts of the town. In addition to children who are working on the streets and other open and visible areas a significant number of children, especially females work as domestic workers.

Though Ethiopia has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the problem of child labor is widely observed. This might be related to several factors like culture, level of economic development and modernization. There is no sufficient information about child labor in terms of both quantitative and descriptive data. The necessity of qualitative and quantitative studies are realized when Government organizations (GOs), Non-Governmental

Organizations (NGOs) and International Organizations plan an intervention programs to mitigate the problems of children working on the streets as well as those who undertake various types of jobs at homes (United Nations Children's Fund, 2000).

Furthermore, it is also important to mention the literature gap that prevails in the study area. More specifically, though similar studies have been conducted in different cities in the country particularly in Addis Ababa, Hawassa, Dessie, Jimma and Bahir Dar, the researcher has, however, not come across studies assessing the life of street children in Woldia Town. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the life of street children in North Wollo zone urban areas particularly in Woldia town. Specifically, it identifies the major factors that expose children to street life in Woldia town. It also finds out the major challenges and abuses which street children faced in the study area and elucidate the already employed survival strategies of street children in the town.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed qualitative approach and explanatory type of research. The relevant data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected from street children and stakeholders. In a sense that the researcher gathered primary data through key informant interview from different concerned bodies. These were officials from Woldia Women, Children and Youth Affairs, and Social and Labor Affairs Office. Secondary data were collected from the relevant literatures. Expert and purposive sampling technique were employed to select respondents.

The primary data were collected through the combination of key informant interview, in-depth interview and observation. The secondary data were collected from published government reports, books, articles, and government proclamations. More specifically, street children and stakeholders were included as a study participant especially for in-depth and key informant interviews respectively.

In relation to this, qualitative data were collected through open ended questions and verbally presented, narrated and described. The results were classified, and then conclusions were drawn. Finally, the collected data were briefly discussed under the categorized themes. Moreover, secondary data that were obtained from various data sources were organized and analyzed to reach persuasive results. Those secondary data were analyzed through content analysis.

## **Results and Discussions**

This section discussed and analyzed the data obtained through interviews and observation in a pure qualitative interpretation. It primarily focuses on the general overview of street children, the causes of streetism, challenges and abuse commonly experienced by street children. It also elucidate about children's coping mechanism.

### **General overview of street children**

Street Children can be defined as any girl or boy for whom the street (in the widest sense of the world, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults (Tetteh, 2018; Black,1993; UNICEF,2000).

According to UNICEF (2000) street children are categorized in to three groups. The first one is those children who are both economically and socially engage in street life. These children have little or no contact with relatives, are homeless, and fully lack parental, emotional, and psychological support they often move from place to place living in a shelter and abundant buildings. The second group is those children who maintain good family ties and often return home in the evening. These children spend most day, some night working and socializing on the street because of poverty, overcrowding, sexual or physical abuse at home of different categories this is the most innumeros. The last group is those children whose parents are also exposed to street life. They may be displaced due to poverty, war, or natural disaster. In this case, often work on the street with other members of their families.

Ideally childhood is a time for exploring, learning, and growing up. Children in early childhood explore and learn about their environments and themselves. Late childhood is a time when children develop physically, socially, and psychologically; it is a time for learning, play, and fun. In spite of these facts, a lot of children in the world are involved in economic activities, shouldering responsibilities to support themselves and their families at the expense of their education and health (Alem & Laha, 2016).

ILO (2019) estimates that in developing countries about 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are engaged in economic activities. Among these 48% work full-time while the rest combine work with schooling. In Africa 46% of the boys and 36.7% of the girls participate in economic activities, which rank the continent first on child labor indicators.

A child labor remains a wide spread and a serious problem throughout the world. The accurate number of working children in the world is not known, however, some estimates have been made. Worldwide 218 million children between 5 and 17 years are in employment. Among them, 152 million are victims of child labor; almost half of them, 73 million, work in hazardous child labor. In absolute terms, almost half of child labor (72.1 million) is to be found in Africa; 62.1 million in the Asia and the Pacific; 10.7 million in the Americas; 1.2 million in the Arab States and 5.5 million in Europe and Central Asia. In terms of prevalence, 1 in 5 children in Africa (19.6%) are in child labor, whilst prevalence in other regions is between 3% and 7%: 2.9% in the Arab States (1 in 35 children); 4.1% in Europe and Central Asia (1 in 25); 5.3% in the Americas (1 in 19) and 7.4% in Asia and the Pacific region (1 in 14). From this most of child labor is concentrated on hazardous works which affects the children's physical and mental development (ILO, 2017).

Ethiopia shares the problems of child labor with other developing and developed countries. The major factors for children working on the streets of Ethiopia are poverty and family instability. Children are engaged in various types of jobs such as carrying goods, shoe shinning, peddling, and newspaper selling. The problem of streetism is serious in big cities and towns due to migration and poverty. The number of working children continues to increase in proportion to the population size (MoLSA, 1993; Kevin, 1999).

Woldia is one of the four urban administrations in North Wollo Zone and serves as its administrative capital. The town is also one of the fastest growing small urban centers in eastern part of Amhara region. Currently, in the town different development projects are become established and expanded. So, the town has quickly spread out almost in four direction parts of the Zone. The population who live in the town is highly augmented. Rural to urban migration is lofty in the town. Due to this, the numbers of street children become enhanced greatly. Those street children are found around Adago-Meneharia, Piyasa and Gonder Ber. These are the prominent parts of the town that street children lived in. Based on the observation of the researcher the street children who live in Woldia town have led miserable life in the street in this COVID-19 pandemic time.

### **Contributing Factors for Children's Leaving Home in Woldia Town**

Studies showed that in many developing countries the exposure of children for a risk "a natural outcome of reflection of the socio-economic factors. Rural-urban migration, incipient revolution, and other social unrest are highly enhanced whereas in developing countries the exposure of children for danger

is related to moral abandonment. Correspondingly, poverty, natural disasters, war and violence, family disintegration, HIV/AIDS are the major reason why children live and work on the streets. They are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and have little opportunity to claim their rights. In addition to this, family disintegration, parental death, unfavorable home environment, absence of adult supervision and parental pressure to start work, and rural-urban migration, which negatively affect the stability of families is another force causing street life to increase at an alarming rate (Heinonen, 2011; Chauke & Mudau, 2019; Chetty, 1997).

The case of Ethiopia is not exceptional; it is similar with different cases in the world. So, there are different factors that contributed for child streetism. Some studies that were carried out on street children in the country have shown a multiplicity of factors that lead to the emergence and development of street life. Among them are: poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, parental death, child abuse and neglect, dropping out of school, child labor, the influence of peers, migration, and many other reasons related to the social environment. Based on the interview respondents the numbers of factors have contributed to children's joining the street life. The most common factors were family poverty, followed by disagreement with real parents, death of parents, peer pressure and family breakdown. So, family poverty takes the lead for children's decision to leave home and followed by conflict with family. In relation to this, parental exploitation and mental problems are another pushing factor that children joined to the street lives.

As the researcher inferred from in-depth and key informant interview respondents poverty, death of parents, family breakdown, strict parenting, conflict with parents, work seeking, peer pressure, and mental problems are significant causes for street life in the study area. The other main causes are displacement due to ethnic conflict, the presence of many children in a family, disobedient of children and hopelessness. As noted above these are the concise lists of main contributing factors of street life in Woldia town.

### **The Challenges and Abuses of Street Children in Woldia Town**

There are many challenges that street children have encountered in the streets. Some of the challenges that street children have faced in the streets include malnutrition or difficulty to access basic nutrition, susceptible to cuts and wounds due to lack of shoes and protective clothes, injuries and physical pain due to work and walking long distances. Exposure to drugs, violence, and abuse

by other street children, the general public and law enforcement officials that street children endure in the streets may make them feel nervous, scared, angry, or confused. Moreover, the danger of getting in to accidents, physical abuse, psychological disturbance (feeling of liveness, anxiety, and fear), social exclusion, immersing in various addiction sorts (like alcoholism, smoking, chewing chat, taking 'shisha' and so on) were the significant adverse effects of street life for children.

In addition to the above, forbidding payment for their work, working without sufficient payment and labor exploitation are the other main challenges of street children in Woldia town. In-depth interview respondents added that the various properties of street children have often robbed and stolen in night times. Some people who live in Woldia town bulldoze the street children to exploit their labor gravely.

The other pervasive challenge for street children is access to food. Daily bread is the major problem for most of the population of poor countries. The problems get worse when viewed from the point of view of vulnerable groups like street children. The sources of food as to how and where street children get their daily meals become a crucial point for children who live in the street. According to the majority interview respondents view, buy leftover food from cafes, purchase cheap food from small low quality cafes and get leftovers free food from cafes and restaurants are the main means that helps them to get food. Even though they access foods in such ways, they have encountered hunger and starvation in many times in their street life.

The COVID-19 pandemic is another serious impediment for street children in Woldia town. Discriminating by the society, the problems of food accessibility, low work opportunity and the police harassment came to us and intensified on us due to the outbreak of corona virus. This result is inconsistent with Save the Children, (2020), and United Nations, (2020) outcomes or findings.

Abusing the street children in various ways is the common problem of many towns and cities of Ethiopia. Although the law enforcement bodies have a responsibility to curb such serious abuse, the difficulties seem out of their control because the troubles or adversities of street children are increased that make them more vulnerable to various problems from time to time.

Living on the street, with no supervision, protection or guidance often makes street children vulnerable to a wide range of problems or hazards. Accordingly, the type of abuses they face on the street of Woldia experienced both verbal and physical abuse and occasionally sexually abused. Moreover, some key

informants point out that there is some sort of attempts in committing sexual violence on both male and female street children.

Some respondents also argue that some of the street children of the town had involved in crime like theft. This has been proved by incidences of police arrests. But, according to the view of the affected one in Woldia town sometimes there is police brutality on them without any sufficient evidence. If a problem arises among them, then they are considered as trouble makers by vast majority of the society.

Most of the street children work and live alone on street without parents or legal guardians. And these children have reported that they suffer in their sleeping places much due to cold, verbal abuse and physical abuse by gang group, being beaten by older street boys is very common. In relation to this, those street children are exposed to committing crime like theft. They forced by gangsters to steal money, mobile and the like for the benefits of the gang group. Therefore, engaging in forced stealing is the other adversities of street children in the town.

In general, street children are unprotected working children who are highly vulnerable to exploitation by the work itself and by others. Their lives on the streets leave them with few opportunities to access basic needs like food, shelter, education and basic health services. They also exposed to different kinds of health problems.

### **Activities which Performed by Street Children for their Survival in Woldia Town**

Their survival or livelihood strategies involve drawing all sorts of skills, knowledge, labor resources and social networks. Street children center on income earning activities mainly in the informal sector either as wage employees or self-employment like carrying luggage, shoeshine or begging. Others employ illegal means such as theft and gambling as a strategy to cope up with the challenges they have faced.

The street children involved in all portfolios of activities in order to diversify their source of income for their survival. To cope with their day-to-day challenges, street children resort to several coping strategies to avert their adversities and to acquire income for survival. These survival strategies include ways they use to make money, acquire food, and other basic needs. For instance, they engaged in street vending like selling boiled eggs, roasted grains, gums and etc. for their employer to get some cents. Some street children who return from big cities to Woldia town have sucked benzene in order to protect themselves from cold weather condition and hunger.



From the observation that most of the time they are involved in carrying some ones luggage if available and if it is not available they beg money from a person who have good dressing and nice for them. Their life style does not allow them to follow strict and structured hours of work. This is a factor that determines the number of hours they work every day. Such life style, in general, is reflected not only on the number of hours they work or engage in begging but also in the number of hours they have for entertainment, sleep, play or meal.

### **Conclusion**

In Ethiopia, children living and working on the streets are not typically classified as the worst forms of child labor. Nonetheless, the problem of streetism is growing considerably in the country. Simultaneously, the extent of child labor in the street is increasing due to poverty and social, economic, and political crises. Children between the age of 9 and 13 and even younger are engaged in different economic activities on the street.

The primary objective of this article is to investigate the life of street children in Woldia town. Family poverty, death of parents, family breakdown, parental exploitation, conflict with parent, work seeking, peer pressure, and mental problems are significant causes for street life in the study area. The other main causes are displacement due to ethnic conflict, the presence of many children in a family, disobedient of children and hopelessness. More briefly, children come to start streetism due to the following contributing factors; push factors include: economic hardship, family breakdown, death of guardians and disagreement with family. Whereas pull factors include: search for independence, urbanization, better employment, attractions of the cities and peer influence...etc.

Verbal and physical abuse, difficulty to access food, getting in to accidents, psychological disturbance, immersing in various addictions, facing discrimination due to COVID-19, the presence of low work opportunity and police harassment are the main challenges that the street children have encountered in the town. These children have also faced health problems for which they did not get treatment. They are abused and threatened by older children. They are exploited and underpaid. Robbing and stealing of street children's property, banning payment for their work, working without sufficient payment and labor exploitation are the other main challenges of street children in Woldia town. They feel insecure and have worries about several things in

their lives. These circumstances indicate work that is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of the children.

However when they join such life on the street they face: verbal abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. Consequently, they induced to survive by: engaging in shoe shining, carrying luggage, entering in begging, gambling and street vending. These are the main survival strategies that street children have employed to cope up adversities or troubles.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher forwarded the following points as away to minimize and alleviate the problems of street children in Woldia town:

As children are the most precious asset and part of future asset for any country and are the most vulnerable group of the society, it is necessary to support children in every aspect. This bird eye view assessment reveals that child streetism is a serious problem in Woldia both on the life of those who base their living on the street and on the other hand it can deteriorate the image of the town. Thus, it calls for immediate attention and concerted action from the government, NGOs and families.

Urban development policy and planning has to incorporate streetism issues under its component and devise feasible strategies, projects which can significantly improve the street children's wellbeing.

This study indicates that a significant number of children are already on the streets of Woldia town. Therefore, two fold programs should be designed by the concerned government offices, consisting of short-term and long term programs. Short-term program should be rehabilitative, while long-term program should be preventative.

Above all awareness raising program should be given for the general public to bring about effective and sustainable change in the lives of these innocent children because streetism is viewed as a negative phenomena by the majority of the societies.

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