Knowledge and Sexual Practices Among The Street Children in Kota City

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ABSTRACT

Across the developing world, children living on urban streets are a byproduct of economic deprivation, urbanization, and industrialization. Rajasthan is the largest and most populous state of India. Jaipur, Jodhpur, Ajmer, Kota, Bikaner, Bharatpur, Udaipur, and Jaisalmer are major cities of Rajasthan. All these cities are growing rapidly due to rapid industrialization and tourism. All these cities are becoming the home of millions of street children and migrants. Kota is the largest and most developing city of Rajasthan and home to street children. The study examined the knowledge about HIV/AIDS, STIs and sexual practices among the street children in Kota City. The survey was conducted in the month of March 2013 among 50 respondents, ages 6-18, as a part of Ph.D. Programme that aspire to explore the reality of street life in four major cities of Rajasthan i.e. Jaipur, Jodhpur, Ajmer & Kota city. The present research paper is focus on exploring the facts about their knowledge about HIV/AIDS, STIs and sexual practices among the street children in Kota city. The responses were selected randomly and they were interviewed at major contact points of the city. Interview questionnaire, Focused Group Discussion, Field Visits and in depth, interviews were used as tools for primary data collection. The research paper found that street children are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and STIs due to unsafe sexual practices and unawareness.
INTRODUCTION

They are unwanted, unloved, and uncared. They are in torn clothes, naked, half-dressed. They are untidy, unkempt, unwashed, and half-buttoned, with uncombed hair. They do not have permanent shelter. They sleep on footpath, railway platform, bus terminals, under bridge, pavements near shops and malls, under construction buildings, condemned buildings, and train bogies, and the places that can be protect them from the harshness of weather. They arrange their food by begging on platforms, circles, restaurants, train coaches or searching bins for food. In addition, leftovers, throwaway food by pantry cars satisfy their hunger. They earn money by begging in train coaches cleaning compartments with their shirts and brooms, selling chain, paper soaps, water bottles, cigarettes, tobacco & gutkha, cleaning floors, rag picking, washing dishes, boot polishing etc. They use psychoactive substances, including medicines, alcohol, cigarettes, heroin, cannabis, marijuana, and readily available industrial products such as shoe glue, solution, and whitener etc. to numb the pain and deal with the hardships associated with street life.

As night progresses, these children are seen gambling, smoking, sniffing solvents, taking up with locals or tourists for a night of “big money,” taking on odd jobs to get some money to ease their grumbling stomachs or to take home to starving family members (Childhope, 1993).

The above portrayal is very common in each and every city. Earlier it was common in metro cities but now it has become a common seen in cities that are well connected with rail and rapidly growing. Worldwide they are addressed with different names like stroller in South Africa; they are known as ‘bui doi’ (the dust of life) in Vietnam (Noble, 1994); stroller in Cape Town; In Brazil, the word “Moleque” is used to refer to these children which means bastard (Rosenberg & Andrade, 1999: 115); chokrra, a derogatory term, meaning both ‘to pick’ and a ‘kitchen’ or ‘odd-job’ boy in Kenya (Johnson, 1939, cited in Davies, 2008: 314); the word ‘sewas’ (plural for the word ‘sousa’), the small insects that destroy grains and crops is used in Egypt (2003: 8-9); Lalor adds that slang words used by the police for street children include “the plague” or “dirty faces” in Columbia, “vermin” in Ethiopia and “mosquitoes” in Cameroon (1999: 765); word like Malundi and “omalalapayipi” means those who sleep in the pipes are used in Johannesburg (South Africa); in India, they are known as “Sadak Chap” means “without root or roof” or ‘carrying the stamp of the street’(Patel, 1990: 10), or “Tapore” means vagabond or rowdy or “Bhagoda” means runaway.

In English, of course, the term ‘street child’ has been a successful marketing tool touching the sensitivities of the Western donors “for whom the term... represents both the violation of the sanctity of childhood and the need for moral reform” (Nieuwenhuys, 2001: 551; see Hecht, 1998: 113).

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There are many definitions of street children, but the definition introduced by Inter-NGO Programmes (cited in UNCHS, 2000, p.73) covers important dimensions:

“Any girl or boy…for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwelling, 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”. This definition was formulated by Inter-NGOs in Switzerland in 1983.

In this definition, the term “street children” is used to refer to the children who work and/or sleep on 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 as those “on the street and those “of the street”(Agnelli, op.cit.,p.34).

There are many factors that are responsible for the phenomenon of street children. The first is the economic stress and poor conditions that families face due to industrialization and urbanization. The second cause is changes in the traditional family structure, breakdown of the family. Street children live and work amidst trash, animals, and open sewers. Not only are they exposed and susceptible to disease, they are also vulnerable to exploitation and incurable disease like HIV/AIDS due to unsafe sexual practices.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the study came from three main sources: a questionnaire survey, Focus Group Discussions and in depth interviews. The survey was conducted at the locations of Kota city. Contacts points were decided through field work and visits, help and assistance was taken from the NGOs working for street children in Kota city. Kota Railway station, Dakaniya Railway Station, Bus terminal and main circles of the city were selected as contact points to collect the data. To ensure an adequate representation of the street children the study targeted a sample of 50 male children aged 6 to 18 years. Two interviewers were assigned to interview the respondents. In addition, the field worker of TAABAR Society worked closely and helped to locate and contact the children. A random sampling technique was used to represent universe.

Two Focus Group Discussions were conducted with the respondents. In Addition, some stakeholders like vendors, coolies etc. were also interviewed to collect qualitative data. A few problems were encountered, as it was very difficult to assemble the children for Focus Group Discussion. If they were assembled then it was difficult to talk to them due to their 24 drunken states due to drug, alcohol, and substance use. Apart from this, they were reluctant to give answers regarding sensitive issues like sexual practices etc.
STREET CHILDREN IN KOTA CITY

Kota is a well-known city on the map of India. The city is the fourth largest city of Rajasthan State and most populous city of India. Earlier it was known as an “industrial city” but now it has been phrased as an “Educational City. Rapid urbanization and migrated populations is the salient features of this city. Every Year millions of highly ambitious students across the country enter in Kota city for Science and Maths coaching. This comprises of students of the age group of 12 to 18 years. This has created a multi cultural environment and fusion of cultures in Kota City. The coaching institutions and inflow of the students from across the country is the base of economy of Kota at present. Moreover, rail connectivity from all metro cities makes it more approachable to everyone especially for children. Every day a number of children including street children, runaway, missing, neglected, and beggars step down at Kota Platform.

The train feeds hundreds of children every day. These children travel from train to train to earn their livelihood. They have their own system to avoid quarrels and fights regarding earnings. Older boys direct the younger boys and teach tactics of begging in the train caches and take commission whatever they earn from morning to dawn. They divide the train coaches among themselves and if someone breaks the rules, a huge fight takes place among them.

The little urchin migrates from Sawai Madhopur, Bharatpur, Gangapur city, Keshorai Patan. They earn money from morning to dawn and go back to their perches or homes in the evening. Girls also travel train-to-train from these stations. They use different methods to lure people to give alms like singing, little and weak siblings in their lap, stunts, disguising themselves, in the name of different God & Goddesses. Street children who are abandoned and don’t have connections with family live permanently at the station. If a new child comes at the station, he becomes the member of their group soon. When Government Railway Police (GRP) & Railway Protection Force (RPF) take an action, against these children, they disappear for some time but soon they are back on track.

These children get support from goon and crooks who provide them shelter with vicious intentions. When these children are trapped, the goon and crooks start exploiting these children to fulfill their own vicious interests. Begging is the main occupation but as the children grow people don’t feel pity on older children so there is slump in begging occupation as their age grow. Due to growing age, some of the street children start selling goods like paper soap, water bottles etc., but some of them starts bossing around the little street urchins. They take commissions on the income, which younger children earn by begging, or they force to do some petty crimes like stealing passenger’s luggage or asset, snatching, stealing railway assets like iron and other goods, pick pocketing etc.
OUTCOMES

The study brought some fascinating and astonishing facts about the target group. Street world has its own sub-culture, professionalism, mannerism, support system etc. “Didi the first requirement of our street life or our profession is our untidy, unkempt, naked, look. The more the child is untidy, the more he would earn as people get emotional and feel pity so there is no place of bathing, cleaning and hygiene in our life. The respondent answered when they were asked about health and hygiene. They told, “If we look neat and clean and tidy who will give us alms, who will mercy on us?” Ironically, this if the professional dress code...

These children live in adverse conditions and get into the contact of many persons. There are slums nearby in each and every junction. The people live in shanties mostly depend on begging and petty crimes. The women and girls are equally involved. The slum girls mainly feed their families by begging or prostitution. The study explored about their relationships with peer group and others. It was found that 40 % children had friendship with opposite sex on streets. This includes mainly street and slum girls who are engaged in begging or prostitution who resides near around the railway station area and physical intimacy is the common thing between street boys and girls.

Homeless children are at risk of getting many diseases, including sexually transmitted infections (STI). The study explored that 90% children were sexually active. The median age at first sexual activity was 13 years among the street children. At early age, they had experienced or experimented sexual activity on streets by masturbating. Initially they started it with beggar and slum girls in exchange of some food, gutkha and other substance like alcohol, whitener etc. This is cheapest entertainment for the boys because they didn't pay money for this as the respondent told. The study revealed that sometime they abuse mentally disturbed girls who are lost, missing sometimes. The respondent reported that they go to commercial sex workers for change. Bundi district is stronghold for commercial sex. The group of these children goes to Indergarh and hires a sex worker, spends a night over there and return to the station. In addition, the study found that these children are abused by older children and especially by eunuchs who begs in the train. Eunuchs take these children on tour for a month or two; they take care of them, give them nutritious food, in exchange use them to fulfill their sexual urge.

The study-examined knowledge regarding the HIV/AIDS and STIs and found that 80% respondent were not aware about HIV/AIDS while 20% were aware about HIV/AIDS but not about STIs. They had just heard about the name of HIV/AIDS but didn't know how it spread and
what are the symptoms of the HIV/AIDS. They main source of information about HIV/AIDS was from friends and television.

When they were asked about the knowledge and practice about the condom, 72% said that they knew about condom but never used. They said that knew from friends that condom gives less pleasure. In addition, due to the use of alcohol and substance, they are not in such condition that they could use condom. It was found that 30% street children knew about condom from friends, 34% friends and television, 10% from only television, 36% from porn movies.

The study also examined about their sexual health and found that 40% children experienced the complaint of itching in genital and burning in urination, 12% had eruption and pus on genitals, 20% had itching in genital and burning in urination along with eruption and pus, 18% only had eruption on genitals, 10% had several problems. Nevertheless, they didn’t care about this and didn’t seek any medical advice or treatment due to fear and shame. Apart from this, they told that in Government Hospitals, “We are not listened carefully so we can’t imagine going to government hospital for this type of illness and private treatment is so expensive that is beyond our capacity.”

CONCLUSIONS

• The research paper provides a platform for the discussion over a critical issue of the sexual health of the street children. The research paper revealed that the street urchins are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and STIs and need care and protection.
• Poor knowledge level on HIV including misconceptions and false assumptions about use of condom, and risky sexual behavior among street teenagers were the major findings of the study.
• Substance and drug abuse impede efforts on HIV prevention among street children. Various forms of drug use results in physical, psychiatric, and social problems in street children.
• Hormonal changes in adolescent age make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and sexual diseases.
• Sources of information about HIV/AIDS used by street children include half-baked knowledge provided by their friends and peer group, television, and porn movies. The study finds that these children are provided platform to watch porn movies by some venders or crooks.
• Street children need to be regarded as a high-risk group for acquiring HIV. The potential benefit of providing homeless youth with night-shelters should be explored more since this could be an opportunity to integrate risk-reduction programmes that take into account all problematic behaviors such as risky sexual behaviour and drug use.
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