

An Explication of the Paradox of Street Working Children (SWC) with Special Reference to Pakistan

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Abstract

A scientific understanding of the issue of 'street children' embedded in its present context is imperative not only to understand the characteristics, needs and role of these children as social actors and the factors behind their work but also to devise and propose appropriate legal interventions. Therefore, the present research deals with the question: why a contextualized understanding of the issue of street working children is important? The gravity of the problem is highlighted in the form of negative and biased public perception about 'street children'. The empirical evidence from Pakistan's urban areas mainly Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar is used. The paradox of the "street child" phenomenon is that streets are considered harmful for children's well-being and the work they carry out is stigmatized. However, the research findings suggest that despite risks, there is a remunerative function to street work which is often ignored.

Key words: street children, Pakistan, contextual understanding, children as social actors, street children estimates

1. The Estimates of "Street Children": The Issue of Exaggeration

In 1986, it was estimated by the United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs that the number of "street children" varies between 30 to 170 million. The difficulty of accurately estimating the number is evident by this large range (Scanlon, et al. 1998). The UNICEF estimated the number of "street children at 100 million in 1989 (Campos et al, 1994) which remained the same in 2002 (Benitez 2011; UNESCO, Street Children n.d.). In 2005, the UNICEF declared that the number of "street children" is impossible to quantify but the figure almost certainly runs into tens of millions across the world (ibid). Most of the world's estimated "street children" are boys, although estimates of girls range from one-fourth to one-third worldwide (ibid). These numbers are referenced uncritically by not only advocacy groups but academic journal articles (e.g. (Ali, et al. 2004). However, a critical approach is needed to consider and reference the numbers of "street children" because of policy implications and the impact on their well-being.

Exaggeration of the issue does not help to devise informed policies but serves other interests. IOs and NGOs try to attract increased funding and attention of policy makers and governments towards the issue that also recognize need for the agency's work. Ennew (2000) argues that both the "street children" issue and the "homelessness problem" are constructs cleverly manipulated to reflect various agendas and interests of stakeholders such as the welfare agencies. At best, these estimates rest upon largely elastic and vague definitions of homeless and working children. At worst, they are made up (Ennew 2000, p. 170 cited in Panter-Brick 2002).

2. Estimates of "Street Children" in Pakistan

The total population of Pakistan is 145 million (till 2005), of which 48.15% are women with an annual growth rate of 2.6 percent (Tufail 2005). The total number of children less than eighteen years old is 78 million- i.e. 55 percent of the total population. One third of this population is within the age group of ten to eighteen years old. 35 percent of the population is estimated to live below poverty line (Tufail 2005). "Street children" are not subject to formal counting but included in the only national level Child Labor Survey under the broader category of working children, who were estimated at ten million children less than fourteen years old in 1994. Three out of ten children within the age group of five to nine years old do not attend school (UNESCO 2006). According to the UNICEF's current estimates, the primary school enrolment ratio of boys in 2007-2010 was 72 and for girls 60 which are still very low and also reflect gender disparity.

The non-official sources estimate the number of “street children” in Pakistan at 1.2 million (SPARC, 2011). The estimated children working on the streets of major cities are given in table 3 below which shows not only large variations in estimates but also the difficulty of deciding as to what is a “street child”, what her characteristics are and what should be the criteria to include someone in the counting.

Table 1: Overall estimates of “street children”

The world	Estimates (million)				
	30-170 million <i>v</i>				
	100 million <i>ix</i>				
	100 million <i>x</i>				
	Hundreds of million <i>xi</i>				
Country	Estimates				
Pakistan	1.2 million <i>vii</i>				
Cities	Karachi	Lahore	Islamabad/Rawalpindi	Quetta	Peshawar
	15000 <i>viii; ii</i>	14000 <i>viii; ii</i>	3000- 5000 <i>iii</i>	15000 <i>viii</i>	5000 <i>viii; ii</i>
	10000- 12000 <i>iii</i>	5000- 7000 <i>vii</i>		4000- 6000 <i>iii</i>	4000- 6000 <i>iii</i>
	25000 <i>vii</i>	3500- 5000 <i>viii</i>			
		8000- 10000 <i>iii</i>			
Ethnicity	Burmes; Bengalis; Balauch; Urdu speaking; Punjabi <i>viii</i>		70% Afghan, Pathan; 30% Punjabi <i>i; vi</i>	Afghan, Pakhtoon in majority <i>iv</i>	Afghan, Pakhtoon in majority <i>iv</i>
Age	largest age group 11- 12 years <i>vi</i>				
	8-12 years (boys); 5-9 years. (girls) <i>i</i>				
	13 years- SD 1.9 <i>iii</i>				
Main Occupations	Mobile vendors; Scavengers; shoe polish, car wash; waiters, physical labors; beggars				

Sources: *i*-Ali, et al. (2004); *ii*-Amal (2006); *iii*- Emmanuel, Iqbal, and Khan (2005); *iv*-Lowicki (2002); *v*-Scanlon, et al. (1998); *vi*-SPARC (2011); *viii*-Tufail (2005); *ix*-UNICEF (1989); *x*-UNICEF (2002); *xi*-UNICEF (2005)

2.1. Characteristics of Street Working Children

Studying the characteristics of street working children (SWC) helps in understanding their needs, social status, economic conditions, and also the political factors behind this phenomenon (e.g. inequality, forced migration, poor urban planning etc.). The dimension of physical well-being (health) is also presented in the following section that links the empirical findings about health as an indicator of well-being.

2.1.1. Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Occupations, and Income

It can be concluded from table three above that the age of most SWC in Pakistan’s major cities like Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta and Karachi, ranges from eight to fifteen years old, majority of which is boys. Girls on the other hand are in minority and are relatively younger- i.e. five to nine years old (Ali, et al. 2004; SPARC 2011; Emmanuel, Iqbal, and Khan 2005). The explanation for the age is that the kinds of occupations these children are involved in are not considered suitable for older children who are usually involved in hard physical labor. Fewer girls are found on the streets due to the factors of culture and religion of Pakistan where male members are supposed to earn and do outside jobs and females are usually involved in household chores or home-based economic activities. This factor calls for legal interventions to pay attention to gender issue because girls who are invisible are equally if not more vulnerable to the human rights violations and exploitation. SWC mostly belong to marginalized populations comprising of e.g. Afghans and Pashtoon in Islamabad (Ali, et al. 2004; SPARC 2011).

In Pakistan, most children are involved in non-skilled economic activities including scavenging garbage to search for recyclable items which they collect for selling to recycling plants, cleaning/ washing cars, waiters at roadside restaurants serving mainly to the customers also belonging mostly to poor segments of the society, begging, shoe polishing etc. (Emmanuel, Iqbal and Khan 2005; AZAD 2004).

Average monthly income of the SWC is estimated to be around Rs 4000 per month (SPARC, 2011). The average income of the fathers of street working children was Rs 2500 and the mother who if working (which was only 5%) was Rs 2333 (Ali, et al. 2004). Due to poverty and lack of earning opportunities or government support, poor households combine their earnings in order to survive, due to this children are a kind of economic asset for poor people (Motlagh, 2008).

2.1.2. Health as an indicator of physical well-being

The health risks faced by SWC are determined differently by the two schools of thought where one group of scholars considers such children at risk of malnourishment (Ali, et al. 2004). Others argue that children working on the streets are in a better health position compared to their peers living under same socio-economic conditions but not working (Aptekar, 1994; Black, 1993; Ennew 2003). In case of Pakistan, a study conducted by Ali, et al. (2004) in the cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad find that about twenty percent of children in their sample were not the same height for children of their age group in general. However, these findings can be challenged on the basis that the control group comprising of children from the same socio-economic background not working on the streets was not used in the study. In general SWC often work in very unhygienic conditions (e.g. children scavenging garbage with bare hands, eating leftovers from restaurants, people etc.). However, incidence of illness was not found to be very high among such children (SPARC, 2011). Most of the children (74.2 %) (AZAD, 2004) were also reported to be taking three meals per day (SPARC, 2011).

2.1.3. Importance of Understanding Children's Coping Strategies

SWC are exposed to larger risks than other children in general because of negative physical and psychological factors at home and challenges posed by the street environment. However, evidence suggests that children develop several coping mechanisms that are adaptive and may help in strengthening their social and cognitive development and well-being (Koller and Hutz 2001). Despite vulnerabilities, it is asserted that social support, love, and trust from peers, family, school teachers, social workers, children on the streets can withstand many challenges (Orme and Seipel 2007). It also exerts positive influence on their subjective well-being (resilience, personal autonomy) when they do not feel humiliated, isolated, discouraged, and outcast.

Understanding children's coping strategies on streets also gives a perspective about the function of work in their lives which can be helpful while devising informed and responsive policies. Children are active in responding to the conditions of their lives at home. It is evident from their act of voluntary or involuntary presence and economic activities on the streets (Bordonaro 2012).

As part of survival strategy, children form networks and new relationships on the streets. Subsequently children form groups commonly referred to as "gangs" and Densley and Joss (2000) call it their larger "family of choice". Advantages of grouping include sharing workloads, protection from law enforcement agencies, and mafias, opportunities to play, form friendships and so on (Oloko, 1992) (although some children prefer to work alone). In Pakistan's context, due to the bonding and commonalities amongst peers, even if someday a child earns less s/he does not end up hungry because of peers' support (Ali, et al. 2004). Studies conducted in Pakistan mostly highlight the negative aspects of street gangs formed among the drug addicts living on the streets and focus on the exploitation and negative peer pressure to get involved in illegal activities (Sherman, Plitt, Hassan, Cheng, & Zafar, 2005). However, these findings are not generalizable to all children working on the streets who often work along with their siblings.

Various policies and programs in Latin American countries have been devised from the understanding developed from studying children's characteristics, activities and survival strategies on the streets (Benitez 2001; 2011). Organizations working with SWC engage the former "street children" (who were provided services in the past) as "street educators" who know their younger peers better and are able to convince them to attend school or learn some skills helpful to earn sustainable living. In addition, children are provided training in "life skills" in which they are told to make safe work options due to risks associated with dangerous activities like commercial sex.

3. Understanding Determinants: the Supply and Demand

No single factor can be attributed to the "street children" phenomenon which is the result of a combination of various forces at the individual, local, national, and international level. It includes urbanization, growing population, environmental changes such as drought or flood, rural to urban migration, political and ethnic violence, poor economic condition of an economy, unemployment, illiteracy and so on.

3.1. The Supply Side Factors

There are various determinants involved behind the “street child” phenomenon as emphasized by various scholars. The following sections provide an overview of these explanations by linking them with empirical evidence from Pakistan’s urban areas.

3.1.1. Family Factors and Financial Issues

A research in context of Brazil focused on household factors such as broken families and shows that SWC are more likely to come from the households headed by single mothers (Scalon, et al. 1998). In addition, these children usually do not have access to basic needs of life such as clean drinking water, and their parents are mostly illiterate and/or unemployed. Besides financial problems, physical violence and unstable parental relations push children to the streets in Pakistan’s context (Ali, et al. 2004; Emmanuel, Iqbal, and Khan 2005; Tufail 2005). Certainly, poverty is one of the most important reasons but not the only reason for SWC because if this is the case then all the children living in the poor households would be on the streets. Factors like poverty, poor health provisions, illiteracy, unemployment and poor urban management are inter-related and contribute to push children towards the streets in Pakistan.

3.1.2. The Political Conflict and Forced Migration

Political factors like war and conflict are extremely important behind SWC in Pakistan. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Pakistan hosts 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees at present and “this is the largest and most protracted refugee population in the world” (2013 UNHCR country operations profile - Pakistan 2013). It is estimated that after September 11 Attacks and subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan, two hundred thousand refugees entered Pakistan joining already residing over two million since 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Lowicki 2002).

How the Afghan refugee problem is related to “street children” in Pakistan? This is an important question to consider because Afghan refugees mostly take refuge in Pakistan’s urban areas due to the prospects of work. There are about fifty nine percent children in 1.6 million Afghan refugees (less than 18 years old) and half of them are girls (Lowicki 2002). Household poverty is the main reason of these children’s work and their earnings are considered as the “backbone” of their family’s survival (ibid). Pakistan being a developing country with the population of 180 million is unable to cater to the needs of these refugees.

3.1.3. Urbanization and Migration

The “street child” phenomenon is also seen as a problem of modernization because it breaks down the traditional urban family structures, loss of arable land, and rapid expansion of cities (Oloko 1992). In Pakistan, increased immigration and consequent urbanization has led to the crowding of cities during the last two decades. The problem arises when the receiving cities are unable to absorb and accommodate the influx of individuals and households from rural areas. Due to this, rural immigrants in Pakistan have moved to the informal settlements in urban peripheries (Ali, et al. 2004). Poverty and inadequate family income have forced children and adolescents into seeking employment in the informal economy. In Pakistan, many children migrate to the cities for economic reasons, including children from Afghanistan (Emmanuel, Iqbal and Khan 2005). Migration of unskilled and uneducated people in developing countries makes it difficult for these families to survive in city lives. For this reason, children also have to compensate for the family earnings and play their role as economic agents.

3.2. The Demand Side Factors

Bordonaro (2012) emphasizes the importance of informal economy on the streets as one of the demand side or pull factors for children work. He further (like others Aptekar 1994; Black 1993; Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003; Ennew 2003; Orme and Seipel 2007) adds that the desire for independence and autonomy also contributes towards children’s decision to move on to the streets. This study claims that if street migration is successful then children are seemed at ease on the streets; on the contrary if their migration experience turns out to be a failure, then they are more likely to return to their families. However, this research does not take into account those children who do not permanently reside on the streets or those who migrate to the streets despite their negative experience and do not have other alternatives available. It is also very unlikely to consider the experience of children completely successful or completely a failure because of the tradeoffs involved. For example, despite harsh treatment from public and authorities, the streets provide livelihood to numerous poor children.

4. Gravity of the Issue: Negative Public Perception and Policy Response

SWC live in a community, peopled by other “street children”, street educators, help agencies, law enforcers, law makers and also law breakers and exploiters. The world of street children is complex. People who are supposed to protect them (law enforcers) may at times mistreat them because they might rightly or wrongly think of children’s involvement in criminal activities. On the other hand the law breakers and exploiters may provide “street children” with provisions but at the cost of criminality or exploitative sex. One needs to understand the children’s and communities’ perceptions about each other in order to devise appropriate policy interventions (Black, 1993).

The way the street working children’s lives and work are understood not only influences the perception and behavior of society towards them but also the interventions and laws related to them which are very important for their well-being.

The political implications of social understanding about SWC can be summarized as follows:

- i. Labeling these children gives a negative impression to the society that considers them delinquents (Ennew, 2003; Rurevo and Bourdillon 2003), amoral, and need to be controlled, rehabilitated or simply removed from the streets.
- ii. Viewing these children as delinquents leads to cruel treatment by people and punitive measures by the law enforcement personnel. However, in reality begging is the only deviant behavior most people experience from these children (Denssley and Joss 2000).
- iii. Being arrested (as part of the plan of removing them from the streets, on complaint of someone, drug use etc.) tarnish their image in society as drug addicts and criminals. On the other hand, the underlying causes of poverty, inequality and the function of work in children’s lives as a survival strategy are completely disregarded.
- iv. Creating hype about the issue calls for urgent policy measures. Consequently, policies and funding made to address the issue would miss the needs of SWC (Benitez 2011). For example, the governments adopt coercive measures to remove children from the streets in order to avoid international criticism, the human rights violation, protect children’s “best interest” and ensure public security. This approach pushes the children from visible to invisible activities such as commercial sex, working as domestic workers in households, road-side restaurants and bus stops (which are considered inappropriate and unsafe for women and children due to illegal activities and unsecure environment).
- v. Most visible children attract the attention of welfare agencies and children in slums and shanty towns are ignored.

As an example, despite knowing some skills (e.g. car repair, puncture fitting, garment-related work, and welding/molding), it is hard for adolescent boys in Pakistan to find a job (AZAD, 2004). Due to weak law enforcement, people do not care much about legal prohibition of employing children under ECA, 1991. However, employers find it difficult to trust the boys due to fear of stealing valuables and running away with no possibility of being found again. Due to this, adult’s guarantees are required. This is problematic though in case of children living without adult supervision or those belonging to marginalized groups (Afghan refugees and gypsies), or living with mother only, the apprenticeship or job is extremely hard to get. The following statement by a child expresses part of problems they confront due to lack of guardianship and/or the stigmatization in society:

“Why people will give job to us, no one is there to become our guardian or support us. They are afraid that we are going to kill them or steal something and run away.” (AZAD, KABPS study for street children in Karachi 2004, p. 27).

5. Political Contentions Surrounding the Children’s Rights in Pakistan

Being a marginalized segment of society, belonging to poor households without the provisions of electricity, water, sanitation and educational facilities, “street children” in particular and the children’s rights in general enjoy feeble political support in Pakistan. These are promoted mainly by international humanitarian agencies like the UN and the UNICEF or some NGOs. However, the interests of some humanitarian organizations and its negative implications for children’s well-being have already been discussed (section 3.1). Here, lack of response by parliamentarians will be analyzed with special reference to the controversial the ‘*Child Protection Bill*’ in Pakistan.

There is no law in Pakistan that explicitly deals with the issue of “street children”. However, if SWC are placed in the broader context of children’s rights, provisions for their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) exist. At the time of ratifying the convention, general reservations were made by the Government of Pakistan that the UNCRC shall be interpreted “in accordance with the Islamic laws and values in Pakistan” (Pakistan: National Laws, 2011). These reservations were withdrawn in 1997 but this evidence suggest that the child rights like the women rights and minority rights remains a politically contentious phenomenon in Pakistani politics.

Given the international pressure, the National Commission for Child Welfare and Development and the Ministry of Social Welfare initiated the drafting of a comprehensive *Child Protection Bill* in 2005 (Sardar). The main provisions of the proposed law include child protection against physical, sexual abuse and deprivation of liberty (Pakistan: National Laws, 2011). It also includes clear reference to “street children” who are entitled to the state’s protection. However, the bill was turned down by the parliament with some reservations. One of the main objections states that “***the bill appears to be alien to the prevalent societal norms, cultural values, and religious beliefs***” (Sardar, p. 7) and the phraseology were not sensitive enough to take account of these considerations. In 2007, after three revisions the bill was sent to the cabinet for review which was sent back from the then prime minister with additional observations (ibid). “It seems that once the origin or basis of a law or a rule is claimed to be Islamic (or in contradiction with Islamic values), governments and political leaders dare not repeal them (or support them). The political costs of defying such a stricture are too high and most of the time governments simply do not act, or act inconsistently. Thus signing or ratifying international human rights treaties remains virtually a symbolic act and many treaties even when signed can be ignored with impunity” (Imran, 2005, p. 84).

The prolonged delay of child protection bill provides the grounds for skepticism about government’s intentions to implement children’s rights in practice and not just to avoid the international opprobrium. The lack of legislation and implementation mechanisms about the protection of children’s rights have repeatedly been highlighted by reports of the UN committee on the rights of the child (Pakistan: children rights in the universal periodic review, 2012).

In its concluding observations in the year 2009, the report makes reference to its previous observations in the year 2003 regarding Pakistan’s compliance with the UNCRC that remains unaddressed to date:

The Committee urges the State party to take all necessary measures to address those recommendations... related to the harmonization of laws with the Convention, improved ***coordination*** of the national and the local levels, the establishment of a ***monitoring mechanism, resource allocations*** for children, ***data collection***, its cooperation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the ***definition of the child, violence and abuse*** against children, including sexual abuse, the right to education, child labor, and juvenile justice... (UNCRC, 2009, p. 3).

Despite international commitment, it is important to understand what makes policy makers in Pakistan delay the promulgation of a comprehensive law about children’s rights since 1991 (Pakistan ratified the UNCRC)? The first part of these observations are related to the organizational and institutional matters which may be impeded by lack of resources, continued inflation, internally displaced populations due to floods and terrorism, and refugee problem. However, there has been a low level of government commitment for allocation of resources to education- i.e. less than two percent which is lowest amongst the South Asian countries (Dawn, 2012). The formulated policies and plans of actions are not backed by proper monitoring mechanisms, as is evident from poor data collection mechanisms in the absence of which, it is extremely difficult to monitor the progress. Nevertheless, the macro level indicators show gender disparity in primary school enrolment ratio of 92 percent for boys vs. 77 percent for girls.

The second part of the observations are even more complicated politically- i.e. definition of the child, the violence and the abuse. Other than the cultural and economic differences about who is a child, there are serious religious reservations about it in Pakistan. The distinction between children and adults does not exist in the Constitution of Pakistan. However, some of the relevant articles of the constitution contain provisions that refer to children indirectly: Article 11(3) prohibits employment of children up to fourteen years old in hazardous employment; and Article 25A establishes compulsory education for children between five to sixteen years old (Pakistan: National Laws, 2011). A child according to the Islamic jurisprudence is a person who has not yet attained puberty which varies greatly with age and sex. This is one of the reasons that extreme variations exist in the age of a child in the national laws of Pakistan.

Secondly, the 'rights' of protection against violence and abuse are equally controversial. Corporal punishment at educational institutions remained a problem in Pakistan and many children drop out due to fear of being punished at school. In 2013 the government has just passed the Corporal Punishment Act prohibiting it completely (Nations, 2013). However, the effective implementation would depend greatly on the monitoring and compliance mechanisms.

In addition, the "street child" problem in particular does not enjoy any clear support or opposition from powerful national or international corporations and interest groups as in the case of child labor in export industry. Therefore, the issue gets a cold response from the government and these children remained to be stigmatized in society. Political manifestos of the mainstream political parties including Pakistan Muslim League N, Muttahida Qaumi Movement, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, and Pakistan People's Party include education and it is claimed that current GDP of less than two percent will be increased to five percent once they come in power (Sahi, 2013). However, no party makes clear reference to the "children's rights".

5.1. SWC as a Liability and Security Threat: Policy Maker's Perspective

Among the circles of legislature in Pakistan, street working children are considered as beggars and begging is a punishable offense and a security threat. During a National Assembly session in 2012 (reported in a state owned press), notice was called about calling attention to professional beggary in Islamabad, involving mostly children (Professional beggary in Islamabad on decline: NA told). The stance of these politicians is elucidated from their statements about the issue and their proposals reflect the state of their understanding and perception, which is not different from common people's perceptions. For example, the Minister of State for Interior praises police vigilance due to which number of women and children on the streets were declining in Islamabad. The state was not taking a "deterrent action" against women and children due to moral and social limitations. Some of the proposals of the members of parliament are the following: confining beggars to a particular area to prevent the projection of the country's negative impression in front of foreigners; the establishment of philanthropy centers; complete ban on beggary (which is already banned in the law); discourage begging (without further explanations about how); collaboration with NGOs and Sweet Homes in order to "get rid of" beggars. All these proposals are the examples of failed programs experienced in Latin America, some Asian and African countries (as mentioned by Aptekar; Ennew; Benitez; Woodhead and many other eminent scholars).

The judiciary's perspective appears to be ambivalent about the issue, though not very different from parliamentarians. For example, in 2011, the Lahore High Court ruled that the government should strictly enforce laws to discourage beggary, set up homes for the destitute and improve "charity" disbursements (Begging becomes business in Pakistan, 2013). "Most beggars, if arrested, get bail. Judges also take into consideration the lack of welfare homes for destitute people and the result is that once released, offenders... start begging (again)" (ibid). Similarly, when a child is caught from the streets, his/her parent/guardians are traced while keeping her in shelter (developed under Child Protection and Welfare Bureau). The child's parent swears in front of the court that s/he will take better care of the kid in future (ibid). Police officers are of the view that their "crackdowns" on the street people are not working because these children along with elders are involved in a lucrative business and often work in gangs (ibid). These positions of government actors from the top policy making to the bottom implementation level present similar kind of stigmatized views which completely disregard the underlying causes of begging or working on the streets (policy analysis is presented in chapter 4).

6. A Tacit Acceptance of Children's Economic Contribution

It has been stressed in chapter two that poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon due to which many children are found on the streets of Pakistan's major cities like many other developing countries. Richter and Swart-Kruger (2001) argue that poverty is not the shortage of income but *bona fide* income opportunities. In the developing, non-dictatorial and capitalist countries, children are allowed to be on the streets because they learn to find a niche in the economy of the poor and that they participate as citizens by earning a living (Richter and Swart-Kruger 2001). I disagree with part of the statement because in case of street working children in Pakistan, being on the streets is more of a compulsion arising out of lack of the educational/ occupational opportunities and alternatives and displacement in case of Afghan children, rather than as free and equal "citizens". Rag picking is one of the examples of children's participation in the informal economy and is very common among children working on the streets in Pakistan.

It can be defined as searching through the cities' dump sites to find the recyclable items, sorting and sifting through plastic material, glass, bread, iron/ steel etc. Although harmful (because of the exposure to waste materials, hospital waste, injury, breathing, and skin infections), their work contributes not only to their survival but also the environment and informal economy. A study conducted by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) on Rag Pickers/Scavengers in 2003 estimated that 89,500-106,500 children are involved in it (cited from Gulrez 2006) (table 2 shows large variations in estimates).

Table 2: Estimates about the rag-picking children in Pakistan

Cities	Estimates	Sample (Children refers to < 18 yrs)
Karachi	20000 (only children)- ii	Only children
	25000 (70% < 18yrs- 17,500- i	70 percent children < 18 years
	33,000-40,500- iii	Only children
Lahore	10,000- iv	Age group not specified
	35,000-40,000- iii	Only children
Peshawar	10,000-12000- iii	Only children
Quetta	8000- 10,000- iii	Only children
Islamabad	3500-4000- iii	Only children

Sources: i. Motlagh (2008); ii. Pakistan: child rag pickers should get protection (2009); iii. SDPI survey 2003 cited in Labour Watch Pakistan; iv. Tahir (2006)

It can be seen from table 2 that it is difficult to assess the number of children involved in the rag-picking occupation because of unavailability of official estimates. However, combined samples of children with adult also show disproportionately large number of children's involvement. The collective earnings of waste picker families range between Rs. 6,000 and Rs. 8,000 per month and earning from family members are often pooled together (Budlender 2009).

In terms of contribution to the environment, rag pickers' support is very important for the city district governments in their waste management (e.g. in Karachi and Lahore) (Pakistan: child rag pickers should get protection 2009). These children help in handling and disposing off twelve percent of recyclable material (ibid). Due to this, the city district government is able to save huge amount of money needed to collect the material otherwise (ibid). By spending six to eight hours a day, children sell the waste material to junk buyer, earning enough money to ensure their and their families' survival (Motlagh, 2008). However, these junk buyers are often exploitative without any checks from the city district administration (Tahir, 2006).

In absence of social protection and safety nets, poor families and their children have very restraint choices. Provision of facilities like providing masks, gloves, and other necessary protections from the government can help reduce the work related hazards of rag pickers. The provision of schools and/ or training centers within their communities (e.g. slum areas) with basic facilities of toilet, clean water, and meals can help improve their well-being. Moreover, it is also possible to not to restrict children for school uniforms and conventional examination system to increase their convenience where they can manage to combine schooling with work which is safe for their health (detailed analysis is provided in chapter four).

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper shows that "street children" is a complex phenomenon that needs to be viewed in its entirety by shifting the focus of the conventional approach of considering children as a site of problems to considering them as social actors interacting with their environment. Children as social actors make the best from their exploitative environment and restraint alternatives (e.g. schools, vocational training centers, social security provisions and so on). Due to underlying poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities, these children take on adult duties relatively early in their lives. However, the way the "street child" phenomenon is framed by IOs and NGOs creates and strengthens the prevailing prejudice in society. The conventional understating of the issue is "narrow-minded" because of not considering the tradeoffs involved in children's work. Policy makers and implementers also share the common negative perception about "street children", viewing them as a problem that needs to be suppressed. Informed and scientific understanding of this issue is imperative in order to devise policy approaches according to the needs and demands of these children.

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