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Impact of Family Breakdown on Male Street Children: The Case of Suez and Port Said

By: Mohamed Abdel Ma'boud Morsy

Introduction:

Previous research on street children adopted a holistic perspective to address the issue. This was necessary at that time when little was known about it and scholars were still building knowledge and designing the general framework to deal with the subject. This was an important step that paved the way for more in-depth and qualitative studies, that went beyond surveys, thus the importance of the current study.

The choice of the topic has been made on objective and methodological grounds. Studies on the role of the family are limited both in terms of number and quality; in fact they do not exceed some statistical indicators that point to the increase in rate of street children. They point in a limited way, to results of observations and visits to the families of street children in some urban areas in Egyptian cities. The current study addresses this shortcoming by focusing on family dimensions and variables from a structural functional perspective. The analysis is based on a comparison between children who come from broken families and others from un-broken families, taking into account criteria for measuring family breakdown. It also makes an important distinction between aspects of breakdown of family structure, and forms of disorder in performing the function, and the impact of each on the decision of the child to desert his family.

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Objectives:

From a theoretical perspective, the study examines the phenomenon of street children and its link to family breakdown. From a practical perspective, the study focuses on:

- The nature and size of the problem of street children in Port Said and Suez; the study examines the different dimensions of the problems and reasons behind its escalation in the last two decades of the 20th century, as well as the increase in number of street children in the study sites compared to other local communities.
- The relationship between family breakdown and the causes and development of the problem in the two cities; this is undertaken through a comparison of patterns among broken and unbroken families.
- Internal and external pressures on the family such as poor housing and utilities, poor health care, prevalence of unemployment and low professional and educational levels.
- Applicable proposals for implementation with the participation of official and unofficial bodies in order to mitigate the problem, lessen its rate of prevalence and begin to address family breakdown so that street children would remain with their families. This can be done by enhancing the economic and social condition of the families.

Methodology:

A comparative approach is adopted that focuses on areas of agreement and disagreement in the different variables. This is known as horizontal comparison. A historical approach as well as case studies have also been used to trace the development of the phenomenon of street children. In addition to an interview questionnaire, field reports, statistics and official documents have also been used. Snowballing was applied to reach the required of 300 children. Suez and Port Said were selected as study sites due to the increasing number of street children in the two cities. The duration of the study was 12 months from February 2003 to end of January 2004.

Findings:

First: Characteristics of the phenomenon of street children in the study areas:

1.Characteristics of street children:

-The largest percentage of street children in the study sample, amounting to 52%, lies in the age group 12 to less than 15. Findings indicated that 36.67% of the sample did not go to school. Those who dropped out of school reached 77.9%. Family poverty was the main reason behind school drop out as indicated by 53.38% of the children, followed by lack of interest in education (33.78%), and helping parents at work (26.35%). Peers are the factor with the largest effect on why children drop out of school (36.49%), while poor family resources and inability to pay for education was behind non enrollment in school (55.45%).

Factors related to family breakdown, such as separation between parents, disagreements between them, death of father or mother and role of step parents, are the main reasons why children leave home for the street as indicated by 53.17%. Of the total sample, 42.67% said that they have been living on the street for more than three years and 51.3% still visit their families on a daily basis.

2. Behaviors and health condition of street children

Findings indicated that smoking cigarettes is the most prevalent deviant behavior among street children. Peer pressure is among the main sources for picking up the habit of smoking, according to 80.36% of the sample; 51% take drugs and 39% believe that their health condition is normal. The main source of food is the child himself if he has money (45.67%).

3. Social and economic characteristics of families of street children:

-The study indicated that most of the children have illiterate parents (65.33%). Many parents do not work (28.79%). Illiterate mothers account for 63.4% of the total sample and 56.6% of them do not work.

-Two thirds of the sample i.e. 61.67% belong to broken families compared to 38.33% of unbroken families. The study indicated that the origin of half the sample was towns outside Suez and Port Said; the other half came from the study sites, which points to the impact of immigration on the increase in number of street children.

4. Living and housing conditions of street children

The study indicated that 34.67% of the families of street children live in one-room flats; 25.67% of the flats are on the ground floor and are made of sand and cement.

Second: Comparative characteristics of street children in Suez and Port Said**1. Main characteristics of street children:**

-Street children in the age group 12 to less than 15 constitute 55.33% in Suez compared to 48.67% in Port Said

-Findings indicated significant discrepancies between street children in Suez and Port Said with regard to the children's educational status with more children enrolled in schools in Suez compared to Port Said (74% and 52.67% respectively). The study also indicated a high rate of drop out among street children in the two cities.

-Family's poor conditions are the main reason why children leave school and move to the street: 46.91% in Suez and 61.49 in Port Said. In Suez, fathers are responsible for children's drop out of school (40.74%) while in Port Said, the child is the main decision maker (43.33%).

-Family's poor resources are the main reason why children don't join school, accounting for 58.97% in Suez and 53.52% in Port Said. They are also the main reason why sons leave parents' home (46% in Suez compared to 61.33% in Port Said).

-Findings indicated that a large percentage of children maintain relations with their families and spend the night at home (73.33% in Suez and 29.33% in Port Said).

2. Behaviors and health conditions of street children

-The study indicated that half the sample in Suez smokes (47.33%) compared to two thirds in Port Said (64.67%). Peers are the main source of learning to smoke (78.87% in Suez compared to 81.44%) in Port Said; 42.67% of the Suez sample take drugs compared to 59.33% in Port Said.

-Findings indicated that among street children the general tendency to obtain food in Suez is to beg it or find it in the garbage or through others (57.96% in Suez compared to 72.72% in Port Said).

3. Socio economic characteristics of families of street children

-Findings pointed to the large percentage of illiterate parents in Port Said reaching 68%, compared to 62.67% in Suez.

Unemployment rises among fathers in Port Said compared to Suez (41.32% compared to 17.65%). Also the number of illiterate mothers in Port Said is higher than in Suez (86.76% compared to 82%). There are more working mothers in Port Said than in Suez (56.93% compared to 26.24%).

-Family breakdown rises in Port Said to reach 76% compared to 47.33% in Suez. Findings indicated that 86% street children in Suez come from families whose origin is Suez. The opposite is true in Port Said, where children's families originate in other governorates (73.33%)

-The study indicated that parents mostly use physical punishment when their children make mistakes (92.67% in Suez compared to 71.33% in Port Said)

4.Housing and living conditions of street children:

-The study pointed to the rise in number of families that live in independent housing units in Suez compared to Port Said (57.33% compared to 38.67%). The opposite is true with joint housing i.e. the number of families that share the same house is higher in Port Said than in Suez (38.37% compared to 15.33%).

-Findings indicated that the majority of families (80%) have potable water in their houses in Suez. On the other hand, those who have potable water in Port Said constitute 41.33% only. The number of brick houses with concrete ceilings account for 36.67% in Port Said compared to 78% in Suez.

Second: Comparative characteristics of street children along family breakdown

1.Main characteristics of street children

-Findings pointed to the low percentage of enrollment in compulsory education (primary and preparatory) among children of broken families compared to children from un-broken families (55.14% and 76.52% respectively). Poor family resources and absence of father or mother were the main reasons behind non enrollment in school

-Findings indicated a high percentage of drop out among children of broken families compared to un-broken families (88.23% and 65.91% respectively).

-Son's link with family in the sample of broken families is weak as indicated by 43.78%, unlike unbroken families who have strong links with their children and the latter return home every night (75.26%)

-Study indicated statistically significant differences between children from broken families compared to children from un-broken families with regard to their profession. Broken families are characterized by the large numbers of children who do not have a concrete profession.

2.Behaviors and health conditions of street children

-The number of street children who smoke rises in broken families to reach 46.32% compared to 42.61% in un-broken families, indicating a statistically significant difference between the two types of families. Friends are the main source of learning about smoking in broken families (85.72%) compared to un-broken families (67.35%).

-Results indicated that more than one fourth of the children in broken families are ill and have less than normal health conditions (29.19% compared to 13.91% in un-broken families). Of the sample of children in broken families, 58.92% of the children obtain their food by begging it and finding it in waste places, or receive it in the form of assistance, compared to 46.96% in the sample of children in un-broken families.

3.Socio-economic characteristics of families of street children

Illiteracy among fathers of children in broken families is higher than in un-broken families (68.11% compared to 60.87%).

Unemployment among fathers of children in broken families is higher than unemployment in unbroken families (35.92% compared to 20%). Findings indicate low level of education among mothers of children in broken families than among mothers in unbroken families (88.65% compared to 77.39%). Working mothers in the sample of broken families account for 48.47% compared to 31.58% in un-broken families.

-Findings indicated that more than half the sample of children in broken families i.e. 51.35%, originates outside the governorates of Suez and Port Said compared to 31.7% in unbroken families.

-Findings indicated that beating and scolding are the most common ways of punishing children in broken families compared to unbroken families (47.03% compared to 39.63%).

4.Housing and living conditions of street children

Findings indicated statistically significant differences between the sample of broken and unbroken families with regard to the number of rooms in their flats. The number of families living in independent flats in the sample of children from broken families is less compared to children in unbroken families (44.86% compared to 69.56%). The average number of rooms in flats of broken families is 1.8 compared to 2 rooms for the un-broken families. This indicates the shortage of space for children in the flat, which aggravates the problem of street children.

-Findings indicated that 54.59% of the houses of broken families have a source of potable water compared to 70.43% among un-broken families. They also pointed to statistically significant differences between the two types of families.

Recommendations:

Through the analysis of the findings, the study reached the following recommendations:

-Need to intervene in order to support the families that suffer the problem of separation between parents. Assistance can be material through helping the families, or social through family counseling offices

-Address the material and social pressures facing families through improving the housing environment and enhancing their living conditions.

-Enhance social defence activities and institutions that protect vulnerable children. Usually problems begin when children leave home and ultimately end with acquiring deviant behavior. Social intervention through these institutions to re-integrate children within family life is considered an important method of treatment. Protecting street children can be actualized if social protection institutions expand their role to provide alternative families and help families that need social and material assistance. Assistance should also be sought from the National Council for Women particularly with regard to female headed households; more coordination is needed between social defence institutions and other social care units.

-Activate the role of local communities by addressing the problem of school drop out and examine why children find it an attractive alternative. More attention should also be given to slum areas to improve their conditions and utilities; expand the program of social guidance and enhance programs of child care.

About the Author

Dr. Mohamed Abdel Ma'boud Morsy: Director of the Social and Developmental Research Center, Faculty of Education, Suez Canal University

About the Program

The Egyptian Partnership in Development Research Program aims to inform development policies and strategies by linking those who conduct research with those who can utilize its findings to promote development in local communities. It promotes a research agenda which is responsive to the needs and priorities of local communities. The program is characterized by a multi-disciplinary, demand-driven, and participatory approach. The program began in Egypt in 1999. The program is directed by an Advisory Board of prominent members who are concerned with development issues.

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Partnership in Development Research

American University in Cairo

Social Research Center

11th Floor ,Cairo Center

106Kasr Al-Aini Street

Cairo-Egypt

Tel: 00202-797-6959

Fax: 00202-795-7298

Email: pdr@aucegypt.edu

Website: www.aucegypt.edu/pdr

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