

A Qualitative Study on the Causes and Solutions of Street Children: A Qualitative Study on the Causes and Solutions of Street Children

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General Background: Street children represent a major social issue worldwide, reflecting poverty, social inequality, and weak institutional protection mechanisms. This problem threatens not only the welfare of children but also the social fabric and future human capital of affected societies. **Specific Background:** In Afghanistan, particularly in Pul-e-Khumri city, the phenomenon has intensified due to ongoing economic hardship, family disintegration, and limited access to education and social services. **Knowledge Gap:** Despite global studies, little empirical research has explored the sociological dimensions of street children in Afghanistan, leaving local causes, consequences, and contextual solutions largely understudied. **Aims:** This qualitative study aims to identify the social, economic, and familial factors leading to the emergence of street children in Pul-e-Khumri, examine its individual and societal impacts, and propose practical solutions. **Results:** Findings indicate that poverty, unemployment, inadequate parental care, and domestic violence are key determinants, while consequences include physical and psychological harm, social exclusion, and increased inequality. **Novelty:** The study contributes original insight by contextualizing the street children phenomenon within Afghan socio-economic realities. **Implications:** The research underscores the urgent need for targeted policy interventions, including poverty alleviation, job creation, and educational programs to prevent and mitigate street child vulnerability in Afghanistan.

Highlight :

- Economic poverty and lack of guardianship are major causes of street children in Pul-e-Khumri.
- Street children suffer from physical, psychological, and social problems.
- Financial aid and job creation are effective solutions to reduce this issue.

Keywords : Street Children, Pul-e-Khumri, Child Labor, Poverty, Social Vulnerability

Introduction

The phenomenon of street children is one of the major global social issues, often referred to as an urban tragedy. This phenomenon affects most human societies, with each society confronting this challenge based on its socio-economic conditions, level of development, quality of life, and cultural awareness. Afghanistan has not been immune to the emergence and spread of the phenomenon of street children and its consequences. In fact, in most cities, due to various reasons, we witness the

uncontrolled formation and growth of street children. The increasing presence of children on the streets not only causes individual harm to them but also leads to numerous social problems and disturbances in the public domain. Observations of the actual conditions of street children show that these children spend most of their time on the streets, engaging in various informal jobs such as carrying loads, washing cars, street vending, garbage collection, and working for city taxis. Through these street occupations, they aim to provide financial and economic support to their families. Becoming street children not only robs them of the prospect of a bright and better future but also exposes them to numerous challenges and dangers, ranging from traffic accidents and inhalation of toxic fumes to the anger of drivers and city passengers, as well as arrests by police officers for loitering and obstructing public pathways.

Various studies on the phenomenon of street children have been conducted outside of Afghanistan. However, none of the previous studies have examined this phenomenon from the perspective of experts both inside and outside the country. For instance, Moqadam (2022) conducted research titled "An Exploration of the Formation Process of the Street Working Children Phenomenon and Its Consequences in the City of Ahvaz," and found that at least two factors—family and its existing dysfunctions as a necessary condition and starting point, and differential association of the child or, more broadly, environmental roots through peers and place of residence as a sufficient condition—shape the process of the street working children phenomenon in Ahvaz.

Moltafat and colleagues (2021), in a study titled "Analysis of the Status and Consequences of Children's Street Work Habits Using the Grounded Theory Approach," found that family dysfunction and disintegration, incomplete socialization, institutional reductionism, neglect in laws, deprivation of support and assistance from adults and education are significant and fundamental factors in the formation of street children in the city of Ahvaz. Hosseini (2005), in a study titled "The Status of Working and Street Children in Iran," examined the phenomenon of working and street children in provincial centers including Tehran, Mashhad, Ahvaz, Shiraz, and Rasht. The findings of this study indicate that factors such as the inadequacy of socializing institutions (such as family, school, or educational institutions), the economic poverty of families of street children, their inability to adapt to urban lifestyles, pollution and harmful conditions of city outskirts, lack of adequate supervision by responsible organizations, and improper patterns of interaction between citizens and street children have all contributed to the emergence of this phenomenon. Khamesan (2000), in a study titled "An Investigation into the Issue of Street Children" in Birjand County, found that poverty is the primary cause of the emergence of street children.

Migration and living in the outskirts have a significant impact on the issue of street children. Most children do not have access to social services, their families are not covered by social support programs, and most of them come from large families. Adriento, in a study conducted in 2000, found that low literacy levels of the child, increased family size (i.e., number of family members), parental illiteracy, and divorce significantly influence children becoming street children. The results of Hati's 1994 study show that most young people who run away from home and prefer to live on the streets have been physically and psychologically abused within their families. Hickson and Gideon, in a 1989 study, found that many street children come from poor families whose adverse living conditions have created numerous problems for them. The death of parents, family tensions, or lack of housing may force children to live on the streets.

Street children, due to the nature of their lives, are the source of many improper behaviors that not only harm themselves but also jeopardize the health of society and its members, ultimately destroying the human capital of a nation. Therefore, addressing the issue of street children is equivalent to addressing the health of society, families, and especially the future of children. Moreover, conducting this research titled "Qualitative Analysis of the Phenomenon of Street Children in Pul-e-Khumri City (Factors, Consequences, and Solutions)" is considered by the professors of Baghlan University, and its findings can provide clear, effective, and practical guidance to responsible authorities, particularly the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Afghanistan. Officials can take measures to prevent the increase of street children by using the

solutions and findings of this research. Similarly, economic and social organizations, as well as families, can take responsibility in economic, social, and educational support for children by utilizing the results of this study. By being aware of the negative consequences of street children's lives, they can take necessary actions to prevent this issue.

However, this research focuses on finding answers to the following questions:

1. What are the social factors behind the phenomenon of street children in Pul-e-Khumri city?
2. What are the individual and social consequences of the phenomenon of street children in Pul-e-Khumri city?
3. What actions and solutions can reduce and prevent the number of street children?

Theoretical Framework

Although the precise definition of street children is debated, many experts and policymakers adopt the definition used by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), according to which street children are "boys and girls under the age of 18 for whom the streets are a source of livelihood and who lack adequate care and supervision". (Vameqi (2011: 137). From UNICEF's perspective, street children refer to those children who, in large cities, are forced to work or live on the streets in order to survive. According to UNESCO, street children are homeless and wandering children and adolescents who have been separated from their homes and families and spend their days on the streets by begging, selling goods, and similar activities, sleeping in alleys and sidewalks. From a general perspective, a street child is defined as a child whose large part of life and activities is connected in some way with the environment of streets, parks, and public places, and who is generally seen alone and active in these spaces. (Qasemi (2019: 90), The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies street children into four groups:

1. Children who have no home or family and live entirely on the streets.
2. Children who have been separated from their families for various reasons and live with friends or in abandoned areas.
3. Children who were previously homeless but are now living in shelters or special care centers.
4. Children who live with their families but spend most of their time on the streets due to poverty and other problems.

Lask (1992) and Patel (1990) classify street children into four relatively similar categories:

The first group consists of poor children who work on the streets during the day and return home at night. This group probably attends school and is less likely to engage in criminal activities.

The second group includes independent street workers whose family ties are weakening. Their school attendance is decreasing, and delinquency among them is on the rise.

The third group comprises children from street families who live and work on the streets alongside their families. Economic poverty, including lack of housing and shelter, is the main reason for their street life.

The fourth group consists of children who have completely cut ties with their families and run away from home. This group spends full-time on the streets and, according to Lask, these are the true street children, constituting about 15 percent of his study sample. Some other researchers have categorized street children based on the stages of their life on the street. Aptkar (1988) and Visano

(1990) define the process of moving from home to the street as gradual stages in which the time children spend away from home progressively but continuously increases until the child fully adopts the street life and culture. Despite differences in definitions, children rarely begin street life before the age of five (Gutierrez, 1970: 3).

Research Method

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical design within a qualitative research framework. The primary objective was to identify the social factors contributing to the rise of street children in Pul-e-Khumri, along with the associated consequences and potential solutions.

Data Collection

Information was gathered using qualitative questionnaires designed to capture the perspectives of experts. The questions focused on the drivers of street life, the risks faced by children, and possible interventions to mitigate the issue.

Population and Sampling

The research population consisted of professors and subject-matter experts at Baghlan University. Given the nature of the study, purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant expertise. Based on Morgan's sampling table, a total of 132 respondents were identified as the representative sample.

Findings

In response to the main research question regarding the factors that have led to the street involvement of children in Pul-e-Khumri city, the majority of respondents believed that factors such as economic poverty of families, lack of guardianship, neglectful care, migration, unemployment, domestic violence, the income-generating nature of streets and public places, underestimation and normalization of the street children phenomenon, rapid population growth, unequal access to job opportunities, and limited access to education and schooling have driven children onto the streets. In response to the question about the social factors underlying the phenomenon of street children in Pul-e-Khumri, respondents identified various contributing factors. A number of respondents identified kinship networks as a social factor contributing to the phenomenon of street children in Pul-e-Khumri. According to their view, street children usually belong to a single kinship network, which provides a framework and model for their involvement in street life. Similarly, some other respondents considered family economic poverty and the income-generating nature of streets and public places as significant social factors influencing the phenomenon of street children. They believe that in Pul-e-Khumri, most families suffer from economic poverty and, therefore, are unable to meet their children's needs. Consequently, to address their economic demands, these families often rely on the labor of their children. Children turn to the streets to earn income and participate in street work in order to provide food and sustenance for themselves and their families. Therefore, the reliance of families on child labor has created the conditions for an increased presence of children on the streets. Another group of respondents consider the exploitation of children's social dignity by their families as a significant social factor contributing to the emergence and growth of the street children phenomenon in Pul-e-Khumri. According to these respondents, children, due to their innocence and the compassion they evoke, have always been respected by society. Consequently, some families, aware of the community's sensitivity and high social regard for children, exploit this respect by bringing their children to the streets and public places for their own benefit. They send their children, often dressed in a disheveled and frail manner, and teach them emotionally charged and sorrowful phrases and expressions, to engage in street vending and begging, thereby generating income to support their household expenses through these children.

The exploitation and misuse of sending children to the streets, besides being very common and

widespread, takes on various forms and types. In some cases, it appears that parents accompany their children to the streets, and this accompaniment is mostly based on exploiting the presence of the children there. Even more disturbing and reprehensible is the fact that many mothers bring their infants and children under five years old to the streets during extreme heat or cold. There are also reports that these children are often given sleeping medications so that, alongside the stillness and calm they exhibit, they evoke a kind of emotional response from passersby. Moreover, many families who do not have children under the age of five themselves take children from other families as "borrowed" and bring them to the streets. At the end of the day, the money earned from these children's street activities is shared with the children's original families. Additionally, domestic violence has been identified by some respondents as a significant social factor. According to these respondents, domestic violence against children causes them to spend most of their time outside the home, particularly in alleys and along busy streets, which increases their vulnerability. In fact, domestic violence, especially violence within the family directed at children, disrupts the familial living environment and pushes children toward street life.

Regarding the question of what consequences the phenomenon of street children has on the individual lives of children, the majority of respondents believe that becoming a street child leads to seriously negative and harmful outcomes in their personal lives. Some of these adverse effects can be summarized as follows: children on the streets are exposed to physical, bodily, and psychological dangers. Additionally, they face a higher risk of sexual abuse, substance abuse, involvement in theft, contracting various diseases, deprivation from education, and lack of access to a decent quality of life. These are considered the detrimental and harmful consequences on the individual lives of street children.

Regarding the question, "What do you think are the social consequences of the street children phenomenon in society?" the majority of respondents believe that the most prominent social consequence of street children is the creation and exacerbation of social inequality and class stratification within society, as this phenomenon significantly impacts the reproduction of social classes. Additionally, increased addiction and substance abuse, rising crime and delinquency rates, higher levels of unemployment and poverty in the city, threats to the overall health of the community, and the underutilization of the talents and capacities of street children—who, due to adverse family conditions, lack access to education—are regarded as the detrimental social consequences of the street children phenomenon.

In response to the question, "Which strategies and actions can be effective in preventing the phenomenon of street children?" the majority of respondents believe that the following measures can effectively contribute to preventing the phenomenon of street children: providing economic support to children and needy families; creating employment opportunities for adults and parents of street children (which can help reduce poverty and unemployment in society and consequently prevent the phenomenon of street children); and encouraging parents to educate themselves and raise awareness about the causes and consequences of street children in the community. Additionally, planning for job support programs and providing necessary educational opportunities by the government system can also be effective in preventing the phenomenon of street children.

Discussion

the findings of this study indicate that the majority of respondents consider economic poverty to be one of the main factors contributing to the increase of the street children phenomenon in Pul-e-Khumri city. According to their views, most families in Pul-e-Khumri suffer from economic hardship, and some are unable to meet their basic living needs. Consequently, to address their economic needs, these families often rely on the labor of their children. Children turn to the streets to earn income and participate in street-based activities as a means of providing food and livelihood for themselves and their families. Family reliance on child labor creates the conditions for an increased presence of children on the streets. This finding is consistent with the results of Khamesan's study (2000) titled "An Investigation into the Issue of Street Children" conducted in Birjand County,

which states that "poverty is the primary cause of the emergence of street children.

Most street children abandon their education and engage in income-generating activities. Migration and marginalization have a significant impact on the issue of street children. The majority of these children do not benefit from social services, and their families are not covered by social support programs. Furthermore, most come from large families." A substantial portion of the findings of Hickson and Gideon's 1989 study also align with the results of the present research. The findings of Hickson and Gideon's research indicate that many street children come from poor families whose adverse living conditions have caused numerous problems for them. The death of one or both parents, family conflicts, or lack of adequate housing may compel children to live on the streets. According to the findings of this study, the majority of respondents believe that factors such as economic poverty, unemployment, unequal access to employment opportunities, divorce and lack of parental supervision, neglect, limited access to education, and domestic violence have driven children to the streets. Another part of the research findings indicates that a group of respondents consider kinship networks and the children's residential neighborhoods as social factors contributing to the street children phenomenon in Pul-e Khumri city. According to these respondents, on one hand, street children are often embedded within a single kinship network, which provides a model or framework encouraging them to spend time on the streets. On the other hand, the families of these street children typically reside in neighborhoods where a large proportion of the city's working children also live. This co-residence in the same neighborhoods also significantly influences the increased presence of children on the streets. Therefore, kinship networks and place of residence are considered important social agents in the process of formation and increase of the phenomenon of street children in the city of Pul-e-Khumri. This part of the research findings closely aligns with the results of the study by Mohammad Hossein Moqaddam and his colleagues (2022), who conducted research titled "An Exploration of the Formation Process of the Phenomenon of Street Working Children and Its Consequences in the City of Ahvaz." Their findings indicate that at least two factors—family and its existing dysfunctions as a necessary condition and starting point of this process, and differential association of the child, or more broadly, environmental roots through peers and place of residence as the sufficient condition—induce child labor and shape the process of the street working children phenomenon in Ahvaz.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The phenomenon of street children is a complex, multidimensional, and multifactorial issue that affects most human societies and has become a global challenge. Research conducted in various societies shows that the phenomenon of street children is influenced by specific and unique agents depending on the social, economic, cultural, and other conditions of each community. This study, which focuses on a qualitative analysis of the phenomenon of street children in Pul-e-Khumri city and specifically addresses its factors, consequences, and solutions, reveals that economic poverty, lack of parental care, uncontrolled population growth, and low levels of awareness are among the key and influential factors in the formation and increasing trend of street children in this city. According to the findings of this research, various physical, bodily, and psychological risks, sexual exploitation, engagement in criminal acts, deprivation from education, creation of inequality, intensification of social stratification, and endangerment of public health are among the individual and social consequences of the street children phenomenon in Pul-e-Khumri city. On the other hand, economic support for children and needy families, creation of employment opportunities for adults and parents of street children, and raising awareness about the stigma associated with the phenomenon of street children are other findings of this study that can serve as solutions to reduce poverty and unemployment, and consequently prevent the street children phenomenon. Unfortunately, in our society, the issue of street children has not yet received serious and fundamental attention, and this critical socio-economic problem is met with a kind of indifference and complacency. Neglecting this major social and biological issue has not only facilitated its spread and persistence but has also fostered a common misconception and normalization of the phenomenon of street children. This normalization has led to the perception that children living on

the streets is a straightforward, income-generating, ordinary, and accepted matter.

Therefore, it is recommended that authorities provide financial support to the families of street children, ensure educational opportunities for these children, and create employment opportunities for the adults in their families, so that they can independently meet the needs of their children.

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