Positioning Agency of Migrant Street Working Children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Ethiopia is among the poorest countries of the world in which many children do not have access to a quality education, and many children are engaged in child labour. The study aims to explain the interplay of factors for independent migration and street working experience of children. The article adopted an ethnographic qualitative research method. In-depth interviews, observation, and informal discussions were important tools of data collection. The findings show that independent migration is an important component of working children on streets of Addis Ababa. Children exercise their agency to migrate and engage in a certain kinds of street activities. Most of them migrate from rural areas for non-economic reasons. Street activities are gendered as well as generationally divided. These children have positioned themselves as workers and streets as their workplaces. Despite their agency, they are vulnerable to different structural problems. Hence, blaming child street workers cannot be an effective means of eliminating child labour.

KEYWORDS

Agency, Children, Migration, Structure, Vulnerability
1. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is among poor countries of the world where children don’t have access to education and health services. In this regard, the majority of children suffer from violation of their rights written in UNCRC. In the actual practice, it is the day-to-day practical situations that shape children not policies either national or international. Their childhood is full of food insecurity, poor quality education, no access to health services, exposure to HIV/AIDS, various forms of violence, and inferior positions compared to adults. In all these circumstances, girls faced subordinated position; priority is given for boys. Children are not allowed to participate in social affairs. They are socialized since their early ages to work responsibly than play and study (Clark, 2005).

Ethiopia has ratified the Convention on Right of Children (CRC) in 1992 and it has incorporated in its constitution of 1995 under Article 38. While very lag behind, the responsibility to implement CRC is given to Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (EMOLSA). In Ethiopia, it is the circumstances of parents that shape children’s direction—no welfare policy that saves children from worst situations. Parents’ wealth and poverty trickle downs to their children. This different socio-economic condition of the community in general and parents in particular shapes childhood of children in family. That means childhood is constructed in time, place and different circumstances even within a household let alone in a community.

Despite children have got attention in the academic discourse, and despite some moves towards developing international policies, there are little grounds for political will and commitment that treat migrant street working children(SWC) as competent social agents in their own rights. Particularly in Ethiopia, children and parents are not consulted while developing programs that concern these children. Providing critical explanation for questions of: What is the actual situation of children individual agency? Do children exercise their agency since they have rights to do so or because of day— to-day interactions of structure and agency? In what way do governments respect best interest of a child; is vital in the study of ‘children and work.’ In this article, the author tried to situate agency of migrant SWC and its interplay with government actions.

1.1. Objectives and Rationale of the Study

This study has the objective of exploring the ‘agency-structure’ interplay of migrant SWC in Addis Ababa. It aimed at appraising the working experiences and vulnerability as a result of the existing institutional setups. This study is important since it counters previous studies which greatly emphasized on children of the urban poor and migrant families with little emphasis on independent migrant children who migrate without their parents and siblings. Besides, studies on SWC overlooked the capacities, rights, and social and moral obligation of children to work. Hence, this study helps to understand that more than the generational age of children; it is the structure and the mainstream society in their place of destination that expose them to vulnerabilities. Moreover, it tried to show how the weak political will of politicians to see streets that are filled by proficient children whose rights are respected and realized.
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