STREETS OF THE CHILDREN: STREET-WORKING CHILDREN PHENOMENON IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This study is a descriptive one that tries to describe and understand the socio-demographic characteristics and solidarity networks of the street-working children, and meaning they attribute to their working on the street. The research was conducted as an exhaustive one between 2006- 2009 on 931 street working children in eight cities of Turkey. This study claims to be a unique contribution to the literature on street-working children focusing on the strengths of the children such as the solidarity networks they establish and exploring the meaning they attribute to the place they turn into a space. These two are also the factors that make Turkey distinctive in terms of street-working children.

Keywords: Street Working Children, Solidarity Networks, Urbanization, Migration, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

As the "little men" of many centuries, children have only become the focus of research as an agent/subject in the last quarter of the last century. However, the discovery of childhood has only meant either a new inquiry of social sciences or a field of social problems. Research on street children also have framed the issue only from a "problem-based" perspective focusing on the causes and results of the phenomenon disregarding the child as an agent in society. Such an outlook seems so much in line with the "little men" of the history closing the eyes to the subjectivity and rational choice of the child. Rational choice of the child does not mean the rational choice of the child for living or working on the street, but her/his subjective existence of the realm of any kind. It is obvious that the street-living or street-working children do not participate in either the definition of the phenomenon or the solutions to their problems. Taking the participation of the child into consideration would lead us to a "strengths-based" perspective which locates the child as an actor/subject in decisions pertaining to their life. This study aims at understanding the street experiences of the street-working children in Turkey via their own strengths such as their relations with the family, their solidarity networks, and their attribution of meaning to working on the street while considering abusive and destructive nature of these experiences. Therefore, this study tries to point out first what makes Turkey distinct in terms of the phenomenon of street-working children, and second the subjectivity of the children the research was conducted on.

Despite the fact that literature on the street life of children may somehow make a clear-cut distinction between street-living and street-working children, these two categories are indeed interrelated. The two often are intertwined and may be experienced interchangeably. A street-living child may have a home, but prefer living on the streets, or a s/he may both work and live on the streets. The two categories are also divided into varying sub-categories. For example, Philips (1994: 7) describes street-living children under three sub-categories: children on the street keeping regular relations with their families; children of the street lacking regular and continuous relations with the family; and

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children without family having been left alone to the street. This proves that street-living or street-working children cannot be homogenized as a social group and it in fact what constitutes their being on the streets is a combination of different social, cultural and economic factors (Pare, 2003: 2).

During recent years, several studies have focused on the diverse experiences of children around the world. However, it has been increasingly recognized that the experience of childhood cannot be separated from the criteria as class, gender, ethnicity (James and Prout, 1990), migration and development.

Aptekar (1994) explains the causes of being street-working children as urban poverty, neglect and abuse within the family, urbanization, and migration. Nevertheless, literature (Standing and Tokman, 1991; Atauz, 1997; Işık ve Pınarcıoğlu, 2001) discuss that causes of the phenomenon may vary according to different cultural, socio-economical and political structures. This study discusses the phenomenon of street-working children from the angles of culture, economy and migration.

In Turkey the process that began after the 1950s and with 1970s became a transformation like "industrial revolution" altered the structure of centuries of Anatolian Turkish society. The traditional society of an agricultural empire began to be broken; traditional institutions, values, relations, briefly, everything began to change (Türkiye Aile Yıllığı, 1991).

In this period the efforts for industrialization, mechanization of agriculture, education, health, transportation services, and mass media accelerated (Merter, 1990); division of labor and the sectors and the relations of production changed. Since 1950 the development of industry extended, the population increased, and transportation developed and villages began to spread outside. In this period the proportion of mechanization in agriculture increased. Besides, the interest of humans in environment increased, job opportunities emerged in cities, and immigration from rural areas to cities emerged (Merter, 1990). The picture of the intertwining of urbanization and migration between the 1950s and the 1970s was more dramatized by the emergence of a new phenomenon, namely, forced migration after the 1980s originating from the PKK terrorism in the South-Eastern Turkey. Between 1985 and 2005 nearly a million people were either displaced or migrated from insecure rural areas to metropolitan cities (H.Ü. Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü, 2006).

Having all their riches and memories left behind, people, desperately, set off a journey towards the lands of hope. It is interesting for example that Istanbul, as a popular culture image, was described as "the city whose stones and soil are made of gold". Without anywhere to stay or any social assistance including housing, these immigrants built their own houses overnight. These houses are called "gecekondu" (slam areas, chantey towns) which means "settled at night". "Gecekondus" are one-floor, illegal, unhealthy and private houses that are so weakly constructed. The slam areas in the peripheries of the big cities gradually established a kind of "twilight culture" (see Lewis, 1975). In this mixture of traditional and urban values, reflections of this culture, especially on the childhood practices in Turkey, caused confusion compared to the practices in more industrialized Western countries. For example, children are traditionally assumed as potential labor power in the agricultural areas. In the agricultural, rural areas the child was perceived as an "assistant" of the parents and other family members. The child was familiar with the working experience so that the child's working experience was perceived as a "normal" process in the child's socialization and education process. Another distinctive characteristic of this period was that the child was not forced to work emotionally or physically or the parents did not expect the children to be an economical source of income. In that period the child mostly worked on their own rational choice and the working experience was seen as a way of maturation. By considering the historical and sociological characteristics of the period, it is possible to state that these characteristics were transferred to the urban life through the transition process.

Urbanization has brought about the inclusion of the traditional values into the new urban life. It should be noted that because Turkey has not yet completed her modernization project the "urban" or

"metropolitan" in Turkish case connotes something different from highly urbanized Western centers. Therefore, the perception of street-working children did not necessarily imply risk or marginalization. Instead, it was perceived as something immanent in the culture legitimating the existence of the children on the street. As opposed to the many examples in the Western centers, street-working children in Turkey were found sympathetic by society at large. As a very good example of this, in one of his speeches, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that

> … I also sold simit (a kind of bagel with sesame) on the streets when I was a child. Some people may see this as a loss of honor, but I don't. On the contrary, I take this as knowing and understanding the life. I also sold simit, water and sugar. I bought my books with that money… (Milliyet Newspaper, 2009)

Thus, this is a proof of the fact that the phenomenon of street-working children was seen as normal in that period of transition. This is so intrinsic into the culture that not only the children of the poor or gecekondu areas, but also of the middle-class in Turkey including the authors of these lines who experienced that kind of a learning of life.

It should be emphasized that inclusion of the phenomenon of street-working children by the culture serves the legitimization of it causing much more troubles for these children now. Nowadays, the streets are not safe as it was in the past. The primary relationships in small neighborhoods are replaced with secondary relations in the big neighborhoods in tower blocks. The protective natures of primary relationships are not available any more. So that the work experiences of the children are not perceived as the maturation of the child but they are perceived as a destructive and risky process. Another distinctive characteristic is that now the children are seen as a means of earning money and discarding of poverty. The children are convinced that the family is living in poverty and they are the only family members who can earn the needed money. So, the children, feeling all the responsibility of the survival of the family, are emotionally abused by their parents. However, an understanding of the cultural dimension of the phenomenon would open the door for a strengths-based perspective taking strengths of the children –and culture– into consideration. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore these strengths for better policies and social work intervention, and to show the differences of Turkey in terms of the street-working practices.

METHOD

This research is a descriptive one that tries to describe and understand the socio-demographic characteristics and solidarity networks of the street-working children, and meaning they attribute to their working on the street. In doing so, the research was conducted as an exhaustive one lasted from May 2006 to 2009 on 931 street-working children in Diyarbakır (32,7%), Elazığ (5%), Mersin (7,6%), İzmir (7,3%), Malatya (13,9%), Siirt (0,5%), Van (11,9%), and Batman (21,1%) in Turkey. These children receive social services from the Children and Youth Centers (ÇOGEM) in these cities under the General Directorate for Social Services and Child Protection Institution. ÇOGEMs are not like the children and youth centers in the West, but specifically target street-living and street-working children.

These eight cities were chosen due to the fact that they have been the cities of origin for both immigration and forced migration in Turkey for since the 1950s and the 1980s respectively. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted by the authors in Malatya on 30 street-working children to enable an appreciation of some of the issues involved.

The authors employed two main methods in this study. First they prepared and applied a questionnaire comprised of 197 questions, whereas only 51 of them were analyzed for this study. Data were collected by eight social workers who work in these ÇOGEMs with these children attending the centers between 2006 and 2009 under the supervision of researchers. The social workers applied the

questionnaires with the children face to face, and each took approximately one hour. Secondly, the authors made use of their own and social workers' observations at the research sites.

Finally, the questionnaires were collected in preparation for data processing. The questionnaires were edited to check for those that were not properly filled and those that were full of unanswered questions. At the end of this exercise, 931 questionnaires passed the editing stage. Data were analyzed via the SPSS (Statistics Package for Social Sciences 15.00) software program.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics

91,9% of the children in this study is comprised of male. Black (1993) lists different countries in terms of the gender distribution as the following: Brazil (90%), Uruguay (84,4%), El Salvador (85,9%), Sao Paulo (80,7%), and Cordoba (79,1%) all these ratios indicating the male intensity.

93,8% of the children in this study is between 7-16 years of age. This finding is in accordance with previous research (Altıntaş, 2003; Institute of Social Research and Development, 1990; UNICEF, 1998; Philips, 1994; Atauz, 1997; İlik ve Türkmen, 1994).

Great majority of the children (73%) were students in the primary school during the data collection. School attendance differs from country to country (Philips, 1994).

Approximate total income of the family including the money the child brings on average is concentrated between 150 TL (70 Euro) and 550 TL (250 Euro) per month.

Almost half of the fathers (47%) were graduated from the primary school. 17,2% of the fathers are illiterate, and 21,2% of them are literate, but never attended school. 60,9% of the mothers are illiterate. Only 17,8% of them were graduated from the primary school. Educational status of the parents was found very low in general. These findings are in line with Altıntaş's research (2003).

As to the social security of the families, 73,1% of the families hold green card which is given to the poor people by the government and covers only part of their health expenditures. Besides their right to the green card, these families receive no social assistance. Distribution of the fathers' jobs shows that 42,4% of all are workers working for the minimum wage. A significant number of all (24,8%) are unemployed. Great majority of the mothers (87,1%) are housewives.

It seems that 63,2% of the families immigrated to the metropolitan cities mostly from the South-eastern Turkey between 1990-2000 (72,6%).

Type of housing shows that these families have their own *gecekondu*s (63,4%). The ones who are tenants (35,1%) pay 100 TL (45 Euro) per month. These houses are so inadequate that 41,8% of them lack at least one room inside (toilet 26,4; bathroom 7,9; kitchen 1,9; all the three 6,2%). This means that the three rooms are constructed as a separate part in the garden. These houses generally have 2-3 rooms (76,2%). Children do not have any separate rooms (88,8%).

Solidarity networks

Solidarity networks in this study are comprised of family, relatives, and peers.

The results indicate that there is no breakdown in the family as a problem. 89,9% of all the parents are alive, and interestingly, all of them live together keeping their unity. For 96,2% their marriage is the first. The results show that the average age of the fathers is so young (40). Mothers are even younger (37). And 70,7% of the parents have 4-7 children. As we know from our observations in the field and

according to the Turkey's Shadow Report, the marriage age of the women starts from the age of 13 and the men's from 17. The 30.6% of women in Turkey are "child brides" (Turkey's Shadow Report, 2004).

As to the relationship of the children with the parents, their relations with the fathers are mostly stated as good or very good (74%). Relations with the mothers are even higher (90,6%).

Almost half of the families have at least two children working on the street (49,7%) in order to contribute to the family income.

As to the route they follow in settling in a neighborhood in the city of migration, 73,9% follow the relative network constituted by the ones who had already immigrated.

The results indicate that the half of the children choose their friends on the street within their solidarity networks (relatives, peers who work with them, and peers from their neighborhood).

Even if the children escape home in order to work on the streets of another city, all of them again find themselves within relative networks. And only 12,1% of all the children escape home.

Their security needs also prove the strong solidarity networks. 77% of all state that they are protected on the street by friends (39,7%), relatives (29,6%), neighbors (10,7%), and the police (10,5%). The children trust their solidarity networks in case of a threat or danger on the street (64,3%). The ratio of the ones who trust the police is only 14,6%.

Meaning attached to working on the street

The children in this study mostly began working on the street when they were between 6-12 years of age (89%). And as to how long they have been working on the street, it appears that 74,2% of them have been on the street for 2-8 years.

Distribution of the type of work they are involved in is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Type of Work

Type of Work	Number	%
Street vendor (fire, nuts, chocolate, razor blade, pencil, match, handkerchief, mussel, accessories, toys, battery, chewing gum, bagel, cigarette, pocket knife, scissors, belt, lemonade, socks, water, vegetables, etc.)	453	48.6
Shoe shining	299	32.1
Weighing	35	3.8
Hand truck	27	2.9
Apprenticeship	17	1.8
Garbage collecting	12	1.3
Agricultural work	6	0.6
Not working	67	7.2
Others	15	1.6
Total	931	100

The children primarily work in the squares of the city (67,1%) in order to earn more because these are the most crowded places of the city (81,5%). Nevertheless, they do not find these places secure (77,8%). These places are not secure because there are youth gangs (32,9%) and some adults maltreat them (the police, 23,9%; the people around, 16,9%).

The children state that the most common negative attitudes they face are seizure of their money (35,2%), and verbal violence (32,2%).

The results on the cause of their working on the street indicate that almost all (91,9%) work in order to contribute to their family income. Surprisingly the children indicated that they decided to work on the street by their own will with the ratio of 49,8%. The other factors (will of the family, 34,2%; influence of peers, 11,3%; and influence of relatives, 4,6%) that affected their decision do not mean that the children found themselves on the street without their will. The following table shows how the children use the money they earn.

Table 2. How the Children Use the Money They Earn

How they use the money they earn	Number	%
They give all or almost all the money to their families	757	81.3
They give half of the money to their families	59	6.3
They give a little amount of the money to their families	35	3.8
They use the money for themselves	27	2.9
No answer	53	5.7
Total	931	100

The ratio of the ones who give all or some of the money they earn to their families by their own will is 83,9%. And the ones who keep their money for themselves spend it mostly for their school expenditures (34,3%) and food (25,1%).

As we indicated before, the children are emotionally convinced to take the responsibility of survival of the family and because they are children and they are in need of believing their parents or other adults, they gradually believe and accept their new roles in the family.

After all the children are not happy with working on the street (65,2%) because they find working on the street very insecure (40,5%) and tiring (27,5%). On the other hand, some children (34,8%) are happy with working on the street because they think they may contribute to their family income (68,2%).

The results show that the children hanker mostly for sufficient income (44,6%), affection (19,3%) and nice food and clothing (17,1%).

Most of the children state that they expect to be teacher (23,9%), doctor (16,3%), football player (12,1%), and policeman (11,7%).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study claims to be a unique contribution to the literature on street-working children focusing on the strengths of the children such as the solidarity networks they establish and exploring the meaning they attribute to the place they turn into a space. These two are also the factors that make Turkey distinctive in terms of street-working children.

Unlike what literature shows on street-living children, this study explores that, in Turkey these children are not the victims of family breakdown (Manadhar, 1994; Zeytinoğlu, 1989, Patel, 1990). On the contrary, these are the children of very strong nuclear families, in which relations of children with their parents are highly positive. Nevertheless, these children are not forced but most probably convinced emotionally to work on the street by their parents. They convinced to work by their own

will because they believe that they will contribute to the family income which is very low compared to the average income in Turkey. These are the poorest of the poor because they are the newcomers to the metropolitan city which has already long been populated by the people from rural areas in the process of urbanization. They are especially vulnerable compared to the others because as they were displaced they had to leave everything behind.

Therefore, this vulnerability became the motive behind their endeavor to establish strong solidarity bonds which transformed street-working practices as well. Hence, the general picture of street-working children is somehow different from other countries. For example, despite the fact that the children in this study started working on the street at a very early age (6 years) they haven't got acquainted with street-living children. Their solidarity networks are constituted firstly by their families then, relatives and neighbors, and peers. These networks are not only perceived as a protector of the children on the street without any need for the police protection, but also determine the route they follow for migration and location they end up with. Although these networks provide a shield for the children against the dangers of the street, these children still find the streets insecure. It is obvious that these are so strong children that they go on working on the street by their own in order just to contribute to family income. It also shows their strength; they give almost all their earnings to their families by their own will. Moreover, the ones who keep their money for themselves spend it for meeting their school needs, which proves how they become "little men/women" having responsibility in life. What they long for in life is also a very good sign of this. They state that theirs is a longing for sufficient income for their families. Their expectation from life also reproduces their status as "little men"; majority of them want to be teacher or doctor in the future. It is interesting that a significant number of the children want to be a policeman; this points out how they try to exist in an extremely insecure environment in spite of their solidarity networks.

It should be noted that all these factors that empower these children on the street also reproduce and legitimate their existence as street-working children on the street. On the other hand, all the professional interventions must locate these children as the agents/actors of their own life while considering all the negative factors surrounding their working experience such as family's emotional abuse and threats and risks at the streets.

Also, what makes them "little men/women" will constitute the basic ground of any endeavor to help them improve their social functioning. As a result, what makes the practice of street-working children in Turkey should also be the main focus of both social policies and social services delivered for them.

It appeared as a result of the research that there is a great need for further research on street-working children especially from a qualitative methodology. The results of the research show that solidarity networks and how the children interpret their existence on the street constitute the ground for understanding the phenomenon. Therefore, in-debt and focus group interviews would be efficient tools for a comprehensive understanding of the street-working children.

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