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EARLY SEXUAL DEBUT AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG STREET CHILDREN OF HARARE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

There is a paucity of academic studies that examine the complex and or multi-dimensional relationships between substance abuse and early sexual debut among street children of the Harare Central Business District. In this article, the child rights and child agency perspectives were adopted as conceptual frameworks in analysing the realities of these children. The substance abuse and early sexual debut among street children of the Harare Central Business District, illustrate agency of these children. The behaviours could be the only viable options for these children in a context of multiple constraints thus thin agency. Conversely, the behaviours could also be viewed as 'ambiguous agency.' The actions could also be seen as part of the self-destructive agency. Drawing from a child rights concept, the early sexual debut and substance abuse of the street children illustrate huge child rights violations prevalent on the streets of the Harare Central Business District. The behaviours are inconsistent with the provisions of international, regional and local child rights laws, policies and programmes. The qualitative research methodology involving street ethnography was used to generate data for this study. The paper concludes by arguing for full implementation of child rights laws, policies and programmes in order to reduce risks associated with early sexual debut and substance abuse among street children.

KEY TERMS: *early sexual debut, substance abuse, street children, child rights.*

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INTRODUCTION

Very little studies have been conducted that examine the multi-dimensional relationships between substance abuse and early sexual debut among the street children of the Harare Central Business District from their perspective. Street children as sexual beings engage in various sexual behaviours such as sodomy, prostitution, early sexual debut, among others (Ruparanganda 2008; Mhizha 2010; Beazley 2003). This paper problematises the multi-dimensional relationships between early sexual debut and substance abuse among street children of the Harare Central Business District. The child rights, child agency and *ubuntu* or *unhu* perspectives were adopted to analyse the realities of these children. Research findings suggest that some of the street children engage in early sexual debut as a result of abuse of substances. For example, one of the street girls was involved in early sexual debut when she was under the influence of intoxicating substances such as cough syrup, cannabis among others. As highlighted in case two, one of the street boys also engaged in early sexual debut as some result aphrodisiac substances. The case three also discusses that some of the street children of the Harare Central Business District engaged in substance abuse as a result of early sexual debut. The abuse of substances and early sexual debut demonstrate increased vulnerabilities of street children of the Harare Central Business District. In addition, the behaviours also highlight self-destructive agency, thin agency among these children. The abuse of substances and early sexual debut among the street children of the Harare Central Business District is inconsistent with the values of *ubuntu* or *unhu*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Yilmaz and Dolgerler (2011); Rotherman-Borus, Mahler, Koopman and Langabeer (1996) observed that street children had early sexual debut as compared to non-street children. Additionally, Zapata, Kissin, Robbins, Finnerty, Skipalska, Yorick, Jamieson, Marchbanks and Hillis (2011) observed that sexual debut among street children was very high as street children below the age of twelve years were already initiated into sexual intercourse. In addition, Zapata et al attributed the early sexual debut among street girls as being responsible for the high cases of pregnancies among street children of Ukraine. Forst (1994) noted that street children had sexual debut at the age of thirteen years. This could be as a result of street sub-culture, among others.

The observations made by Yilmaz and Dolgerler; Zapata et al (2011) and Rotherman-Borus et al (1996), were limited in examining the relationship between early sexual debut with substance abuse among children in street situations. For example, Zapata et al noted that early sexual debut among street children could have been as a result of desire for sex rather than substance abuse.

The early sexual debut among street children illustrates sexual agency of these children. Through sexual debut, some of them were able to survive in a context of constraining resources resulting in thin agency (Tisdall and Punch 2012). The adolescent street children engaged in early sexual debut, substance abuse and other sexual practices so as to survive. The behaviours constitute the concept of ambiguous agency. Bordonaro (2012), Bordonaro and Payne (2012) defined the concept of ambiguous agency as it clashes or threatens the existing societal values. Therefore, behaviours such as sexual debut and other sexual practices threaten the existing moral values in Zimbabwe.

Drawing from the *ubuntu* or *unhu*, for street children to engage in early sexual debut as early as at age twelve, illustrates moral decadence as children are not supposed to engage in pre-marital sex. It also shows that both the behaviours of the perpetrators and the street children's moral and cultural values have been seriously eroded. The *ubuntu* or *unhu* philosophy is premised on moral values which places significant values on marriages and abstinence from premarital sex (Ruparanganda, 2008).

The early sexual debut among street children also demonstrates child rights violations as the practice contravenes the provisions of the UNCRC, the ACRWC and the national child rights laws, policies and programmes. Early sexual debut and substance abuse among street children is regarded as not 'in the best interest of the child' UNCRC principle. The Children's Act (5:06) defines street children that are involved in early sexual debut as 'in need of care'. The National Action Plan for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (2010-2015) also classifies street children including those engaged in early sexual debut as 'vulnerable.' Furthermore, early sexual debut also illustrates that Government of Zimbabwe as the primary duty bearer is not doing enough to provide protection services to innocent and vulnerable children on the streets of the Harare Central Business District.

There seems to be paucity of academic studies that interrogates the complex relationship between early sexual debut and substance abuse among the street children of the Harare Central Business District. However, previous studies on street children by Bourdillon from 1994 up to the present, Mhizha (2015), Mella (2012), Author (2014), Author et al (2016), Wakatama (2007), Core author (2008), Chirwa (2007), Chirwa and Wakatama (2000) have been limited in articulating the multi-dimensional relationship between early sexual debut and substance abuse among street children of the Harare Central Business District, Zimbabwe. In other

words, there is paucity of literature on the nexus between early sexual debut and substance abuse among these children.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Child rights perspective

The UNCRC (1989) defines child rights into four principles namely, the best interest of the child, the right of a child to participation, non-discrimination and the right of a child to survival and development. The Save the Children (2002) also noted that, child rights perspective recognises the relationship between the duty bearer and the rights holders. The child rights perspective could be seen as social contract that exists between the rights holders and the duty bearers.

The application and implementation of some of the principles of the UNCRC (1989) are seen as problematic. For example, Liebel (2012: 15) argues that “There is little guidance on how exactly the core principles of the ‘best interests of the child’ should be interpreted and implemented. In practice, it probably most often depends on who exactly has the authority to interpret this principle and how this authority is put into practice.”

Bourdillon (2009) observed that the child rights perspective has been viewed as part of advancing globalisation of childhood issues. Okoli (2009), Nhenga (2008) noted that the child rights perspective is discredited for its western world orientation at the expense of childhood experiences for other countries. Abebe and Tefera (2014) observed that, the UNCRC as a childhood framework is problematic in terms of its implementation in non-western societies.

The early sexual debut and abusing of substances by the street children of the Harare Central Business District demonstrate huge child rights violations. The behaviours are inconsistent or contradict with ‘the best interest of the child’ principle of the UNCRC (1989) and article 44 of the ACRWC (1999). The actions are considered as not in the best interest of child as the children are exposed to a number of potential risks that may include death among others because of early sexual debut and substance abuse.

The early sexual debut and substance abuse among the street children of the Harare Central Business District contravene the provisions of the national child rights laws, policies and programmes. For example, according to Children’s Act (5:06) children who engage in early sexual debut and abusing of substances are defined as ‘in need of care.’ They are in need of care because of their level of vulnerability as a result of substance abuse and early sexual debut on the streets. The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (9:23) refers to them as ‘in conflict with the law.’ The National Action Plan for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (2011-2015) viewed children involved in abusing substances and early sexual debut as ‘victim or vulnerable.’

Drawing from a child rights framework or perspective, street children who engage in early sexual debut and abusing of substances illustrate increasing level of vulnerability of these children on the streets. This also highlights that the duty bearers in the name of the Government of Zimbabwe through the City of Harare is not providing adequate child protection services.

Child agency

Chuta (2014: 02) has defined agency as “understood as an individual’s own capabilities, competences and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their life worlds fulfilling many economic, social and cultural expectations.” Ursin (2013), observed agency among homeless children focuses on their skills, knowledge, strength and aptitudes.

Kovats-Bernat (2006:07) observed that “the danger in emphasising the agency of street children lies in the erroneous assumption that they are not simultaneously victims of larger political and economic machinations that severely impact their lives, complicate their survival and place them at higher risk of dying younger and more violently than other children”.

Ursin (2013: 35) noted that “by emphasising agency on behalf of the surrounding context of extreme structural constraints, the researcher runs a risk of unwittingly substituting vulnerability by responsibility.” Bordonaro and Payne (2012) have also raised concerns that child agency becomes ambiguous when it clashes with existing societal values. For example, in situations when street children of the Harare Central Business District are involved in early sexual debut and abusing substances, the behaviour is seen as clashing societal values. Author (2014 & 2017) observed that children are expected to be asexual.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology that included street ethnography was adopted in this study. Through the street ethnography approach spanning more than twelve months, the researcher was able to interact with the participants in their natural environment known as the 'bases'.¹⁷

Data collection methods

The qualitative data collection methods including the life history interviews, in-depth interviews, informal conversations and semi-participant observation, were used to collect the data for this study. Similarly, Core author (2008) used life history, semi-participant observation and informal conversations to collect data on the lives of street children of the Harare.

Sampling technique

The purposive sampling was used to select or identify six participants for the study. Through purposive sampling, the research was able to identify participants that were linked to various sexual behaviours and abuse of substances. Babbie and Mouton (2012), Neuman (2011) observed that purposive sampling is ideal or suitable to in dealing with the hidden, difficult or vulnerable populations such as street children and street based sex workers. Mhizha (2010) also used purposive sampling during his studies with the street children of Harare.

Data analysis

The thematic content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data for this study. The data analysis focused on themes and sub themes that emerged from the study. Some of the themes and sub themes included early sexual debut, substance abuse and psycho active substances, among others. Farmer, McAlinden and Maruna (2016); Garland, Richard and Cooney (2010); Mhizha (2010, 2015); Chikoko (2014& 2017); Ruparanganda (2008) used thematic content analysis in their studies with street children.

Research ethics

Neuman (1997) defines ethical considerations as what is or not legitimate to do or what is 'moral' when conducting a research. The following ethical considerations were observed when conducting this research; informed consent, confidentiality, benevolence among others. In the case of the street children of the Harare Central Business District, the researcher obtained verbal informed consent. The researcher also ensured confidentiality by using alphabetical letters instead of writing the names of the street children on data gathering tools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents research findings and discussion. The presented names of the participants are not real but are pseudonyms, in line with the principle of confidentiality.

Early sexual debut

There is evidence that the attitudes and perceptions of adolescent street children of the Harare Central Business District suggest that early sexual debut was linked to rampant substance abuse. The relationship between substance abuse and early sexual debut is multi-dimensional. The case one highlights how substance abuse led to early sexual debut of one of the street girls. The case two also highlights how aphrodisiac substances expose street children of the Harare Central Business District to early sexual debut. Case three also demonstrates how early sexual debut led some of the street children to abuse substance so as to cope with the traumatic experiences.

Case one

Tanya (not real name) is one of the adolescent street girls who were a victim of early sexual debut. As a social actor, when she joined the street life, she fell in love with a certain street boy called Kambanje (not real name). The boy would take care of her needs. She was introduced to the smoking of *mbanje* (cannabis) by Kambanje and his colleagues. Tanya narrated that one Friday night, as they were abusing various substances such as *mbanje* (cannabis), zed and *burongo* (cough syrup), among others, she became heavily intoxicated. As a result of being heavily intoxicated, she was unaware of what later happened to her but she claimed that she was sexually abused by Kambanje and she lost her virginity that day. She had this to say:

When I started staying on the streets, I fell in love with one of the boys called Kambanje. One of the days on a Friday, we started taking on marijuana, zed, double punch among others. On that day, I got heavily intoxicated to an extent that I had not done in all my life. I was heavily drunk that I became a useless person. Kambanje and his friends had to sexually abuse me one by one (sobbing). I was unconscious).

The narrative illustrates the human agency of street girls in terms of them being able to survive in a context with limited opportunities thus thin agency (Tisdall and Punch 2012). In other words, these girls navigate their lives through having a boyfriend that provides their daily survival needs. This demonstrates that the girls as social actors reinvented their lives in situations where extreme poverty is a reality of their childhood. The behaviours of the street children can also be regarded as ambiguous agency. Bordonaro and Payne (2012) viewed ambiguous agency as actions inconsistent with the societal values. The actions could also be viewed under the notion of self-destructive agency (Gigengack 2008).

One becomes concerned about the cases of early sexual debut as this contravenes some of the values of *ubuntu* or *unhu*. Within the context of moral values emphasised by the *ubuntu* or *unhu* perspectives, young children are not expected to engage in sexual intercourse before they are married. However, because of modernity and erosion of moral values, the majority of girls get married when they were no longer virgins as was recommended among the Shona people in Zimbabwe. In addition, the involvement of young girls in early sexual debut and abuse of substances is also seen as an abomination among the Shona people.

Drawing from the child rights perspective, the narrative demonstrates that there are serious child rights violations on the streets of the Harare Central Business District. Tinotenda and Kambanje are children 'in need of care' as defined by the Children's Act (5:06) as they are vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation. According to the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform Act) (9:23), Kambanje is a child who is 'in conflict with the law.' On the other hand, Tinotenda is also seen as a child 'in contact with the law.' The narrative illustrates how street children of Harare have become more vulnerable to sexual abuse, exploitation and violence, as a result of substance abuse. One becomes concerned about the risks associated with early sexual debut. Some of the risks include, early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and AIDS, among others. The early sexual debut and abuse of substances also highlight weak child protection structures as street children continues to be exposed to abuse. It means that the duty bearers in the name of the Government of Zimbabwe, local authorities, and other key stakeholders are not doing enough to protect and prevent child abuse and exploitation on the streets of the Harare Central Business District.

Zapata, Kissin, Robbins, Finnerty, Skipaska, Yorick, Jamieson, Marchbanks and Hillis (2011) observed that sexual debut was high among the target population. The study also noted a strong relationship between early sexual debut and substance abuse. Zapata et al noted that the sexual debut was as high as twelve years of age among street girls who were abusing substances such as cocaine.

Case two

Jah Bulu (not real name) is a 15-year-old boy who stays on the streets of the Harare Central Business District. During the life history interviews, he revealed that he had an early sexual debut at the age of 10, as a result of using aphrodisiac substances. Through peer pressure one of the days he took seven hours as known aphrodisiac and ended up engaged in early sexual debut with a certain sex worker at Solane court in the Avenues area. He had this to say:

I had started on the streets when I ran away from home in Epworth. When I started staying at this base, due to peer pressure one of the days we took seven hours tablets. After taking the tablets, we indulged in sex with sex workers at Solane court in the Avenues area. Elder, I had problems there because it was my first sexual experience in my life.

(While crying) I had unprotected sex. My penal area developed bruises. It is horror for me to always think of this incident. I always think that life has no meaning for me because maybe I contracted the deadly HIV and AIDS. From that day, I lost interest in having sex.

The case two suggests that, it is evident that, some of the street children of the Harare Central Business District succumbed to early sexual debut as a result of the use of aphrodisiac substances such as seven hours. The early sexual debut and abusing of aphrodisiac substances by these children, demonstrate agency. The actions could have been the only viable options of these children thus thin agency (Tisdall and Punch 2012). The behaviours could also be explained using the concept of ambiguous agency. Bordonaro and Payne (2012), Bordonaro (2012) defined ambiguous agency as those that are threatening existing societal values and also the well-being of the children. Gigengack (2006 & 2008) also view such behaviours as self-destructive agency.

The self-destructive agency is also highlighted in a context of risks associated with early sexual debut and abuse of substance by the children in street situations.

Drawing from the child rights concept, early sexual debut and abusing of substances by the street children of the Harare Central Business District, illustrate the increasing levels of vulnerability of these children. The behaviours expose the duty bearers for not providing adequate child protection services. The sexual debut and abusing of substances by street children is inconsistent with the provisions of the UNCRC (1989), particularly the best interest of the child principle and ACRWC article 44.

In terms of the Children's Act (5:06), street children who abuse substances and also who engage in sexual debut are considered as 'in need of care'. They are in need of care because of their level and extent of vulnerabilities on the streets. The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (9:23) defines such children as 'in conflict with the law.' Additionally, the National Action Plan for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (2010-2015) views street children as 'vulnerable or victims'

One also becomes concerned about the level of vulnerability of street children of the Harare Central Business District to abuse of substances and sexual violence. In this particular case there are possibilities that the street boy succumbed to the deadly HIV and AIDS as a result of using aphrodisiac substances. It is evident that the impact of indulging in early sexual debut was evident as the street boy indicated that he had lost interest in sex as a result of the traumatic sexual abuse.

Ironically from the masculine socialization perspective, the particular street boy, Jah Bulu, lost interest in sex as a result of the traumatic experience that he was exposed to. Core author (2008) on his studies of the street boys of Harare, noted that the majority of the boys had macho feelings of having multiple sexual partners due to gender socialization. He added that some of the boys had a macho feeling after having sex with sex workers.

Ruparanganda (2008), Mhizha (2010) seem to agree that some of the street children of Harare used a number of traditional aphrodisiac substances such as *vukavuka*. The authors also observed that, some of the street boys that were using these traditional medicines were also perpetrating sexual violence to their fellow street girls. However, the studies from Ruparanganda and Mhizha were limited in articulating the nexus between early sexual debut and aphrodisiac substances particularly modern ones such as seven hours. The two studies looked at aphrodisiac substances and sexual behaviours without applying an in depth analysis.

Case three

Carol (not real name) is a 16-year-old street girl. During the informal conversations, she revealed that she resorted to abusing substance as a result of the early sexual debut she experienced on the streets. Carol added that when she lost her virginity at the age of ten, she became aware that finding a man that would marry her was very unlikely. She subsequently joined commercial sex work. In order to cope with the demands associated with commercial sex work, Carol had to abuse intoxicating substances. She had this to say:

I started abusing substances after I lost my virginity at the age of ten (10) years. I was frustrated as I was aware that no man would take me seriously and marry me. I also started selling or transacting sex at the Njanji base. With that, I started using substances.

Through using substances, I am able to cope with my ordeal of early sexual debut. Life has never been fair with me. I am concerned about my situation but I do not have an option.

The narrative demonstrates the agency of street girls in a context of multiple challenges. For example, as a result of early sexual debut, the street girl had to cope with the situation through abusing substances and also resorting to selling sex at the *Njanji* base. The behaviour of the street girl could be referred to as thin agency as noted by Tisdall and Punch (2012), considering the limitedness of viable options for her. The behaviours could also be explained in the context of ambiguous agency as substance abuse and early sexual debut are seen as threatening moral values (Bordonaro and Payne 2012). The ambiguity is also in the context that early sexual debut and substance abuse affect the well-being of the street children of the Harare Central Business District. Gigengack (2008) also referred to such behaviours as self-destructive agency. The self-destructive agency of the behaviour is demonstrated as early sexual debut and abuse of substances among street children which is associated with a number of risks. Some of the risks include death and contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS, among others.

The narrative implies child rights violations are prevalent on the streets of the Harare. The abuse of substances and resorting to commercial sex work by this particular girl, contravenes the principles of the UNCRC, especially article three. It also contravenes the provisions of the Children's Act (5:06), the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (9:23), the Domestic Violence Act (5:16), among other child rights laws, policies and programmes.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the paper highlighted the multi-dimensional relationships between early sexual debut and substance abuse among street children of the Harare Central Business District. The early sexual debut and substance abuse demonstrate the agency of these children. As social actors, the children engaged in early sexual debut and abusing substances in a context characterised with harsh realities of their lives. However, the behaviours could be viewed as ambiguous agency as they threaten existing societal values. The behaviours are considered as self-destructive agency because of the extent and level of risks associated with early sexual debut and substance abuse among the street children. The early sexual debut and substance abuse among street children of the Harare Central Business District highlight that there are huge child rights violations on the streets. The behaviours are inconsistent with the provisions of the international, regional and national child rights laws, policies and programmes. For example, the local child rights laws define street children who engage in early sexual debut and substance abuse as children 'in need of care.' The in need of care concept suggests that the street children are vulnerable and they require more protection services from the duty bearers in the name of Government of Zimbabwe through the City of Harare and other institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for Government of Zimbabwe to fully implement all child rights laws, policies and programmes so as to reduce vulnerability of street children to early sexual debut and substance abuse. For example, the Children's Act (5:06) should be fully implemented so as to empower street children on issues of early sexual debut and abuse of substances. In addition, some of the national programmes such as the National Action Plan for Orphans and Other Vulnerable children should also be implemented fully with such programmes as harmonised cash transfer etc. Such national programmes if implemented fully will go a long way to fight childhood poverty among other issues.

All perpetrators of child sexual abuse must be brought to book. In other words, there is need to fully ensure that all perpetrators of child sexual abuse should face trial. It also means that key stakeholders such as victim friendly courts and units should be thoroughly doing their work. This will lead to a significant reduction of reported cases of corruption in some of these institutions,

Key stakeholders should raise awareness on child rights, establish and strengthen community based child protection structures. For example, the Department of Social Services and other child rights organisations should strengthen the capacity of community based structures to handle child rights issues. In addition, the street children and community based structures should be empowered through awareness raising on substance abuse and sexuality issues,

Social Protection programmes such as cash transfer should be introduced and implemented targeting street children including those around the Harare Central Business District. This would significantly reduce cases of childhood poverty,

The duty bearers in the name of the Government of Zimbabwe, the City of Harare and another duty bearer, should avail more resources for street children programmes so as to arrest childhood poverty. For example, they can initiate and implement microfinance projects targeting street children of the Harare Central Business District.

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