

**CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF  
TRAUMAS AMONG STREET CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN  
(AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE)**

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**Abstract:**

The paper signifies research findings regarding life of street children in Pirwadhai, Rawalpindi. Keeping in view the holistic approach of Anthropology, the understanding of street children as an important segment of the society, became indispensable because they possess very unique characteristics within themselves. The presence of children in the street and their practical experiences can make or break their personality which ultimately would affect the whole society. This study has attempted to identify the vulnerability and issues of street children to generate the anthropological knowledge which could be utilized to solve the social problems and make the society healthy, prosperous and sustainable. It has also addressed the family milieu, current and direct experiences of street children, perceptions about them and its impact on human development. This anthropological study would give insight about this segment of the society.

**Keywords:** Street Children, Social Deviance, Culture&Environment, Directionless, Disorders, Vulnerability,

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**Introduction:**

The importance of children signifies in social structure that has its role in human and societal development. Child is father of the man (Proverb): The experiences of childhood determine a person's character as an adult(Oxford Dictionary). This quotation indicates the importance of children and role of socio-psychological experiences children undergo through interaction with other people and the prevailing environment.Sigmund Freud (n.d.), known for his psychoanalysis saw the traumas of childhood reflected in the neuroses of adults. Although Psychology and Anthropology are different disciplines and deal with different aspects of humanbehavior and development but both share the commonality about human beings as an individual and/or group under their own given parameters.

Culture plays pivotal role as it is considered a learning behavior. Children learn such a tradition by growing up in a particular society, through a process called enculturation. Cultural traditions include customs and opinions, developed over the generations, about proper and improper behavior(Kottak,2002).The culture they live in and experience they gain is very crucial for the street children because they encounter different kinds of threats both physical and psychological that tests their strength and their ability to cope with the challenges they face in everyday life. As the street children grow in a particular environment, they gain experience about the surroundings and sooner or later adapt to cultural practices and these are expected to have a strong bearing in their adulthood. Culture can be adaptive or maladaptive and may lead to pro or deviant role in making or breaking the society, its rules and regulations, norms or traditions.

Population, dependency ratio, degradation of institutional management, feeble internal and external interventions, and mismanagement of available resources also give rise to the number of street children. It does not only entail overexploitation but also signifies the underutilization of available and alternate resources due to unawareness, mass illiteracy and poor access to development sources. Poverty together with backwardness, lack of alternative income sources, fewer employment opportunities, stagnant agricultural technology and logistic constraints in terms of productive infrastructure support and external linkages presents an integrated set of problem in Pakistan.

Street children were directionless, ignorant of their future and their development. It is beyond doubt that such rich domain of human resource was being wasted instead of being developed purely due to negligence. Civil society did not seem to be much interested or concerned about the problems of the street children and its impact on the social order. Their primary emphasis was on poverty alleviation, population planning, environment, gender, health, child labor and education etc. No doubt, these are still paramount issues and are vital to economic development and welfare of the public. These issues need to be addressed on a priority basis as they have significant impact on society and well-being of children but the issue of street children is equally important. A constant neglect of the said human resource can adversely affect the social and economic fabric of the society. It can lead to destruction of values; bring widespread lawlessness and direct threat to peace, human security and development. Thus the negative environment makes the children vulnerable, and allow them to play in the hands of the criminals and later used by these outlaws for their nefarious activities.

The culture they live in and experience they gain is very crucial for the street children. They encounter different kinds of threats both physical and psychological that lead to the personality development and designate the positive or negative role to the children which they have to play in the society. For instance the street children who were involved in rag-picking learn the business tactics of this trade while others who got socialized with those involved in petty crimes become criminals, but of course exceptions are always there. There had been instances where street children had turned into delinquents and antisocial elements, also contrary to that they had been transformed into good businessmen. This study will be significant in all respects for civil society, NGOs, scholars, academia and for those who are related to policy making and planning of the country.

### **Research Methodology:**

Both qualitative and quantitative anthropological research techniques such as participant observation, interviews, questionnaire, and focus group discussions were used to collect primary data. The field work for this study was conducted for couple of months and snow ball sampling

technique was employed and targeted eighty four (84) street children. Children ranging from ages nine to eighteen years were selected for the study.

### Street Children in Pakistan

In Pakistan, street children belonged to broken and overcrowded families (six to ten children per family), psychologically disturbed due to family pressures, abuses and neglect, growing urbanization and industrialization. They were mostly illiterate with a few exceptions of those having received formal education. The most frequent causes were family disintegration, divorce, single parent, plural marriages etc. According to Centre for Research and Social Development (CRSD), 1.2 million Children are on the streets in Pakistan's large cities, working as rag-pickers, hawking small goods, shining shoes, washing cars, involved in petty crimes, sniffing glue and other drugs. Some also drift into prostitution to make extra money and there are some who only steal and prostitute themselves. Many are found in the vicinity of religious shrines, bus stations, and railway stations constantly exposed to various risks & become more vulnerable" (Anwar, 2002). Most estimates refer to the main urban centers of Pakistan, suggesting that Lahore has around 14,000 street children compared to 5,000 in Peshawar, while Karachi and Quetta are thought to have around 15,000 each (Godh Report, 2003). The reliability and potential for comparison of these estimates is, however, questionable. There has to-date been no unified effort to assess the scale of the problem nationwide by using a single methodology. This is perhaps because the issue of street children has not generally been considered important or urgent enough in Pakistan to warrant such a check. This is despite reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan suggesting that the kidnapping and rape of children has become one of the most common crimes in the country, averaging one girl every day (Gannon, 2000). In fact, the more visible problem of child labor instead continues to dominate the focus of most intervention and analysis, with the plight of street children come to the fore only in relation to specific and brutal incidents (Pervaiz, et al. 2004).

In Pakistan, around 43% among the total population is under 15 years of age and 48 million adults are below the poverty line earning less than \$2 a day. Street Children work 12 -15 hours a day to earn their livelihood. Only in Karachi, the estimated population of street children is

15,000 out of which 83% street children sniff glue, 45% are involved in crimes and 49% are at high risk of HIV and AIDS. United Nations Office on Drug Control and Crime (UNODC) asserts that 72% of all street children have no family contacts and 10% have no knowledge of their families. A large proportion of these children sniff cheap readily available glues to starve off hunger, loneliness and fear (SPARC, 2007).

### The Nature of Street Children

Street children could be classified in many ways such as by age, physical health and their time spent on the street. In order to understand this phenomenon in light of the definition taken for this dissertation, street children were found to be unprotected, unsupervised, maximum time spenders on the street, and those for whom street was a source of livelihood. Once on the streets these children in Pirwadhai became not only exposed but highly vulnerable to all kinds of threats round the clock, ranging from emotional to physical and verbal to sexual abuses. Acts of violence against them are considered as justified and pervasive and this has been found in various forms, such as at homes, on the streets, and work place. However, as observed, law enforcing agencies, which were expected to provide them protection against various criminal highhanded types of immoral conducts, were seemed partners in violence against street children. *Here indiscriminate violations against children are committed with impunity because of no fear of reprisal from the law and the society (SPARC, 2007).*

Street children usually spend their lives in danger, stress on one hand and in search of food, shelter and protection on the otherhand. For this purpose they join drop in centers, work places and affiliate themselves with more powerful street/community elders thinking that by pleasing these influential they will be protected from many external dangers. *Street children are subjected to physical assault, sexual abuse, and harassment from the public, intimidation by gang members and criminals, and arrest by the police (Richter, 1988). This victimization frequently repeats what has occurred in the home. Though often victims themselves, street children, according to Swart (1988), are regarded as irresponsible and lawless and a serious financial burden to society.* The whole environment is dangerous for them and they have to face and tackle it in accordance with their own ability, resources and available circumstances. The factors responsible

for their existing condition were poverty, frustration, lack of understanding and support from parents, teachers, and the leading being the criminalization of the society as a whole. In order to survive in the hostile environment, they have to do some work on daily wages. They feel independent and comfortable while doing such work and they can choose according to their capacity, nature of work and its requirement. The only difficulty is that sometime they have no work for entire day, whole night or for several days and even weeks. During such hard times, they become more susceptible to get involved in unwanted and socially unacceptable activities.

*Some children work in the informal sector (Wright, Kaminsky, & Wittig, 1993): hawking in the markets and darting in and out of the traffic jams, plying their trade at bus and train stations, in front of hotels and shopping malls. On the street, they shine shoes, wash and guard cars, carry luggage, do street vending, hawk flowers and trinkets, collect recyclables, sell newspapers and find a myriad of other ingenious ways to make money, often resorting to begging in between (UNICEF, 1997; Krueger & Richter, 1997; SPARC, 1999).*

Whether it was home, work place, street, or a market, none of these places were safe for these unattended street children. The streets, pavements, bus stops, railway stations and market places become their homes and workplaces. These places and their environment remain uncomfortable for street children. Notorious people appear ready to trap the children and bring them under their fold to get maximum benefit by using them in illegal activities. The desires of these people were driven by selfish motives as they subject the children to sexual exploitation. The tragic part was that the children on one hand were victim of exploitation and on the other hand struggled to find a decent livelihood by hunting for jobs, shelter, and food but each time ended up in the hands of antisocial gangs. Approximately 26 million children are believed to be engaged in hazardous work (UNICEF, 2006). They are denied of their basic needs such as food, shelter, clean water and parental protection. Inadequately protected children were vulnerable to abuse and had tendency to commit petty crimes starting from petty crimes like thefts, therefore, they were conveniently used by the vested interests. It was found that unsupervised children were also vulnerable but in lesser intensity, as they were bold and knew well how to escape from any dangerous situation when faced with any. Aptekar (1994) stated that in the beginning child spends a small amount of

time away from home, and progresses to the total adoption of the street lifestyle and culture. It can be safely said that this idea applies to almost all the children belonging to any classification or category. Peer group plays an important and helping role to bring them on the street and once they become habitual of this life it becomes difficult for them to leave it. Some were fortunate to leave the street life, start their own business, generate handsome income, but yet continued to remain in touch with the street.

*Lusk (1992) has emphasized the psychological characteristics of four groups of street children: poor, working children who return to their families at night and usually attend school - they are not likely to exhibit delinquent behavior; independent street workers, whose family ties are in the process of breaking down - their school attendance is erratic and they exhibit increasing delinquency; children who live and work with their families on the street - poverty is the overwhelming reason for their presence; and children who have broken off all contact with their families - they live full time on the streets and are the "real" street children.*

Street children who belonged to elite and middle class had adopted street life for fun, adventure and enjoyment. Their time span on the street was very short as compared to the children from poor class. The reason was that they could get undue favor from their parents any time for their wrong doings and money was no problem for them if at all they were trapped in a difficult situation.

### The Nature and Extent of Street Children

Children from Elite Class	Children from Middle Class	Children from Poor Class	Orphan Children	Street Children of Troubled Families
Temporarily on the street for fun, thrill, time killing,	Temporarily on the street, struggling for education,	Spend 14 to 15 hours on the street, support their families	Street permanent abode, fight for survival, no hesitation in	Keep visiting families, aggressive, can do anything for

hanging out	employment	financially	doing anything	money
No financial problems, attend schools, graduation and above	Have some financial problem, attend school, 10 <sup>th</sup> grade to 12 <sup>th</sup> grade, in some cases graduation or post-graduation	Attend, drop out, attend again drop out, continue until finally drop out, 5 <sup>th</sup> grade or $\pm$	Attend drop in centers for food, shelter and to some extent so called education, can read and write + counting	No schooling, no interest, fed up of people, hatred and irritating behavior, Never went to school
Not vulnerable to any threat but themselves were threat	Little vulnerable, want to be rich, forced to leave education	Struggling for survival, vulnerability is less	Vulnerable to abuse, probable delinquent	Vulnerable to all threats, mostly delinquent

Environment and socialization played substantial role to make children helpless or to protect them from potential danger. The society was in a dilemma; it wanted to help but could not do so due to various socio-economic limitations. Delinquents were getting powerful and influential while the ordinary children were getting weak and powerless, fearful and hesitant to face life's realities. This is because of de facto or built-in defect in socio-economic setup that creates huge gap between the powerful and powerless. The powerful intentionally create fear among the weak to exercise and maintain their authority. Police and criminals join hands with them and get their due share.

### Prevalent Environment

Environment has different connotation to different people and disciplines. It covers all existing ambience and features of the living and non-living things. It has wide-ranging impact on living things including human beings and their living conditions. Its severity multiplies when we talk about vulnerable segment of the society. For instance poverty forces to adopt poor living conditions, which ultimately refer to live rest of life under threat. Environment was playing a



decisive role in the lives of children who had left their home for some reason or were forced to spend much of their time in the streets. *The term 'environment' refers to our total surroundings including the components of the biophysical world, and the cultural, social, political and economic spheres in context of the people. The environment includes the things we can see, feel and touch (such as trees, water and soil) and things we cannot see (such as the operation of political and economic system, technology advancement or stagnancy, working of religious and the institutions that operate in society) (Baker et.al. 2000).* Their experiences within available environment decide their destiny. Hunger forced them to steal; hatred behavior of people made them mentally sick, unprotected environment compelled them to adopt careless attitude. Self-esteem of these children was badly damaged in the street environment and they were considered misfits in social environment and were called with bad names, termed as thieves, notorious and social evils. Pirwadhai is known as one of the scandalous places of its kind, of course having very notorious environment, which is enough to encourage infamous characters such as street children especially. The surroundings of Pirwadhai including biophysical or built environment is pathetic where these children are roaming around unprotected in search of food, shelter, and for labor work to meet the basic requirement of their survival.

*Every environment consists of two parts that are closely interconnected: the biophysical environment and the built environment. The biophysical environment includes living things such as plants and animals, and non-living things (physical) such as rocks, soil and water. The built environment includes everything that is made or altered by people, such as buildings, roads, schools, pollution and laws of the land (Baker et.al. 2000).*

In the study area as mentioned earlier entire surroundings comprised of biophysical and, built environment was not feasible for uplift of the children and society. Subsequently it could not make them literate or provide them education, safe drinking water or create a pollution free environment. Trees had become nonexistent because of deficient water and over construction, so there was no point in talking about clean water. A similar situation was prevalent in case of political and economic system, religious and other institutions that operate in society; these were almost non-functional and in some cases were nonexistent apparently. The roads, as mentioned earlier, were in a very poor condition, pollution from vehicles was alarmingly high, and laws,

though they exist were violated by all and sundry in the study area.

### **Role of Social Environment**

Social responses of elite, government and local privileged class towards the deprived and deviants determine the social problem, but did not take into account the structural flaws and unequal opportunities to the less privileged or their access to the resources. The question that arises is whether street children cause a social problem or the social problem produces these children. Conflict between facilitation and impediment to succeed in fact caused deviant behavior among them.

Street children of Pirwadhai remained away from the environment kept them away from setting an aim (according to the accepted norms of success) for themselves. Weak policies, poor implementation, lack of transparency and above all the connivance of law enforcing agencies with the criminal elements add to discrimination against the street children. Deviant activities of street children, unjust and rude attitude of local community and abuse-loaded environment were prevalent round the clock and helped in creating a situation where X-rated videos and movies were easily available in hotels, mini cinemas and video game clubs in the study area. Street children had access to such activities at cheap rate which helped in satisfying their inner sexual desires. Sometimes they got a chance to watch the dirty stuff free of cost but they did not realize that they had to pay huge cost for it. By watching these X-rated videos the street children had a sexual arousal; and being weak they became easy victims of pleasure-seeking people. The X-rated pornographic movies aroused lustful feelings in the street children due to which they were driven intentionally or unintentionally to physical and sexual exploitation. They were too timid and immature to anticipate the outcome of this dirty activity free of cost.

### **Children Living with Other Children**

Street children felt secure by living together and helpful when the need arises. They lived in group form, shared room rent, shared food if required and also confronted the danger jointly

when required. About 37% children lived with only one best friend, 37% lived with two other friends, and 26% lived with four other friends. It did not matter whether they lived in rented house; drop in centers, hotels or *Sarais*.

An informer told the researcher that children living together in large numbers were problematic, and they tended to divide into small groups of two to three. Teasing or bickering in large group sometimes turned into serious fighting and landed one group or person in hospital or in police lock up. The conflict was usually started with verbal abuse or bullying and turned into a physical and violent quarrel and ended up with injuries to both sides. Interestingly, this was not the end of fight but it continued till the aggrieved party had avenged its humiliation. Living together and fighting for the interest of their group was found to be common feature. This was the result of influence of other peers even if they were not involved in the quarrel.

#### Children Living with Other Children

No. of Other Children Living with	Number of Children	Percentage
1	31	37
2	31	37
4	22	26
Total	84	100

#### Social Deviance takes Roots in Street Children

Generally speaking, if someone who followed whatever rules/norms of the society and complies with the social expectation is called normal/adaptive/obedient and useful organ of the society and if he failed to comply with set standards of the society, he/she was labeled as maladaptive and deviant and a sick organ of the society. The deciding forces hardly consider that such behaviors are contingent on other people's reactions and behaviors. Because *deviance is behavior that does not conform to social expectations, it is socially created (Becker, 1963). Deviance is not a property inherent in any particular kind of behavior; it is a property conferred upon that behavior by the people who come into direct or indirect contact with it"* (Erikson, 1966). If this argument is accepted then one has to change the behavior of those people who were a driving force behind such unacceptable behaviors. Additionally some rethinking needs to be

done about changing the norms/rules and regulations of the society which appear to deny the basic needs to the individuals. Also it needs to be found why society failed to create an environment conducive to provide equal opportunity to its member to prosper or get involved in healthy and fair competition. The sick structure of the society is plagued by class system and unable to tackle this issue or lessen such behaviors, should be transformed completely if necessary, as it produced wicked and sinful class, such as street children.

*Most of us conform to the norms of society most of the time. Similarly, most of us on occasion violate minor social norms, and these violations are usually tolerated or even ignored. An occasional breach of etiquette, participation in a riotous celebration after an important sports victory, or loud chatter in a theater may bring some minor social disapproval to the violators but no serious punishment. The social deviance, that most interests sociologists concerns, offenses that are seriously disapproved of by many people and therefore evoke serious social consequences for the violators(Stanely, and Baca, 2002).*

The occasional or irregular violations were irritating but not of much concern to society and its members. Deviance was an integral part of all societies and retained positive and negative attributes. In positive way of thinking, deviant stimulate individuals on how to behave, value the norms of the society and avoid the negative behaviors while perceiving how violators of important social norms were stigmatized. According to Emile Durkheim (1960), deviant behavior actually has positive consequences for society because it gives the non-deviants a sense of solidarity. By punishing the deviant, the group expresses its collective indignation and reaffirms its commitment to the rules. One should be careful while talking about the behaviors because in the perspective of cultural relativism if a particular behavior in one society is considered a norm, the same behavior pattern in some other society could be considered as a taboo, or a deviation. For example, wearing scarf by girls is a norm, rather value in Iranian and Pakistani societies, which is considered deviancy in European society. Deviancy is a social creation that is not inherited.

*Society impinges on this intensely private form of intimacy to shape our ideas about what is erotic, to define what taboo is, and to determine who appropriate sexual partners are. The social context of parents, peers, community, church, school, media, and government thus condition, constrain, and socially define sexual behavior (Ross and Rayna, 1983).*

Street children were labeled sick, dishonest, criminal, and wicked etc. without realizing the factors behind their deviant behaviors and kind of consequences, such as arduous attitude, would have on them and ultimately on society. The awfully depressing response from the society to street children might cause irritation and personal antipathy towards street children, instead of making an effort to steer them back to normal and respectable life.

### **Psychological Trauma Creates Disorders in Children's Lives**

Street children went through enormous traumatic events at home, on the streets and in the drop in centers or schools. These events affected their thought processes, which ultimately were reflected in their behaviors while dealing or interacting with other people who were also part of the society. The continuity of such events finally leads to the type of personality that provides opportunity to the people, with whom they are interacting, to label them according to their wish and develop their own perception, the way they understand such children. *It is a type of damage to the psyche that occurs as a result of a traumatic event. When that trauma leads to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, damage can be measured in physical changes inside the brain and to brain chemistry, which affect the person's ability to cope with stress (wikipedia, 2008).* Street children found themselves in a conflict situation when faced with different perceptions prevailing in the society about them.

*There is frequently a violation of the person's familiar ideas about the world and of their human rights, putting the person in a state of extreme confusion and insecurity. This is also seen when people or institutions depend on each other for survival and violate or betray the person in some unforeseen way. However, different people will react differently to similar events. One person may perceive an event to be traumatic that*

*another may not, and not all people who experience a traumatic event will become psychologically traumatized (humandevlopment.bu.edu).*

These traumas had diverse physical and socio-psychological repercussions on child's psyche and their fight and flight responses. These children either had gone through one or more of said responses which created trauma or they were living in such vulnerable condition where they were prone to undergo some traumatic conditions. They accepted themselves as a part of society's evil resulting from traumatic situations like physical, sexual or verbal abuse, deprivation of basic rights, individual or institutional betrayal, and exposure to natural or man-made disasters. They were left no choice but to accept one of those situations for their survival. These children were also victims of family betrayal where their parents or close relatives put them in betrayal traumas that led them to a behavior full of distrust, helplessness, and deceit. But some of the children took these situations in an unusual way; besides being self-reliant; they became volatile, and delinquent. These were the ways they reacted to these traumas which surely affected their psyche. These traumas especially betrayal arises primarily from difficult circumstances created by family. The children feel lonely, helpless and find no way to express their feelings, and ultimately end up with another psychological disorder called depression.

### **Conclusion:**

Street Children are those who live or spend most of their time in the streets besides earning their livelihood there. They live alone in the streets, without proper supervision or safe shelter. Street children share the streets with millions of adults, many of whom regard them as nuisances, and even dangerous mini-criminals. Street children face hardships and dangers on the streets, lack of food, clean water and adequate health care on the streets. They are often victims of various physical and moral dangers and as they grow older they often become a danger to others. An attempt was made to understand why instead of being raised and nurtured at homes under protected environment the children tend to prefer street life that is full of hard realities. Whether they adopted street by choice or they became part of it by some external influences. The fact was that street children phenomenon has existed in all the societies including Pirwadha though its severity varies.

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