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“Like rubbing salt into the wound”: Lived experiences of homeless youth in Gondar City, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing research on homeless street children, women and elderly people in Ethiopia, there is little empirical evidence regarding the experiences of homeless street youth in the country. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research is therefore to understand the lived experiences of street homeless youth aged between 18 and 29 years in Gondar city. Face-to-face in-depth interview was conducted with 9 purposively selected study participants. Interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized and thematized through thematic analysis strategy. Five themes emerged from the data analysis include Reasons for becoming homeless; Social marginalization; Violence and Criminalization; Psychological distress; and Means of a living. Findings of this study illustrate that homeless youth suffered from poor health, sexual violence, psychological trauma, social stigma and hostility from the public. The combined effect of these precarious situations places homeless youth at the margins of society and makes them feel helpless in their daily lives. This study implies that social workers should use and promote family- and community-based interventions to deal with the problem of homeless youths and integrate them into society.

KEY TERMS: lived experience, homeless, street, youth, Gondar City, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of homelessness among young people is growing problem in urban areas of Ethiopia. The drivers of youth homelessness mainly lie either in poverty, unemployment, family conflict, or substance abuse. Homeless youth are visibly destitute beggars, and engagement in survival sex is also common among female homeless youth. Homeless youth face problems of physical and mental health, sexual abuse, substance abuse, violence and criminalization. In the context of this study, the term homeless youth refer to young adults aged 18 to 29 years living on the streets. The purpose of this qualitative research is to illustrate the lived experiences of homeless street youth in Gondar City, north-western Ethiopia.

BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of street youth has become increasingly visible in major urban areas in recent years in Ethiopia. Youth is legally defined as anyone between the ages of 18 and 29 years in the country (Ethiopian Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture, 2004). Homeless youths are then defined as young adults in this age ranges.

While there may be a variety of reasons why a particular youth becomes homeless in urban areas, the research literature has identified some common factors. These include alcoholic families and parental conflict, poverty, unemployment, school violence, fast rising cost of living, high rates of population growth, rural-urban migration and displacement, disability, and inappropriate public policies (Abebe, 2008; Demewozu, 2005; Melese and Addis, 2020; Shegaw et al., 2022) and the search for a lost family pushed children and adolescents to the street whereas peer pressure or company of friends drew them there (Mathebula and Ross, 2013).

Living on the streets endangers young people in low-income countries such as Ethiopia. On the streets, homeless youth face numerous social and health problems including social marginalization, stigma, violence, poor health, hostility of the public, psychological trauma, victim criminalization, and sexual assault (Abebe, 2009; Ally and Paul, 2022; Bourdillon, 1994; Lockhart, 2008; Mathebula and Ross, 2013; Tyler and Melander, 2015). Evidence indicated that begging, petty theft, survival sex, and vendor can be used as means of a living by homeless youth (Abebe, 2008; Demewozu, 2005; Fantahun and Taa, 2022).

Studies of street people in Ethiopia have focused primarily on street children (Abebe, 2009, 2008; Chemdessa, 2022; Demewozu, 2005; Fantahun and Taa, 2022; Worku, Urgessa and Abeshu, 2019) and a lesser extent on women (Edwards, Guy-Walls, Jacino and Franklin, 2015) and old people (Ayalew, 2019) who beg for their livelihoods. There is little empirical evidence about the lived experiences of homeless youth in Ethiopia in general, and in Gondar in particular. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of street homeless youth in Gondar city, Ethiopia. The research questions that guide the process: 1) what forces led young people to become homeless? 2) What lived experiences do youth have after becoming homeless?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative study design was used to explore the experiences of homeless youth living on street from their own perspectives. Endaweke (2017) stated that qualitative research helps researchers to gain comprehensive understanding and meanings of a study from various perspectives in the context of Ethiopia. I contend that the logic of sample selection in qualitative research is based on the value of information-rich participants who can provide in-depth understanding of the subject of study. Nine homeless youth living on the street were chosen using purposive sampling.

I used in-depth interviews to gain an understanding of the meaning and experience of the lived world from the subjective perspectives of study participants. Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Interviews were conducted between 20 September -13 October 2022. The dialogical interview approach was used throughout the research process. This allowed me to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences. For the text to be co-created by the researcher and participants, I attempted to capture the temporality of each remark within a dialogue, acting as an active research instrument. I and research participants collaborate to construct knowledge throughout the interview.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed in Amharic language and translated into English. Transcripts went through a series of coding and recoding, refining and categorizing, and thematic procedures. I thoroughly pursued a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting on themes discovered in a data set throughout the analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to validate the meaning and definition of their experiences throughout the research process.

Ethical clearance was obtained from Research and Publication Coordinating Office at the University of Gondar. Written informed consent was obtained from study participants to ensure voluntary participation. Anonymity and confidentiality rules were followed to preserve the privacy of study participants.

FINDINGS

Demographic profiles

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine homeless youth ranging in age from 20 to 24 years old. Five of the participants in the study were females, while four were males. In terms of academic level, four of them dropped out of grade 8, three completed grade 10, and two completed secondary high school education. Table 1 shows the details.

Table 1. Profile of participants

	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Education level
1	Hana	F	23	Grade 8 drop out
2	Alemu	M	22	Complete Grade 10
3	Tigist	F	24	Complete Grade 10
4	Belew	M	21	High school complete
5	Hirut	F	23	Complete Grade 10
6	Kassa	M	21	Grade 8 drop out
7	Fasil	M	21	Grade 8 drop out
8	Elsa	F	20	High school complete
9	Yeshi	F	21	Grade 8 drop out

Themes

Five themes emerged as reflecting the daily lived experiences of street youth: Theme 1- Reasons behind becoming homeless; Theme 2-Social marginalization; Theme 3-Violence and Criminalization; Theme 4- Psychological distress; Theme 5-Means of a living.

Theme1. Factors behind becoming homeless

The events and circumstances surrounding youths' reasons of becoming homeless are complex and diverse. Many interview participants reported family poverty has been the frequent factors in the growth of homeless youth population in urban areas of Ethiopia. Alemu said:

I am from rural family. My parents were poverty-ridden small scale farmers. They hardly feed their children. I migrated to Gondar city in search of job opportunity. But the situation was not as I expected in the city. I did not have a place to live in. I cannot get jobs to sustain my life. My last resort was street life.

Some participants reported abusive home environment led them to leave home and end up on the street. Tigist said:

My stepfather used to quarrel with my mum because of me. He disliked and disrespected me. He often nagged me on a silly issue. He never wanted to see me. My mother remained solidly with me...But he aggressively fought with her. He was terribly arrogant for my mother through me. I was not treated as a family member. What can you do in such situation? I escaped home. Sadly, there was nowhere for me to go. I ended up on street.

The case presented above exemplifies family conflict as one inducing reason for homelessness. This implies that a strong sense of dissatisfaction or recurrent conflict with parents and/or stepparents was a significant contributing factor for young people to leaving home. On the other hand, some participants recounted of substance abuse, such as *Khat* chewing, alcohol, and smoking, as a pathway out of home. It was reported that substance abuse was commonly associated with spending nights outside of parent home. Their substance abuse has generated persistent conflict with their parents and led young people to homeless. Kassa said:

I accustomed to spending nights away from my parents. My parents caught me drunk and confronted me about it. I know my mother had big dream on me. But my behaviour disappointed her. So, I encountered difficulty in living with them. They did not stop me and keep annoying me. What should I do to get away from this confrontation? Was simple! Just moving out home and got drunk. I started selling everything including my cell phone, jacket and shoes. Eventually, street has become my home.

This narrative shows the emergence of substance abusing behaviour among young people has been shown to have a negative impact on family relationships and can lead to family conflict. In such situation, if parents fail to manage their children's problematic behaviour, young people may choose to leave and run away a strict home-based environment.

Theme 2. Social Marginalization

Majority of participants reported experiences of living on the margin of the society in all aspects of their lives. They described that living on the street is a painful experience. Hirut said:

I am abandoned in the community. Nobody paid attention to me. I felt I am blocked from my human rights and opportunities. Life is miserable in such highly detached life. The system disconnected me from these opportunities. You are less important for the community. No space for me in the community. Look, here everything is threatening and painful, I am the least involved and benefited. Opportunities came rarely on the street.

Hirut's story demonstrates that she is deprived of social opportunities, which causes her to feel lonely and isolated. Unequal power relationships across various dimensions of homeless young people may result in feelings of social exclusion and uninvolved. This social deprivation prevents them from receiving the same benefits and opportunities as the rest of the community. Alemu reported:

We [street youth] are invisible. We have no place in our community as citizen. It's a terrible life we live. You know we are the poorest of the poor; but the local administration is not ready to include street youth in the safety net programs, supposed to help disadvantaged groups. That's not only, we do not have identification card as you do not have home so that we are prevented from registering to vote. Feeling extremely excluded and feeling trapped. The public put us down. We are not bad people.

This reveals the result of inadequacy in social policy and administration in systems of provision for social security, protection, and social care for those in need. Because homeless youth are unable to participate in the norms of formal economic activities, they face more stigma and discrimination. They are widely perceived as lazy and irresponsible at a productive age when they are expected to assist their parents. The public frequently see young people become homeless as the result of their fault. The public attribution of youth homelessness to personal moral failings may undermine humanity's dignity and worth. These people are not bad, but they are in a bad situation that necessitates structural intervention to get them out of it. The stereotyping and stigmatization have left homeless youth in a severe state of disenfranchisement and impoverishment.

Theme 3. Violence and criminalization: "Like rubbing salt into the wound"

Female and male homeless participants speaking different violence experiences committed against them since they started life on the streets. Homeless female experienced frequent sexual assaults on the streets. Such experience of sexual assault is narrated by Elsa as follow:

Once I came here, street life started to become violent. I used to sleep alone close to a building. Least safe street...you know I am young female. One evening a man approached me and wanted me to have sex with him. He powerfully raped me. No one protects me. It was so terrible...it's like rubbing salt into the wound.

It is evident that the situation of homeless females youth worsened by sexual violence. Elsa was asked during the in-depth interview if she ever reported the rape case to the police and with a tone of despair in her voice, she responded:

I do not think the police can help me as I did not recognize the man raped me. Even they may not believe me. Plus, I do not know even how to take my case to the police because it's a disgraceful act committed against my will. I have no close friends to share my case and get advice. I am alone with no one to help me.

Similarly, Hana expressed:

We, homeless female youth, are sexually exploited. Rape is very frequent in the street. We could not fully sleep at night because we are afraid of being raped by non-homeless intoxicated men. We are victims of different forms of abuse, particularly sexual abuse.

The ability of female homeless youths to report their victim to the police is restricted by their weak social capital. They cannot easily obtain support and protection from the community and the police to assist them when they are victim of the crime. Such situation is an indication of how powerless they are on the street.

On the other hand, female participants reported that some men tend to lure and push them into sexual acts, with promises to give them money and other gifts as well. Tigsit said:

No one is trusted. What Street life has taught me! Men wanted me to have sex with them in exchange of money. I recalled, a man squeezed my breasts and rubbed my buttocks and telling me erotic terms... I was very upset with him, so he firmly pulled his hand away. You feel devalued and helpless. Street life is punishing. It's horrible to be here, but no option.

This demonstrates that coercing homeless female youth into sexual assault on the streets traumatizes them. It is evident that the perpetrators take advantage of the desperation of homeless youth to make sexual assault. It is mentioned that sexual assault is not only coming from non-homeless men but also from homeless counterparts. Some female participants reported that seeking protection from male homeless people makes them vulnerable to sexual assault. The experience of Yeshe illustrates this:

I used to sleep alone during the night, when I started living on the street near public buildings... Some dreadful things happened to you. I have been sexually assaulted by both strangers and street youths in the past. Later, I began living with street young man seeking protection from such assaults, with whom I had affairs in exchange. You know, the situation is out of my hands.

These narratives demonstrate that female homeless youth are victims of various forms of sexual abuse by both homeless and homed adults. By implication, sexual oppression and discrimination exacerbate the precarious situation of homeless female youth. On the other hand, homeless male youth reported general criminalization for any violation of the law on the street. Kassa said: *"It's not a crime to be on street. I have no place to go... Because of not my fault, I am blindly criminalized for every law breaking committed on street. We were arrested when street crimes committed by others.*" The presence of homeless youth on the street is frequently perceived as a threat to the community and serves as justification for arrest. Fasil said:

Because you are young and you are on street, you are getting arrested, particularly if there's public movement. In other times, police officers frequently come and threaten me to arrest; they tell me to go back home. But I have none. They just want to harass me. I felt I am not wanted. It's like being violated for being homeless. A lot of people yell at me. You're just begging on the street because you're hungry. Yet people make you so ashamed. You are young why you begging? Get the hell away from me, you thief! Shouting on you. They think, I am in the street to do something bad like steal or something like that. It's all contempt.

This shows that simply being on the street exposes homeless youth to police attention and makes them vulnerable to threatening, harassment and arrest. Although the majority of young people reported being on the street as a result of being pushed out of their families, the widespread perception that they were blamed for their situation was especially painful. Homeless youth are vulnerable groups in need of protection, not violence and criminalization. The criminalization of homeless youth implies that they are being punished for living outside the mainstream society.

Theme 4. Psychological distresses

Majority of participants reported various forms of psychological problems. Participants started believing that they lost faith in their ability to influence the course of their lives. Belew said:

I am in a bad situation... You know, I am trapped here. Nothing I do matter. I always lose. Things never change to me, whatever trying to do. I feel my destiny is inseparable from this bad situation. Do not know how to escape from this terrible life.

This story shows how Belew lost control of the forces that determined his fate. It makes sense that the homeless phenomenon has eroded youth's sense of agency and control on their fate. Because of the learned helplessness mindset, participants felt powerless and had low self-esteem. The experience of Elsa illustrates this:

I feel my life is valueless and worthless. I am always sad to be in this situation. I am a dumb. You can imagine how life is boring here. I am simply stressed out at this age. No purpose within me. I feel empty inside. Who cares about tomorrow?

It seems that homeless youth living on street experience diminished sense of hopelessness and self-worth. The feeling of being overwhelmed and incapable of making any positive difference in their situation makes participants develop negative beliefs, low motivations, and no life direction. This has important implication for depression and anxiety. On the other hand, participants reported that substance abuse not only pushed them out of their homes and onto the streets, but that their continued use of substances on the street exacerbates their mental health problems. Most participants indicated use of multiple drugs including alcohol, cigarettes, and *Khat*. Alemu explained: “*Being homeless means traumatic by itself. So I smoke cigarettes and chew Khat to counter this stressful life.*” The study participants smoke cigarettes and chew *Khat* as a coping strategy. The use of cigarettes and *Khat* as a coping mechanism appears a maladaptive mechanism that can complicate and contribute to the numerous health problems that youth face. Kassa said: “*I do not have shelter. I do not feel safe all the time. I do smoke or chewing Khat to be numb to the scary experience of being on the street. Sleep-deprived and later you get depressed*” It is evident that homeless youth in this study use substance abuse to escape from their hardship experiences of street life. The implication is that youth who are homeless have often experienced significant trauma in their lives and often cope through substance use, and experience other mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which are all exacerbated by substance use.

Theme 5: Means of a living

Begging. In this study, young people living on the street reported a variety of ways to make a living. Most participants identified begging as their primary source of income. But it was indicated that having begging as a primary source of income was related to social stigma. Tigist expressed:

You know, street is not only my home but also a place for income. so, I can make my own money by begging. It's really helping me to have money for food and cloth. Begging gives me a chance to survive. It's the only source of income. But begging has additional challenges to me. People are more compassionate to beggars with disability and aged ones. As a nondisabled beggar, I occasionally encountered humiliating interactions.

This story demonstrates that, despite actively begging as part of their livelihood strategies to create opportunities for themselves, homeless youth face violence and abuse from the public and law enforcement. It appears that life as a street beggar is extremely difficult for young people who do not have disabilities. They are not only threatened continuously by stigma and violence, but also ashamed of begging. Kassa said:

We do not like street begging. Of course, we are ashamed but what can we do, we need money. You know, begging is like the least option to survive the adverse conditions. It's a very shameful activity. This ruins our self-esteem and confidence. No one wants to continue in this situation.

It suggests that making a living by begging is a shameful activity that may harm homeless young peoples' self-esteem. It implies begging is not only a social problem for beggars, but it has also psychological consequences.

Survival sex. Some female participants reported having participated in survival sex. They explained that their circumstances forced them to trade sex for subsistence needs. Yeshe said:

You need something to eat. You know, No option other than sex. I exchange sex for money. In such dire situation, selling your body is a means to survive. That's all, what I have is my body. Imagine, how degrading is. Being homelessness is a desperate state.

Although participants reported engaging in survival sex to earn money, they clearly articulated that the internal process they go through when deciding to engage in this type of sex exchange is very distressing. Hana described:

It's sort of like suicide in a way. You know, I am presenting my body as commodity. It's a challenging decision. Openly, I am not gonna lie to you, it's a dirty business. Because it's disgusting and embarrassing. Sometimes, I feel it takes me out of humanity.

This story shows that selling sex for survival has implications for mental health issues and human rights issues. Participants also express concern about their involvement in unprotected sex, which may increase their risk of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Yeshe described:

I do not use condom. My casual partners come to me with no condom. Even do not want to buy condom while asking them. I could not buy it as I do not have money. I am not the decision maker overusing condom. I am regretted over having unprotected intercourse. I prayed to my God that I would not get pregnant.

This indicated that homeless female youth have no influence on the decision to use a condom while having sex with partners. They regret over engaging in unprotected sex due to their partner's preference. This can exacerbate the health risks for homeless youth. Homelessness increases youth's vulnerability to a variety of health problems including sex and reproductive health.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that there were a variety of factors including poverty, unemployment, family conflict and substance abuse that led the youth in the study to leave home for streets. This finding corroborates results of previous studies (Abebe, 2007; Demewozu, 2005; Shegaw et al., 2022). However, disability, alcoholic family, and displacement, which were commonly cited push factors in the previous studies, were not mentioned by this study participant as reasons for leaving home. Consistent with previous studies (Fantahunand Taa, 2022; Mathews, 2003), homeless youth in this study were stigmatized group and their homelessness is attributed to their personal failure rather than structural factors. The negative public perception and stereotypes about homeless youth stem from a dominant cultural narrative that links homelessness to personal failure (Bullock, 2008). The stigmatized social perception contributes to the neglect and multiple deprivations of homeless youth, which in turn result in the denial of young people's civil, social, and political rights as citizens.

This study found that homeless men and women experience violence and criminalization in different ways. While homeless men are criminalized and prosecuted for any law breaking that occurs on the street, homeless women are more likely to be the victims of sexual assault and rape. This suggests that homelessness has increasingly been understood through the lens of criminalization and violence (Abebe, 2008; Demewoz, 2005; Tools and Hammack, 2015). The finding of the study also illustrated that homeless youth suffered from a combination of lower self-esteem, trauma, depression, and addiction on the street (Lockhart, 2008; Mathebula and Rossa, 2013).

Consistent with previous studies (Abebe, 2009; Abebe, 2008; Demewozu, 2005; Ally and Paul, 2022; Fantahunand Taa, 2022), homeless youth participated in this study reported begging and survival sex as their livelihood strategy despite shameful activities. Homeless young women are coerced into having survival sex, in which sex is sold as a commodity in exchange for cash and food. It is argued that engagement in unprotected survival sex and the vulnerability to rape endanger the issue of female youths' sex and reproductive health. Consistent with this finding, Oduro (2012) homeless children and young people are widely cited as being at higher risk for sexual abuse and sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS.

IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that the stigmatizing social perception and the social tendency to blame the victim exacerbate discriminations and exclusion of the homeless youth from the community systems. Social workers work with homeless youth need to put African theories and cultural values at the center of their interventions. It is time for social workers to reframe the homeless debate in an empirically based approach that connects personal problems with collective issues. In the climate of Ethiopian indigenous philosophical theories, such as Zara Yacobe (ዘርዐዖቅብ), the main teaching is harmony and no room for discrimination. It is also imperative for social work researchers and practitioners to influence policy makers to consider the complexities of homelessness when developing policies. The complexity of homelessness involves the conceptualization, causes and lived experiences of homeless youth which remain largely under-researched in Ethiopia.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the lived experiences of homeless youth in Gondar City, Ethiopia. It is indicated that growing number of homeless youths is significantly attributed to abject poverty, unemployment, family conflict and substance abuse. The study indicated that homeless youth were frequently targets of social exclusion, violence, sexual assault, risky sexual behaviours and criminalization. These precarious social situations led pervasive traumatic experiences in the lives of homeless youth. The combined effect places homeless youth at the margins of society and makes them feel helpless in their daily lives. More social work research and interventions are needed to address the growing phenomenon of homelessness among young people in the country.

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