

Title

Social factors contributing to harmful child vending practices among children in Zimbabwe: The case of Epworth

Magavude Tafadzwanashe James, Lead Researcher, Elevation Research and Consultancy
tjm@elevation.co.zw, tafadzwamagavude@gmail.com

Abstract

The study explored the social forces behind harmful child vending practices in Zimbabwe. The research was triggered by an observation that vending has become one of the most menacing challenges among children in Zimbabwe. The objective of the study was to explore social factors contributing to child vending in Zimbabwe. This research was informed by the Ubuntu-oriented Social Work, Welfare and Development Theory. A number of previous studies that focused on the same subject and age-group were consulted. The research utilized qualitative research methodology, in which four key informants were purposively selected for interviews and the convenience sampling (used to get the 12 child vendors who participated through in-depth interviews) and also the 6 community members (whom the researcher interacted with through focus group discussions). The research findings revealed that poverty is a leading factor forcing children in Zimbabwe to engage in vending. The research also revealed that some of the factors contributing to child vending include, child abandonment, orphanhood, bad modeling, and misinformation. The study recommended collaborative efforts to be made between government and other stakeholders in coming up with interventions to support children subjected to vending and other harsh conditions.

Key words

child, child abandonment, child vending, Ubuntu, Zimbabwe

Key dates

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Indexing



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Introduction and Background

Across the world, unsafe child vending practices are a burning problem in both developed and developing countries. In the context of Ubuntu, children can relieve other family members in vending as part of their responsibilities. However, due to circumstances beyond children's control, they end up engaging in unsafe vending practices that infringe their rights. Despite several attempts having been made and being made to alleviate the problem of child vending at national (Zimbabwe) and international (Worldwide) levels, the magnitude of child vending has been increasing at an alarming rate, particularly in third world countries. This study seeks to explore social factors contributing to child vending in Zimbabwe. The study employed a qualitative research methodology in which a total of 22 participants took part. A brief background on circumstances of children in unsafe vending is given, followed by review of related literature. The study methodology is presented, followed by presentation and discussion of findings. The study concludes with presenting a summary of the study and recommendations.

The study objective was to explore social factors contributing to harmful child vending practices among children in Zimbabwe. The specific research question was: Were the social factors that contribute to harmful child vending practices among children in Zimbabwe?

Contextualizing child vending

Neither the United Nations Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) nor the International Labour Organization (2012) defines child labour in explicit terms (Nhenga, 2008). The International Labour Organization describes child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity. This categorically classifies child vending as a form of child labor. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen. Zimbabwe's Labor Act prohibits employers from hiring a person under eighteen years of age to perform hazardous work, while the Children's Act Chapter (5.06) makes it an offense to exploit children through employment. Whether or not the law allows children to work as vendors, many have no choice. This, unfortunately, is inevitable for the disadvantaged children who, if they stop vending, there will not be food for them and their siblings may die of hunger, bearing in mind that a considerably huge percentage of these children are heading families (Muzvidziwa, 2013). The magnitude of unsafe child vending in Zimbabwe has always been far smaller throughout its existence than now, as current child vending activities have grown to include sex work and pimping, besides those considered to be normal vending practices (Mekonen, Adhena, Araya and Hiwot, 2020). It is unfortunate that the living conditions of children in Epworth and other areas continue to be appalling, forcing children into various forms of socio-economic activities. with vending at the top of the list.

Understanding child vending social factors leading to unsafe child vending

Child vending is a consequence of certain forces, situations and backgrounds, among other factors. Across the world, in almost every nation, child vending is experienced at different levels and magnitudes. This is undoubtedly a manifestation of the underlying pushes or root causes which are inevitably different in each setting. While there are factors that span across all nations and settings, there are also context-specific factors for child vending.

Poverty

There are several circumstances that coerce children into vending. Studies across the world have shown that regardless of where or when child vending happens, the most prevalent push factor is poverty (Martínez and Short, 2022). Things like a child's education are generally dependent on parents' economic status. If a family is living below the poverty datum line, they may end up seeming to be encouraging their children to participate in economic activities more than desired. Basu (1998) used a theoretical model of child labour, where he concluded that the major reason parents may send children to vending is low income. The assumption is that since poor households are unable to send their children to school, they may end up sending the child into the streets for vending in a bid to raise school fees. Tackling poverty can be a perfect solution to reduce child vending (Chikoko, Mhizha and Mundau, 2021). First, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach was noted as one of the key strategies to building up the social and economic capital of youth, which can help to reduce poverty and, subsequently, child-vending. The approach focused much on targeting the strength of children in creating positive environments that reduce their chances of engaging in unsafe child vending practices (Mutambara, 2015).

Orphanhood

It is quite common across the globe that oftentimes, vending children are living in child-headed households or simply orphaned backgrounds and have to work to sustain their families (Mekonen, Adhena, Araya and Hiwot, 2020). Children in vending are most likely to be orphaned and living with an elderly grandparent or with a caregiver who is chronically sick or disabled. The present-day world has come to terms with the reality that most vending and exploited children drop out of school or will be so tired that even if they are in school, they cannot concentrate on their studies. More dishearteningly, it is also known that much of the economic activities engaged in by girls are sexually exploitative, whereby they are forced, directly or indirectly, to engage in prostitution because there is not enough food on the table.

Family condition

A growing number of children who have either lost one or both parents are rendered helpless and soaked in financial

problems which may force them to work as vendors or other forms of child labour in order to support themselves and their siblings. The numbers of orphaned children are increasing, particularly in third world countries like Zimbabwe, many of whom may become street children and live in very different circumstances (Martínez and Short, 2022). The existence of health problems along with poverty has resulted in economically, socially, and psychologically insecure environments for the children, hence child labor.

Urban migration

Many rural families migrate to urban areas because of rural push and urban pull factors. As a consequence of that, some families are often forced to live and work in the street as they lack access to basic requirements such as food, shelter and other basic services. Many cities in developing countries have experienced rapid urbanization. This means that the population is increasing in cities due to immigration and natural growth. According to Dash (2013), many from rural areas migrate to urban areas where migrant families and their children are forced to work for survival.

Theoretical framework

This research study was guided by the Ubuntu theory in social work with children (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019). In relation to social factors leading to child vending, the theory asserts that we should holistically look into the plight of children under five existing levels of Ubuntu, which are the individual, the family, the community, the environment and the spirit. These five dimensions can be utilized to understand the causes of child vending in Zimbabwe and, subsequently, coping mechanisms towards the same phenomenon.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research refers to an inquiry into understanding of social phenomena, thus premised on creating a complex picture, formed with words, reporting in-depth views of the participants and being conducted in a natural setting. This approach was selected to afford a close fit between the research methods and research questions being asked. The study's target population was child vendors in Domboramwari, a metropolitan red spot in Epworth that is characterized by multiple types of socio-economic activities, including vending and sex work. In this research, sampling was done through two different techniques which are purposive sampling (utilized on selecting 4 key informants who went through interviews) and convenience sampling (used to get the 12 child vendors who participated through in-depth interviews) and also the 6 community members (whom the researcher interacted with through focus group discussions). Utilizing the themes emanating from the data, the researcher then clustered all information under thematic areas. It was these themes that allowed the focus of the

researcher on phenomenal issues arising or reported during the study.

In every research, the researcher considers ethical issues that surround the study. Ethical principles were upheld to protect the interests of respondents and the researcher sought for consent from respondents before the research commenced.

Findings

This section presents and analyzes the data that were collected for this research study. The findings will be presented in line with the objective of the study, which is to understand the social and cultural factors that influence child vending in Epworth. The data will be analyzed using qualitative methods, and the findings will be discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Poverty

Although official statistics are outdated or unavailable, anecdotal evidence is overwhelming. There are reports that young school-going-age girls are engaging in sexual exploits in exchange for very small sums of money, food and second-hand clothes.

This research established that these working children are living in the poorest households and have to work to sustain their families. These children are most likely to be orphaned, to be living with an elderly grandparent or with a caregiver who is chronically sick or disabled. It appears that these children drop out of school or will be so tired that even if they are in school, they cannot concentrate on their studies. Moreover, much of the economic activity engaged in by girls is sexually exploitative, whereby they are forced to engage in prostitution because there is not enough food on the table.

Findings from the study revealed that poverty can lead to families feeling desperate for money and forcing their children to engage in vending activities to earn an income. The research also gathered that poverty can cause families to feel as though they have no other options but to send their children to engage in vending activities to earn money. Key informants in the study revealed that in many cases, families in acute poverty particularly, families without decent accommodation and those without any form of registration are faced with a lack of social safety nets and little or no access to government support. The study established that parents in such families may feel as though they have no choice but to send their children out to earn money through vending, even if it means putting them at risk.

John (pseudo-name), indicated that,

Guys, there is nothing else that drove me into the streets, am seeking to live, if I do not do likewise, I may die. Never undermine hunger, I may die if I do not do this vending.

Mai Tee (Pseudo-name), a teenage mother interjected:

Mate, just say it as it is, these guys should know the truth, if we don't do vending our children will perish. It's not willingness to be here, we are forced by situations.

Child-headed families

Another push factor for child vending obtained in this study is child-headed families.

The study gathered that majority of children who engage into unsafe vending practices were those heading families. In some situations, unsafe vending practices were noticed in situations where the eldest child was expected to provide for the family when relatives cannot afford to give support. The study also found that the eldest children in families were forced to drop out of school in order to work as they have no other means of support. Responses from community members indicated that these children do not have family members or friends who can care for them, and they are often too young to work full-time jobs. As a result, they turn to vending as a way to earn a small amount of money to help support themselves and their families.

Mr. James (pseudo-name) a key informant explained the situation as suggesting;

These matters are complex my dear brothers, when we look at these children involved in vending, some of them are child heading children who lost their parental privilege to several unforeseen circumstances like accidents, poverty, migration, HIV and AID and other obscene factors. The challenge is that most of them do not even have birth certificates or identities, it's very difficult to even try and intervene. They are just a group of neglected, impoverished and suffering children that needs us to do something to help them, otherwise vending is the only remaining way of survival!

An interesting revelation also came out, that although it is against the law as in the Labor Act of Zimbabwe, some organizations working with vendors have begun facilitating the registration of child vendors in the same stream of vendors as a way of assisting them to help themselves and their families. One key informant noted that:

We currently have approximately 700 vendors registered between the ages of 15 up to 65, although very few are below 17 years. These people are victims of poverty, unemployment, rejection and other factors we can't even mention, they just need to earn a living.

Child abandonment

This research discovered that some of the children in vending in Epworth are victims of child abandonment. The term 'child abandonment' in this research is used to describe a variety of behaviors that include leaving a child alone or with another person without provision for the child's support and without meaningful communication with the child. It was gathered that children who are abandoned or orphaned end up living on the streets and are at risk of being exploited by adults. These children resorted vending as a way to earn money to buy food and shelter.

One of the child vendors burst into tears during an interview and revealed:

Shaa, ndakangoudzwa kuti mdara vakafa gore rapera vaindichengeta vanga vakandinhonga mu road. Ndofunga ndezvanguwo kungova nehupenyu hwemuroad. (I was told that the old man who passed on last year who used to take care of me had picked me from the streets, I guess this is just but my destiny to be a street person.)

Moreover, some of the children in child vending in Epworth reported that they were foreign children, having been abandoned in Zimbabwe by their parents who had gone back to their mother countries. One of the children reported that,

Blaz inini ndakaudzwa kuti vabereki vangu vakandisiya muno muEpworth ndiri mudikidiki vachidzokera ku Mozambique kunova ndiko kumusha kwedu. Ndaigara nemukoma wangu akashaya pamazuva atasiwa. Parizvino kutengesa mazai uku kutozama kutsvaka kurarama. (Brother, I was told that my parents left me here in Epworth when I was young going back to Mozambique which is our place of origin. I was staying with my late brother by the time my parents left me to Mozambique. As for now I have resorted to selling eggs to earn a living.)

Modeling

Some child vendors follow in their parents' footsteps. For many children, vending is a source of pride as children do it cognizant of their families' economic circumstances that make their street work necessary. Most children vending on the streets carry significant responsibilities, taking over where their parents left off. Most of them feel strongly accountable to their families. The study also found that children in Epworth often learn by watching the people around them. The majority of adults around were reported to be earning a living through vending, hence children around them see this as an acceptable way to earn money. Thus, they decide to engage in vending themselves. From the voices of the key informants, this is especially true if the children do not have access to other role models, such as teachers, mentors, or counselors.

One child noted that,

My father is a metalworker. He gets a good sum of money, but he spends it out with his friends, yet I see other men doing business on the streets to support their families. He does not give my mother money even to pay the house rent. Our mother has no work. When I see that she is stressed, I go out and do some business. She blesses me because I am doing this to help her and myself.

Another child exclaimed,

Ahh, what is wrong with doing business? Isn't it that this is what everyone else in Harare is just doing?

Misinformation

The researcher also noted that there are a number of misconceptions held by the children in relation to child

vending. This misinformation might come from adults who are engaged in vending or from other sources, such as social media or the news. The study established that misinformation can influence children's perception of vending and can make it seem like an attractive or acceptable activity. Community members indicated that children may also be misinformed about the risks or consequences of vending. This led to children engaging in dangerous forms of vending, such as pimping and selling drugs.

Brian (pseudo-name) explained that he is actually targeting to get help by being active in the streets. He had this to say,

When donors come, they look for us, if we are not doing anything they will not help us, they help those they find doing something. Well-wishers are more compassionate with child vendors, who knows maybe God will remember me if I am found here in the streets.

Internet-birthered behaviors

Today's child vending is also initiated, motivated, promoted and sustained on and through the internet. Children reported being motivated by their cohorts who are selling online, and hearing the testimonies of others tends to impress children into vending.

One of the children noted that:

Mukoma Masahwira akawanda angu ari kubudirira nekutengesa pamusika chaiko vanogara vachinditumira mapicture avo vachigadzira mari. ("Brother, my friends are leading a successful life through selling at marketplaces, and they always send me pictures whilst getting money.")

There are actually internet-powered ventures that are being done by children who have access to phones. One child vendor had this to say:

My brother, right now I am looking for a small phone to start selling airtime through ecocash and to provide cash out services like what others are doing to raise money.

Strategies for reducing unsafe child vending practices

Education

The study established that education is a key component in reducing child vending, as it can help to raise awareness about the risks and consequences of the activity. Participants asserted that education can be delivered through a variety of channels, including schools, community groups, and local media.

Mr. Jim, had this to say,

Schools can include lessons about child vending and its risks in the curriculum, and community groups can hold educational sessions for parents and caregivers.

One key informant added that,

Local media can produce programs and articles that raise awareness about child vending and its negative effects.

Setting age limits for particular vending practices

The study established that vending can be done as a means of supporting a family and thus children are viewed as having the responsibility to support families in vending. However, community and key informants revealed that some of the vending practices that children are being involved are detrimental to the wellbeing. The study, therefore, established that setting minimum age requirements for particular vending activities is an important strategy for reducing unsafe child vending. Enforcement of these age requirements is, therefore, considered a crucial measure as this would ensure that children who are not old enough to safely participate in vending are not allowed to do so.

On community member had this to say,

Children who are too young to safely and responsibly participate in vending may be more likely to engage in unsafe or unhealthy practices, such as working long hours or handling unsafe materials.

Law enforcement

The study found that increasing penalties for employers who deliberately employ children in unsafe spaces could be an effective way to deter this behavior. This approach would send a strong message that this practice is not acceptable, and that there will be serious consequences for those who engage in it. Some examples of penalties that were proposed by the key informants and community members include:

- Increased fines for businesses and individuals that are found to be employing children in unsafe spaces.
- Loss of business licenses for businesses that are found to be engaging in this practice.
- Criminal charges for business and individuals that are found to be exploiting children through vending in this way.

Providing in-kind support for child-headed families

This research established that in-kind support services are among effective ways to support child-headed families and, subsequently, a measure to reduce unsafe child vending practices. Participants indicated that children can be supported through assistance with food to ensure that families have enough to eat, while assistance with clothing can ensure that they have appropriate clothing for the weather. Housing assistance can provide families with a safe and secure place to live, which is especially important for children. The study further established that the government and line ministries may embark on means assessment to proffer tailored in-kind support that meets children's specific needs.

One key informant had this to say:

My brother, child-headed families often have specific needs that can be addressed through in-kind support. Remember they need assistance with obtaining food, clothing, housing, and education. In some cases, they may also need medical assistance, access to clean water and sanitation, or

transportation to and from school. This can reduce their involvement in unsafe vending practices.

Positive youth development approach

The study established that focusing on building strengths of young people could be the best option towards reducing unsafe child vending in Zimbabwe. Participants suggested that the government and all responsible authorities could be involved in creating opportunities for young people to participate in meaningful activities and engage with their communities. The goal of this approach is to help young people reach their full potential and become productive members of society. Participants who supported this approach indicated that to reduce child vending, it is critical to shape children in the way society wants rather than focusing on vending itself.

Mr. Smith said,

We can do this through a variety of approaches, such as community-based programs that offer after-school activities or summer camps. These programs can provide children with a safe place to spend their time, as well as opportunities to learn new skills and meet new people.

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, the majority of children in Epworth are engaged in vending due to orphanhood. Key informants informed the researcher that orphaned children are doing vending in order to take care of themselves and their siblings. The findings of this study are in line with the findings by Muzvidziwa (2013), who reported that a sizable number of children in Zimbabwe were in child-headed households and are involved in economic activities like street vending to meet their basic needs. This research discovered that orphaned children are engaged in street vending in order to earn income.

Current trends such as technological advancements have been noted as contributing factors towards the rise of malevolent child vending acts. Through social media platforms, children testified that they learn from, and envy their peers who claim success from vending. Findings on the role of technology and social media in influencing child vending are consistent with other research in this area. Talmud (2017) found that young people who spend more time on social media are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as substance use, violence, and other illegal activities. Additionally, research has shown that exposure to media can affect children's attitudes and behaviors, and that this effect can be both positive and negative (Rodgers, Rowe and Hall, 2017). This suggests that more research is needed to understand the impact of technology and social media on child development.

The study also observed that in Epworth, children's work experiences and vending along the streets are shaped in part

by their perception of some members of the public whose lives tend to paint a glowing picture of vending, as explained by the social learning theory as utilized in this study. According to this theory, children learn and model their behavior based on the actions of others in their environment. Children who see others engaging in vending may view it as a desirable activity and be more likely to engage in it themselves. This theory has been used to explain a variety of social behaviors, including delinquency and other risky behaviors.

Street working children want to feel solidarity with others and with anyone who shares the same values and thoughts as themselves. Work provides children an opportunity to develop a feeling of belonging. The children who participated in this study indicated that they liked the street activities they were engaged in and reported that they were happy to work, even though the money they made was too little to meet all of their needs. Among the leading sources of their contentment with street work was the solidarity that they enjoy with their peers.

The study also gathered that today's child vending is also initiated, motivated, promoted and sustained on and through the internet. Children reported being motivated by their cohorts who are selling online, and hearing the testimonies of others tends to impress children into vending. These findings are consistent with other studies that have examined the impact of the internet and social media on children's behavior. A study by Twenge and Campbell (2015) found that increased time spent on social media was associated with an increase in depression and other mental health problems among adolescents. Similarly, a study by Primack et al. (2018) found that social media use was associated with an increase in unhealthy behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use, among young adults. These studies suggest that the internet and social media can have a significant impact in influencing children's negative behavior.

The study finding on the need to empower children positively through providing opportunities such as education, provision of food and also modeling their inborn skills is in sync with (Mutambara, 2015) who emphasizes on the need for positive youth development approach as a means to reducing poverty and its effects among children. Mutambara explains that the PYD approach can be adopted through providing children with opportunities for education and skills development. The approach can also proffer to children social and emotional skills, which can help them to cope with the stress of poverty and to make better choices, rather than venturing in risky behavior.

Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

This section provides a summary of the findings of this study, outlines the conclusions and provides recommendations. The study looked at the social factors contributing to child vending in Zimbabwe. The study was conducted in

Domboramwari area in Epworth Harare. The research was triggered by the inconsistencies of findings from studies on child vending. This study sought to explore the socio-economic forces behind child vending in Zimbabwe. The social learning theory was used to provide useful insights on the factors contributing to child vending in Zimbabwe. The research utilized the qualitative research approach which covers the topic under study in greater depth as it allowed the researcher to interact with research subjects and have room to probe for more information. The study targeted children involved in vending activities in Epworth. A sample size of 22 people was employed, of which 12 were children and 10 were key adult informants from DSW, NVU and the Local Authority.

Summary

This research found that poverty creates many problems such as child labour, prostitution, corruption, robbery, increased unemployment, poor living conditions, and malnutrition. Child poverty refers to a situation whereby children are born to poor parents, exposed to poor conditions or later subjected to inadequate support. Child poverty differs from adult poverty because it has different reasons and effects, for example it robs a child of his/her childhood. It may affect or bear a long-lasting or psychological makeup in their mind and the impact of poverty during childhood leaves permanent effects on children. Poverty influences children in many social ways, for instance, malnutrition can affect children's health and education which, in turn, may impact a child's long-term development (Ortiz et al., 2012). According to UNICEF, child poverty is based on child rights. These children lack adequate nutrition, decent water and sanitation facilities, health services, education and information (Ortiz et al., 2012).

The study also established that usually parents are aware that their children are involved in unacceptable and harmful jobs like street vending, sex-vending (prostitution), pimping and other ills, but they are forced to send their children into the streets anyway. However poor households do not usually think of the consequences and even if they do, they rarely have any options.

The majority of child vendors in Epworth highlighted that they venture into vending to supplement family incomes. Some child vendors, according to the study, come from child-headed families, others have unemployed parents, hence have no other alternatives at their disposal to attain the basic standards of life. As a result of stiff competition at the vending sites, parents tend to use their children as vendors to get more customers out of the public's sympathy.

This study also found that among the top causes of child vending are child-headed families. A child-headed family or child-headed household is a family in which a minor (child or adolescent) has become the head of the household. In some cases, relatives of the children adopt them after the parents die. Situations where a child, usually the eldest, has to provide for the family happen when there are no adult relatives to take the children, or the relatives cannot afford to support more children. Findings from the research studies

revealed that the situation of heading a family diminishes children's rights to escape poverty. Reports from key informants portrayed that there is a variety of mechanisms that were put in place by government which are misused by some office bearers, hence not protecting the needs of disadvantaged children. Due to this, child vending continues to exist, and new forms of vending emerge.

Another cause of child vending found is child abandonment, which occurs when a parent, guardian, or person in charge of a child either deserts a child without any regard for the child's physical health, safety or welfare and with the intention of wholly abandoning the child, or in some instances, fails to provide necessary care for a child living under their roof.

Recommendations

This study, thus makes the following recommendations:

On factors contributing to child vending, it was noted that there are root causes that are rarely mentioned, if at all they are known. Most interventions here present are mostly targeted at fruits and symptoms of these root causes. This study, thus, makes the following recommendations for possible sustainable and effective interventions.

- The study recommends collaborative effort between government and other stakeholders in coming up with interventions to support children subjected to vending and other harsh conditions.
- The research also recommends inclusion of children in the processes and strategies implemented to protect children from the multiple forces pushing them into child vending.

Conclusion

The study focused on investigating social factors behind the continued increase in the number of children involved in child vending. This study established multiple factors that include, but are not limited to, poverty, child-headed families, child abandonment, bad modelling, neglect or negative parenting, orphanhood, misinformation, and internet-birthed behaviors, need for personal gains, and low access to education

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