



The adversities in the lives of street children with disabilities during the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic: The case of Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Kudzai Mwapaura (MSc), Lecturer/Coordinator, Department of Social Work, Women's University in Africa (WUA), Manresa Campus, Harare, Zimbabwe. Email: kudzaimwapaura@gmail.com /or kmwapaura@wua.ac.zw

Tafadzwanaishe Magavude (MSc), Lecturer/Assistant Chairperson, Department of Social Work, Reformed Church University (RCU), Masvingo Campus, Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Email: tafadzwa.magavude@gmail.com

Shumirai Munyanyi (MSc), Lecturer/Coordinator, Department of Social Work, Women's University in Africa (WUA), Kadoma Campus, Harare, Zimbabwe. Email: shumieghau09@gmail.com

Austina Rufurwokuda (MSc), Disability Specialist, Masvingo Province, Masvingo Zimbabwe. Email: tinarwokuda@gmail.com

Telson Chisosa (MSc), Lecturer, Department of Social Work, Reformed Church University (RCU), Masvingo Campus, Masvingo Zimbabwe. Email: chisosat@rcu.ac.zw

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Abstract

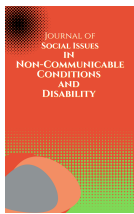
Street children with disabilities are some of the most vulnerable children on the planet. This study explores the challenges that these children have been facing in the wake of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in Masvingo. The pandemic has already had a devastating impact on people's wellbeing and children with disabilities seem to have been plunged into more misery. As such we adopted the Ubuntu theory in an attempt to analyze the realities of street children with disabilities in this difficult time. We then respectfully selected and had dialogue with 13 participants. The research findings from the participants revealed that, street children with disabilities lack shelter, social networks or social capital, health care, prone to drug addiction, low self-esteem, limited access to basic education, vulnerable to abuse and violence. Using the Ubuntu theory, the researchers are of the view that there is need for a world where street children with disabilities live with dignity, in safety and security. Given this, the researchers offer suggestions for the government's Department of Social Development and other key stakeholders to deal with the current adversities in the lives of street children with disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words

street children with disabilities, adversities, COVID-19, Ubuntu, Masvingo

Key points

- The journal uses the African research methodology to study street children with disabilities are some of the most vulnerable children on the planet.
- The study explores the challenges that these children have been facing in the wake of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Using the Ubuntu theory, the researchers are of the view that there is need for a world where street children with disabilities live with dignity, in safety and security.



Introduction

Street children are one of the most vulnerable groups of urban poor. They face difficulties while living on the streets. They live and survive on the streets. This state of affairs can be made worse when they have a form of disability. The pandemic seem to have exacerbated the challenges already being experienced by different vulnerable groups including street children with disabilities hence plunging them into more misery. Given this, the researchers noted with concern that there is paucity of literature focusing on street children with disabilities in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. This qualitative study explores the challenges that these children have been facing in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic in Masvingo. The first section will interrogate definitions of street children, causes of this phenomenon, and some of street children's characteristics.

Background

The term street children can be problematic as it can be seen as a negative label. One of the problems for these children is that they are often viewed by mainstream society as a threat and a source of criminal behavior (Bourdillon, 1994a). One of the definitions is that, any girl or boy for whom the street has become his or her habitual abode and or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults. There are two groups of street children (Mhizha, 2015). The first group is children of the street, which refers to children who are homeless, and streets in urban areas are their source of livelihood, where they sleep and live. The second group is children on the street, who work and live on the streets in the daytime but return back home at night where they sleep, although some of them sleep occasionally on the streets. Nevertheless, there is no clear distinction between the two groups as they often differ from their common definition: some children of the street may still have links with their families and some 'children on the street' often sleep on the street.

In Zimbabwe, there are numerous reasons why some children live and work on the streets. The answer is complex as many street children as there are around the country; there are as many reasons for them being there. Every single child has their own unique story (Mhizha, 2015; Chikoko *et al.*, 2021). The reasons for their connection to the streets vary from country to country, city to city, and from person to person. These factors will also vary over time, such as poverty, displacement due to natural disasters and conflicts or family breakdown all lead to increases in the numbers of street children in a given area.

Economic poverty plays a major role, although other factors are of equally high importance. These can include: parental deaths, parental neglect and other social factors such as violence and abuse of children at home or within communities. Discrimination, lack of access to justice, a lack of legal status (due to a lack of birth registration for example) all contributes to a situation where a child is living or working on the street (Mhizha and Muromo, 2013).

Children may migrate to the streets for other reasons as well, including: sexual, physical or emotional abuse; urbanization; HIV / AIDS; being forced into criminal activity; being rejected from their family for so called moral reasons; mental health issues; substance abuse; sexual orientation or gender identity. While there is no doubt that there are common themes and reasons that push children onto the street, dealing with each child as an individual, with their own backstory and identity is key to understanding their situation.

Conceptual framework - Ubuntu theory

The Ubuntu perspective was adopted as the theoretical framework for the article. Huntu/Ubuntu has dominated the public discourse especially in Zimbabwe and South Africa where it has been used to deal with both political and social challenges. Ubuntu is an African worldview that values positive and reciprocal relationships in family, community and society. Ubuntu is also about justice, inclusion and recognition of people who are often marginalized and their needs. A person is not considered a true human being unless one is concerned about the wellbeing of other people. One of the main characteristics of Ubuntu is communality or communal well-being.

Ubuntu is often presented in short statements called maxims by Samkange and Samkange (1980:106). Some of these are: *ndiri nekuti tiri* (Shona), *motho ke motho ka batho* (Sotho/Tswana), *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Zulu), *umntu ngumntu ngabantu* (Xhosa), meaning a person is a person through other people). This saying can exist in most African languages. Letseka (2012) argues that Ubuntu is based on the etiquette of humanity, which includes caring for each other's well-being and reciprocating kindness. Ubuntu is more than just being who you

are through others; he extends Ubuntu to how people relate to others around them. Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of having a mutual understanding of how people treat each other.

Different authors have defined Ubuntu as the ethic of care and 'a theory of 'right action' or 'moral theory' (Letseka 2012), as a pedagogical principle and as a constitutional and jurisprudence principle. As Ubuntu concerns the way in which people treat each other, this article focuses mainly on the adversities in the lives of street children with disabilities in Masvingo, Zimbabwe in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. The research also sought to explore how different players including development workers could work with this group to improve their wellbeing and inclusion. This theory can be used in social work with children in Zimbabwe (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019).

Ubuntu was used in selection of the target area, participants, having dialogue with the participants, making sense of their submissions (analysis) and presenting the data in line with cultural values of respect, honesty, collaboration and humaneness (Mugumbate and Mtetwa, 2019).

African research methodology

The study was conducted in the City of Masvingo is situated on the southern part of the country along Harare – Beitbridge main road. In short, Masvingo was the first modern settlement to be established in the country in 1890. Mucheke, likewise thus becomes the first and oldest low income residential area in the country to be established by the colonialists. Livelihood activities for most households in Masvingo are centered on vending and petty trading. Vending is normally done along busy streets such as Chesvingo Street and at bus terminuses like Mucheke bus terminus. In this regard, the area was chosen as it is usually frequented by street children including those with disabilities.

An Ubuntu research approach (URA) was utilised in the study because the researchers wanted to elicit information from the participants' point of view and without cheating, deceit, harm, injustice and disrespect which is made URA most ideal (Mugumbate and Mtetwa, 2019). This design can be used to unpack the adversities in the lives of street children with disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic in Masvingo. It is highly advantageous as it is theoretically humane and methodologically collaborative (Mugumbate and Mtetwa, 2019). This approach has not yet been utilised on street children related studies such as those by scholars such as Mhizha (2015), Chikoko *et al.* (2021) and Chikoko *et al.* (2022) who adopted a Eurocentric research designs.

Through conversation between the researchers and seven (7) street children with disabilities and six (6) social workers data was generated data for this article. Considering the importance of context, the participants were all residents in Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe (Khupe and Keane, 2017). The following ethical considerations were observed when conducting this research; oral consent, use of local language for participants to understand, among others (Seehawer, 2018).

Thematic analysis was utilised in the study because it was in line with theoretical assumptions and the research questions of this study. In this light, we allowed the themes to emerge from the data after reading, listening, and engaging with the data adequately. In other words, the data was transcribed and arranged into common themes. Thematic content analysis has been used similarly on street children related studies in Africa by scholars such as Mhizha (2015), Chikoko *et al.* (2021) and Chikoko *et al.* (2022). Some of the themes generated from this analysis include, lack shelter, social networks or social capital, health care, prone to drug addiction, self-esteem, limited access to basic education, vulnerable to abuse and violence.

Research findings and discussion

The number of street children with disabilities in Masvingo

This is an important question to answer in order that governments are able to devote the resources needed to address street children's needs. The true numbers are unknown. In a dialogue, SW1 had this to say:

Estimating and counting street children with disabilities is not easy as they are one of the hidden populations. Firstly, street children are a dynamic and mobile population, which requires specific methodologies other than standard household surveys or census last conducted in 2012 and possibly next year. Practically speaking Mr Mwapaura, estimates or counts that are done at a fixed point in time can be misleading depending on when the counts takes place numbers of children in the street can fluctuate either with seasonal change or if the government removes street children ahead of big events international sporting events or global meetings or celebrations.

In another dialogue, SW2 weighed in on the same sentiment. He had this to say:

They are often invisible while researchers can take a snapshot of the children currently on the streets, they won't capture the children who are indoors at that particular day or moment. Some groups of children can be less visible on the streets, for example girls, or children with disabilities Street children experience high levels of stigma and often are suspicious of attempts to count them, fearing negative consequences as a result of being counted and preferring to remain below the radar.

Despite these challenges, it is crucial to establish reliable numbers of street-connected children and the realities of their lives. Organizations working with street children need accurate data to better design their programmes. Donors need data so they can ensure their health, education and justice funding also reach street children. Governments need accurate data on street children so that they can devote the resources required to fulfill their obligations to these children, under the Child Rights Convention. This is in line with Ubuntu, which suggest that social interventions should strengthen families, communities, society and the environment.

Lack of shelter

It is evident from the study that street children with disabilities usually do not have a permanent place to sleep. Most of them highlighted that they sleep in the streets or on pavements near shops and malls, while others prefer sleeping at bus terminals, railways platforms, under bridges and by cinemas. Meanwhile, some girls prefer spending their nights with security guards due to being vulnerable and subject to abuse if they spent their nights on the streets. So, they try to find a suitable place to sleep according to their surrounding circumstances. In a dialogue, SW3 had this to say:

By virtue of being children living in the streets, this group of children is homeless and is affected by lack of shelter and their separation from family. Street life results in other difficulties related to being homeless where children fail to provide themselves with good sources of food, clean drinking water, health care services, toilets and bath facilities, and adequate shelter. Additionally, being homeless results in children being exposed to COVID 19 as they are always out of confinement.

It can be noted that, these children with disabilities often find refuge in areas where they do not have access to one or all of these services: drinking water, sanitation and electricity. It could also be argued that these areas are not secure for living and expose street children further to vulnerability similarly to the findings by Mhizha (2015) and Chikoko and Rugaranganda (2020). However, street children do not pay for services such as rent, electricity and water, which would reduce the financial burden on them.

Lack of social network or social capital

The study noted that street children with disabilities often lack social networks or social capital and resultantly, depend on peer groups as their social network for their protection, support and solidarity. In another dialogue, SW4 had this to say:

Social capital comes from the moment one is conceived. An unborn child is believed to possess social capital when the mother accepts to carry them for nine months and the father owns up that he is responsible for the pregnancy. Both parents take expected and rightful responsibilities to nurture the unborn baby in terms of preparations for the coming of the baby. When a child is born, every member of the society is aware of it. The nuclear family, extended family, village head, headman as well as the chief of that particular area will bring gifts and congratulating messages to the baby and the mother. This process is a way of building social capital. As they bring gifts, it is a gesture that they are accepting the baby as their relative and community member.

Another participant had this to say:

When a child is born, the parents and nuclear family members will name a child; this is a way of developing an identity. Identity is the only thing that children living in the streets of Masvingo are clinging to; therefore, it is difficult for them to easily divulge identification status. All the people in the community will know about it, hence, the saying 'It takes a village to raise a child'.

Three types of social capital have been identified namely; bonding social capital, bridging social capital and linking social capital. Bonding social capital denotes ties between people in similar situations, such as children living in the streets of Masvingo, immediate family, close friends and neighbours. Bridging social capital encompasses more distant ties of like persons, children living in the streets of Masvingo, loose friendships and workmates. Linking social capital reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside the community, thus enabling members to leverage a far wider range of resources than are available within the community.

Social networks have a great impact on people's lives. They help people to make their lives better and it can be realised that socially isolated people like children living in the streets of Masvingo face severe risks to their well-being, 'it is not what you know but who you know'. People who are able to ask for help from others for support are healthier than those who cannot. Children in the streets of Masvingo are not happier, and their communities do experience antisocial behaviour. This is in line with Ubuntu theory, because street children with disabilities need some form social network that provides them with means of support, especially economic support and solidarity.

Addiction to drugs

Another adversity for street children with disabilities was addiction to drugs and substances. Some street-connected children with disabilities highlighted that they do engage in substance use to cope with the realities of living on the streets, trauma, illness, hunger, stigmatisation and discrimination. During a dialogue, SW5 had this to say:

While the image of all street children being addicted to drugs is inaccurate, some are indeed abusing drugs. Half the time, they do not know that long term use at young age whilst they are still physically and mentally developing can cause long term problems in adulthood. The use of drugs is not automatic for all children living in street. Younger children are less likely to use drugs, but the likelihood increases with exposure to street life and many of them do become addicted. Almost all street children sniffed glue, and it had been shown that using milder drugs can lead one to the use of more potent ones.

Similarly, SW6 had this to add:

Recently the rise in the use of drugs such as Mutoriro is increasing at an escalating rate exposing children to serious health problems.

In the streets of Harare marijuana is popular among street children, as it produces relaxation, which gives the children some relief from the stress of their daily life (Chikoko *et al.*, 2021 and Chikoko *et al.*, 2022). It has been noted that drugs can suppress appetite, and this allowed children occasional relief from hunger since there will shortage of food already so the drugs would be like a savior to them. It can be elaborated that children in the streets can have psychological impacts on the children through mental disturbances accelerated by drug and substance abuse.

Limited access to health care, income and infrastructure Amenities

The study noted that this group has limited access to health care facilities. The street children with disabilities highlighted that most of the clinics require funds to treat them. In a dialogue, SCWD1 has this to say:

We are exposed to different types of diseases because of the harsh environment we live in. As for treatment, it depends on how much money we have to seek treatment when sick. If we have money, we go to the chemist to buy medicine, especially if we have some knowledge about medicines, but if we do not have money, we wait until our bodies heal naturally. Sometimes we also receive support from our friends during illness.

On the same issue, SW6 had this to say:

Although many street children show incredible resilience in the face of unspeakable hardships, many studies show their sense of well-being to be generally low. Street-connected children often suffer from depression, anxiety and trauma, which then may lead to substance abuse and a risk of suicide. The stigma and social exclusion faced by street-connected children has a negative impact on their mental well-being.

Street children with disabilities find it difficult to engage in work often done by other street children such as car-parking boys, car washers, guarding for the cars, shoe shiners and baggage loaders. Older girls with disabilities who live on the street cannot exchange sex for money. These are some of the jobs which were found to provide livelihood and sustenance to street children in Harare CBD (Chikoko and Rugaranganda, 2020; Chikoko *et al.*, 2021). Some of them rely on selling goods and begging in traffic for making an income. Others are involved in illegal work like drug dealing. In order to secure their daily basic needs, they set up a system whereby each group has a zone where they undertake their activities to avoid any kind of competition for the available resources.

It could be argued that despite street children seeming more vulnerable than the urban poor in general, they can manage to afford their daily life needs due to being very well organized. For example, they know worshipping places and times so they can go there at prayer time in order to gain money or food. They are also aware of religious festivals and celebrations, as these days bring them good sources of income. They also use tourist sites and NGOs as a good source for survival. However, being chased by police and state authorities hinders their activities.

Some street children use water from streams for washing, while others use public bathrooms. Sometimes they use leaking water from public pipes or use public water kiosks to fulfill their needs for drinking water. However, they are harassed either by people or by police. Some use public and railway toilets while others use pavements, parks and the seaside. This shows the extent of their suffering. It can be noticed that this group do suffer to access to drinking and washing water, but street children with disabilities suffer more because of being chased by the police and not being accepted by society.

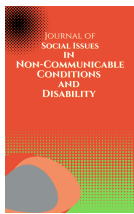
Low self esteem

Children with disabilities living in the street often struggle with low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and a sense of worthlessness and shame. The stigma of being in the streets makes it difficult for children to integrate into education and with their peers. Street life makes children to be less confident in associating with other children, to this end children living in the streets create their social class that is less likely to interact with the main stream society. In the case of Masvingo, Majority of street children were moved to vocational training centers and leaving streets with very few children in them. This created boredom to those who remained in the streets as their peers have been moved away from their vicinity.

Lack of access to basic education

Children with disabilities living in the streets lack proper education as well as access to basic health facilities. Street children are still being ill-treated, do not access formal education, lack of basic needs and some of them they do not have birth certificates which prevents them from accessing government grants. According to it is the duty of the government to assess the needs of the street children separately because their situation and social environment are different from those of other vulnerable children.

The universal right to education has a solid basis in international law and is a key component of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, centered on leaving no one behind. The goal to get all children, adolescents and youth into education by 2030 has been rising global enrolment rates in the previous years. Despite this commendable progress, streets children are at risk of being left out. The numerous societal, political and health barriers street children face means they are among millions of the world's hardest to reach children who are unable to attend mainstream schools and high drop-out rates from formal education programmes (Mhizha and Muromo, 2013).



Other researchers discovered that street children are often to enroll due to lack of legal identification, permanent address or guardian. From the previous researches' children living and working in the streets are the most exploited, marginalized and dehumanized members of the society. It is believed that they live in a perpetual state of living hell. They are improvised, deprived to decent shelter, education, access to health facilities, good nutrition and various other social services that children need to prepare them for the future.

According to Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) it is the mandate of the State, civil society organizations and members of the public to protect the rights of children and provide for their needs as children in a special condition of dependency. However, this has been hindered by bureaucracy in some Government departments and the popular discourse on violence and delinquency, which defines street children as criminals, malefactors and prostitutes. According to Masvingo the Government of Zimbabwe has come up with initiative to remove all children from the streets of Masvingo to Mushangashe Vocational Training Centre. At least 14 children between the ages of eight and 19 were removed from the streets of Masvingo. The area is about 30km, north of the Ancient City along Masvingo-Harare road where they are undertaking cookery, agriculture and building and brick laying courses.

Vulnerability to abuse and violence

Cases of sexual abuse of children living on the streets in Masvingo are increasing markedly, although they are not readily available statistics as most cases go unreported. Street kids are being abused by people in the communities and some of them hold important positions in the authority. These children can be abused on a daily basis, but chances of them reporting cases are slim because of their situation. It is believed that girls are the most affected as they get exposed to sexually activities, high susceptible to sexually transmitted infections, they lack information on sexual and reproductive health, and they are harassed by members of the public and law enforcement agents. Boys are being sodomised and bullied probably by the people from the community as a form of being initiated into gangs.

Children who are already vulnerable due to not being registered, not having an adult being in a position to advocate for them, or not having appropriate shelter can leave them vulnerable to abuse by those who know they have no protection from family or the law, and no recourse to justice. Children are often robbed, beaten or otherwise targeted even by law enforcement or government officials in some cases. Street-connected children are vulnerable to exploitation by abusers who may sexually assault them, forcibly recruit them into criminal activities, traffic them and send them out into the streets to beg and steal.

Government of Zimbabwe launches projects to equip street children with life skills in Masvingo and other cities around Zimbabwe. Police officers and members of the public perceive streets children as criminals and an indictment on the way cities are run. According to law enforcers take disciplinary approach towards street children that manifest through frequent and severe beating with button sticks, forceful removing them from the streets and placing them in detention centers.

Recommendations

In order to reduce adversities in the lives of street children with disabilities during COVID-19 in Masvingo, the paper has proffered a number of recommendations:

i. Tracing and reunification

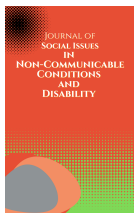
There is need for the Department of Social Welfare and other key stakeholders in Masvingo to scale up tracing and reunification efforts for street children with disabilities.

ii. Case management

There is need for social workers to continue the case management process to ensure that children and families identified are fully integrated into the society through addressing the push and pull factors which drove them on to the streets. This can also enable children with disabilities who cannot be reunited with their relatives or parents due to unfavourable living conditions at home, are being placed in child care institutions for care and protection.

iii. Mushagashe Training Centre

There is need for street children with disabilities to be accommodated at Mushagashe Training Centre some 32km from Masvingo along Masvingo Harare Highway so that they can live comfortable lives with the potential to learn



one or two survival skills. The Provincial Task Force should be proactive in taking all street children with disabilities to Mushagashe because they can starve to death during COVID-19 lockdown.

iv. Philanthropy

There is need to encourage more philanthropy work from key political actors such as the efforts of First Lady Amai Auxillia Mnangagwa through her charity organization called Angels of Hope Foundation whose focus is to uplift the disadvantaged children and other vulnerable members of society in all parts of the country.

v. Training

The Government and other key stakeholders need to work on projects, to provide not only accommodation but also skills training to street children with disabilities in Masvingo during and after the nationwide lockdown. There is need for an additional focus of taking street children with disabilities for skills training rather than just keep them. This is quite an advantage because they will be able to receive free training and free food which the government will be providing. Even after the lockdown, the intention will be to continue training the homeless children so that they leave with skills after a year or so.

iv. Enrolment back to formal education

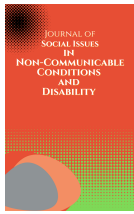
There is need for the Ministry of Education to enroll street children with disabilities back into the formal education system when schools open and to ensure that their fees are paid.

Implications

As coronavirus takes hold around the world, making trustworthy adults accessible to street-connected children is more important than ever. Street work can be considered to be an essential service that must continue, safely, to reach the many children and young people on the street who otherwise have no one to turn to. It is clearly vital that Street Workers and Street Work organisations carefully balance the need to prioritise public health and compliance with local regulations with that to provide essential support to children and young people who are further isolated and at risk as a result of the pandemic and their partners are doing all we can to continue to respond to the needs of children and young people who have no one to turn to and to ensure that as this public health crisis unfolds, they are afforded the same protection as other children. This guidance for street work during the COVID-19 crisis includes both practical guidance and advocacy messages and resources to support Street Work during this worrying time.

Conclusion

No child should ever be harmed by those who have the duty to protect them. While children should not be forcibly removed from the only home they know and detained for their own good, leaving children exposed to danger with no protection or recourse to justice is also not acceptable. Many street-connected children with disabilities are harmed on a daily basis by adults, including government officials and the police, other children, and even their own families. They are also denied access to education and healthcare, which is their right. There is need for the government and other key stakeholders to take appropriate steps to ensure there is world where street children with disabilities live with dignity, in safety and security in line with Ubuntu theory.



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Author contributions

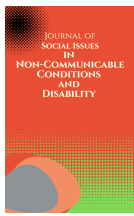
This work was conducted in collaboration with all authors. Kudzai Mwapaura was the primary researcher. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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