



Vulnerability to violence of girls of the street in Mauritania

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with an empirical study of girls of the street in Mauritania. This study is original for three main reasons. First, it investigates Mauritania, a country where there have been very few studies of the phenomenon of children of the street. Secondly, it seems to us that though the academic literature on street children sometimes provides comparisons between girls and boys, very few studies focus specifically on girls of the street. Thirdly, the literature focusing on children of the street generally elucidates the mechanisms that lead some young people to live on the streets. On the contrary to previous literature, our study does not directly focus on mechanisms that lead some young people to live on the streets. Our study focuses on the question of the socio-economic determinants of the risk of violence. In other words, whereas the literature, following the hypothesis of aberrant families, uses violence as an explanatory factor for the phenomenon of children of the street, we attempt here to highlight the explanatory factors for the risk of violence and we treat this risk as an explained variable. A novel finding emerges from this study: there is less risk of violence facing girls of the street if the mother does not work. Conversely, the risk of violence is greater if the mother works and the father stays at home.

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1. Introduction

Everywhere in the world, but especially in developing countries, street children constitute a population particularly affected by deprivation and absolute poverty (Bartlett, Satterthwaite, De La Barra, & Missair, 1999; Gordon, Pantazis, Pemberton, & Townsend, 2003). The international community became aware of the phenomenon of street children, in 1979 (International Year of the Child), and child-specific human rights were adopted in 1989 (U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child). Improving the condition of children thus came to be an important principle of the Millennium Development Goals in the year 2000, and is now incorporated into most international development strategies. Despite this, the population of street children continues to grow, in particular in developing countries (Kerfoot et al., 2007). UNICEF (2006) estimates the number of street children to be between 100 and 120 million in developing countries.

Obviously these figures are not to be taken at face value, and this for various reasons. Firstly, it is not easy to estimate the phenomenon accurately. Secondly, estimates are a way for international agencies (mainly UNICEF) to draw the attention of people and political decision-makers to their activities. The figures used to support the phenomenon are symbolic rather than accurate (Ennew, 2000).

Thirdly, the expression “street children” has several different meanings. The general notion of “street children” encompasses both working children living at home and street children who work in the streets but do not live with adults (Aptekar, 1994). Therefore the estimate can have different values depending on the meaning adopted.

According to UNICEF (1984), *children on the street* (also sometimes called street-working children) include categories of children who spend a considerable part of their day on the streets, but who still have numerous connections with their family as well as a home to return to, especially for meals and rest periods. The distance separating these children from their families is quite relative. Moreover, the street phenomenon represents an important aspect of these children's expression and activity. For them, the street constitutes a living space in which they spend time, though it cannot be regarded as their sole living space. *Children of the street* (also sometimes called street-living children), on the other hand, refers to categories of children for whom the street is not only a living space, but also an existential space in the sense that it constitutes either their only living space or an essentially dominant space in which their life is entirely constructed. Relationships with the family are either nonexistent—which is generally the case—or sporadic and do not provide for these children's subsistence. So, while the situation of children of the street is connected with a social marginalisation, that of children on the street may be interpreted as being vulnerable with regard to marginalisation (Ballet, 2006). Between children on the street and children of the street a third category is generally considered, those of children of street

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families. It is an intermediary category since children work on the street, have regular relations with their family, but at the same time, street constitutes an existential space (Aptekar, 1994; Lusk, 1989).

Nevertheless this dichotomy between children on the street and children of the street arose out of the policy literature and is far from being an accurately defined categorisation. According to Hall and Montgomery (2000) the dichotomy is not neutral, and is used as much to alert the public to the living conditions of such individuals as to describe their stages of life. However, according to Lalor (1999), making a distinction between *children on the street* and *children of the street* sheds light on the factors that drive children to migrate onto the streets. Furthermore, Panter-Brick (2003) considers that classifying these children is useful as long as the categories are not perceived as discrete and homogeneous. The use of the term “street children” certainly poses problems, but few alternatives are available—apart from local terms—to refer to this particular group of children (Ennew, 2000; Panter-Brick, 2003).

Being aware of the non-homogeneity of categories, in this paper we look at girls of the street. Indeed, in our case study, girls living in the street have only sporadic relationships with their family. We attempt to analyze the factors that increase the risk of violence in the family; in other words, we will analyze the vulnerability of girls of the street to family violence. We use “vulnerability” in the meaning given to it by the World Bank as “the likelihood that a shock will result in reduced wellbeing” (World Bank, 2001, p.139). The shock considered here is family violence. Then, following Hutz and Koller's (1999) suggestion, a risk-related dimension is introduced. In this study, we propose to use data gathered in Mauritania in 2004 among an exclusively female population of children of the street. As the subjects being studied are girls of the street, the data concern past relationships within the family.

This study is original for three main reasons. First, it investigates Mauritania, a country where there have been very few studies of the phenomenon of children of the street (Ballet, 2006). Secondly, it seems to us that though the academic literature on street children sometimes provide comparisons between girls and boys (Aptekar & Ciano-Federoff, 1999; Conticini & Hulme, 2007; Raffaelli et al., 1993; Rizzini & Lusk, 1995), very few studies focus specifically on girls of the street (see also Lalor, 1997). Thirdly, the literature focusing on children of the street generally elucidate the mechanisms that lead some young people to live on the streets (In the African context, see for instance Aderinto, 2000; Aptekar, 1994; Beyene & Berhane, 1997; Bourdillon, 1994; Ebigo, 2003; Ennew, 2003; Kilbride, Suda, & Njeru, 2000; Le Roux, 1996; Mambwe, 1997; Marguerat & Poitou, 1994; Matchinda, 1999; Muchini & Nyandiya-Bundy, 1991; Olley, 2006; Sampa, 1997; Taçon & Lungwangwa, 1992; Veale, 1996; Veale & Donà, 2003). Two competing explanations are often discussed. The most widespread explanation is that children are urged by their family to work on the streets in order to support themselves, or even provide the household with a supplementary income (Aderinto, 2000; Alexandrescu, 1996; Aptekar, 1988; Basu & Van, 1998; ILO, 1996; Lusk, 1992; Olley, 2006; Peacock, 1994; Rizzini & Lusk, 1995 for instance). Then, children on the street gradually become children of the street. However, the part played by economic poverty has been challenged (see for instance Aptekar, 1988; Blanc, 1994; Conticini & Hulme, 2007; Lalor, 1999; Marguerat, 1999; UNICEF, 2000). The studies challenging the economic poverty factor can be grouped under the “aberrant families” hypothesis (family disintegration, family conflict, alienation from parents, abandonment, neglect, physical abuse, or incestuous relations) (Aptekar, 1994).

On the contrary to previous literature, our study does not directly focus on mechanisms that lead some young people to live on the streets. Our study focuses on the question of the socio-economic determinants of the risk of violence. In other words, whereas the literature, following the hypothesis of aberrant families, uses violence as an explanatory factor for the phenomenon of children of the street,

we attempt here to highlight the explanatory factors for the risk of violence and we treat this risk as an explained variable. Then we do not attribute causality to family violence for explaining girls of the street phenomenon. We take for granted the causal mechanism. On the contrary we consider family violence as an explained variable. In other words we analyze factors contributing to violence.

The article is structured as follows: after the Introduction, Section 2 presents the Mauritanian context and the method used to gather data. The ensuing statistical results are expounded in Section 3. First we report the results using descriptive statistics. Amongst other things, these results are intended to find out whether the girls of the street have been the victims of violence. We then carry out a multiple correspondence analysis in order to identify the risk factors for violence. Section 4 draws the conclusions from the study, and proposes a few guidelines for public policy.

2. Data overview

In a seminal paper on the analysis of street children in the developing world, Aptekar (1994) warns about the methodological problems that may be encountered when studying this phenomenon. This author suggested providing the reader with a contextual analysis of the data (explaining how the data were gathered and how the methodological problems were overcome). Of course, the need for contextual analysis is not specific to studies on street children, but it appears very crucial in this case. Ballet (2006) shows for instance that responses to a questionnaire vary depending whether they are coming from children, families or educators. In this section we will focus especially on the context, and the method used to gather data.

2.1. The Mauritanian context

For the past forty years or so, the Mauritanian context has been marked by a very strong migratory movement towards the cities. The 1961–1962 census thus revealed that the nomadic population represented 76.9% of the whole population, compared to 13.3% for the sedentary rural population, and 9.8% for the urban population. In 1977, the proportions were of 33.2% for the nomadic population, 44.1% for the sedentary rural population and 22.7% for the urban population. By 1998, the nomadic population only corresponded to 5% of the population, while the urban population accounted for 53% (Igneongba, 1992; ODHD, 2000).¹ This means that the settling down process in rural areas occurs alongside a relatively new but huge phenomenon of urbanization. Furthermore, there is a large foreign population from neighboring countries migrating into Mauritania either to find a job (for example in the fishing sector), or who pass through to get to Europe. Migration flows into the big cities are therefore strong. Migration has been presented as a factor that may lead to the existence of street children in Africa (Mambwe, 1997; Sampa, 1997), and is often advanced in the local context to explain the phenomenon (Mohamed Salem, 1996). For instance, the change in life style of people who were formerly nomads, or the arrival of foreigners from neighboring countries can explain the phenomenon of children living in the streets with their families, due to the difficulty of finding accommodation and employment. However, the mere fact of living in the street does not mean that children necessarily become children of the street. The increased migration of nomadic populations may increase the phenomenon children on the street, but not necessarily that of children of the street. If, for example, we cannot rule out the possibility that certain formerly nomadic populations find it difficult to change their way of life, no evidence has established any link between migration and the presence of children of the street in that country. On the contrary, we are entitled to doubt the reality of this relationship. In particular, the analysis of the children's ethnic origins

¹ The new census has only just been completed and the data are not yet available.

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