

## A QUALITATIVE LOOK INTO THE LIVES AND ASPIRATIONS OF STREET CHILDREN IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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**Abstract:** The following paper presents a phenomenological view of Street children's future aspirations in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (HCMC) in 2018. Information was collected addressing general background data, their experiences of living on the street, and the reasons for and how they came to be living on the streets. The subjects studied comprised 3 male and 3 female street children living in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Phenomenological interviews were generated using a variety of quantifiable data techniques. They included: in-depth interviews of participants (street children), in-depth interviews of adult individuals in the children's lives, questionnaires, and observation. The results of the study show a correlation between poverty, broken homes, abuse, limited schooling, and at times, human trafficking. Participants often displayed avoidance or aggression when confronted with uncomfortable or taboo topics. Possible symptoms relating to mental disorders displayed were: depression, generalized anxiety, attachment disorders, aggression, criminality, frustration and hopelessness. The children were drawn to foreigners as a means to earn money, either through sales of trinkets or through scams or begging. As such, the participants generally displayed exaggerated friendliness, superficial connections, and forward mannerisms with adult speaking patterns. All the children had aspirations and perhaps unrealistic goals for the future.

**Keywords:** Street Children, Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, Human trafficking, Exploitation, Relationships, Future aspirations, Developing Countries, Asia's Mega Cities.

### Introduction

In 2016, the Asia Pacific region was home to nearly 4.5 billion people, nearly 60% of the world population. A diverse region, it contains seven of the world's ten most populous countries, but also holds some of the world's smallest island nations in the Pacific (Floro & King, 2016). Estimates prepared by ESCAP in the 2014 Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific reveal that the number of people in the region living on less than \$1.25 dollars a day fell from 52 percent in 1990 to 18 percent in 2011 – a reduction from 1.7 billion to 772 million people. As of June 9, 2017, the current population of Vietnam was 95,540,800 based on the latest United Nations estimates (Countries in the world by population, 2017). Vietnam's population is equivalent to 1.27% of the total world population, with the median age in Vietnam of 30.8 years ("Mundi Index," 2016). According to the Mundi Index (2016) the age structure of Vietnam's youth is: 0-14 years: 23.84% (male 11,938,563/female 10,767,261); 15-24 years: 16.69% (male 8,240,861/female 7,658,711). 15-25 million Vietnamese citizens are classified as children. The age structure of a population affects the nation's key socio-economic issues. Countries with young populations (a high percentage under age 15) are often advised to invest more in schools, while countries with older populations (a high percentage over age 65) need to invest more in the health sector (McNicoll, 2006). The age structure can also be used to help predict potential political issues. For example, the rapid growth of a young adult population unable to find employment can lead to unrest ("Mundi Index," 2016).

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Several organizations have estimated the street children population in Vietnam to be well over 23,000 children. The Human Rights Watch report from 2006 estimated that there were 23,000. UNICEF says that official government figures for 2014 were down to 7,300 (UNICEF, "Street children," 2015). However, these statistics do not accurately reflect the prevalence of children living and working on the streets, according to Vijaya Ratnam-Raman, acting chief of child protection for UNICEF in Vietnam.

### **Research Objective**

This study examined beliefs and aspirations identified by the street children, which may shed light into the policies, interventions and global initiatives that are focused on reducing the amount of street children, while simultaneously serving the needs of the current street children of Vietnam. This study is focused on determining the attitudes of Vietnamese street children toward their futures. The research explored how these realities affect their expectations for what type of lives the future holds for them.

Vietnamese street children live in constant threat of physical violence, abuse, and labor exploitation. Leaving their primary caregiver's protection and/or residence to live, work and subsist on the street puts these children in danger and displays fundamental social deficiencies. The sheer fact that these children are on the street and have either voluntarily or through negative influences left the home must signify to society that these children need support and protection.

### **Literature Review**

This research study was conducted in an effort to identify common factors, points of risk for exploitation, and possible interventions to minimize the damaging effects on the lives of Vietnamese street children living in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The connections, beliefs, aspirations, and relationships identified by the street children should shed light onto the kinds of effective policies, interventions, and global initiatives that could be focused on reducing the number of street children while simultaneously serving the needs of the current street children of Vietnam. Furthermore, it should allow for the development of recommendations for efficacious methods of treating stress and alleviating psychological trauma among street children.

Children often experience the effects of political, economic, and social crises within their countries more severely than adults, and many lack the adequate institutional support to address their special needs. Eventually, they end up on the streets (DQ, 1999). Around the world on a local and regional level, initiatives have been taken to assist street children, often through shelters (Philip, 1998, p. 29). Many shelters have programs designed to provide safety, healthcare, counseling, education, vocational training, legal aid, and other social services. Some shelters also provide regular individual contact, offering much-needed love and care (Philip, 1998, p. 29). One of the key findings in research was that most incidents of running away appear not to be reported to the police in the western world (The Children's Society, 2004). It is estimated that a child runs away from home or care every five minutes in the UK. That's 100,000 children every year ("Railway Children," n.d.). Children are often running away from problems at home or school. Some are dealing with very serious issues at home, such as neglect, drug and alcohol addiction (their own or their parents'), mental health problems, violence, and abuse ("Railway Children," n.d.). Many children run away on the spur of the moment, without any forward planning – meaning that they probably haven't thought about where they will go, where they will sleep, or how they will manage to support themselves ("The Children's Society," 2004). This means that many children end up on the streets, where the problems they face are often even worse than those they have endured at home. In many cases, children and young people who end up alone on the streets are at risk of sexual exploitation, drug and alcohol dependence, abuse and violence ("The Children's Society," 2004).

Unfortunately, all too often runaway youth are often considered a family problem, rather than a child welfare and societal concern (Rudometkin, 2013). Caseworkers have heard runaway youth referred to as "unruly kids who choose not to follow rules", or as "troublemakers", "voluntarily missing," or "just a runaway" (Rudometkin, 2013, p. 4).

Today we are sharing with you the truth: runaways are children in danger. They need to be searched for immediately and helped (Rudometkin, 2013, p. 4). There are several false assumptions by parents and society about runaway children listed by Rudometkin (2013).

- *False Assumption #1:* Teenagers are rational decision-makers; they make decisions and plan their actions with care.
- *False Assumption #2:* All homeless children have a home to return to.
- *False Assumption #3:* Runaway/throwaway children are capable of: 1) getting themselves out of whatever they were doing to survive and 2) returning home safely on their own.

*Historical Background of Vietnam and the Street Child Phenomenon.* According to the CIA World Fact Book, Vietnam has a minor population (under age 18) of about 35%, or roughly 29 million people. With such a strong number of youth and a background of national conflict, a historical background of the Vietnamese street children is warranted.

Vietnam opening to the world economy has induced a process of modernization of social and economic structures and at the same time increased the vulnerability of the country to external shocks (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 9). Although it is too early to assess the long-term impact of the Doi Moi (Open Door) reform policy, it can be stated from the outset that these processes are not neutral and they affect social groups in different ways. Doi Moi has benefited the rich more than the poor, and urban populations more than rural populations (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 9).

In a traditional society such as Vietnam, gender differences are very important as well. Different groups respond to the transformations in different ways, with different coping mechanisms and strategies (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 9). The transition in the economy has meant a shift from a national self-supplies and subsidy-based economy into a multi-sector commodity production under the management and control of the State. This makes products of labor and labor power itself into a commodity admitted, exchanged and traded drastically in the market (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 9).

The demand for labor has increased substantially, and voluntary internal migrations are larger than before. Children's labor, being readily available and cheap, it is obviously the main source used to meet a significant part of this demand (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 10). Migration, changing family structures and need for differentiated sources of income, together with the de-collectivization and reduction of social services, are creating new groups of poor, such as street children, and pushing some households towards extreme forms of poverty and misery (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 10).

The problem of inconsistency in statistical figures is mainly due to two reasons: first, the lack of a common definition of street children; and second, the fact that although most reports identify different categories of street children, for their individual data and thus are not correlated by category per category, making it therefore difficult to understand the characteristics of each of these very different groups of children (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 23).

According to UNESCO, Vietnam has a literacy rate of 94 percent, which is very high in comparison with its neighbors. There is only a 57 percent literacy rate in Laos, an 81 percent rate in China, and an 83 percent literacy rate in Myanmar. Most individuals who are illiterate live in remote areas and have an ethnic minority background. The formal Vietnamese school system is organized into pre-school education (3-6 years olds and 5-6 years olds), primary education (6-11 years of age), and secondary education (11-18 years of age).

Children are highly valued in Vietnamese society and education is accepted and expected as a path for children to better their future as well as their families'. While parents and communities are well aware of the importance of good nutrition, health, environment, and psychosocial stimulation, little attention is paid to the importance of play in promoting the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 35).

Contrary to Western societies' educational patterns, Vietnamese patterns are directed to the strengthening of the community, the family, the village, and the State, and not the individual with independent personality (Gallina & Masina, 2002, p. 40). The family or in the wider sense, the household, remains the most popular form of economic structure in Vietnam.

#### *The Present Situation of Vietnamese Street Children*

Most research on street children has been in the international arena and focused on generalized populations. Though a lot of information can be correlated to Vietnam in a broad sense, Vietnam has its own identity and social society that make their population of street children unique. With the many wars and conflict Vietnamese citizens have faced, it has left a large population with more than two-thirds under 30 years of age. This has been a defining situation in Vietnam. The number of 'street children' seems to have declined for a variety of reasons, while the number of young migrants may have increased. However, it appears outside of the two main cities, street children are exposed to violence, abuse, drug, sexual exploitation, and organized crime in a way that fortunately does not exist in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (Gallina & Masina, 2002).

Poor children live in conditions of particular vulnerability. Their future life is often compromised by shocks and stresses that hit their households when they are at a young age (Gallina & Masina, 2002). Lack of adequate nutrition in early years may impair physical and mental development for the rest of their life (Gallina & Masina, 2002). Low levels of education and high dropout rates are unsustainable coping mechanisms. These have severe consequences for future employment opportunities in the rapidly changing labor markets of Vietnam (Gallina & Masina, 2002).

There are many causes that drive Vietnamese children to leave their homes and seek a job or a new life on the streets of a big town. Behind each of these children there is a story to be understood – often of extreme poverty and despair, sometimes the attempt to escape a life as a poor farmer. Most of these children retain strong links with their rural families, and their livelihoods perspective must be understood as part of their household's needs and projects, which are often a very different understanding than the more common understanding of international street children.

#### *Summary*

To summarize the findings of the literature review, the factors contributing to Vietnamese children living on the streets of a major urban area such as Ho Chi Minh City seem to be escaping rural poverty and/or family discord, abuse, or violence. There are various complex issues that have been identified that motivate children to leave home and live on the streets, if indeed they have not been abandoned or forced to leave, and they have adopted a number of survival strategies. These usually do not include begging, but involve strategies for finding temporary emergency accommodations and contacts, either peers or adult handlers, who can help provide them with forms of casual employment.

#### **Method**

This research is a qualitative research study designed to identify Vietnamese street children's attitudes toward their aspirations and outlook toward their future. (Creswell, 2009, Chapter 10). A series of interviews began with 20 children, and was narrowed down to in-depth, phenomenological interviews conducted with six street children living in Ho Chi Minh City. The in-depth, phenomenological interviewing technique ideally requires more than one session with each child, although owing to the transient nature of the sample this simply was not possible with all the children. The phenomenological interviewing approach allowed us to delve into and arrive at a first understanding of the phenomenon of street children in urban Vietnam, within its natural context, and from the perspectives of the participants involved (Creswell, 2012, Chapter 4, pp. 76-83)

#### *Data Collection*

The study focused its research on two sources of data. One was the primary source: qualitative interviews based on in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, and semi-structured surveys. The secondary source relies upon interviews with persons familiar with and knowledgeable about Vietnamese street children. The primary data sources are from phenomenological interviews, semi-structured surveys, and

observation. The secondary data sources came from interviews with persons knowledgeable and familiar with the Vietnamese street children.

#### *Data Collection Procedure*

The data were collected in 2018 over a three month period (March to May 2018). Nights, days, weekdays, and weekends were utilized to meet with and observe participants. A variety of times and days were needed to build rapport and get a realistic idea and answers to interview questions. It is noted that as the street children have informal jobs located close to large tourist areas, and that their ability to answer questions and speak in English with the principal researcher became apparent without the need of the fulltime presence of the Vietnamese interpreter.

#### *Data Collection Techniques*

The data collection techniques are as follows: rapport and trust building for the children, rapport and trust building for adult “handlers” of these street children, direct observation of the participant in the street, phenomenological interviewing, brief and/or In-depth interviews with individuals who are familiar with the Vietnamese street children:

### **Findings**

The study setting was in the natural street environment of the children. Often, more than one child wished to participate at a time, or at other times no child wished to participate in the interview; therefore, we did direct observation and interviews with those familiar with the children.

The principal researcher initially interviewed 20 street children who lived and worked on the streets. Three boys and three girls were chosen who represented the general population of the street children in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They were divided into three age groups: two between the ages of 5-11, two between 12 and 14 years old, and two aged 15-17 years.

To summarize the observation, it seemed that there were distinctive cultural rules that the Vietnamese street children adhered to. They learned and mimicked behaviors that increased the likelihood of receiving compensation. Playfulness and flirtation behaviors towards tourists were tools used to secure sales of wares; adult conversation and cognition was expected during these interactions. Threats and displays of threatening behavior were accepted as a means of securing needed resources. However, once these needs were met there was a social construct that the older children looked after the younger street children and that sharing and cooperation was expected. Children who could interact at an adult level when working often reverted to age appropriate play and communication when not working. The children and the local vendors often shared a symbiotic relationship and were an accepted part of the vendors' business. The children were used as supplemental labor and or runners for the vendor.

Most of the participants had dreams of fitting into society. They wished to take care of their parents in their old age and get married and have families of their own. They had big dreams of being famous or rich, and often saw themselves becoming important members of the society as a whole. Many indicated they were not in school, but indeed had future plans (without any indication when) to go at some point. They often acknowledged the importance of education, but looked at it as something that they worked for so that either: a) a family member could attend school, b) a future child would attend, or c) that they could go themselves one day.

It was noted that nearly all had future aspirations and goals. However, very few of these Vietnamese street children had the necessary life skills to make these aspirations a reality. Some of their behaviors were risky, including, selling drugs and using drugs and alcohol, petty theft, and risky behaviors when it came to personal safety. These behaviors had the real risk of placing these children in direct conflict with the law. They often displayed a naïve understanding of finances and long term economics. While they had superior understanding of products and profit and loss on a daily basis the prospect of future saving, investments and how to get a formal job or make legal businesses was completely lacking.

## Discussion

There was a stark difference between the type of street children in Vietnam from the street children that were explored when reviewing the current literature on the subject. Vietnamese street children often did not feel helpless but, in contrast to their peers abroad, actually often felt empowered by the street. It provided them with food, shelter, and even a type of status in their respective home towns. The children indicated positive regard for their families, handlers, as well as their peers. The motivation to live on the streets was purely for financial gain and opportunity.

## Findings

The key findings and general indicators discovered through research study of street children in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam can be summarized as follow:

### 1st. Context Assessment:

- There are no precise estimates of the exact magnitude of the problem of street children in Vietnam but all providers believe the problem is growing. Many NGOs estimate that the number of children on the streets is between 50,000 and 250,000 children.
- Street children are found in almost all sections in both cities (News, 2008), but they tend to concentrate in areas suitable for their lifestyle and where their existence does not pose a threat against them. Their mobility seems to be highly affected by a number of internal and external factors which include: being apprehended, the nature of commercial activities in specific areas/settings, violence from the surrounding community, violence within the street children group, and access to transportation.

Data indicated that many street children exist in areas where neither the services of NGOs or governmental agencies can reach them. Hence, the development of outreach strategies and street-based activities seem essential.

- Street children in Vietnam do not represent a homogenous group, and prefer to stay in small groupings while being on the street.
- Street children turn to begging and other activities for survival in case they have no permanent jobs or means to sustain themselves.
- Street children suffer from various problems on the street, which include: violence; community disapproval; police arrests and verbal and physical abuse by the law enforcement officials; robberies of their savings by adults and other children; health problems, both physical as well as with mental; stresses due to the inability to cope with street life; and a lack of positive attachments.
- Various needs were expressed by street children, as direct and immediate needs, which included: 1) Learning a profession and finding a formal job in the future, 2) having a current job (work) to sustain themselves (and their families), 3) returning back to their families someday. However, many street children like street life, and have no intention to change their situations, while others could not identify their own needs, as the future appears ambiguous to them.

## Recommendations

### *Street-Based Interventions*

Street based interventions are highly recommended for all governmental and NGOs working with street children to support them in real life situations and with their immediate needs. This activity can be very helpful in reaching out to street children in remote areas, and could be a main tool for effective intervention and rapid assessment. The following program/activities are suggested:

- Carrying out training programs to service providers on methods of street education.

- Legal support should be given to street educators when working on the street-level. That could be achieved through Vietnamese government agencies.
- Mobile response teams should be put in place to respond to crisis situation on the streets.
- Mobile medical services that include doctors, nurses, and mental health personnel should be setup to have temporary and mobile locations on the streets to reach street children in their natural environments. This could be further expanded to rural areas as party of community outreach programs.

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