

Findings of a Study Exploring Homeless Street Females in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: A Need for Community Based Programs

Beverly Edwards¹, Patricia Guy-Walls², George Jacinto³ & Robert Franklin⁴

Abstract

A qualitative research design using the interviews of five homeless street females was undertaken to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of the homeless street females and their identified need for community based programs. This research design provided the researchers with the opportunity to understand the complexities of homelessness from the homeless street females in Ethiopia using ethnography. The qualitative study was exploratory in nature and utilized ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews within both formal and informal social contexts. This ethnographic approach allowed the homeless street female the opportunity to utilize their own point of view to explore their concerns, attitudes, and personal experiences with caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, and cultural beliefs and practices in how they manage their lives on the street.

Keywords: Homeless Females in Ethiopia, Homeless Females, Homeless Street Females, Homelessness

1. Introduction and Background

The number of homeless girls and women in Ethiopia is growing and the government does not have a plan to address the issues of youth homelessness. In all stages of homelessness simultaneous action by the government, nongovernment organizations, and homeless individuals is important to address the problem through identifying local resources to meet the needs of the homeless youth (Baynesagn, 2006). The researchers believed that the ethnographic methods used in this study would give the homeless females an opportunity to identify their needs and resources to address their homelessness. In addition, the lived experience of homeless street females may lead to traumatic events each day as these females attempt to survive. While living on the streets females are vulnerable to sexual exploitation including rape and prostitution, as well as physical and emotional violence. While youth homelessness has been studied extensively, the plight of young females who are now adults requires a closer analysis. One of the principle questions that the researchers explored was: What is the nature of caregiving relationships among the homeless street females? This paper is the result of a grant to study homeless street females in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. There are several thousand youth who are homeless sleeping on the streets of Addis Ababa, and girls constitute a significant number of homeless individuals (Tadesse & Mengistu, 1996). The researchers proposed to explore the role that caregiving relationships, social support, coping strategies, gender and stigma, cultural beliefs and practices play in how the homeless street females manage their lives. In order to achieve the goal of this study a small number of homeless street females were selected to share in-depth accounts of their life experiences as homeless youth.

¹ PhD, Assistant Professor, Fayetteville State University, Department of Social Work, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC 28301. Email: bedwar11@uncfsu.edu, Tel: 910.672.2432/Fax: 910.672.1755

² PhD, Associate Professor and BSW Program Director, Arkansas State University, Department of Social Work, P.O. Box 2460, State University, AR 72467.

³ PhD, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, College of Health and Public Affairs, University of Central Florida, HPA I Suite 255, P.O. Box 163358, Orlando, FL 32816-3358.

⁴ PhD, President, Green Thumb Foundation, Inc. 366 North 117th Court, #10, Omaha, NE 68154.

In order to meet the requirements for the Institutional Review Board approval for the study the researchers made a decision to interview adults about their experience as homeless youth. The number of street children and women in major towns of Ethiopia is rapidly increasing. Most women migrate to Addis Ababa as a means to avoid marriage and to be employed as servants in families. Most of these women become homeless in Addis Ababa (Baynesagn, 2006). Yet problems these individuals face which drive them to street life has not been fully studied. Demographic health surveys in many of the developing countries have shown that, today, boys and girls experience puberty at a younger age than the previous generations (Tadesse & Mengistu, 1996). Consequently, homeless street females are more vulnerable than males and they experience health, social and economic problems. Because of these problems, homeless children are reported to have a high rate of developmental and emotional problems. Street children face these problems at early ages and because of this they may remain disadvantaged throughout their life time due to a lack of experience in a functional family. It is well documented that street girls in particular are also exposed to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual exploitation, rape, prostitution, violence and death. Some of the girls practice prostitution to support them selves which may put them at a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other STIs (Sorsa, Kidanemariam & Erosie, 2002). The researchers investigated the role that caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, cultural beliefs and practices play in how the homeless street females manage their lives. This study was accomplished by offering homeless street females the opportunity to tell their stories from their own perspectives. The video and audio taped narratives provided valuable information for a more in depth understanding of this issue and much needed insight for the development of effective interventions to address this major social problem.

There is an ever growing body of research and literature on children's homelessness in developing countries, much of which focuses on street children. Homeless street females can be defined as, "those who lack real homes; live in bad housing; sleep on pavements; lack basic needs (with no access to safe water and sanitation) and lack personal needs (self-determination, dignity, creativity, expression and voice)" (Olufemi, 2000, p. 10). Extreme poverty is a major cause of homelessness for any household type. It is also recognized as a reason for the increasing number of children living and working on the streets. It is cited as the main reason for leaving home by street children, many of whom leave home in order to provide for themselves and take the pressure off their siblings (Korboe, 1996). Early childhood experiences, such as family breakdown, conflict between parents, lack of care and support and bad parental behavior have a significant impact on young children. Children suffer more with parental separation. According to Judith (1994 as cited in Baynesagn, 2006), children whose parents separate are more disadvantaged than children whose parents live together. Children who grow up in single parent households with low emotional care and support are more likely to run away in their teenage years. The existence of such causes as, the unavailability of affordable housing, unemployment, migration, and early childhood experience create potential homeless people. These social problems expose individuals to a higher risk of homelessness. In a study conducted in Zimbabwe, Speak (2005) found that more than 35% of street children left home to earn an income for their families. Street children are not the only ones who experience poverty. Many children who remain in homeless households also experience chronic poverty, but do not leave. Frequently, child homelessness also results from being orphaned. In many countries children have no rights to inherit or own their family homestead. This is problematic for children who lose both parents as the result of complications related to AIDS (Speak, 2005).

Many street children do not have access to proper care, education, psychological support and supervision. Often, orphans and other vulnerable children are forced to work to earn an income. They are exposed to various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia more than 30% of females aged 10-14 are not living with their parents. Twenty percent of this 30% have run away from child marriages. Twelve percent of adolescents aged 10-14 of the 30% not living with their parents are domestic workers with no legal or social support (Speak, 2005). Forty-four percent of people live below the poverty line, lacking basic needs such as food and housing; the majority of those are women and children (Ethiopian Economic Association as cited in Cross Catholic Organization, 2009). The average woman has more than six children, and more than 40 percent of these women have their first child before they are 19 years old (World Bank as cited in Cross Catholic Organization, 2009). Literacy among women is about 26 percent, compared to 41 percent among men (USAID as cited in Cross Catholic Organization, 2009). Only half of the females attend primary school, while primary school attendance among males is 72 percent (Ethiopian Economic Association as cited in Cross Catholic Organization, 2009).

Women in Ethiopia are no strangers to inequality. It permeates every aspect of their lives. They did not learn to read because they had to stay at home and help their mothers. They are fired from their job after missing a day to care for their sick child. They are also frequently abused by their husbands and male relatives. In towns such as Mekelle, Alitena, and Adigrat, which have a high prevalence of unemployment and individuals living in poverty, life circumstances are even worse for women. Often abandoned by their husbands or families, they struggle to survive and find jobs. Some have developed mental disorders resulting from abuse that renders them unable to work. The United Nations (UN) has reported that one in three women and girls in Africa are beaten or sexually abused during their lifetime. According to a UN report most of these women are unable to secure basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. They also do not have the resources to educate their children so that the children will have a chance at a better life. Those who do find jobs are paid substantially less than men or often have to take lower paying jobs because of the shortage of work. Ethiopia has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world putting the number of unemployed urban workers at 50 percent, a rate that is even higher among women, according to a report published by the U.S. Library of Congress. Facing discriminatory, political, economic and social rules, Ethiopian women have lagged behind men in all areas of self-advancement (Cross Catholic Organization, 2009). In addition, Ethiopian women have suffered sociocultural and economic discrimination for decades. Many Ethiopian women are without jobs, homes, and resources to support their young children. The Ethiopian government estimates that there are currently 50,000 to 60,000 children living on the streets of Addis Ababa. The government estimates that about 25 percent of Addis Ababa's street children are females who are subject to violence and many turn to prostitution as a coping mechanism. Consequently, an increasing number of street children have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. Females who work and live on the streets are faced with extremely harsh conditions including lack of food and shelter, unwanted pregnancy, early motherhood, and sexual exploitation (Cross Catholic Organization, 2009).

According to the Labour and Social Affairs Ministry, some 150,000 children live on the streets in Ethiopia (UN Office, 2008). However, aid agencies estimate that the problem may be far more serious, with nearly 600,000 street children country-wide and over 100,000 in Addis Ababa alone. With the HIV/AIDS pandemic and falling incomes, the United Nations Children's fund suggests that the problem may be getting worse. HIV/AIDS has already orphaned 1million children in Ethiopia (UN Office, 2008). According to Ethiopian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), poverty is also fostering the growing numbers of child prostitutes which is complicated by the HIV/AIDS crisis. The children often identified lack of work, family deaths, poor education or unwanted pregnancy as factors driving them into prostitution. According to a report distributed by the UN Office (2008), the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that many of the child prostitutes have been victims of serious sexual and physical abuse as a result of living on the streets. Homeless street females suffer most from unprecedented population growth, high levels of poverty, homelessness, and illiteracy (Olufemi, 2000). These females form part of the largest group of the poorly sheltered population in Addis Ababa. The homeless street female constitute a population at risk, especially when the nature of their homelessness is concealed (Olufemi, 2000). Furthermore, the issue of street children in particular is one of the fastest growing social problems in Ethiopia. Economic problems have made many of these youth assume responsibilities normally reserved for adults. A large number of these youth are forced to work on the streets to satisfy their basic needs and support their families. The ages of the youth range from eight to 20. They include orphaned, disabled, neglected, and abandoned children all over the country (Global Security Organization, 2008).

Several factors are blamed for forcing many of these children to the streets. Poverty, family breakdown or instability and peer pressure are considered the main reasons forcing children to the streets (Global Security Organization, 2008). Another dimension to the problem of street children in Ethiopia is their desperation for food and other basic necessities. The lack of these necessities leads them to become involved in illegal activities such as stealing. Working on the streets has become a vital necessity in the homeless street female's lives. According to the Global Society Organization (2008), the street youth do not worry about tomorrow but their day to day survival – something to eat, something warm to wear, and somewhere to sleep. Consequently, the NGOs, Children Aid-Ethiopia (CHAD-ET) and The Forum on Street Children-Ethiopia (FSCE), who were interviewed as a part of the larger study on homeless street youths in Addis Ababa discussed the need for more government involvement in order to provide resources for the homeless females and their children. The main purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of the homeless street females by looking at the role caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, cultural beliefs and practices play in how they manage their lives. This was accomplished by interviewing homeless street females who are a part of the larger study that was conducted in Addis Ababa with homeless street males and NGOs along with some other agencies.

This ethnographic approach was empowering in that it allowed the street female to have a voice in identifying their own strengths and proposing solutions to their problems. To this end, five interviews were conducted with homeless street females utilizing ethnographic methods, such as participant observations and semi-structured interviews. For this part of the study, only five homeless street females were interviewed to better understand their experience as homeless street youth. Due to the sensitive nature of the interview and the time required to conduct the interviews, the five homeless street females were interviewed by the researchers and an interpreter. The interviews were audio taped to provide verbatim transcripts for later analysis, and they were videotaped to document interactions with participants and accuracies for transcription purposes. It is believed that this research will significantly contribute to the growing body of knowledge focused on providing effective and culturally specific interventions to improve the homeless street children's living conditions. The findings of this study are to provide an understanding of what factors bring and keep children on the streets and how causal factors differ by gender. The findings are important in developing effective services for the homeless street female. This study is also significant in the development of services tailored to the particular needs of homeless street females, including community based prevention, street based health, and street child counseling and re-integration programs.

2. Methods

This section details the methods used in the larger study, as well as those used in collecting, transcribing, analyzing, interpreting and reporting data. In the larger study, the researchers used a qualitative research approach that included field observations, semi-formal interviews with research participants, and with non-governmental organization (NGO) providers of services to street youths. A semi structured questionnaire was used to conduct this smaller part of the research with the five homeless street females observing the purpose of the study. The research team included two primary investigators who conducted the interviews of different groups on four different days of the week, at different locations and at different times with an Ethiopian interpreter. The locations and times were agreed upon by the participants and the interpreter. This was done to increase the variability in the composition of the final sample. The researchers systematically reviewed questions before each field visit, and discussed what was learned from the previous day. A qualitative research design was used for this particular study. Qualitative methods are useful tools when the research task involves generating meaning for the lived experiences of underrepresented groups (Creswell, 1998; Saleeby, 1994). Accordingly, understanding the meanings of the experiences of the homeless street females who participated in this study required the use of methods that would allow them to tell their stories. Therefore, the researchers approached the task of understanding the complexities of homelessness in the homeless street female in Ethiopia using ethnography. The use of the ethnographic approach was emphasized in this study of homeless street females to utilize their own point of view in an exploration of their concerns, attitudes, and personal experiences with caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, cultural beliefs and practices in how they manage their lives.

3. Sample Description

Human subjects' approval was obtained for this study from the University's Institutional Review Board. The sample was composed of five homeless street females 18 to 23 years of age living on the street in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The participants were a sample of convenience. They were selected by the bilingual PhD student at Addis Ababa University who had agreed to not only work with the researchers in conducting this study but had also agreed to be the language interpreter for this study. The bilingual PhD student had also conducted qualitative research with the homeless street youth in Addis Ababa. Therefore, the interpreter was more familiar with this population given he too was from Addis Ababa and had conducted similar research on this population. He identified and recruited the homeless females who participated in this study. The researchers were taken by the interpreter to an agreed upon safe location in order to conduct interviews with the homeless street females. Participants were offered an Ethiopian currency stipend, \$50.00 Ethiopian Birr, as an incentive to participate in the research. Before beginning each interview, informed consent was explained to all participants by the researchers and then translated by the bilingual Ethiopian interpreter. The participants were then asked to sign an informed consent form which was written in English.

None of the participants could read in English or speak in English so informed consent was read and explained to the interpreter who translated what was said by the researcher to the participants in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language. Each participant was asked by the interpreter in Amharic if they understood that they were agreeing to participate in the study. With respect to the specific aims of the present work, such an approach contributed to the researchers' analysis of their own experience as minority researchers conducting ethnographic research in Addis Ababa. Each of the researchers selectively attends to, interprets, and acts on their beliefs about themselves and the world around them, a concept embodied in the theory of social constructivist. Social constructivist focuses on how people construct meaning in their lives, emphasizing social meaning as generated through language, cultural beliefs, and social interactions (Gergen, 1994 as cited in Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2009, p. 33). For instance, the use of the ethnographic approach was emphasized in this study of homeless street females to utilize the individual's point of view in an exploration of their concerns, attitudes, and personal experiences related to homelessness which is consistent with the social constructivist perspective. Similarly, cultural identity and social position influence the person you believe yourself to be and therefore the way you interpret the events in your life. Allowing the homeless street females the opportunity to tell their stories is empowering in that it gives the homeless street female a voice in identifying their own strengths and proposing solutions to their problems. This is exemplified in the social constructivist perspective where the telling of stories is significant in creating meaning and purpose in life. Narrative approaches use the individual's story to help them make sense of adversity and adapt positively to life events (Borden, 1992; Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996 as cited in Greene, 2007). Hence, stories constitute the basic structures all persons use to make sense of their lives, and understanding the homeless street females' narratives is fundamental to the practice of social work (Goldstein, 1988; Scott, 1989 as cited in Kilpatrick & Holland, 2009).

4. Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected from five homeless street females utilizing a structured interview process where the participants were asked questions related to their perceptions about caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, and cultural beliefs and practices and the interpreter translated the researchers' questions and the participants' responses to each question. The questions selected for the interviews were based on the researchers obtaining feedback related to the females' perceptions of social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, cultural beliefs and practices, and caregiving relationships. Sample interview questions included the following: "Are girls on the street treated differently than boys?" "In what ways?"; "Give examples of how others have assisted you when you were in need." "Who were those that helped you?"; "Do you belong to a group on the street?" Give examples of how you assist others who are in need." and "Please describe a typical day for you?" The interviews were conducted utilizing one researcher per participant and the Ethiopian interpreter who translated the interview questions in Amharic for the participants and then translated the participants' responses in English. Each volunteer participant was audio and video taped to provide verbatim transcripts for later analysis. Data collection observations were also recorded and were considered during the data analysis. The taped recorded interviews were translated by the Ethiopian interpreter into English and transcribed by one of the researchers. To ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions, each transcription was checked against the video and audio tape by the researchers and the Ethiopian interpreter. If the researchers found any inaccuracies, the corrections were made, and the interview was entered into a qualitative data analysis program for the detection of themes related to caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, and cultural beliefs and practices. Completion of the transcripts of the data generation took two months. Copies of the transcripts were preserved on paper and on a computer hard drive. The paper copy is kept in a locked file cabinet in one of the researcher's office.

5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was facilitated through the use of NVIVO which is a software package for managing and analyzing qualitative data. This program provided the technological assistance necessary to thoroughly examine the content of the interviews so that the research could provide the most complete and accurate picture possible of the stories, themes and patterns that may emerge during the researchers' examination of the data. One of the basic tenets of the social constructivist approach is that there is no objective reality, no absolute truth that is independent of the knower (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Based on this perspective, reality is the product of a social construction process formulated under the influence of cultural, historical, political, and economic conditions. Given that knowledge is socially constructed, it varies historically over time and differs across cultural groups that hold diverse beliefs about human development and nature (Lee & Greene, 1999). Therefore, reality is not discovered but created by individuals (Lee & Greene, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 1994). This framework was chosen because the constructivist approach

decreases the possibility of the researchers reconstructing or deconstructing the participants' reality of their daily experiences of being homeless and of the unique barriers that went along with this status in Addis Ababa.

As this approach to research focuses on the cognitive schemas that allows study participants' experiences and actions to be socially constructed, it is relevant and suitable as a means of conceptualizing the research participants' personal stories, experiences, desires and their way of looking at living on the streets from their inside perspectives, impacted by the social and historical factors which are unique to them. This approach also promotes openness and tolerance that guided the researchers and team from data collection, through data analysis and interpretation. It permitted the participants' culture and the social context of the research participant's world view to influence the research process, the findings and the analysis. In sum, the researchers embraced this perspective because it gives the homeless street females the opportunity to tell their stories as they have socially constructed them in their own words, from their personal experiences and group experiences, while providing a strong rationale for analyzing the researchers own experiences in relation to how these affected their perception of the experiences of the participants in the larger study. With respect to the specific aims of the present work, such an approach contributed to the researchers' analysis of their own experience as minority researchers conducting ethnographic research in Addis Ababa. Each of the researchers selectively attends to, interprets, and acts on their beliefs about themselves and the world around them, a concept embodied in the theory of social constructivist.

6. Results

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the researchers while conducting research among the homeless street females in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. These are illustrated below. They are followed by illustrative quotes from the data analysis.

Themes Emerging from the Analysis of the Researchers' Data

The following eight main themes emerged from the interview data when analyzed using NVIVO.

Themes

Reasons for Running Away to Addis Ababa

Most respondents stated that they had a conflict at home with a parent and/or step parent so they left their home to come to Addis Ababa to find work. "I don't exactly remember my age but guessing I was about 10 years old and there was a quarrel between my stepmother and me and that's why I started living on the streets. -" this came from the participants' interview discussions involving how the females ended up on the streets in Addis Ababa.

Poverty

"I beg for money from people on the streets each day"- this came from the participants' interview discussions involving a description of a typical day for the homeless street female.

Menial Jobs

The females also responded that they sometimes find menial jobs to do to earn money, such as selling tea on the streets and exchanging dollars for change so that people can ride the bus in town.

Self Help

Another theme-"I belong to a group of females who live on the streets"- this came from the participants' responses to the following interview question, "Do you belong to a group on the street?" When the respondents were asked to give examples of how others have assisted them when they were in need, another theme emerged- "The other females in my group help me when she gets money she shares...If I am sick, the other girls will wash my clothes...If I am sick, the other girls will help me go to the clinic where the Sister will give me medical treatment if I am sick...We help each other by sharing food"- are examples of this content from the participants' interview discussions.

Co-occurring Theme

Self help and Support System

Among the eight themes that emerged from the interview data, co-occurring themes also emerged. The following are co-occurring themes that emerged in relation to self help and a support system. "The other females in my group help me when she gets money she shares...If I am sick, the other girls will wash my clothes...If I am sick, the other girls will help me go to the clinic where the Sister will give me medical treatment if I am sick...We help each other by sharing food"- are examples of this content from the participants' interview discussions.

Forgiveness

People who Physically Hurt Me

The following theme also emerged from the interview data in relation to self forgiveness. Do you forgive others who have hurt you? One respondent stated that she forgave the two street boys who raped her. All respondents stated, "When they sleep in the dark areas of the street they get attacked and when they sleep in the light areas of the street the police chase them from their plastic homes".

People who Emotionally Hurt Us

A fourth theme-"They hate us...Many people have an attitude toward us..." When the respondents were asked if they forgave others who hurt them, most respondents replied. "I have already forgiven those people who have hurt me"

Ridicule by Peers and Others

People say why don't you work rather than sit on the street...The community see me as useless"- are examples of the content that was discussed in the interview in response to the following question, "Are females living on the street treated differently than males? If so, explain in what ways?"

Subtheme

Self Forgiveness

A fifth theme-"I am an Orthodox Christian and I pray"- emerged from the interview data in which the females were asked if they practiced a particular religion and if they were spiritual. In addition, most of the females stated that they slept around the church. Another theme-"I forgive myself for things I have done on the street"-came from the participants' response to the following question: "Do you forgive yourself for acts that you have committed?" The respondents also stated that when they commit a sinful act on the street they pray for forgiveness. A seventh theme that emerged from the interview data-"I have already forgiven those people who have hurt me"- came from the participants' response to the following question: "Do you forgive others who have hurt you?" One respondent stated that she forgave the two street boys who raped her. The final theme – "shelter, food"- came out in interview discussions as a response to the question, "What are the main issues that females who are homeless face?" As a result of living on the street, the respondents stated that when they sleep in the dark areas of the street they get attacked and when they sleep in the light areas of the street the police chase them from their plastic homes.

7. Discussion

The researchers found that the impact of migration, urbanization, and the significant rate of poverty were all factors that contributed to the high percentage of children living on the street, along with factors of abuse, and escape from child marriages. During the course of the data collection, the researchers found that there were many factors, such as dreaming about a brighter future in Addis Ababa, early marriage, unemployment, rural urban migration, death of one or both parents, the divorce of parents, and pregnancy out of wedlock that were the major reasons which drove the females to Addis Ababa. The researchers also found that homeless individuals face many challenges in their living condition; however, problems encountered by females are more serious than the rest of the homeless. Homeless females are vulnerable to more risks such as rape, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. If a single female is found among the homeless almost everybody demands sexual intercourse with her. Married females are also victimized. There is no protection at all for the homeless and if the female is not willing, she will be raped and the females suggested that no one cares about it. Usually homeless females use marriage as way out of this kind of danger. Marriage is seen as the only option for a female to reduce her challenges as being homeless. (Baynesagn, 2006). The homeless females discussed the fact that they did not receive any assistance from the various government bodies in Ethiopia.

They did not even have access to low cost housing. In fact, they discussed how the government would load the homeless people on trucks and release them once they were out of the city of Addis Ababa. In addition, the researchers found that their "insider-outsider" collaboration helped to provide them with a more accurate representation of the problems with homeless street females. During the research some strengths of the homeless street female were discovered. The strengths consisted of the following: they were more than helpless victims and objects to be pitied, but they also possessed hopes, dreams for their future, and feelings of responsibility for each other. But these attributes did not diminish the harsh realities of the streets that females encounter almost on a daily basis. In summary, the main purpose of this study was to further examine the lived experience of the homeless street female by looking at the role caregiving relationships, social supports, coping strategies, gender and stigma, cultural beliefs and practices play in how they manage their lives. First, the homeless street females seemed to exemplify caregiving relationships in that they took care of each other when one of them was sick and if they could not care for the sick person they took them to the clinic where the Sister provided help to those who were destitute. Second, once the females became homeless they sought out other females so they could become a part of that group. The females discussed needing to belong to a group as a way to protect themselves from the possibility of being raped. Consequently, when the females were a part of a group, the group members helped each other and shared food, clothing and shelter made of plastic. Also the females helped those homeless females just coming to the streets find a boyfriend.

Having a boyfriend or husband is one way of reducing threats of physical and sexual abuse including rape. In addition, the homeless females discussed how they were treated differently than the boys by people in the community. The females expressed how the people in the community thought they should be working not sitting on the street begging and one female stated that she was referred to as something lower than the gutter by the people in the community. Although they were not treated any differently by the police, some of the females stated that they felt stigmatized by the people in the community particularly when they had children and were homeless on the street. They stated that the people would say to them, "You should be working not living on the streets with your children." Some of the homeless females interviewed began living on the streets as young as age ten. They left home due to a conflict with a parent and/or step parent, to look for work, and to go to school. Many of these females come from rural areas and they see Addis Ababa which is an urban area as an opportunity to live a prosperous life. Also, these females are often married with a husband and at least one child by the time they are sixteen. The girls reported that it was normal for girls to be married in Ethiopia at such a young age. The homeless females also discussed that they practice religion and are spiritual. The females stated that they were Orthodox Christians and they prayed constantly. The females in the study discussed how they lived by a church and went to the church to pray. Even though these females spend the day begging for money on the streets, they sometimes find menial jobs such as, selling tea on the streets and exchanging money for people on the streets to ride the buses as a way to survive. The females shared whatever money they received and helped each other. Despite the main issues, lack of food and shelter, the homeless females did not blame others for their plight. They only blamed themselves for their situation. According to the homeless females, the problem of homelessness happened to them as a result of personal fault and governmental fault, when the existing system fails to provide employment opportunities and housing. For instance, one respondent in the study stated that if she would have tolerated her stepmother, she would not be on the street even though she left home at the age of ten.

8. Limitations & Future Research

This study offers important contributions to the literature, however there are important limitations that affect external validity, particularly generalizability: (1) the small sample size and (2) all participants were Orthodox Christians. While this may have increased openness for the females to participate in the study and respond to the researchers' questions, it may have resulted in potential bias. Further, the convenience sampling employed in this study may have resulted in the selection of a specific subset of homeless street females and may not capture the extent of the diversity of the homeless street females' experiences. Problems which drive women to the street have not been fully studied, therefore there is a need for further research that might provide evidence that will lead to the development of culturally specific interventions to assist homeless females who are at risk for mental illness and health related issues.

Although there is no simple solution to homelessness, a rehabilitative and better network of community care, and job development services and supports are needed so that vulnerable people will have access to affordable housing (Baumohll, 1996). Single women and children are the most vulnerable groups among the homeless. Single women face physical and sexual abuse. Therefore, women and children are a group of homeless people who need services tailored to their particular needs since they face many challenges that differ from other homeless people. As a result, almost every community based prevention program is relevant to those who runaway to the streets. Moreover responses to homelessness cut across multiple agencies and multiple service systems. Homeless street females also have a multitude of causes that might happen to a single individual. However, addressing the major identified reasons homeless street females' runaway will help reduce the potential homeless population. Therefore, further research should include an understanding of the existential experience of homeless street females.

9. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that homeless street females have their own culturally defined views about homelessness that significantly influence their attitudes about caregiving relationships, coping strategies, social supports, gender and stigma, and cultural beliefs and practices. A key finding of interest is that these homeless females report that if the government would assist them with housing, food and a job they would be able to have a better life and future. The comments of participants in this study demonstrates that providing a community based program aimed at assisting the homeless street female with housing, food, and job training would lead to a sense of hope for a good life. An additional key finding in this study reveals the need for street based health and safety interventions, and street counseling which is supported by the homeless street female's interview discussions of illnesses due to syphilis and HIV/AIDS. Similarly, this study demonstrates further issues related to suicide and depression expressed by the homeless street female as a result of them feeling that they have no control over their circumstances.

References

- Baumohll, J. (1996). *Homelessness in America: The National Coalition for the Homeless*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Baynesagn, Ashenafi H. (2006). *Exploratory study of homelessness in Ledeta Sub City of Addis Ababa*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross Catholic Organization. (2009). *Female homeless street youth in Ethiopia*. Retrieved from <http://www.crosscatholic.org>.
- Global Security Organization. (2008). *Street children in Ethiopia*. Retrieved from <http://www.GlobalSecurity.org>.
- Greene, R. R. (2007). *Social work practice: A risk and resilience perspective*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Kilpatrick, A. C., & Holland, T. P. (2009). *Working with families: An integrative model by level of need (5th Ed.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Korboe, D. (1996). "Street child study, part two: A profile of street children in Kumasi." Report commissioned by UNICEF and Response, Faculty of Environmental and development Studies, University of Science and technology, Kumasi, 30 August, Unpublished.
- Miley, K. K., O'Melia, M., & DuBois, B. (2009). *Generalist social work practice: An empowering approach (6th Ed.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Olufemi, O. (2000). *Feminisation of poverty among street homeless women in South Africa*. *Development Southern Africa*, 17(2), 221-234.
- Sorsa, S., Kidanemariam, T., & Erosie, L. (2002). *Health problems of street children and women in Awassa, Southern Ethiopia*. *Ethiopia Journal of Health Development*, 16(2), 129-137.
- Saleeby, D. (1994). *Culture, theory, and narrative: Intersection of meanings in practice*. *Social Work*, 39(4), 351-359.
- Speak, S. (2005). *Relationship between children's homelessness in developing countries and the future of women's rights legislation*. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 22(3), 129-146.
- Sleeter, C., & Grant, C. (1994). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Tadess, G. A., & Mengistu, G. (1996). *Survey of adolescent reproductive health in the city of Addis Ababa*. *Ethiopian Journal of Health Development*, 10(1), 35-39.
- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2008, January 08). *Ethiopia: Focus on street children rehabilitation project*. Irin News. Retrieved from <http://www.irinnews.org>