

Original Research Article

**SOCIAL FACTORS LEADING TO STREET CHILDREN ABSCONDMENT FROM
REHABILITATION CENTERS IN IRINGA MUNICIPALITY**

ABSTRACT

This study examined social factors leading to street children abscondment from rehabilitation centers in Iringa Municipality. Specifically, the study investigated the children's peer pressure, social culture and children's autonomy factors contributing to children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers. Snow ball chain was used to obtain 10 street children who absconded from the centers and Purposive sampling key informants. Interviews and documentary review were used for data collection. Thematic analysis technique (TAT) was used to analyze data. The results showed that social factors significantly influenced children's decisions to abscond from rehabilitation centers. The study found social factors that drive children's decisions were peer pressure, social culture practiced at rehabilitation centers and the desire children's freedom or autonomy played a significant role towards children's decisions to abscond from rehabilitation centers. These factors are rooted in their social experiences, relationships, and perceptions of the environment that they lived before joining rehabilitation centers. To end the study, it concludes that children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centers was a result of a combination of social factors ranging from the influence of peer pressure, street children autonomy and desire to regain self-independence as well social culture practiced at the rehabilitation centers. The study recommends: (i) To rehabilitation center, addressing social factors effectively requires rehabilitation programs to incorporate comprehensive vocational training, financial education, and sustainable livelihood options that cater to the unique needs and aspirations of street children (ii) The government must develop a coordinated multi-agency strategy to identify and share information about concerns for a children person's safety when absconding from centers. (iii) Recommendations to scholars, the study recommends to examine political ecology factors contributing to children abscondment from rehabilitation centers to cover large area to enable generalization.

Key words: *Child, Street children, Abscondment, Rehabilitation Centers*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Street children's absconding from the rehabilitation centers is a global problem that has been studied and documented in various countries around the world. It dates back since industrial and demographic revolutions in the world where children were collected from the streets to rehabilitation centers to a meet service required for their lives. The United Nation International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 2022 estimated that 10 million Children were growing up along the urban streets. However, the magnitude of the problem varies around the world nations (Rees, 2022).

In response to the problem of street children absconding from rehabilitation centers, various initiatives and approaches have been implemented around the world. For example in Europe, some centers adopted a more participatory and child-centered approach to rehabilitation, including involving children in decision-making processes and providing opportunities for recreation and socialization. Additionally, some countries have developed policies and programs to support street children and prevent their involvement in the criminal justice system.

In Tanzania, Street children's absconding from the rehabilitation centers is a significant problem and it has been a subject of research and advocacy for many years (Ismail, 2020). One study by Kisanga, *et al.* (2015) explored the experiences of street children in Tanzania and found that absconding from rehabilitation centers was a common occurrence. The study found that some children absconded due to poor living conditions, mistreatment by staff, and a lack of opportunities for education and vocational training. The study also found that many children had difficulty adjusting to the structured and regimented environment of rehabilitation centers. Another study by Chambi and Temu (2018) looked at the challenges of rehabilitating street children in Tanzania and found that absconding was a significant obstacle to successful rehabilitation. The study found that children who absconded often faced multiple risks, including exposure to violence, exploitation, and substance abuse.

In Tanzania, response to street children absconding from rehabilitation centers have been in existence since 1980's (Ismail, 2020). Various initiatives include the establishment of Tanzania Street Children Network (TASCNET) in 1994 to coordinate efforts to support street children, including those in rehabilitation centers (Kweka and Kassile, 2013). Additionally, some centers have adopted a more flexible and participatory approach to rehabilitation, including involving children in decision-making processes and providing opportunities for

recreation and socialization (Kisanga *et al.*, 2015). Nowadays there are rehabilitation centers established across many urban centers of Tanzania working to rehabilitate children. Similarly, children taken to these centers seems to abscond and moving back to street where they lived before. Addressing these challenges requires a research data, facts, comprehensive and context-specific approach that involves collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, community organizations, and families to create supportive environments that meet the diverse needs of these Children (UNICEF, 2020).

It is due to existence of this problem and its prevalence at Iringa Municipality, this study attempted to examine social factors leading to street children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers and it provided a broad knowledge about the problem at Iringa Municipality.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study examined social factors leading to street children abscondment from rehabilitation centers in Iringa Municipality. Specifically, the study investigated the children's peer pressure, social culture and children's autonomy factors contributing to children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers in Iringa Municipality.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 The Rational Choice Theory

This study adopted Adam Smith's rational choice theory. His study on "An Inquiry into the Nature and causes of the wealth of nations," from 1776, proposed human nature's tendency toward self-interest resulted from moving economics to social sciences, in the 1950s and 1960s.

The advanced argument in this theory is that "individuals use their self-interests to make choice that will provide the greatest benefit. People weigh their options and make the choice they think will serve them best". The theorist assumes on how individuals decide what will serve them best is dependent on the personal preference. For example, one individual may decide that abstaining from smoking is best for them because they want to protect their health. Another will decide they want to smoke because it relieves their stress. Although the choice differs, both individuals make these choices to get the best result for themselves. This study sought to examine factors that influences street children abscond the rehabilitation

centers in Iringa Municipality. The linkage of rational choice theory to this study is that; street children's decision to abscond from the rehabilitations centers is rational as it is influenced by social a factor that drives their decision leading to abscondment. Hence, children weigh their options and make the choice they think will serve them best.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

2.2.2.1 Peer pressure and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centers

Peers are individuals who share common interests and needs (Malunde, 2018). Peer groups tend to be homogeneous in age and gender (Malunde, 2018). The peer group has a strong influence on street children because of the child's need for acceptance, belonging and protection. The group often determines the process of change, socialization and development among street children by providing emotional and material support.

The qualitative study by Muchiro (2021) explored the status of the rehabilitated children in shelter homes in South Africa. The findings showed that, Street children in most cases were socialized by peer group in streets. Hence, Children had a very close bound to their fellow children living in streets and helped for one another's survival. They often join together to form emotional and material support networks. The networks can range from a simple circle of friends to an organized, business network. Experienced street children teach new comers how to survive. Members of the group share food, clothing, shelter, information and psychoactive substances.

Annie (2013) also documented on the challenges affecting street children in post conflict Northern Uganda using quantitative methodologies. Peer pressure was cited to be a driver to street children conclusively. Researchers realized that; peer pressure can also be responsible to why these children turn to streets from rehabilitation center. The study findings further showed that, living in the streets allows for ultimate freedom due to lack of adult supervision. Sometimes other children already living in the street try to lure their friends into living in streets too in order to escape household tasks, school, and other responsibilities. The idea of freedom and lack of responsibility appeals to these children when life at home or rehabilitation centers becomes too demanding. Using an interview in her study respondents asserted that there's peer pressure demanding them to rejoin their fellow children living in streets where they assume to be free and do whatever they wish unconditionally.

These findings were controversy to the study of Musabyimana (2018) although didn't tally well with the study results of Molahlehi (2014), who realized the liberty of street children as

a driving force for them to establish own life and live as they wish instead of being under control or supervision offered by rehabilitation centers. An analysis of their study suggested a view that, while some children are influenced by peer groups, many of them are lured by the promise of excitement, freedom, and lack of responsibility. Hence, majority of street children are pushed onto the street by desperation and realization that run away to escape reality; however, reality hits even harder when on the streets.

In examining the peer pressure and street children's preferences to leave at the rehabilitation centers, Alem and Laha (2021), assessed socio-economic determinants of street children category and their occupational choice by considering the relationship between friend circles and the children category, empirical results showed that the majority of children working in the street have both street and non-street children friends. However, children who belong to streets and abandoned groups were familiar with only street kids' friends. A significant association indicated that their working and living environment have contributed in deciding on their friends.

Conclusively, literatures reviewed suggests a view that, the peer group had a strong influence on street children because once in the street, it was very important to become accepted among other children. The peer group provides a sense of belonging and protection against dangers of street life. Street children help in one another's survival by forming social networks, business networks, and teaching each other how to survive. They share clothing, food, sleeping space, drugs, and alcohol. The influence of the peer group is so dominant when it comes to peer pressure. Here the biggest limitation was this peer pressure is a relevant consideration in understanding why some street children abscond from rehabilitation centers, it was not the sole determining factor. The interplay of individual characteristics, support systems, the quality of rehabilitation centers, and external interventions all contribute to the complex decision-making process of street children regarding their rehabilitation journey.

2.2.2.2 Social culture and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centers

De Brito, (2014) argued that, cultures differ in terms of the particular norms that they find important and that guide the behavior of group members. Social psychologists have found that there is a fundamental difference in social norms between street life and life of rehabilitation centers. Norms in street life cultures are primarily oriented and focuses

primarily on self-enhancement and self-independence, self-direction and self-help by street Children themselves.

Socialization as defined by Fiasorgbor (2015) is the process that prepares humans to function in social life and to fit in the given context. It should be reiterated here that socialization is culturally relative - people in different cultures are socialized differently. This distinction does not and should not inherently force an evaluative judgment. Socialization is, of course, a social process. As such, it involves interactions among people. Socialization, can take place in a multiple context and as a result of contact with numerous groups. Some of the more significant contributors to socialization process are: parents, friends, peer groups, schools, siblings, and co-workers. Each of these groups has a culture that must be learned and to some degree appropriated by the socializee in order to gain admittance to the group.

Gwanyemba (2016) in the study to examine resilience of street children to violence, exploitation and abuse in Tanzania cities, employed quantitative analysis to develop the findings: To an end, he realized that, at safer home and centers for street children, cultures are taught to develop and value a sense of their personal self and to see themselves as inclusive family members, cooperation good citizens from the people around them and taught good manners and good life skills. Some of them feel special about themselves and they enjoy living at the rehabilitation centers while others feel disappointed and failed to cope with cultural norms and values at centers where they are taken for rehabilitation.

2.2.2.3 Street children's autonomy and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centers

The influence of freedom as a social factor on abscondment is a significant concern on different literatures. Freedom, considered a basic human right, holds paramount importance in shaping the dynamics within rehabilitation centers. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), individuals have an innate psychological need for autonomy and self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985). When children are deprived of this need for freedom and self-expression within rehabilitation centers, it can lead to feelings of frustration and rebellion. Research by Williams *et al.* (2019) highlights that a lack of perceived autonomy can increase the likelihood of abscondment, as children may attempt to regain a sense of control over their lives. Therefore, recognizing the pivotal role of freedom in the rehabilitation process and ensuring an environment that respects and supports children's autonomy could potentially mitigate the risk of abscondment.

It has have been augmented by other scholars that, Street children, who often experience hardships, challenges, and a lack of control over their lives on the streets, can develop a strong desire for autonomy (Mohammed, 2013). This desire for independence and self-determination can significantly influence their decisions to leave rehabilitation centers, where their actions and movements may be restricted (Byrne, 2018).

Kagumire (2020) in Western Province of Nigeria established a relationship between children autonomy as a coping mechanism that caused a resistance and attempts to escape from centers. The study realized that, Street children often develop survival strategies and coping mechanisms on the streets, where they have to make decisions independently. When placed in rehabilitation centers, they might perceive these controlled environments as a disruption to their developed autonomy. Street children in Africa often experience complex challenges due to their marginalized status and exposure to life on the streets. When these children are placed in rehabilitation centers, their desire for autonomy, developed through their experiences on the streets, can significantly influence their decision to abscond Kagumire (2020).

Bordonaro and Rishy, (2014) looked on the same variable using qualitative approach to develop findings. They examined rehabilitation centers provide support to street children in Mbale Uganda. The study found that in striking the right balance between offering necessary structure and maintaining individual children autonomy was challenging. An overly controlled environment clashed with street children's inherent desire for freedom, leading them to leave. The study further concluded that, there is psychological need for control. Psychologically, humans have a fundamental need for control over their lives. Street children, who have likely experienced a lack of control and agency on the streets, might perceive rehabilitation centers as further deprivation of their ability to make decisions. This can lead to a strong desire to regain control by leaving. Since for street children who have experienced disempowerment and marginalization, autonomy becomes a form of empowerment. The ability to make choices and decisions about their lives, even if these decisions are not always in their best interest, can provide a sense of agency that they may not want to relinquish.

Conclusively, these studies suggest a view that a desire for autonomy is a critical factor influencing street children's decisions to abscond from rehabilitation centers in Africa. They recognized that accommodating this desire within rehabilitation programs can improve engagement, reduce absconding rates, and contribute to the successful reintegration of street children into society. The gap developed to this factor is that, some street children may be

addicted to drugs or alcohol which can be a powerful barrier to rehabilitation making them disobedience and running away from centers as children who are smoking need to satisfy their addiction which can lead them to abscond from centers where substance use is restricted. Other children Street children may have learned to survive on the streets by engaging in informal labor or other activities. The prospect of returning to rehabilitation may be perceived as a threat to their livelihood hence running away from centers. As a result the study critically examined social factors using qualitative methodologies and qualitative designs to explorer street children's and caregivers experiences and opinions towards the problem.

3.0 METHODS

The study was conducted in Iringa Municipality under a case study of three street children rehabilitation centers. The study employed qualitative approach to capture the opinions, experiences, feelings, perceptions and understandings from the respondents on social factors leading to street children to abscond the rehabilitation centers by using a Cross - sectional research design. The target populations of this study were street children who absconded the rehabilitation centers. The study involved Ten (10) key respondents and (7) key informants. Key informants were seven (7) in this category; one (1) Social Worker at Iringa Municipal Council and Six (6) Caregivers of children from Upendo Center, FISCH and Huruma Center. The study employed non-probability sampling techniques to obtain street children who absconded from the rehabilitation centres as well it used to obtain key informants from the population. Using Purposive sampling, this technique used to obtain key respondents while Snowball sampling technique was employed to obtain ten (10) respondents that are street children who absconded from the rehabilitation centers. Collected data from different primary and secondary sources were recorded, edited, organized, and analyzed using thematic analysis and presented in relation to research questions. After recording and translating the interviews, researchers identified, analyzed and report on patterns and themes within the data by means of thematic analysis. Then, Results were interpreted and presented using a content of words based on themes discussed.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study examined social factors leading to street children abscondment from rehabilitation centers in Iringa Municipality. The study revealed the presence of children's peer pressure,

social culture and children's autonomy factors contributing to children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers which are presented in this section as follows.

4.1 Peer groups pressure and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centers

Peer groups are social clusters of individuals of similar age, interests, and backgrounds. They hold considerable influence over an individual's development, shaping behaviors, attitudes, and identity formation. Positive aspects of peer groups include socialization, emotional support, identity shaping, and informal learning (Kilbride, Suda, and Njeru 2017). However, negative aspects encompass peer pressure, potential for bullying, conformity, and unhealthy competition. The group often determines the process of change, socialization and development among street children by providing emotional and material support.

Researchers sought to examine how did the influence of peer pressure in streets influenced children's decision to abscond from the centers. The caregivers had to respond to this question. One caregiver said that;

“Peer groups are inevitable to street children. When they get out of centers to street for visiting or leisure they meet fellow street children. They play a pivotal role in shaping their identity, behavior, and attitudes. Positive aspects include socialization, emotional support, identity formation, and knowledge sharing. However, negative aspects such as peer pressure, bullying, conformity, and unhealthy competition can also influence individuals within these groups.” (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 25, July 2023).

He also added that; *“The Intersection and Impact for children decision to abscond from the centers is that: negative peer influences can lead them engaging into harmful activities or risky behaviors including disobediencies here to our center”*. (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023). Drawing an experience from caregivers, it was found that, street children often help in one another's survival. They often join together to form emotional and material support networks. The networks can range from a simple circle of friends to an organized, business network. Experienced street children teach new comers how to survive. Members of the group share food, clothing, shelter, information and psychoactive substances.

In obtaining information regarding this variable, children who absconded from the rehabilitation centers were asked how this has influenced their decision to abscond from the

rehabilitation centers. One respondent's response is presented in quoted conversation as follows;-

“We have friends at the centers as well in streets, during outing days we meet with our brothers friends who live and run their lives in streets, we also share life experience and they support us small amount of money because they have it... sometimes they visited us during a day time when we resided at centers....there is no restriction, they come to visit us and we play football, dance music...”. (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

Another respondent added that; *“Trust me brother, before I was taken to the center, I had friends here in streets, we looked for each other and lived as a family. I was difficult to leave them and cutoff the relationship with them since we have a strong bound of friendship”*. (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

The given information by children are consistent with that gathered from key informants who commented that most of the absconded children from the rehabilitation centers were the influence of peer pressure who motivated them to take decision to run away from centers. Information and experience shared by one caregiver at Huruma Center revealed that peer pressure contributed to children abscondment. They form the so called Collective empowerment.

“With this collective empowerment, regardless that they are at the center or on streets, these children form a collective empowerment. When they see one of their own taking steps towards creating a positive impact, it can inspire a belief that they too can make a difference. This collective mindset encourage more street children to get involved in running the rehabilitation center” (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

This findings tally well with the prior findings of Mathenge, (2016) that peer pressure contributes to children's at centers behaviours of running away from the rehabilitation centers back to streets.

The previous research shows that friendship and peers in the street are important for most street children survival. The friends become for many of them a sort of family, who give them love, acceptance and care. These groups sometimes also work together and split their income (Bordonaro and Rysi, 2014). There are however also examples of street children that do not work together in groups. They instead prefer to work alone since they believe that the

other children will steal from them (Kaime, 2013). Violence is common between street children, both between different groups, but also within groups of friends (Williams, 2020). It was found that majority of children who receive rehabilitation services come from streets not directly from home. Before taken to centers, these children live in groups, have strong bound to each other in a group and had have high degree of friendship and solidarity. More so, these children have shared experiences: Street children who have faced similar challenges and struggles can form strong bonds based on their shared experiences. When one of them expresses the idea of creating a rehabilitation center to help fellow street children, others might be influenced by the passion and determination of their peers, feeling inspired to contribute to the cause.

From the identified factors in this discussion and the majority of the interviewed cases it was found that, peer groups and children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers are intertwined in a complex relationship that shapes their development and outcomes. Peer relationships profound to empower street children not to break the cycle of street life, affecting their life prospects at the rehabilitation centers. More so, by leveraging the potential of peer groups, children at the centers can develop decision-making skills to resist from activities, rules and conditions offered at the center and end up in running away or being chased away.

From caregivers experience it was found that, peer pressure seemed to contribute much on children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers back to streets. It is now clear that most of the children depend much on their caregivers and when their caregivers are not there to offer guidance, these children find other alternative, knowledge and wisdom from their peers who can help them navigate in life. This was also most reported among interviewed children who also absconded from the rehabilitation centers in Iringa Municipality. Through this study, researchers noted that; for children to be in the street rather than centers could be a result of their fellow children in streets influencing them.

Conclusively findings show that, peer pressure is a significant factor contributing to street children absconding from rehabilitation centers. Recognizing and addressing this issue within the rehabilitation process is crucial to improving the chances of successful rehabilitation and reintegration of these children into mainstream society.

4.2 Street children's autonomy and abscondment of children from rehabilitation centers

Researchers also was interested in finding out how the desire to regain self-independence (freedom) for a sense of belonging in their previous street environment motivated children to abscond from the rehabilitation center. A focus for discussion was children's autonomy and life at the rehabilitation centers.

Many children who absconded from the rehabilitation centers spoke about the importance of having their own freedom and autonomy, and that when they perceived this to be taken from them, this led them to abscond: One street child in response to this question commented that; *"I run because I had more freedom living on the streets, and at least if I'm living on the streets I can use my phone to text my friends, I can meet my extra needs, I can talk to friends ..."* (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 20, July 2023).

Numerous children described by feeling as nevertheless centers was like a prison and that they disliked imposed rules upon them. This influenced children to abscond.

"To me I felt more like a prison than the rehabilitation center ... you have friends around the town center, you are not allowed to go outside without supervision, and you are followed around everywhere you go. You cannot even interact to another girl in the house otherwise you will be suspected to prohibit relationship. How are we supposed to feel like it's a place for us to live?" (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

At Huruma Center one caregiver who was asked same question she said that children demand for an autonomy in ways that could make them live as they wish. Based on her experience she shared an example of a child who were punished due to indiscipline and disrespect. After punishment the child escaped from the center perceiving a center as prison. She added that;

"Street children frequently develop a strong sense of autonomy due to survival in an environment where self-reliance is essential. They make own decisions, often adapting to adverse conditions. This autonomy is a double-edged sword, offering them resilience and survival skills, but also posing challenges when they encounter structured environments like rehabilitation centers" (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 25, July 2023).

At Upendo Center an interviewed caregiver argued that;

"Street life is a special way to live with a lot of freedom and a very immediate way to live. When the street children try to leave the streets it is often difficult for them to

adjust to a normal life again. They have become used to have a great amount of freedom, to do what they want, when they want it and without anyone telling them to do or stop doing something”. (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 25, July 2023).

From these arguments it was clear that, rehabilitation centers impose rules and regulations that may clash with the autonomy street children are accustomed to. This loss of freedom can lead to resistance and absconding. Also, unfamiliar environment at the rehabilitation centers are harshly different from the streets, making them uncomfortable and unfamiliar for street children.

The Social Welfare Officer in Iringa Municipal provided information that reflects views that many of the rehabilitation centers at Iringa did not establish strategies to integrate children’s autonomies and center life as a result many of them ended up absconding. He argued that;

“The autonomy of street children comes from their experiences at streets. This complicate efforts to rehabilitate them. Understanding the reasons behind their abscondment and implementing tailored strategies that respects their autonomy, while ensuring their safety is key to effectively addressing this issue. By considering the unique needs of street children, the rehabilitation centers supposed to offer transformative opportunities for these young individuals, while minimizing the challenges of absconding” (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 27, July 2023).

The Social Welfare Officer added that;

“Indeed, Street children may feel that children’s rehabilitation centers are like prisons. They cannot adjust to rules after experiencing freedom while in the streets. During such times their freedom at the rehabilitation centers are limited and they feel that caregivers of the institutions are abusing them” (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 27, July 2023).

The findings in these discussions are compatible to other findings from different studies in the same theme. A study by Beasley (2013) found that for children at centers lack freedom to live as they wish make it difficult for them to live at the center. The study noted that, they miss the freedom and had a hard time planning and have patience to wait for things that will happen in the future.

Bordonaro (2014) found that children had a hard time following strict rules and schedules at the centers. A study concluded that even caregivers who work with children believed that children who came from were addicted to street life.

Beasley (2013) concluded that, one way to understand why freedom is so important for the street children is by viewing it as one of the few things street children have in their life. They are proud of their ability to financially take care of themselves. When they leave the streets for example go to the center they become a subject for aid, which is viewed as if they are giving up the responsibility for own life. To expect them to give up this freedom the things they are offered instead have to be sufficiently appealing based on what the street children desires or needs.

Overall, the studies demonstrate the important role that peer pressure can play in street children's decisions to abscond from the rehabilitation centers. Addressing this issue is essential to ensure successful rehabilitation and reintegration into the society. Rehabilitation programs should focus on building positive relationships between street children and their peers, providing support to resist negative peer influence, and promoting a supportive environment for rehabilitation and reintegration.

The findings from in this discussion implies that street children often develop a strong sense of independence and self-reliance due to gained experience in streets. When placed in the rehabilitation centers, where their actions and decisions may be more controlled, they might perceive these environments as restrictive and seek to escape to regain their autonomy. Also children often have complex relationships with authorities and institutions due to their experiences neglect or mistreatment. If they perceive rehabilitation centers are extensions of such institutions, they might resist the loss of autonomy that being within these centers entails. Therefore balancing the need for structure and support with respect to individual's autonomy is a challenge that rehabilitation programs must navigate to effectively address the needs of street children and ensure their successful reintegration into the society.

4. 3 Social culture and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centers

In this study a social culture constitutes of social norms, values and practiced rules at the rehabilitation centers. The social culture have had to be practiced and adhered to everyone children receiving rehabilitation services or for all residing at the centers. All selected centers

for this study including Upendo Center, FISCH and Huruma Center have norms, values and regulations to facilitate effective rehabilitation programme.

Respondents were asked how these norms, values and rules influenced children to abscond from the rehabilitation centers. Their responses were as follows;

An interview with a child who left one of the street children rehabilitation center indicated that he had been at more than centers before he realized to abscond. He shared an experience from these centers that they had strict norms and values that are bided to everyone individual living at the center. The rules and norms are said to be less relevant to them (children) due to their needs and wants they strive for to achieve. He also added that, streets has neither values no norms. Hence, their lives have no restrictions and have full freedom compared to centers. This is among the reason motivated them him to be free from norms and restrictions.

“When I was in town I was free to do what I wanted. Then I did not understand that teachers are trying to protect us. Not to adopt bad behaviours, but going the good way. It was very hard. Maybe the teacher can tell you don’t go out without permission, so you are feeling very angry, why, I want to go, and I want to go. Maybe you want to go visiting, then teacher told you this is not the right time to go. So it was very difficult” (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

Another child response to same question was;

“When I came to the center there were rules, tougher than today, so it was hard, for example when you go out without permission you get punishment. I disliked this because every time punishment, so I decided to run away. I have been at the center for the fifth months where I experienced conditional life, everything is done by laws and they didn’t want us to go outside at night. We were supposed to garden and make the center clean daily to me it was difficult to perform such duties, while on street we did not have such rules and duties” (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

This arguments point of view shows that in the streets they used to do what they wanted; therefore it was difficult to start following new rules at the centers. They used to take care of themselves and not have anyone to tell them what was right or wrong

Obtained information from the key informants at the rehabilitation centers to some extent seemed to contradict with the argument got from the children in terms of level of treatment, follow-ups values, norms and rules.

One caregiver at Huruma Center shared an experience that, most of the children feel that rehabilitation programs are like minor prisons which limits their freedom and what they want. This is worsened by the stories which are taken to the street by those children who had relapsed from the rehabilitation program. They discourage other children not to undergo rehabilitation because of one reason or the other which they claim to be out of their own experience. Thus when social workers approach the street children for recruitment they face rebellion and few are willing to undergo rehabilitation. The caregiver articulated that, “*There are rules that are implemented here at the center. “These rules are implemented to prevent chaos, maintain control and order in the center”*”. (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 26, July 2023).

According to caregiver at Huruma Center, centers generate a set of rules which are needed for their maintenance and survival. Therefore, behavior setting are created by the physical environment and social norms. The caregiver indicated that since the center was established in 2011 there are standard rules and norms that caregivers and children have to abide.

At Upendo Center, key informant stipulated a number of rules that are imposed to children which are flexible and non-flexible rules. Violation to norms and rules results to punishment that is given at the center. The manner in which it is enforced depends on the child in question, as well the circumstances at a given time. Since the caregiver knows children very well, they are able to deny privileges from which they derive preference. Hence, this results in effective punishment, deterring them from further offense.

On the other hand, the non-flexible rules are never changed and nothing added or omitted. Consequently, children at center need to obey the following rules:

- a) Not allowed to fight
- b) Are not permitted to go out for an hour or two during weekend and week days. Their privileges are taken away if they violate rules.
- c) Are not permitted to smoke anything in the center; this includes glue, Marijuana and cigarettes.
- d) Not allowed to engage in love affairs (boyfriend and girlfriends)
- e) Are not allowed to engage in illegal activities for any means including collecting scrap metals, plastics and firewood at dump sites, betting
- f) Are supposed to engage in domestic chores such as cleaning and gardening.

- g) They signed a contract after absconding three times from the center. The contract stipulates clearly what will happen to them if they abscond once more.
- h) Not allowed to reside in the center when they are older than eighteen years
- i) Not supposed to be removed from the center by anyone without the caregiver permission

According to caregiver's, these values, norms and rules have to be in practical and adhered to every child living at the center or receiving rehabilitation services from the center. The Children's willingness to follow rules and regulations results to easy implementation of the rules. Their cooperation is motivated by benefits that they procure when they are obedient. They receive benefits such as sleeping on nice beds, bed sheets, eating delicious food, and playing sports and games at the centers. On the other hand, the implementation process is hindered by children's familiarity with street life as before they lived independence life without control. The conflict that arises between their needs and rules of the center; and outside temptations such as the need to go to streets to earn income.

To quote One Social Welfare Officer who was interviewed in this study;

"Those are the avenues through which street child can realize his or her potential and self-worth, hence come off the streets." In fact the government provides regulation to all rehabilitation centers the way has to structure their programme norms, rules and regulations. Indeed most of these rules and norms are extremely good. The problem is on children themselves....they have bad perceptions towards these centers. They want an easy treatment and free from imposed conditions hence running back to streets" (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 27, July 2023).

This augment revealed that the rehabilitation centers are in compliance with to regulatory authorities. Their norms and values are good to socialize children into good manner, good behavior and to prepare them to fit well in the society. He added that, there have been fewer centers for street children are operated as NGOs and in many cases do not have regular inspections to centers. **Ultimately, rehabilitation centers were not taking adequate care of the children and some of them take advantage of them to earn money and some mistreat them. To other side, Children have profound to be disobediences as a result they cannot cope with the center's norms and values making them running from the centers to seek a free place where they will be free from norms, regulations, restrictions and conditional life.**

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study focused on social factors leading to street children absconding from the rehabilitation centers in Iringa Municipality. It was revealed that children at the rehabilitation centers abscond as a result of combination of social factors ranging from the social culture practiced at the rehabilitation centers, street children autonomy for self-independence and the influence of peer pressure at the streets. These factors are rooted in their social experiences, relationships, and perceptions of the street environment that they lived before joining the rehabilitation centers. Hence, children were not willing to reside at the centers instead their preference was street life. If nothing change at the rehabilitation centers children will continue running away back to streets.

5.2 Recommendations

This study recommends that, different strategies and comprehensive approaches to address the social factors leading to street children to abscond from the rehabilitation centers. It requires a multi-faceted strategy that considers both short-term survival needs and long-term social integration to street children who are raised at the centers. To rehabilitation center; addressing social factors requires a holistic approach that emphasizes building trust, providing emotional support, respecting cultural identities, and involving street children in the decision-making processes. Rehabilitation centers should create an environment that fosters a sense of belonging and meets their emotional needs can contribute to greater engagement and reduced absconding rates from the rehabilitation centers. In consistency to this recommendation also there should be counseling services offered to caregivers and children at the rehabilitation centers to address emotional and psychological needs. Trained counselors can help street children navigate challenges, build self-esteem, and develop coping mechanisms.

To the government, must develop a coordinated multi-agency strategy to identify and share information about concerns for a children person's safety when absconding from centers. Collaboration between multiple agencies such as the department Social Welfare and rehabilitation centers, the police, education providers and local community could improve ways to develop and implement both prevention strategies and effective responses. Missing incidents are often complex, and one agency alone is unlikely to implement an effective solution. Steps to facilitate collaborative and coordinated responses would be enhanced

through shared understandings about factors for children abscondment and strategies to prevent children abscondment from the rehabilitation centers.

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