

Garbage Collection and Rag Picking: An Issue of Child Labor in Rawalpindi (An Anthropological Approach)

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Abstract

The nature of this study was qualitative and covers the children collecting the Garbage and Rag picking in Rawalpindi city. In the study, Afghan scavengers were selected for qualitative analyses. The family backgrounds of these scavengers and the demographic factors were also analyzed. Most of the qualitative methods including key informant interviews, visit and stay in the area, In-depth interview of 50 participants was applied to observe the phenomenon and collect the relevant information. The process of scavenging and the situation explored presented that besides poverty and economic pressure, the migration, independent nature of scavenging work, higher income as capered to other forms of child labor and increased urbanization were the major causes behind the phenomenon. The study also revealed that scavenging children face isolation due to their Afghan identity, higher health risks due to unprotected exposure to hazardous waste and routine violence from people. A comprehensive strategy is required for dealing with this issue in society.

Key Words: Garbage Collection, Rag Picking, Scavenger Locales, Scavenging

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Child Labour in Rag-Picking Sector may be considered as the nastiest kind of child labor. The children working in this field face multiple problems that seriously affect their physical, psychological and emotional health. The scavengers are supposed to wander in the dirtiest places where they find certain elements from the garbage. In order to collect garbage, they may visit markets, streets, open dump areas or any other place where they might get the garbage. After collecting the garbage, they have to sell the collected items to the specific contractors. The contractors have Kandas and scavengers regularly interact with them and sell their items. This sort of child labor is quite common in almost every big city of Pakistan.

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The involvement of the children in garbage collection badly influences the personality of the children.

Poverty pushes the children towards child labor because due to the large family size, the needs of the family increased. Resultantly, the children have to do work and family becomes economically dependent on the children.. (Pakistan Eco survey 2002-03: 44).

The current study explores and analyzes the garbage collection extensively in the context of child labor. The multifaceted issues that children are facing in the field and the expected consequences are also explored and explained.

The study is significant in a way as few studies have been conducted on this issue particularly in the context of Anthropological approach. This research will guide in understanding the socio-cultural factors which push the Afghan children to become garbage collectors in Pakistani society. The research also suggests that there is a severe need to develop a mechanism to address the issues related to the scavenging and moreover, government must introduce certain policies to engage these children in other productive activities, create jobs, create business opportunities, promote awareness at societal and grass-root level and particularly focus on improving the environment.

Review of the Literature

The majority of scavenging children in the area of research were Afghan refugees and they were from an alien culture and it was important to observe their cultural variations.

The study focuses on Afghan children who use to collect the garbage from the various places of the city. The Afghan children working in Pakistan are facing problems at multiple levels; firstly they moved from their country to this country due to the war situation, secondly; they are facing the discriminatory behavior while working in this society, thirdly; the specific myths have also been constructed towards their deviant behavior which prevails in the society. Consequently, the Afghan children not only work in hazardous conditions but they also suffer from the overall negative behaviour of the society as well.

It is quite complex but interesting to study the living patterns of Afghanis in Pakistani culture. They came from Afghanistan due to the war and they started to live and earn in Pakistani society. They influenced the society economically as well as socially in different domains. They are usually involved in drug trafficking and in other illegal activities that negatively impact society. It also has changed the perceptions and views of Pakistani police regarding the Afghan migrants because they have a bad record and involved in criminal activities. However, the scavenging children are also exploited, harassed, abused, and face psychological and emotional pressure like other children working Pakistani society.

It is also very much important to study all forms of violence in order to understand this phenomenon of the Afghan scavengers,

The act of violence is linked to the multiple socio-cultural factors at a large level and secondly, the violence has multiple types and it cannot be only understood in the context of just physical violence. The psychological violence and undermining the prestige and self-respect of a child may also be linked to violence.” (Robert, 1991, pp.181-186).

The opinions of the certain interviewee in the preliminary research was quite negative about the scavenging and they termed it as dirty work. However, the religion has a different view and these words of the Holy Quran regarding the poor and orphans give us the lesson to love and provision of food to them so that they will not indulge in evil practices like scavenging.

“And do not scold the poor and feed the orphan”. (Al-Quran, Sura Almaoon, 107:2-3).

The role of Scavenger needs to be understood in a clear and holistic way because the role does not only mean that they are performing the economic roles rather at the same time, children also play other roles. Kelly says:

“The children engaged in child labor may get more attention in the context of their economic achievement; however, they also take the other responsibilities of their families”. (Kelly, 1981, pp.268-278)

Ebrahim referred to an article written by Shireen in which she stated that;

It is a good thing if the children are helping their families but these children should not be deprived of their fundamental rights such as education, health, and development”. She further stated that “ It is our responsibility to manage and regulate their working timings, engage them in education, and ensuring their good health (Ebrahim, 1997, pp.60-81).

Research Methodology

Field Observations and Experience

Both the scavenging places were visited in order to observe and interrogate about the genuine situation from 8.00 am till 5.30 pm. In addition, the researcher spent sometimes with them as well and observed their way of living, working, social setup and behavioral patterns of the scavengers. All the details and information were recorded via field notes in the Field Diary. Furthermore, an interview guideline was also developed and employed to gather the data from the respondents.

Area Profile

The Locale

Rawalpindi is quite old and ranks as the fourth largest city of Pakistan. The Pir Wadhai, a famous point in Rawalpindi was the focus of the researcher because at that point many scavengers used to visit and picked up the garbage. The scavengers were observed and followed even till their homes and it was found that mostly they came multiple locations such as Fauji Colony (Pirwadahi), Dhok Mutkial and kachi Abadi (near fruit mandi).

Results and Discussion

Scavenger Locales and Popular Places for Scavenging

It was very important to have an in-depth understanding of the life of the scavengers and for this reason, there are multiple factors that contribute to their life in any way. So, two different locales including Fauji Colony and Dhok Matkial were selected.

Age and Ethnic Composition of the Sample

The purposive sampling technique was employed in the study and audiences were approached through this sort of sampling. The scavenger children working in Rawalpindi were selected for the study. Only those children were contacted who were found doing their scavenging work during my visits to the locale of the study.

The male scavengers with Afghani background were selected with the focus on the age range from 5 to 18 years. The respondents were taken from two places; 23 from Fauji Colony, 27 from Dhok Mutkial. Thus, the total sample size was about 50 scavengers from the age group 5 to 18 years old with the majority between 10 to 16 years.

The Afghan scavenger children were from different areas of Afghanistan and different tribal identities. Most of the children were from Nangarhar, Qandahar and Mazar Sharif. These all scavenging children were Pushto speaker and most of them were Alt Khel, Shinwari, and Mohmman by tribe. These tribes have some native populations in the territorial limits of Pakistan as well.

Life of Scavengers

The study only focuses on the Afghan scavengers who are struggling for their survival and engaged in garbage collection because they do not have any other option.

Family Background of Scavengers

Data shows that about 43.3% of garbage collectors shared that their father died are much higher than the normal figure of our society. This high number indicates that male mortality has been affected by some special circumstances of life. Many respondents shared that their fathers died in Afghanistan during armed conflict and some others reported that the cause behind their father's death was some accident or illness. In present study 8.3% respondents said that their mothers are not alive. Moreover, the observation indicates that most of the houses were comprised of joint families. This high prevalence of joint family system as a result of weaker economy and traditional practice at the same time. During study, 63.3% children claimed that their family is economically dependent on them. That means without their share the economy of their families could not run. The father is answered by 21.6% as the main supporter of the family. To fulfill the basic needs of their family, it was necessary for them to work and earn the livelihood for their family. The number of married couples in a household and the availability of rooms in many of the cases was not matching. It was observed in some cases that in contradiction with the cultural norms some old married couples may have been sharing their rooms with their younger children. It was reported in few cases that females of their families were also involved in scavenging but when these reach puberty, they do not allow them to work.

Education

A Vast majority of (73%) scavenger shared that they did not attend any school and have no education. It was also told that even their siblings or other family members nor went to school. This can be concluded from the response.

Taleem kya hoti hy hmmain pta hi nahi, hmare gaon mn log parte nhi hn aur na hi hmaray ghar mn koi para hua hy (I do not know much about education and people of our village do not get education and nor anyone is educated from my family)

During study, it was also observed that the respondents did not consider themselves as the respectable members of this society rather they believed that they came from somewhere else and it is not their country. In the same way, they think that education is not for them. One of the respondents shared that,

Hum log parhtay nhi to kaam hi krna hota hy. Agar parhain gay tou bahot waqt zaya ho jae ga (We do not get education, we have to work because much time will be wasted if we go for study).

The lack of financial support or poverty was termed as the main reason for not getting education. They further shared that their parents are also not educated and they do not know about the education and only focus on the work.

Health

The findings show that they were not familiar with the basic precautionary measures for maintaining health and hygiene. They did not give much importance to minor injuries and considered it as a normal injury and avoid visiting doctors. It was reported by the respondents that they often get sick and many times in a couple of months they feel temperature. The cough was a common thing among the scavengers. When asked, they responded that they do not consider cough as disease. They usually consider the disease as a very normal part of daily life. This was because of higher presence of ill friends of family members around them. This statement of a respondent clearly gives the same message.

Bemari tou zindagi ka hissa hay. Sub log he bemar hotay hain. Waisay he tou her hasptal main rush nai hota (Illness is the part of normal life. Everyone gets ill, its normal. It can be seen in hospitals where always there is rush).

The high level prevalence of illness is evident from their behaviour that in case of absence of any of their peer, it is generally assumed that he might be be sick.

Areas, Activities and Strategies of Scavenging

The dumping areas existed within the Rawalpindi and around the city. However, mostly the Afghan children work and gather the garbage from within the city in areas, places, roads and containers particularly in Pirwadahi. The different areas and places produce a different kinds of garbage. Every Afghan children tried his best to collect more relevant and expensive garbage in order to earn more money. Some of them specified the areas where they regularly visited and collected the material.

After collecting the material, they sell the items to Kanda and it helps them in earning money so that they could buy bread and better for themselves and family. They never tell the Kanda owner the exact amount of the items rather they bargain with him for better dealing.

Badshah, an Afghan children shared that;

HumApna Maal Kisi Kisi Din Aur Kanda Per Bhi Baichta Hay. Asal main jub kissi malik say paisay udhar lain to wo paisay poray honay tak sub mall usi ko bechna hota hay. Ghareeb log hain or koi paisay bhi too nhi deta. Zada aisay hota hay kay hum nay jeetnay paisay liy hoty hain kanday ka malik us say bhot zada wapis leta hay or jub bhi hum pochain to kehta hay kay abhi paisay poray nhi howay hain. (I also sell my collection on some other Kandas . In fact when you take some loan from any owner of garbage selling shop it is compulsory to sell your material to the same until your debt is over. We are poor people other than these owners no one gives us money. Most of the time we return much more amount to the owner than we actually got from him. When we asked the owner that how much money is remaining he always replies still your debt is not over).

Children under debt of any owner of garbage selling shop do not get proper rate of their materials by him so, they many times try to sell a big portion of their collected material to other selling points because they might have better rate there without having any issue of debt cutting. One of the interesting observations was that many scavengers had a piece of magnet with them and they shared that this magnet helps them in identifying and attracting the metal from heaps of garbage. They consider it very important tool which guides and facilitates them in their professional work.

Work Environment

The environment is almost same for all the scavengers and they had to do their work openly in the summer. However, one of the respondents, Khan Bahadar expressed about their activity in summer;

Humain is say koi faraq nhi perta kay mosam kon sa hay germyoo main dhuper main kam mushkil hota hay or serdiyoo main subah juldi kam kerna mushkil hota hay. Kya kerain kam to kerna hota hay bayshak germi ho ya serdi wesay bhi garmi main hum log kahin chayoon dhek ker lait jaty hain or serdiyoo main bhot juldi kam kay liy nhi nikalty. (It does not make any difference that in which weather we are working in summer it's difficult to work around mid day and in winter the difficult time is early in the morning. What can we do work is work and we have to do it whatever the weather is. To deal with the extreme nature of weather in summer we take some rest under some shadowed place and in winter we try to delay the starting time of our work).

When asked about the environment such type of responses was given;

Kam kay liy bahir to nikalna perta hay. Gher main bhet ker to kuch nhi ho sakta. Wesay bhi humara kam jin jagoo per hota hay wahan shesha pather waghera to hotay hei hain. Ab Nullah kay kinaray to jaga saaf nhi ho saky na. (For work it's necessary to leave your home. We cannot do anything to earn our livelihood while sitting at home. Whatever we do the places of our work are never safe and its normal that the pieces of glass and sharp stones lies there. Its not possible to have clean place around Nullah where the garbage is present).

Scavengers worked in an open environment and they did not have any proper arrangement and their health due to open environment, their health gets deteriorated. In addition, during work, they might face the dangerous insects.

Behavior of Others

The behavioural issues have also been recorded in the study. It was found that Afghans perceive that the society did not own them and they also maintained a distance from the society. Moreover, due to their poor and dirty appearance, people

do not go near to them. This behaviour seriously disturbed the children and even it triggered them to think in a revengeful way as a child expressed his anger;

Jub Mere pas Ropya Aye ga Tou Main Chand Logon Ko Nhi Choron Ga Wo jinoo nay aksar meray sath gulat kiya hay. (When I will get independent by earning a lot of money then I will not spare a few persons who many time did wrong with me)

He shared further on request of the researcher that the local people sometimes beat him against the crimes which he did not commit. The discriminatory behaviour is very clear towards the scavengers, told respondent. Badshah Gul, expressed that;

Humain assi terah kay kam kerna diya jata hay kyun kay as mulak kay log humain chota samjhty hain. Jub moqa milta hay to bhot say log humain bora kehty hain or martay pitay hain or kuch humain gualt kam kernay ka bhi kehty hain. (We had to do similar sort of work because local people treated us as inferior people. We also face harassment, abuse, and demands for sexual favours).

Some respondents reported that;

Jo milta hy eo utha lete hen”, “sra din chowk pr ghomta hun, K shayd kxh engine mil jaye; Kafi Bar Chori B Ki aur Bechin b Magr Ab Tk Apna Kam shoro kernay Ke Paisay Ikathay Nai Ker Saka.(Whatever I get I always try to steal it. I whole day roam around the bus station to get any chance of stealing some spare parts especially engines. A many times stolen different things and sells them but still I am unable to collect the required money for starting the business).

This situation is quite alarming for the society because their behavioural tendency showed that they may do anything for money.

Causes and Effects of Scavenging on Life

Urbanization

In our society, we usually produce a lot of garbage daily and the system of its collection is very weak because of very high growth of population and its unplanned settlement. The unavailability of the facilities of the garbage collection has increased garbage points in the city. This situation produced an opportunity for the poorest of the society and they started to adopt the garbage collection as a profession. Because of much higher pace of urbanization and as a result increase in unemployment rate, poverty, and inflation it is necessary for all members of a family from working class to get economically active because family in this way can ensure their survival. In almost all highly urbanized cities around the underdeveloped world, the phenomena of scavenging by children is prevalent because most of the time the urbanization and expansion of residential area is unplanned and done haphazardly with the passage of time.

Migration

Migration may be considered as a significant reason, because the Afghans started scavengers in this society when they migrated from their country due to the war situation and settled permanently in this society. As a garbage collector shared that;

Main yeh sub sari zindagi nhi kerna chata magar meray pass or koi rasta bhi to nhi hay. Afghanistan main bhi koi kam nhi milta. (I do not have any intentions to do this sort of work throughout my life. However, i do not have any other option because it is difficult to get work in Afghanistan)

Some of the common explanations of the scavengers are as follows;

Meray walid jang main foat ho gay thay ab main bara hon or mujay gher walo ko palna hay. (In war, my father died and now I am grown up so, It is my duty to feed the family)

A shopkeeper stated that;

Ye gande banday hen aur korray ki Oar mn bheek b mangte hn (They are in fact beggars and using the mask of garbage collectors).

Some of the crimes have also been linked to them by the society such as theft, drug addiction and violence. It cannot be generalized as in some cases, they are rightly accused and sometimes, they are unfairly accused and treated. It is a quite natural response by the society because not being a local people do not consider their right on economic opportunities of the area.

Independent Nature

The unskilled people are more inclined towards this sort of activity because they could not get any proper job or work. However, the study found that these scavengers also do not have any intention to work under the supervision of any authority. According to respondent Dost Muhammad,

Main nokri kerta hon or muj ko pora waqat wahn per rehna perta hay or akher mian fixed tunkhawa milty hay. (I am working for payment and my duty is to work till fixed time but I receive very less amount in the end)

Some others said;

Yehan to jeetni dair kam ker saky hain tub tak kertay hain or nokri main appni merzi nhi hoty. Jahn dil kerta hay ja saky hain. Ager zada mall mill jay ya zada pheray laga lain to zada paisay kama saky hain lakin nokri main to asa nhi ho sakta. (Here we can work for as long as we want but in job we are not independent. Here we can go wherever we want, if we work for more time or collect more material we can earn more money but this is not possible in job under someone).

Another said,

Jo waqt malik kehta hy Us waqt pr Jana prta hyv or jub wo kehta hay tub chute hoti hay (you have to go as per the time desire by the employer and only when he allows you can leave the place).

It can be concluded that the migration and many other factors may be connected to this profession such as un-skilfulness, lack of exposure, joblessness and poverty. Thus, such reasons force the people to join the scavenging profession.

Family and Profession of Scavenging

The socialization patterns under which the children are grown let them adopt this profession at very early age. When these children are too young they regularly observe their parents or elder siblings doing the same. It was also mentioned by an informant that,

Kora uthanay waloo kay bachay bachpan say appnay man bapp ko roazana yehi kertay howay dhektay hain. (the kids of garbage collectors see their parents collecting the garbage every day).

Thus children realize that garbage does have some value and they also adopt this profession. They use to cooperate with their parents in collecting the garbage.

Conclusion

The children of Afghan refugees in the form of scavengers are working in Rawalpindi. The profession of scavenging is not only limited to the children rather Afghan men and women are also working as scavengers within and around the city. But, Afghan children of different age groups are in large numbers as compare to the elders. The study found that behind the profession of scavenging, there are multiple reasons such as miseries, poverty, and unemployment. In addition, the role of Afghan families also has great influence on their children to work in this field so that they could earn and give to their families for survival. On the other hand, garbage collection has also become a sound profession and scavengers are working in this profession with their choice. It also has multiple reasons such, the education, special or any technical skills are not required to adopt this profession.

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