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Paid work of street children in Poland: compulsion or free choice? Research report

Abstract: This article uses research findings of a project on street children in Poland and abroad which the author conducted between March 2010 and February 2011 in Poland and 50 other countries. The research contains the opinions of street workers from public institutions and non-government organizations concerning various aspects of the phenomenon of street children. When it comes to street children's work in Poland, it is a relatively marginal problem when compared with street children's earning practices in other parts of the world. Currently the project findings are being used in the form of publications.

Keyword: street children, dysfunction, dysfunctional family

Paid work of street children is not a new phenomenon. This dimension of reality is particularly characteristic for everyday life of children and youth living outside our country, although it is also present among groups of street children in Poland. This phenomenon is not well known to a wider public. When we consider the process of social rehabilitation of street children which aims at raising pro-social individuals whose main source of income (as well as a token of their maturity) is their professional work, this phenomenon becomes a disturbing problem. What is most disturbing is the fact that earning money is one of the relatively constant elements of their functioning outside the home environment. Therefore it is essential to deeply analyze the phenomenon of acquiring money by street children in Poland.

This article aims to answer two questions concerning working with street children which we posed to street workers. The first one is whether children and youth's paid work is a compulsion or a free choice. The other one concerns the types of earning forms that street children perform. Finally we are going to present suggestions for social assistance activities concerning the problem of street children's paid work.

An attempt at defining the notion of street children

The analyses of the phenomenon of street children and youth in Poland, whose everyday life is characterized by a high degree of assimilation with the street at the cost of their time spent in such social-educational environments as family and school, can be traced back to the earliest academic attempts at defining the basic notion of street children. Such an attempt, though presented only marginally in our observations, is necessary for two reasons: firstly, both theoreticians and practitioners differ when it comes to defining groups of children and youth who spend considerable parts of their days, and sometimes nights, in the street, understood in the broad sense of the word. According to A. Fidelus, the notion of street children in the literature on the subject, studies, discussions as well as media coverage clearly suggests that the phenomenon behind this term is growing and assuming new forms and varieties¹. Secondly, it is essential to adopt one's own definition of street children and youth in Poland whose street functioning is correlated with the paid work they perform.

Among the definitions of street children in Poland, the notions connected with family relations and paid activities are the closest to our reflections.

First of all, the concept of street children is used to describe such groups of youth and children before the age of 18 whose family bonds are poor and erratic because of numerous dysfunctional factors. This situation results in the street taking over such functions of the family as care or material and economic aspects; and the upbringing and socialization in the street turn out to be more friendly and attractive than the one of the home environment. Therefore street children's distance towards their families grows in parallel with the amount of time they spend in the broadly defined street. Our standpoint is confirmed by J. Raczkowska who believes that

¹ See A. Fidelus, *Dzieci ulicy – podobieństwa i różnice w zależności od czynników środowiskowych i kulturowych*, in: *Uwarunkowania i wzory marginalizacji społecznej współczesnej młodzieży*, W. Kubik, B. Urban (eds.), Kraków 2005, p. 171.

“a street child spends a considerable part of her life in the street, lives along with its rhythm, functions in the culture of risk, danger and social exclusion”². Moreover, the author suggests that the assimilation of street life style generates various dangers. We have adopted the term of street children in the context of paid work from B.Głowacka.³ It is used to describe children and youth undertaking paid work. In the developing countries, which experience political changes, most of these children come from extremely poor families.

The principal component of the definition of street children in Poland is their experience of two elements: dysfunctional family relationships and paid work.

Street children’s work: compulsion or free choice?

Before we reflect whether street children in Poland undertake paid work out of coercion or free choice, we must stress the fact that paid work is normally an activity performed by adults. The definitions of childhood and youth explicitly prove that these social groups don’t have the duty to work in order to provide even basic financial means for themselves or their families. This duty belongs to parents or legal guardians.

On the basis of the opinions of our respondents from Poland, we understand the term “coercion” in two ways: firstly as pressure exerted on somebody in order to force them to perform some action. An adult who forces street children to work does not ask them for permission and they, under pressure, often against themselves, carry out the demand. This is when we speak about street children being coerced to do paid work. Secondly, pressure can be understood as an inner need to do something for oneself or others. In this context street children feel the compulsion to earn money, but they are not forced to do so. This kind of compulsion should be placed in the category of free choice.

The answer to the question whether street children’s paid work is a matter of coercion or free choice lies in a shared standpoint which we shall analyze according to the three following criteria: street children are forced to work, street children are not forced but they work for themselves and, finally, street children are not forced to work but they do work for their families.

² J. Raczowska, *Dzieci ulicy na marginesie cywilizacji*, „Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze” 2003, no. 5, p. 59.

³ See B. Głowacka, *Dzieci ulicy*, in: *Encyklopedia pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, J. M. Śnieciński (ed.), vol. I, Warszawa 2003, p. 879.

Within the group of respondents from Poland, 54 of them believe that street children are forced to undertake paid work. This kind of coercion is used only by their parents. Here are some examples of survey answers:

- 1) *Occasionally it happens that parents force a child to work when they are financially inefficient (Łódź).*
- 2) *Children are frequently used as breadwinners by their parents, especially in poverty-stricken families (Gdańsk).*
- 3) *Most frequently coercion comes from the parents, e.g. in situations when they take their children to work expecting to be helped by them (Poznań).*
- 4) *Parents very often want their children to work. It is a form of coercion (Złotów).*
- 5) *Most children are forced by their parents to work during summer holidays so that they can buy their own handbooks and other school necessities. It seems to be a form of coercion (Radom).*
- 6) *They are very frequently made to earn by their guardians (Kraków).*

It is worth noting that the above answers of street pedagogues take into account frequency scale: very often (most often and the majority), often and sporadically. On the basis of these representative answers one should draw the conclusion that in so far as parents do force their children to work, this coercion is very frequent.

Analyzing the data collected by our respondents, we must conclude that the problem of street children in Poland being forced to paid work is not free from contradictory views. A street worker from Góra Kalwarii claims that the phenomenon concerns cities with high number of citizens, while a respondent from Krakow believes that it concerns mostly Romany children. It is hard to assume that the survey opinions are objective when it comes to the scale of the phenomenon in all Poland, which can be exemplified by the opinion expressed by a respondent from Złotów, a town with a small population or by the fact that, apart from the respondent from Krakow, no other respondent considers Romany children as a group most afflicted by coercion to paid work. Furthermore, we learn that street children groups include Romany children only from the Krakow street worker.

One should draw the conclusion that the phenomenon of street children being forced to paid work by their parents results from insufficient amount of financial means in families or from chronic poverty. Such a view is confirmed by B. Łaciak, who believes that “ usually the fact that children undertake paid work

is a result of economic compulsion, and their earnings are often the only means allowing them and their families to survive. Such enforced labour of the youngest robs them of their childhood, education opportunities but also of their chances for a better future”⁴.

According to 32 respondents from Poland street children’s compulsion to work stems from their inner pressure to earn money for their own needs. Our respondents describe cases of legal or, more often, illegal work aimed at satisfying the children’s own needs. Such opinions were expressed by respondents from Białystok, Częstochowa, Warsaw, Konin, Brzeg, Kielce, Ruda Śląska, Poznań, Gdańsk and Lublin.

Surprisingly, the study did not specify the needs that generate the necessity to undertake paid work in street children. It leaves us unsatisfied because such a list of needs would provide us with information about the motives of their actions. Even if we refer to the opinions expressed by the respondents from Krakow and Łódź, who claim that street children work of their own free will, knowing that they cannot get any money otherwise (they won’t get it from their parents), complete research results are still lacking.

So far opinions of respondents have been deeply rooted in the belief that earning practices of street children in Poland, even when they are aimed at fulfilling their own needs, are viewed negatively by street workers. An exception to this general conclusion is the following view expressed by a respondent from Radom: “My observations show that not every kind of work undertaken by youth must result from their being used by their parents. If a child earns money doing some work, it may be a constructive way of spending time, and besides, it is better than stealing. I believe that, to some extent, it teaches responsibility. It certainly depends on the type of work and on the condition in which it is performed”.

Still another dimension concerning the work of street children in Poland is represented in our surveys by 25 respondents describing a group of children and youth who look for the chance to earn even the smallest amount of money due to a difficult financial situation of their families. It can be justly claimed that they scrupulously work for every zloty and then give it to their parents. Street workers believe that such an attitude deserves praise and is a token of responsibility only when the work performed is legal (money earned in a fair way) and when it does not collide with school duty. Here are some of the respondents’ opinions:

⁴ B. Łaciak, *Komercyjne przemiany współczesnego dzieciństwa*, in: *Nowe społeczne wymiary dzieciństwa*, B. Łaciak (ed.), Warszawa 2011, p. 86.

- 1) *More and more often children work during summer holidays in order to support their families.* (Radom).
- 2) *The children who we work with undertake earning practices aimed at supporting their families. They do it out of their own initiative* (Ruda Śląska).
- 3) *Street children are often the only members of the family who work* (Warsaw).
- 4) *In cases of extreme poverty they feel the inner need to earn even a small amount of money for their family* (Rybnik).

In the classification of street children proposed by T. Kołodziejczyk⁵, this group of children and youth is called children working in the street. Unlike other researchers, he believes that they earn money oftentimes in order to help their parents or to support their younger siblings. Such a viewpoint is in line with our research results.

The results of our research as to whether street children work out of coercion or free will appear to be clearly defined. The existence of coercion to work is an obvious conclusion. If coercion is determined by the parents' "obligatory" pressure and uncompromising compulsion exerted on their children to gain financial means for the support of the family, we talk about a compulsion to uncompromising obedience wherein any objection can bring about negative consequences. However, in the event when the "compulsion" to earn money results from the willingness to help the family financially, it should be perceived as free choice.

Types of work performed by street children

At the beginning of the analysis of street children's working practices we made an assumption that earning activities are a relatively constant element of their functioning in the street. This view was then confirmed by our respondents. Therefore we must specify the types of paid work undertaken by street children and youth. According to the respondents from Poland, these types include: begging, petty trade, services and scavenging.

Begging is one of the forms of paid work in Poland. According to J. Jachimczak, "political changes which took place in Poland in 1989 resulted in social and economic transformations which caused the stress of material stratification of the society. It brought about a decline in the level of social coherence and solidarity. In such conditions weaker individuals, who cannot adjust to a new situation, very often find it hard to cope. They lose their sense of stability and security. It is

⁵ See T. Kołodziejczyk, *Program Street Children – Children on the Streets w Polsce*, in: *Dzieci ulicy: problemy, profilaktyka, resocjalizacja*, G. Olszewska-Baka (ed.), Białystok 2000, p. 44.

for some of these people that begging may become a new way of life. Because of these transformations begging has become a more commonplace phenomenon and therefore a more visible one”⁶.

The author did not classify begging groups in Poland, but it is an obvious fact that children are part of urban begging communities. It is confirmed by J.Koral who claims that more and more children collect alms in the street from passers-by or ask people to buy them some food. They do so voluntarily for themselves or their families, alternatively for someone else who gives them a tiny percent of what they collect. The author adds that the number of such children who stand on busy crossroads, often in severe weather conditions, risking their health and life, is not even approximately established⁷.

According to 33 respondents from Poland begging is street children’s choice. Street workers point to urban areas as typical begging zones. Here are some sample answers:

- 1) *They beg in front of supermarkets* (Białystok).
- 2) *They go to the registry office and queue to give wishes: there is always somebody who gives them money or vodka to make them go away* (Łódź).
- 3) *One of the begging areas is the square in front of the shopping mall: the children know that the number of people passing by is immense* (Poznań).
- 4) *Bus and railway stations are appropriate areas for street children who want to get money from passengers* (Warsaw).

The results concerning street children’s begging practices in Poland that we have collected are not satisfactory in relation to the number of facts relating to this phenomenon. The mere description of the venues typical for begging children cannot lead to any substantial conclusions. Overall research has merely proven the existence of the problem of street children’s begging practices in our country.

Fortunately, T. Sołtysik’s research on the etiology and scale of street children’s begging practices in several Polish cities come as a valuable source of information⁸. This time the respondents of the survey were made up of 50 children at the

⁶ J. Jachimczak, *Żebractwo dawniej i dziś*, in: *Księga pamiątkowa 150-letniej działalności Konferencji Stowarzyszenia św. Wincentego a’ Paulo w Ostrowie Wielkopolskim*, J. Górny (ed.), Kraków 2005, p. 205.

⁷ See J. Koral, *Żebractwo w Polsce jako zjawisko społeczne*, in: *Horyzonty kultury. Pomiedzy ciągłością a zmianą*, R. Wiśniewski, M. Szupejko (eds.), Warszawa 2012, p. 390.

⁸ See T. Sołtysiak, *Mali żebracy (niektóre etiologiczne i objawowe aspekty oraz skutki zjawiska)*, in: *Zjawiska patologiczne wśród młodzieży i możliwości przeciwdziałań*, T. Sołtysiak, M. Kowalczyk-Jamnicka (eds.), Bydgoszcz 2007, p. 72–77.

age of 6–14. For some of them the beginnings of begging practices go back to their childhood when they were still unable to walk or talk well. They were forced by their parents and relatives to collect alms. At a later period, when they started begging themselves, they gave the following reasons for it: begging is a fast way of gaining money, they had a debt to repay, they were threatened by other children (forced to pay extortions at school), they were hungry or instigated to beg by their parents. At an older age, the motives for begging evolved and the collection of alms was dictated by more utilitarian needs, such as a purchase of a computer, new bicycle, watch or brand clothes, as well as alcohol, drugs for their own use or gaining respect among their peer group.

It is also worth using the results concerning street children, including their begging practices, which were collected by a team of Kraków sociologists: K. Frysztański, M. Nóżka and M. Smagacz-Poziemska. Among several quoted statements, the most noteworthy is the one of a policeman who is trying to define street children's earning practices by listing its various forms: "Begging could be anything: selling postcards, helping another child; sometimes they make up stories, such as that they need to collect money for a school trip, etc, washing a car, looking for a vacant parking lot. We treat all of this as begging and because these children make large amounts of money which they have at their disposal, they become independent and they in fact support their parents or their whole families."⁹

Moreover, the respondent stresses the fact that for children who earn money in the street in various ways, the city is a school of life and a place where they get an education <learn their profession> on their way to independence. Basing on this statement we must show the negative consequences of begging: being deprived of childhood and youth and having easy access to money, which generates the future unemployed adults and regular clients of social assistance centers.

According to 26 street workers, another form of paid work undertaken by street children in Poland is petty commerce. The respondents listed the objects sold by the groups of children and youth they work with. Here are some representative answers:

⁹ K. Frysztański, M. Nóżka, M. Smagacz-Poziemska, *Dzieci ulicy. Studium szczególnego problemu miejskiego*, Kraków 2011, p. 153. M. Nóżka, M. Smagacz-Poziemska, *Dzieci ulicy – zarys problemu*, in: *Rewitalizacja społeczna, współpraca międzysektorowa, streetworking. Refleksje wokół realizacji pilotażowego Programu Rewitalizacji Społecznej „Pod parasolem Kazimierza”*, J. Kowalczyk (ed.), Kraków 2012, p. 99.

- 1) *They trade <organized> goods, such as mobile phones or petty electronic equipment (Warsaw).*
- 2) *They sell scrap metal (Gdańsk).*
- 3) *Some children sell flowers in pedestrian areas, other ones sell car parts on bazaars, teenagers sell illegal cigarettes, alcohol or drugs (Radom).*
- 4) *Around Christmas they sell seasonal cards in restaurants (Kraków).*
- 5) *On Palm Sunday primary school children sell catkins (Łódź).*
- 6) *Most often children sell various objects, for example flowers, illegal cigarettes (Gliwice).*
- 7) *You can see street children who sell stolen goods on markets (Słupsk).*

When interpreting the phenomenon of trade in street children's paid work activities in Poland, one must clearly say that the literature on the subject contains marginal research. Again we refer to the findings collected by B.Łaciak¹⁰: in her reflections on the commercial transformations of the childhood of today the author adds that petty commerce undertaken by street children, e.g. selling mushrooms or blueberries along the roads, is a form of their exploitation by adults. She also adds that people who profit from their work frequently don't pay them their due share of the profit gained.

The results of our research also oscillate around paid services performed by street children in Poland. Such opinions were expressed by 73 respondents. It turned out that street children and youth undertake various activities. The service which scored the top mark was cleaning the windows of cars waiting for the green light. These children are referred to as the so-called <washers>. According to Polish law such earning practices are illegal. It's worth adding that it is the most dangerous type of earning which endangers children with accidents, sometimes fatal, as well as verbal abuse from drivers and passengers. Child "washers" must be agile and dexterous so that they can complete their job before the light turns green. Street workers observe that this service is very profitable: up to 300 zloty per day. Opinions on this topic were expressed by respondents from such cities as Białystok, Częstochowa, Kielce, Łódź, Poznań, Radom, Warszawa and Gliwice.

An earning activity which is quite popular among street children in Poland is distributing leaflets. It is easily accessible on the Internet and in the peer group and consists in distributing leaflets in the street or inserting them into post boxes in blocks of flats. This kind of paid job is most popular among street children in Krakow, Warsaw and Jaworzno-Szczakowa.

¹⁰ B. Łaciak, *Komercyjne...*, op. cit., p. 87.

Another type of activity which brings financial profit is returning trolleys to their stands from supermarket car parks. Here are some representative survey answers:

- 1) *They earn money returning trolleys in supermarkets (Łódź).*
- 2) *They take care of the used trolleys in exchange for petty cash (Ruda Śląska).*
- 3) *They use various tactics to get money or food: they block coin slots in trolleys in front of supermarkets and then collect the coins (Jaworzno-Szczakowa)*
- 4) *In front of shopping malls there are children and teenagers who look for clients willing to give them petty cash for bringing back used shopping trolleys (Kraków).*

A similar range of activities is performed by street children watching over cars in unguarded car parks in front of city councils or around housing estates. Some children also work at the times when employees arrive at and depart from their work place: the children direct the cars according to a specific order and make sure the vehicles do not impede efficient traffic. According to respondents, such a service is performed by street children in Łódź, Krakow, Poznań, Radom and Częstochowa.

Our list of services performed by street children in Poland is growing thanks to the data supplied by other respondents. A respondent from Łódź mentions cases of children cleaning graves around All Saints' Day or assisting an elderly neighbor in cleaning her flat. A respondent from Bytom reports cases when street children transported their neighbors' furniture in exchange for small amounts of money, while a pedagogue from Krakow gives an example of street children helping a street merchant to lay out his goods. A street worker from Warsaw knows teenagers who occasionally arrange products in supermarkets and a pedagogue from Chełm reports cases of young people participating in building works, e.g. helping builders in the finishing works.

17 respondents from Poland described street children undertaking paid work in the form of scavenging. It is not to be confused with syillogomania (pathological gathering). Street children and youth scavenge on rubbish dumps and landfills or other urban and suburban areas, looking for such products which can be sold in special buying stations. One of such products is scrap metal. Such observations were made by respondents from Gdańsk, Łódź, Poznań, Radom, Ruda Śląska, Bytom, Rybnik, Warsaw and Góra Kalwarii.

For the last ten years, since Polish people started caring for the environment through recycling, street children have been segregating rubbish in city skips and

bringing it to collection points, e.g. paper, aluminum beer cans or glass receptacles. Such observations were made in Mrągów, Konin, Poznań and Częstochowa.

According to the model of work performed by street children, which in our research includes begging, petty commerce, services and scavenging, it must be concluded that earning activity is not a marginal phenomenon among these groups. Empirical findings indicate that it is a problem universally present in the groups observed by the street workers who answered our survey.

Guidelines for social assistance concerning street children's paid work

It is an undisputable fact that street children's paid work can be defined as an activity which should not take place at this stage of their life. Even though the scale of this phenomenon in Poland is marginal when compared with other countries, it remains a challenge for social assistance. Therefore here are some guidelines we would like to present.

We propose the following initiatives: firstly, a systematic and cyclical monitoring of street children paid work practices in the form of research carried out by street workers among the groups they work with. Secondly, drafting a comprehensive report on street children's paid work in Poland, which will diagnose the problem when it comes to such indicators as e.g. the frequency of work, place and form of earning, its influence on individuals, on their relationships within the family, on their school duty, etc. Thirdly, engaging local communities in aiding working children. Fourthly, paying periodical visits to the families of working children and teenagers and offering them financial assistance. Fifthly, providing children with an education concerning their security in the work places, e.g. in the case of begging; and protecting them from possible dangers coming from third parties.

The above guidelines certainly do not exhaust the vast issue of the support that social assistance should provide for working street children in Poland as well as their families. They can however be used as a signpost for intervention and preventive activities.

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