



# **Social Factors Leading to Street Children Abscondment from Rehabilitation Centres in Iringa Municipality, Tanzania**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined social factors leading to street children's abscondment from rehabilitation centres in Iringa Municipality. Specifically, the study investigated the children's peer pressure, social culture and children's autonomy factors contributing to children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centres. A snowball chain was used to obtain 10 street children who absconded from the centres and Purposive sampling key informants. Interviews and documentary reviews 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 centres. The study found social factors that drive children's decisions were peer pressure, social

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culture practised at rehabilitation centres and the desire for children's freedom or autonomy played a significant role towards children's decisions to abscond from rehabilitation centres. These factors are rooted in their social experiences, relationships, and perceptions of the environment that they lived in before joining rehabilitation centres. To end the study, it concludes that children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centres was a result of a combination of social factors ranging from the influence of peer pressure, street children's autonomy and desire to regain self-independence as well as the social culture practised at the rehabilitation centres. The study recommends: (i) To rehabilitation centre, 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 centres. (iii) Recommendations to scholars, the study recommends examining political ecology factors contributing to children's abscondment from rehabilitation centres to cover large areas to enable generalization.

*Keywords: Child; street children; abscondment; rehabilitation centres.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Street children's absconding from rehabilitation centres is a global problem that has been studied and documented in various countries around the world. It dates back to industrial and demographic revolutions in the world where children were collected from the streets to rehabilitation centres to meet the service required for their lives. The United Nations International Children's 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 [1].

In response to the problem of street children absconding from rehabilitation centres, various initiatives and approaches have been implemented around the world. For example in Europe, some centres adopted a more participatory and child-centred 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 centres is a significant problem and it has been a subject of research and advocacy for many years [2]. One study by Kisanga, *et al.* [3] explored the experiences of street children in Tanzania and found that absconding from rehabilitation centres 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 centres. Another study by Chambi and Temu [4] 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, the response to street children absconding from rehabilitation centres has been in existence since the 1980s [2]. Various initiatives include the establishment of the Tanzania Street Children Network (TASCNET) in 1994 to coordinate efforts to support street children, including those in rehabilitation centres [5]. Additionally, some centres have adopted a more flexible and participatory approach to rehabilitation, including involving children in decision-making processes and providing opportunities for recreation and socialization [6]. Nowadays there are rehabilitation centres established across many urban centres of Tanzania working to rehabilitate children. Similarly, children taken to these centres seem to abscond and move back to the street where they lived before. Addressing these challenges requires 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 [7].

It is due to the 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 centres 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's abscondment from rehabilitation centres in Iringa Municipality. Specifically, the study investigated the children's peer pressure, social culture and children's autonomy factors contributing to children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centres in Iringa Municipality.

## 2. 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 choices that will provide the greatest benefit. People weigh their options and make the choice they think will serve them best". The theorist assumes that how individuals decide what will serve them best is dependent on 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 influence street children to abscond the rehabilitation centres in Iringa Municipality. The linkage of rational choice theory to this study is that; street children's decision to abscond from the rehabilitation centres 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

### 2.2.1 Peer pressure and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centres

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 rehabilitated children in shelter homes in South Africa. The findings showed that Street children in most cases were socialized by peer groups in the streets. Hence, Children had a very close bond with their fellow children living in the 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 newcomers how to survive. Members of the group share food, clothing, shelter, information and psychoactive substances.

Annie (2013) also documented the challenges affecting street children in post-conflict Northern Uganda using quantitative methodologies. Peer pressure was cited to be a driver of street children conclusively. Researchers realized that; peer pressure can also be responsible for why these children turn to streets from rehabilitation Centres. The study findings further showed that living in the streets allows for ultimate freedom due to the lack of adult supervision. Sometimes other children already living in the street try to lure their friends into living in the 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 centres 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 controversial to the study of Musabyimana [8] although did not tally well with the study results of Molahlehi [9], who realized

the liberty of street children as a driving force for them to establish their own lives and live as they wish instead of being under control or supervision offered by rehabilitation centres. 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, the majority of street children are pushed onto the street by desperation and the 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 live at the rehabilitation centres, Alem and Laha [10], assessed the socioeconomic determinants of the 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 to deciding on their friends.

Conclusively, the literature reviewed suggests a view that the peer group had a strong influence on street children because once on the street, it was very important to become accepted among other children. The peer group provides a sense of belonging and protection against the dangers of street life. Street children help in one another's survival by forming social networks, and 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 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 centres, it was not the sole determining factor. The interplay of individual characteristics, support systems, the quality of rehabilitation centres, and external interventions all contribute to the complex decision-making process of street children regarding their rehabilitation journey.

### **2.2.2 Social culture and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centres**

De Brito [11] argued that cultures differ in terms of the particular norms that they find important

and that guide the behaviour of group members. Social psychologists have found that there is a fundamental difference in social norms between street life and life in rehabilitation centres. Norms in street life cultures are primarily oriented and focus primarily on self-enhancement and self-independence, self-direction and self-help by street Children themselves.

Socialization as defined by Fiasorgbor [12] 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 multiple contexts and as a result of contact with numerous groups. Some of the more significant contributors to the 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 [13] in the study to examine the 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 homes and centres for street children, cultures are taught to develop and value a sense of their 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 centres while others feel disappointed and fail to cope with cultural norms and values at the centres where they are taken for rehabilitation.

### **2.2.3 Street children's autonomy and abscondment of children from the rehabilitation centres**

The influence of freedom as a social factor on abscondment is a significant concern of different literatures. Freedom, considered a basic human right, holds paramount importance in shaping the dynamics within rehabilitation centres. 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 centres, it can lead to feelings of frustration and rebellion. Research by Williams *et al.* [14] 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 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 [15]. This desire for independence and self-determination can significantly influence their decisions to leave rehabilitation centres, where their actions and movements may be restricted [16].

Kagumire [17] in the Western Province of Nigeria established a relationship between children's autonomy as a coping mechanism that caused resistance and attempts to escape from centres. 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 centres, 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 centres, their desire for autonomy, developed through their experiences on the streets, can significantly influence their decision to abscond Kagumire [17].

Bordonaro and Rishy, [18] looked at the same variable using a qualitative approach to develop findings. They examined rehabilitation centres that provide support to street children in Mbale Uganda. The study found that striking the right balance between offering necessary structure and maintaining individual children's 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 a 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 centres as further deprivation of their ability to make decisions. This can lead to a strong desire to regain control by leaving. 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 centres 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 disobey and run away from centres as children who are smoking need to satisfy their addiction which can lead them to abscond from centres where substance use is restricted. Other children Street children may have learned to survive on the streets by engaging in informal labour or other activities. The prospect of returning to rehabilitation may be perceived as a threat to their livelihood hence running away from centres. As a result the study critically examined social factors using qualitative methodologies and qualitative designs to explore street children's and caregivers' experiences and opinions towards the problem.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Iringa Municipality under a case study of three street children rehabilitation centres. The study employed a qualitative approach to capture the opinions, experiences, feelings, perceptions and understandings of the respondents on social factors leading street children to abscond the rehabilitation centres by using a Cross-sectional research design. The target populations of this study were street children who absconded the rehabilitation centres. 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 Centre, FISCH and Huruma Centre. 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. Purposive sampling was the technique used to obtain key respondents while the Snowball sampling technique was employed to obtain ten (10) respondents who were street children who absconded from the rehabilitation centres. 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 reported on patterns and themes within the data by means of thematic analysis. Then, Results were interpreted and presented using the content of words based on the themes discussed.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined social factors leading to street children's abscondment from rehabilitation centres in Iringa Municipality. The study revealed the presence of children's peer pressure, social culture and children's autonomy factors contributing to children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centres which are presented in this section as follows.

##### 4.1 Peer Group Pressure and Abscondment of Children from the Rehabilitation Centres

Peer groups are social clusters of individuals of similar ages, interests, and backgrounds. They hold considerable influence over an individual's development, shaping behaviours, attitudes, and identity formation. Positive aspects of peer groups include socialization, emotional support, identity shaping, and informal learning [19]. However, negative aspects encompass peer pressure, the 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 the influence of peer pressure in the streets influenced children's decision to abscond from the centres. The caregivers had to respond to this question. One caregiver said that;

"Peer groups are inevitable to street children. When they get out of centres to the street for

visiting or leisure they meet fellow street children. They play a pivotal role in shaping their identity, behaviour, 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's decision to abscond from the centres are that: negative peer influences can lead them to engaging in harmful activities or risky behaviors including disobediences here at our centre*". (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 newcomers 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 centres were asked how this has influenced their decision to abscond from the rehabilitation centres. One respondent's response is presented in quoted conversation as follows:-

"We have friends at the centres as well in the streets, during outing days we meet with our brothers, friends who live and run their lives in the streets, we also share life experiences and they support us with small amounts of money because they have it... sometimes they visit us during a daytime when we reside at centres....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 centre, I had friends here in the streets, we looked for each other and lived as a family. It was difficult to leave them and cut off the relationship with them since we have a strong bond of friendship*". (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

The given information by children is consistent with that gathered from key informants who commented that most of the absconded children

from the rehabilitation centres were influenced by peer pressure which motivated them to decide to run away from centres. Information and experience shared by one caregiver at Huruma Centre revealed that peer pressure contributed to children's abscondment. They form the so-called Collective empowerment.

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

These findings tally well with the prior findings of Mathenge, [20] that peer pressure contributes to children's at centres' behaviours of running away from the rehabilitation centres back to the streets.

The previous research shows that friendship and peers in the street are important for most street children's 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 [18]. 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 [21]. Violence is common among street children, both between different groups, but also within groups of friends [14]. It was found that the majority of children who receive rehabilitation services come from the streets not directly from home. Before being taken to centres, these children lived in groups, had strong bonds with 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 centre to help fellow street children, others might be influenced by the passion and determination of their peers, feeling inspired to contribute to the cause [22-25].

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 centres are intertwined in a complex relationship that shapes their development and outcomes. Peer relationships are profound to empower street children not to break the cycle of street life, affecting their life prospects at rehabilitation centres. More so, by leveraging the potential of peer groups, children at the centres can develop decision-making skills to resist activities, rules and conditions offered at the centre and end up running away or being chased away.

From caregivers' experience, it was found that peer pressure seemed to contribute much to children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centres back to the 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 another 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 centres in Iringa Municipality. Through this study, researchers noted that; children being in the street rather than centres could be a result of their fellow children in the streets influencing them [26-28].

Conclusively findings show that peer pressure is a significant factor contributing to street children absconding from rehabilitation centres. 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 Centres**

Researchers also were 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 centre. A focus for discussion was children's autonomy and life at the rehabilitation centres.

Many children who absconded from the rehabilitation centres spoke about the importance of having their 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 feeling that nevertheless, centres were 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 centre ... you have friends around the town centre, you are not allowed to go outside without supervision, and you are followed around everywhere you go. You cannot even interact with another girl in the house otherwise you will be suspected to prohibit a relationship. How are we supposed to feel like it's a place for us to live?" (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

At Huruma Centre one caregiver who was asked the same question said that children demand autonomy in ways that could make them live as they wish. Based on her experience she shared an example of a child who was punished due to indiscipline and disrespect. After punishment, the child escaped from the centre perceiving the centre as a 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 their 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 centres" (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 25, July 2023).

At Upendo Centre 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 having 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 centres impose rules and regulations that may clash with the autonomy that street children are accustomed to. This loss of freedom can lead to resistance and absconding. Also, unfamiliar environments at the rehabilitation centres are harshly different from the streets, making them uncomfortable and unfamiliar for street children [29,30].

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

*"The autonomy of street children comes from their experiences on the streets. This complicates efforts to rehabilitate them. Understanding the reasons behind their absconding and implementing tailored strategies that respect their autonomy, while ensuring their safety is key to effectively addressing this issue. By considering the unique needs of street children, the rehabilitation centres are 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 centres are like prisons. They cannot adjust to rules after experiencing freedom while in the streets. During such times their freedom at the rehabilitation centres is 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 with other findings from different studies on the same theme. A study by Beasley [18] found that children at centres lack the freedom to live as they wish making it difficult for them to live at the centre. The study noted that they miss freedom and have a hard time planning and have the patience to wait for things that will happen in the future.

Bordonaro [18] found that children had a hard time following strict rules and schedules at the centres. 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 street children is by viewing it as one of the few things street children have in their lives. They are proud of their ability to financially take care of themselves. When they leave the streets for example go to the centre they become a subject for aid, which is viewed as if they are giving up the responsibility for their 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 desire or need.

Overall, the studies demonstrate the important role that peer pressure can play in street children's decisions to abscond from the rehabilitation centres. 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 this discussion imply that street children often develop a strong sense of independence and self-reliance due to gained experience in the streets. When placed in rehabilitation centres, 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 of neglect or mistreatment. If they perceive rehabilitation centres are extensions of such institutions, they might resist the loss of autonomy that being within these centres entails. Therefore balancing the need for structure and support with respect to individual autonomy is a challenge that rehabilitation programs must navigate to effectively address the needs of street children and ensure their successful reintegration into society.

### **4.3 Social Culture and Abscondment of Children from the Rehabilitation Centres**

In this study, a social culture consists of social norms, values and practised rules at the rehabilitation centres. The social culture has had to be practised and adhered to everyone all

children receiving rehabilitation services or for all residing at the centres. All selected centres for this study including Upendo Centre, FISCH and Huruma Centre have norms, values and regulations to facilitate effective rehabilitation programmes.

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

An interview with a child who left one of the street children's rehabilitation centres indicated that he had been at more than centres before he realized to abscond. He shared an experience from these centres that they had strict norms and values that are bided to every individual living at the centre. The rules and norms are said to be less relevant to them (children) due to the needs and wants they strive to achieve. He also added that streets have neither values nor norms. Hence, their lives have no restrictions and have full freedom compared to centres. This is among the reasons that motivated 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 were trying to protect us. Not to adopt bad behaviours, but to go the good way. It was very hard. Maybe the teacher can tell you not to 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 the teacher told you this is not the right time to go. So it was very difficult” (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

Another child's response to the same question was;

“When I came to the centre 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 centre for the fifth month 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 centre clean daily to me it was difficult to perform such duties, while on the street we did not have such rules and duties” (Respondent, Iringa Municipality 19, July 2023).

This argument's 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 centres. They used to take care of themselves and not have anyone to tell them what was right or wrong.

Obtaining information from the key informants at the rehabilitation centres to some extent seemed to contradict the argument from the children in terms of the level of treatment, follow-up values, norms and rules.

One caregiver at Huruma Centre 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 have 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, *"There are rules that are implemented here at the centre. These rules are implemented to prevent chaos, and maintain control and order in the centre"*. (Key informant, Iringa Municipality 26, July 2023).

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

At Upendo Centre, key informants stipulated a number of rules that are imposed on children which are flexible and non-flexible rules. Violation of norms and rules results in punishment that is given at the centre. The manner in which it is enforced depends on the child in question, as well as 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 offence.

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

- a) Not allowed to fight
- b) Are not permitted to go out for an hour or two during weekends and week days. Their privileges are taken away if they violate rules.
- c) Are not permitted to smoke anything in the centre; 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 centre. The contract stipulates clearly what will happen to them if they abscond once more.
- h) Not allowed to reside in the centre when they are older than eighteen years
- i) Not supposed to be removed from the centre by anyone without the caregiver's permission

According to caregivers, these values, norms and rules have to be practical and adhered to by every child living at the centre or receiving rehabilitation services from the centre. The Children's willingness to follow rules and regulations results to easy implementation of the rules. Their cooperation is motivated by the benefits that they procure when they are obedient. They receive benefits such as sleeping on nice beds, and bed sheets, eating delicious food, and playing sports and games at the centres. On the other hand, the implementation process is hindered by children's familiarity with street life as before they lived independent life without control. The conflict that arises between their needs and the rules of the centre; 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 regulations to all rehabilitation centres 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 centres. 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 centres are in compliance with regulatory authorities. Their norms and values are good for socializing children into good manners, and good behaviour and to prepare them to fit well in society. He added that there have been fewer centres for street children operated as NGOs and in many cases do not have regular inspections of centres. Ultimately, rehabilitation centres were not taking adequate care of the children and some of them took advantage of them to earn money and some mistreated them. On the other side, Children have profound to be disobediences and as a result, they cannot cope with the centre’s norms and values making them run from the centres to seek a free place where they will be free from norms, regulations, restrictions and conditional life.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

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

### 5.2 Recommendations

This study recommends that, different strategies and comprehensive approaches to address the social factors leading street children to abscond from the rehabilitation centres. It requires a multi-faceted strategy that considers both short-term survival needs and long-term social integration of street children who are raised at the centres. To the rehabilitation centre; 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 centres 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 centres. In consistency with this recommendation, there should be counselling services offered to caregivers and children at the rehabilitation centres to address emotional and psychological needs. Trained counsellors can help street children navigate challenges, build self-esteem, and develop coping mechanisms.

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 centres. Collaboration between multiple agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and rehabilitation centres, the police, education providers and the 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's abscondment and strategies to prevent children's abscondment from the rehabilitation centres.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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