



Joy and Responsibility: Weaving the Hopes of Street-Selling Children in Dili, Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lives of street-selling children in Dili, Timor-Leste, who support their families through informal economic activities. Using a qualitative library-based research approach, the study highlights their dual roles as sources of family income and children with dreams and emotional needs. These children often work under harsh conditions and face social stigma. Only 40% of them have access to formal education. Despite this, they express strong educational aspirations, better livelihoods, and social recognition. The article emphasizes the urgency of inclusive educational policies, child protection laws, and government and civil society collaborative efforts to ensure a supportive environment for these vulnerable children. This research contributes to understanding the intersection of child labor, education access, and child welfare in post-conflict developing countries.

Keywords

Child Labor
Child Welfare
Education Access
Informal Economy
Street Children
Timor-Leste

JSCD

Journal of Social and Community Development

Vol. 2, No. 03, pp. 121-129

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Article history

Received 17 July 2025

Revised 15 August 2025

Accepted 2 September 2025



journal.iistr.org/index.php/JSCD

DOI: 10.56741/jscd.v2i03.1262

Introduction

In the bustling streets of Dili, the capital city of Timor-Leste, young children are a common sight. They often sell snacks, bottled water, or handmade trinkets. These children, some younger than ten, have assumed responsibilities far beyond their age. They work to contribute to household income and survive in an environment fraught with challenges [1], [2].

Despite their young age, these children exhibit remarkable resilience and cheerfulness. Many come from impoverished families with limited access to education, health care, and other basic services [3]. While they smile and engage passersby with youthful enthusiasm, their daily realities are marked by economic hardship, social risk, and educational exclusion [4], [5].

The presence of child street vendors in urban areas is often symptomatic of broader structural issues such as persistent poverty, lack of employment for adults, and insufficient social safety nets. In post-conflict societies like Timor-Leste, these problems are often exacerbated by the legacies of instability, displacement, and fragile governance systems. Children end up in public spaces not because of delinquency or negligence, but because economic survival demands it. They become actors in an informal economy that both sustains and exploits them.

In such a context, childhood is frequently truncated, replaced by adult-like responsibilities that challenge their physical, emotional, and psychological development. While many international frameworks, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasize the importance of education and protection, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in under-resourced environments. These children live in dual worlds. In one, they are expected to perform economically, while in the other, they quietly nurture dreams of education, stability, and a better life.

Understanding their lived experiences is vital for developing inclusive public policies and effective social interventions. Their stories are not only narratives of struggle but also testimonies of agency and aspiration. This study explores the socio-economic conditions of these street-selling children, their impact on family welfare, the challenges they face in accessing education, and their enduring hopes for a better future.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative library study methodology, drawing from academic literature, government reports, NGO documents, and international agency publications. The objective was to synthesize findings from prior studies on child labor, informal economy, and education in Timor-Leste and Southeast Asia [6]. Steps included identifying relevant sources, analyzing themes, and interpreting implications based on existing knowledge frameworks [7].

Results and Discussion

A. Children as Economic Contributors

Street-selling children in Dili often become de facto breadwinners in their families. They earn between USD 1 and USD 5 per day. This amount seems modest, yet it is vital for families living below the poverty line [8], [9]. These children sell food, water, souvenirs, and other items on roadsides and intersections. For many households, this small but steady stream of income helps cover essential daily expenses such as rice, fuel, and school supplies for siblings. In some cases, the children's earnings contribute more consistently to the household budget than the adults', especially when parents are unemployed, underemployed, or engaged in irregular day labor.

Beyond contributing financially, these children often take on responsibilities typically reserved for adults, such as managing stock, negotiating with customers, or avoiding municipal authorities who may fine or remove unlicensed vendors. Such roles increase their exposure to stressful situations and accelerate emotional maturation, as they must quickly learn to navigate unpredictable public spaces to ensure their own safety and financial productivity.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), many of these children lack legal protections, face occupational hazards, and are exposed to exploitative environments [10]. The absence of regulatory oversight makes them vulnerable to verbal abuse, harassment, and coercion by older street actors, including adults who may demand a share of their earnings. Additionally, long hours under the hot sun or in rainy conditions can lead to fatigue, dehydration, and illness. These risks are seldom addressed due to limited access to healthcare services.

They sacrifice formal schooling, rest, and recreation to support their families. This forfeiture of childhood leisure and education impairs their cognitive development and perpetuates the cycle of poverty, as their future earning potential becomes limited. Despite the burden they carry, these children remain integral to the survival strategies of their families, serving as both contributors and casualties of systemic socio-economic deprivation.

B. Emotional Resilience and Joy Amid Struggles

Despite harsh living conditions, street children demonstrate emotional resilience. Social interactions with peers and a sense of purpose in supporting their families bring them moments of happiness [11]. These children often form close-knit bonds with one another, sharing snacks, shelter, or stories, which helps create a micro-community of mutual support amid adversity. Through these relationships, they learn empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution. These skills are often developed outside formal education systems. Even in competitive environments, such as crowded intersections or markets, moments of laughter and camaraderie offer brief but meaningful relief from the burdens they carry.

In Timor-Leste's collectivist culture, these children derive pride and solidarity from their familial roles [12]. Contributing to the family is often seen as noble, and children internalize this

value as part of their identity. Parents and extended family members may express appreciation or admiration for the child's efforts, reinforcing a sense of responsibility and self-worth. This cultural framing can offer emotional validation, helping children view their labor not solely as a hardship but as a valued contribution to collective well-being.

However, emotional resilience does not eliminate vulnerability. Children may suppress feelings of fear, anxiety, or sadness to appear strong or capable in front of others. Without safe spaces to express these emotions, psychological stress can accumulate, potentially manifesting later in life through trauma or behavioral challenges. Thus, resilience should not be mistaken for immunity to emotional harm. It is a coping mechanism, often born out of necessity rather than choice.

Studies show that playtime, rest, and supportive community spaces significantly improve emotional well-being in child laborers [13], [14]. Opportunities to engage in creative expression, group games, or storytelling circles can restore a sense of normalcy and joy. Even short periods of such activities can make a difference. Interventions that include psychosocial support and culturally sensitive recreational programs have been shown to reduce stress, promote healing, and enhance children's ability to envision alternative futures beyond their current struggles.

C. Responsibility and Identity Formation

Carrying economic burdens at an early age cultivates a strong sense of responsibility. Many of these children internalize adult-like roles. They make financial decisions, manage time, and assist with household chores [15], [16]. Their daily routines often mirror working adults' routines, starting early in the morning and continuing late into the evening. They must assess customer preferences, calculate change, and sometimes even budget for reinvestment in merchandise. This economic participation sharpens specific life skills, such as negotiation, planning, and accountability, which might otherwise be developed later in adolescence.

In the household context, these children are not merely helpers but often relied upon as key contributors. Some take on caregiving roles for younger siblings while their parents seek work or manage other domestic responsibilities. Others decide how their earnings are used, such as buying food or contributing to school fees for their siblings. These experiences foster a deep understanding of sacrifice and prioritization, embedding a sense of maturity beyond their chronological age.

However, although this accelerates maturity, it can hinder cognitive and emotional development if not balanced with education and nurturing [17]. The stress of premature responsibility may disrupt brain development, leading to difficulty concentrating, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. Without adequate educational engagement, children may miss critical opportunities to develop abstract thinking, literacy, and numeracy skills essential for long-term success. Moreover, the absence of emotional nurturing through parental affection,

mentorship, or school-based support can lead to feelings of isolation or low self-worth. While responsibility can instill discipline and a strong work ethic, it becomes problematic when it replaces essential aspects of childhood. Overburdened children may struggle with identity formation, mental health issues, or burnout, especially if they perceive that their efforts are underappreciated or if they are unable to meet family expectations. Therefore, programs to support child laborers must balance skill-building with psychosocial care and educational opportunities to ensure holistic development.

D. Educational Barriers and Aspirations

One of the most striking findings is the limited access to education. Only about 40% of street-selling children in Dili can attend school [4]. Most are forced to drop out due to financial constraints, school distance, or conflicting work schedules [18]. For many families, the immediate economic benefit of having a working child outweighs the long-term potential of education. Children are often seen as contributors whose absence from street vending could mean going without food or other essentials. Even when schools are technically free, indirect costs such as uniforms, supplies, and transportation can be barriers. For many low-income families, these expenses become insurmountable.

The burden of balancing school with street vending also leads to chronic absenteeism and poor academic performance. Some children attend school intermittently, arriving late or leaving early to catch the busiest selling hours. Others may skip weeks to help during family financial emergencies or festival seasons. Teachers may struggle to accommodate such inconsistent attendance, and students who fall behind often feel discouraged or ashamed, increasing the likelihood of dropping out.

This lack of access perpetuates poverty and narrows future employment prospects. Without formal education, street children are more likely to remain confined to the informal sector, where wages are low, job security is nonexistent, and exploitation is rampant. It becomes a self-reinforcing cycle: poverty leads to child labor, which leads to educational exclusion, which then limits upward mobility in adulthood. Children interviewed in prior studies expressed a desire to continue their education, often viewing it as a path to a better life [19]. For them, school represents more than just learning. It symbolizes hope, normalcy, and a chance to redefine their future.

Extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and drama have increased motivation and joy in learning, even among vulnerable groups [20]. These programs offer emotional relief, a sense of belonging, and avenues for self-expression that are often missing in their daily lives. Engaging in creative or physical activities can enhance self-esteem, build teamwork, and reconnect children with the joys of childhood. Such enrichment can increase school retention and performance when integrated into formal education settings, especially for children facing adversity.

E. Vulnerability, Stigma, and Aspirations

Street-selling children often face negative societal attitudes. They are sometimes perceived as delinquents or distractions, rather than as children making sacrifices to survive [21]. This perception can lead to marginalization within their own communities, reinforcing the idea that their labor is a result of poor parenting or inherent delinquency, rather than economic necessity. As a result, these children are denied empathy and often excluded from public spaces and opportunities designed for their peers. Stigmatization also manifests in the behavior of teachers, peers, and local authorities, who may treat these children with less patience or trust, thus compounding their vulnerability.

This stigma affects their self-esteem and limits community support. It undermines their confidence and identity formation, as they internalize negative societal labels. Children constantly treated as outcasts may develop feelings of shame, worthlessness, or resignation. If left unaddressed, such emotional burdens can interfere with learning, social relationships, and future aspirations. Public education campaigns and inclusive social programs can help change these narratives and encourage empathy [22]. When communities are educated about the root causes of child labor and exposed to children's personal stories, attitudes often shift from blame to understanding and support.

Street work exposes children to a variety of dangers. These include traffic accidents, verbal abuse, and even physical exploitation. Some children face harassment from aggressive drivers, unfair treatment from older vendors, or even violence from adults who seek to control vending areas. Girls are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence in such unregulated environments. Extreme weather, inadequate nutrition, and lack of healthcare compound these risks [10], [23]. Working under the scorching sun or heavy rain, often without access to clean water or toilets, significantly strains their physical well-being. Many fall ill but continue working due to the absence of safety nets or medical access.

Studies link such exposure to long-term health issues, including respiratory problems, anxiety disorders, and developmental delays [24]. Chronic fatigue, untreated injuries, and exposure to pollutants can lead to physical deterioration over time. Moreover, the psychological toll of constant danger, fear, and overwork can manifest in anxiety, withdrawal, or behavioral disturbances, which may carry into adulthood if unaddressed.

Despite these hardships, many children harbor ambitious dreams. They aspire to become doctors, teachers, or business owners. Their aspirations reflect a desire to uplift their families and contribute to society [25]. These children often cite education as their main hope and believe formal learning could provide the foundation for a better life. For them, dreams are not naive fantasies but deeply held convictions shaped by the injustices they experience daily.

These goals are attainable with proper support. Scholarships, skill training, and mentoring can make them possible. Many Southeast Asian programs have successfully integrated vulnerable children into formal education and vocational pathways [26]. Initiatives that combine academic learning with psychosocial support and economic incentives for families can transform children's trajectories. When children are viewed not just as laborers, but as potential leaders and change-makers, society gains far more than it gives.

Social and Policy Implications

The findings emphasize an urgent need for policy interventions targeting street-selling children in Timor-Leste. A multi-pronged approach is essential to address the complexity of their circumstances. First, it is crucial to enforce child protection laws explicitly prohibiting hazardous child labor and guarantee safe working conditions for children engaged in informal economic activities [27]. These legal frameworks must be supported by monitoring mechanisms and accountability structures to prevent exploitation and abuse. Second, improving access to education is critical. This includes providing scholarships, subsidized transportation, and flexible learning arrangements that accommodate the unique schedules of working children, thus encouraging their continued participation in formal schooling [28]. Third, raising community awareness can play a transformative role. Public campaigns should aim to shift societal perceptions about street-working children, fostering empathy and promoting active community involvement in safeguarding children's rights [22].

In addition, collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, and government bodies is vital for delivering integrated support systems. Such cooperation can ensure that children receive educational assistance, emotional counseling, and legal protection, forming a comprehensive safety net around their needs [29]. Lastly, regular monitoring and evaluation are essential to measure the impact of child welfare policies and adjust strategies based on field realities. These evaluations help ensure that interventions remain relevant, efficient, and responsive to street-selling children's evolving challenges in Timor-Leste [30].

Conclusion

Street-selling children in Dili exemplify both vulnerability and strength. Their cheerfulness amidst adversity reflects psychological resilience, while their sense of duty underscores early maturity. However, the socioeconomic and educational disadvantages they face must not be overlooked. These children require comprehensive, multisectoral interventions to secure their rights and unlock their potential. Investing in their education, health, and emotional well-being is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for Timor-Leste's

human development. We can only begin to build a just society for all by recognizing the humanity and dreams behind every street-sold candy or water bottle.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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