

Educational opportunities for street children

¹Dr Sandhya Khadse, Ex-Dean Academics, DMMC, Wanadongari, Nagpur

²Dr Ishani Arora, Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatrics, SMHRC, DMMC, Wanadongari, Nagpur

Corresponding Author: Dr Ishani Arora, Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatrics, SMHRC, DMMC, Wanadongari, Nagpur

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Abstract

Life on a street is very difficult to sustain. Street children most often struggle to meet the basic needs of life like food and clean water. They have to work harder for these basic requirements than other children living at home, taken care by and protected by responsible adults. For a street child the street is his or her place to live and/or source of livelihood. Causes of the situation can be many, for which they have come to live on the streets and take on the full self-responsibilities, including working and protecting themselves. In these hard conditions education sometimes loses its importance it deserves. Access to free, relevant, safe and quality education is very important in preventing children from ending up in street conditions and fulfilling the rights of children already in street conditions. The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of education for street children and the ways it can be provided.

Keywords: Children, Migration, Sexual, Physical

Introduction

‘Street children’ are those who are dependent on the streets to live and / or work, either on their own, or with other children or family members and for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become their habitat. They have inadequate protection and supervision by any responsible adults. There are estimated to be more than 18 million street children in India.(1)

Why children have to live on street?

The answer to this is more complicated. There can be various reasons for street children for being there as everyone can have their unique reason and story and these reasons can vary from country to country and city to city.(2) But the major common leading cause is poverty, leading to rapid urbanization and forced migration. Displacements due to natural disasters and conflicts, domestic and social disruption like parental death or neglect, broken homes and/or families; various

abuses like sexual, physical or emotional; domestic violence.

Difficulties of Street Children

They are among the most marginalized children around the world, experiencing multiple deprivations and violations of their rights, particularly violence and discrimination. It is very difficult for them to sustain their basic needs. They are nutritionally deprived as they get some amount of food to eat, that too is not nutritious enough for growing needs of children. They also face many problems related to shelter and are vulnerable to all ranges of weather conditions be it the burning heat of summer, the rainstorms or the chilly winter nights. Their access to medical facilities is also very poor, many times they are missed in universal national immunisation programme. Along with physical homelessness, they suffer emotional and psychological homelessness also, as they have no home to go to. So many of these children get involved into substance abuse such as alcohol and drugs, either by forcefully or to actually escape from unpleasant traumatic past and current problems.(3) They are exploited physically as they have to work to survive and as they have less education and skills with which they can ask for fair pay of their work and hence exploited by the employers. They also often suffer physical and sexual abuse, exploitation sometimes even by the hands of those who are in positions to best protect them such as law enforcement officers. Most important agony is that actual data are still lacking regarding street children and their education.

Condition of education in street children-

Although education is the far behind in the queue of the needs of street children they are deprived of, but relevant and quality education is the key tool for nations to uplift this neglected sector of its society. The universal right to

education is a key component of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda, based on "leaving no one behind". Most of these children are unaware of the opportunity of education as their parents are also not educated and do not realize the importance of education. Hence these children are not sensitized regarding education as they are running behind meeting their basic needs. Main problem is that either they are unsupervised by someone or their parents do not know that their children have the right to study in a formal school.(4) Although global enrolment rates has increased to 82% in 2017, with 91% for primary school aged children enrolled in school. But these data are based on household surveys means that street children are not part of this 91% primary school enrolled children neither they are rest of 9% who are not enrolled, street children and simply invisible in majority of national data. (5)

Ray of hope for street children-

Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted its 'General Comment No. 21' for street children in June 2017. (6) This has provided governments an authoritative guidance for ensuring that the government offers the same human rights to children in street situations as any other child living in that particular jurisdiction. It was advised that nations must urgently implement this guidance into their law to protect street children from discrimination and give them access to their rights, they are deprived of. As holistic development in system is needed to endorse education in street children, it is important to match their basic living needs, for which government should have tailored policies in the law and system.

Sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 is "right of all children to Quality education" states that by 2030, all girls and boys should have access to complete free,

equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. SDG 4 comprises of inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.(7)

Hurdles in uplifting education of street children

Street children face various unique hurdles while it comes to education as compared to children that live in houses. Due to lack of legal identification papers they are unable to enroll themselves in formal education system. In some countries admission to basic formal education system might be free, but they are unable to afford invisible educational finance for buying books, tuition fee, uniform, tutoring, etc. As many children are driven to street because of poor financial condition of their parents and family, they have to work and earn to help their parents hence parents are reluctant to send their children to school in evening timings.(2)(8) Also, some children help with looking after their younger siblings so that their parents can work. As per one report in interviewing a street children he said *“I want the government to give jobs to our parents, to have all the children go to school freely without paying money. We have decided to live on the street because of failing to go to school. Our parents are poor and have no means to school us.”*(9). Moreover if parents are willing to educate their children they do not know about the procedures of enrolment, due to lack of awareness about resources. Due to various re-integration challenges they face at formal schools dropping out of school rate is high.

(Re) integration challenges

- Street children are more likely to arrive at school hungry, sick, and tired, so children cannot follow the learning speed of the class (slow student/ weak students) without support from school or teachers.

- They are often bullied and stigmatized because of the cultural bias in schools, slow learners and discrimination from teachers, parents, and peers. They often face lack of support in classrooms which can further compromise the already vulnerable psychological state of street children.(10)
- They are easy targets for blaming in schools without evidence for crimes or vandalism due to stereotypical backgrounds, thus creating **misconceptions about them** that are detrimental to their well-being.
- **The established school hours/ timetables** - Children and adolescents who live on the street need to work or do paid work to survive, making it impossible for them to go to school and at the same time do something to earn money.
- **School environment and supervision might be felt restrictive** after living independently. Having spent time on the street, they may be far older than others of the same education level and may not be permitted to be in class with younger students, and others do not want to return to the restrictive structure and supervised environment.
- **Often they find formal education irrelevant**-Street students will often find that the state's education promotes a somewhat toxic climate rather than community-based mutual help and support environment where they can express themselves freely.

They might feel that educational institutions do not teach them survival and work skills relevant to them and the teaching available is seen as meaningless to their needs. They might find it hard to build meaningful relationships with their peers or teachers compared to the strong bonds they have created in the streets.

Hence, enrolling them into a formal school cannot be the most appropriate path for all street children. Embracing equal education cannot be achieved without addressing these barriers of a school environment faced by street children after thriving in completely different situations.

Best practices in realising street children's right to education-

As street children face many unique barriers for accessing education, it is need of time that education policies for these children should be tailored to their specific needs so that no street child is left behind. There is clearcut need to develop alternative inclusive models for education of street children, and governments along with help of NGOs and feedbacks from local street children, should make innovative models for successful and sustainable education system for street children. Making flexible timing schools so that children can learn and earn in order to thrive themselves and their families. Education curriculum should be modified to make more informal and skill based. Teachers should be trained and motivated specifically for identifying their unique needs and teaching them accordingly. (5) Such innovative education plans are essential not only for meeting the goal of children's rights to education but also right for protection, development and participation. These strategies will also strengthen their autonomy and will make them more closer to mainstream society by building their confidence in educational system. This way who are already in street conditions can be empowered for avoiding and negotiating situations of risk for themselves, and will prevent more children from ending up in street situations.

Conclusion-

Government should make adequate efforts in collecting the adequate data for street children so that they are counted in national statistics and goals. Lack of legal papers should not be restricting them to procure right to education. An holistic approach policies should be made which provide them equality, take care of their health, nutrition, employment of them and their parents or caregivers and should provide protection to street children, in particular from neglect, exploitation and abuse. They should be included and involved in policy- and decision-making for street children. A range of education options is necessary, including "second-chance education", catch-up classes, mobile schools, vocational training linked to market research and followed up with longterm support for income generation, and pathways into formal education, through partnerships with civil society. Teachers should be trained on child rights and children in street situations, and child-centred, participatory teaching methodologies.

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