

A Study of the Street and Working Children Living In Thane City

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Abstract: *Street child labour has traditionally been seen as an urban phenomenon. The large-scale presence of street children is attributed to exploitative socio-economic structure and lopsided development. In present paper researcher has attempted to comprehend the causes and problems of street and working children in Thane city by collecting primary data from 121 street child labourers engaged in different activities like begging, petty vending and scavenging for recyclable materials. A programme focusing on re-uniting street children with their families should be adopted. There is an urgent need of coordination among development agents working for the rights of street children and information sharing among all stakeholders to enhance implementation strategies. Much larger focused interventions are needed such as better housing plans, inclusive urban development policies, and increased number of boarding school for poor children in both urban and rural areas.*

Keywords: *Street children, Child Labour, Focused intervention*

I. Introduction

According to UNICEF, three types of children belong to the category of street children. The first is street-living children who ran away from their families and live alone on the streets. The second is street-working children who spend most of their time on the streets fending for themselves, but return home on a regular basis. The last category is children from street families who live on the streets with their families.

Article 24 of the Indian Constitution and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (1986) defines a child as 'a person who has not completed 14 years of age'. In this study a child is defined as one who is below 14 years of age and the UNICEF definition of street and working children was followed for this study. Agarwal (1999) [1] estimated that India was a home to about 20 million street children (approximately 7% of the child population). There is, however, no census data available for street children since they constitute a floating population (Adeyinka, 2000) [2] Ayuku et al., 2003) [3].

Research paper is divided in to six parts. Introduction is followed by objectives in part two. Literature review is in part three followed in part four by findings of the sample survey. Recommendations and suggested policy interventions is part five of the paper followed by Conclusion in part six.

II. Objectives

- i. To understand the reasons of street and working children living in Thane city
- ii. To comprehend the problems/ living conditions of street and working children in Thane city
- iii. To recommend measures to improve conditions of street and working children in Thane city

III. Literature review

Street child labour has traditionally been seen as an urban phenomenon. It therefore becomes essential to verify through literature why is it that cities attract or employ child labour? Boyden (1991) [4] explains this in detail based on a primary study on 'the children of the cities'. According to him the special qualities attached to youthfulness and childish agility are major attractions for employers. He further adds that employers say that they recruit child labour due to their efficiency and alertness. However, this could well be an approach to justify the involvement of a child in work. In reality it is clear that the abundant availability of children on city streets who are largely without any sort of guardianship, is one of the key reasons that employers are able to freely recruit and exploit them. They are vulnerable because they are young, small, poor, ignorant of their rights, and often have no family members who will come to their defence.

On the other hand, working street children are prone to exploitation by employers who make them work for long hours in the same posture, without food, without providing any safety information or equipment, without informing them about the consequences of the activity, and by making them work for abysmally low wages without any social security and without any holiday or leisure, as mentioned by Wasi (2002) [5] and Goyal (2005) [6]. The work is mostly too demanding in relation to their size and strength, causing irreversible damage to their physical and physiological development, resulting in permanent disabilities, with serious consequences for their adult lives.

Issues that the Street Children Face- various studies on street children (Wasi 2002; Goyal 2005) discuss the sexual abuse that children experience on the street and at the workplace. The children are largely exploited by strangers, adult street dwellers, and sometimes by fellow street children. Moreover, their implications on a child's existing mental and physical status are deep-rooted and will adversely influence her/his mental, physical, intellectual, and behavioural health for the rest of her/his life. Dhawan et al. (2010) [7] reported that the likelihood of street children getting affected by sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS in India is also very high.

It is the responsibility of larger society to mainstream these children and to provide them the rights that they are being denied. It must be recognised that they are a critical part of society, thrown on its streets largely for reasons unknown to us. It is evident that no child is on the street by choice; she/he has been forced to make that choice. Sometimes they end up on the streets due to their own ignorance. It is clear that any reason which leads a child to make that kind of choice needs to be addressed.

IV. Children's condition and life on the street: findings of the sample survey

The large-scale presence of street children is attributed to exploitative socio and economic structure, lopsided development and iniquitous resource ownership, large scale unemployment, rapid urbanisation, rural to urban migration, rapid population growth, extreme poverty, increasing disparities in wealth and income, cutbacks in government social and education budgets, high level child abuse by the parents and society, and the breakdown of traditional family and community structures etc. Consequently children are forced to live on the street, and earn livelihood for themselves and also in support of their families. The risks of children living street life are great and their vulnerability to exploitation is enormous. In India, one of the fastest developing countries in the world, the country's future depends upon the quality of present day children. Hence, there is every need to attend to this problem.

In present paper researcher has made an attempt to study problems and living conditions of street children in Thane city from Maharashtra state.

4.1 Description of Sample

Researcher has collected Primary data by surveying 121 street child labourers engaged in different activities like begging, petty vending -selling of different kinds of food items including fruits and vegetables, selling cosmetics, grocery and cloth items on street, shining shoes, scavenging for recyclable materials, such as plastic, paper, and metal. Majority of them were self-employed. Questionnaire was framed and data was collected from different parts of Thane city including Kalwa, Mumbra and Diva.

4.2 Findings of the Survey

Average Age of children was 11.22 years, with minimum age 6 years to maximum up to 14 years. 66 percent of the sample was male and 34 percent was female. About 70 percent of the children surveyed were from Maharashtra state where as 30 percent were migrants. About 40 percent of the child labourers surveyed were working on street for less than one year, 37 percent between 1 to 3 years, 7 percent were on street for 3 to 5 years where as about 16 percent were working on street for more than 5 years. 18 percent of the children surveyed were staying alone, 60 percent were staying in a group or with friends and 22 percent were found to be staying with family.

Main Cause for working and living on street as indicated by sample of child labour was poverty (53 percent), followed by other causes like alcoholic father (10 percent), disintegration of family (6 percent) and violence (0.82 percent).

About 35 percent of the children surveyed had never attended school, about 20 percent had attended school between I to IV class and about 45 percent had attended school between V to VIII classes. However, about 70 percent of the children surveyed wanted to go back to school if given chance.

With regard to educational background of parents about 80 percent of the children's father was illiterate and of about 84 percent of the children's mother was illiterate. They mainly were from uneducated families.

About 16 percent of the children wake up early to work and reported waking up before 5 am; whereas about 42 percent wake up between 5 to 7 am. About 72 percent of the children surveyed were working up to 8 hours a day, where as 12 percent reported to be working for 8 to 10 hours and about 15 percent reported to be working for more than 10 hours a day. In spite of long working hours about 75 percent of the children reported earning less than Rs 3000 per month. About 58 percent of the sample even reported malnutrition, reporting incidence of missed meal in last one week of the survey. In spite of their low income about 57 percent reported they are able to make savings although amount of savings per month for about 40 percent children were less than Rs 500.

About 63 percent of the sample was found to be spending money only on food and clothing, where as 36 percent reported spending on food, clothing and also on entertainment, about 1 percent was also spending money on Cigarettes/ liquor/ drugs.

With regard to source of drinking water about 73 percent were dependent on community taps, where as regarding sanitation about 26 percent were found to be using no toilet facility where as 63 percent were using public toilets and 10 percent were using paid Sulabh Sauchalaya. Unclean and unhygienic water and sanitation has also resulted in to high incidence of sickness among them. About 25 percent of the sample reported high sickness frequency, with about 14 percent affected ever by T.B., Malaria and HIV/AIDs. About 60 percent of the children surveyed reported dependence on public hospitals and clinics for treatment when sick.

Harassment by police is considered as a major problem by about 30 percent of the child labour surveyed, followed by shelter at night as a major problem by about 20 percent and bullying by seniors by about 18 percent. When in need about 40 percent reported taking help from friend, 29 percent by social workers and 24 percent depend on police. In spite of Government and NGO programmes and projects to help child labour about 60 percent were found to be not aware of any kind of assistance.

V. Recommendations

In view of these findings, this study makes some recommendations and policy interventions that would ensure the rights of street children as citizens of India.

- A programme focusing on re-uniting street children with their families should be adopted. Strategies for intervention need to consider ways of strengthening families' responsibility for their children. Children should only be placed in institutions, or given foster placements as a last resort.
- There is an urgent need of coordination among development agents working for the rights of street children and information sharing among all stakeholders to enhance implementation strategies.
- Existing or new government programmes aimed at street children need three essential components:
 - i. Creating awareness about government and NGO Schemes/ programmes for street children.
 - ii. Ensuring access to basic necessities such as shelter, food, clothing, education, safe drinking water, sanitation with the help of grassroots organisations, so that the benefits reach the end beneficiaries.
 - iii. The government must ensure that when a slum/habitation is demolished, children get reenrol led in other schools where their parents have shifted and their entitlements are restored at the new address.
- It is essential to increase the number of shelters, not only night but also day shelters for street children. It is essential for the Government and NGOs to pay more attention to girls and women on the streets.
- Night classes and other service-deliveries can be also centred around such places.
- Interventions are needed in rural areas to reduce migration of young children from rural to urban areas. Employment possibilities for adults should be increased in rural areas from where large scale migration is taking place.
- The government should ensure that appropriate services with doctors, counsellors, and social workers are provided to these children.

- Finally, to bring down the incidence of street children, much larger focused interventions are needed such as better housing plans, inclusive urban development policies, and increased number of boarding school for poor children in both urban and rural areas.

VI. Conclusion

Developing countries like India are home to street children. Study revealed that Poverty is the main cause for Street child labour. These children were found to be working for longer hours with lower earnings. Incidence of malnutrition was also reported. Unclean and unhygienic water and sanitation has resulted in to high incidence of sickness among these children. There is an urgent need of co-ordination among development agents working for the rights of street children and focused interventions are suggested.

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