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A Study on the Street Children and Social Rehabilitation Services

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Abstract:

Street children represent one of the most marginalized groups in urban India, often deprived of shelter, education, healthcare, and protection. Exposed to poverty, neglect, abuse, and hazardous working conditions, they face multiple risks including exploitation, violence, substance abuse, and poor physical and mental health. This study aims to examine the living conditions of these children and evaluate the effectiveness of social rehabilitation services aimed at their care and reintegration. It reviews both governmental and non-governmental interventions such as shelter homes, non-formal education, child care institutions, and family reunification efforts. Social workers and NGOs play a critical role in outreach, rescue, and long-term support. Using a qualitative and descriptive approach, based on field observations and secondary data, the study finds that while some services provide temporary relief, they often fall short of addressing the deeper, structural issues. The study emphasizes the need for rights-based, community-oriented models that ensure sustainable rehabilitation, educational inclusion, and social integration of street children.

Keywords: Street Children, Social Rehabilitation, Child Protection, Juvenile Justice.

Introduction

Street children are among the most visible yet neglected segments of society in many developing nations, including India. Their presence on roads, railway stations, markets, and traffic signals is not coincidental—it reflects deep-rooted socioeconomic inequalities, family disintegration, and systemic failures in

ensuring the rights and welfare of children. The issue of street children has become a serious concern for policymakers, social workers, educators, and civil society due to its implications for human rights, child development, and social stability.

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Street children are broadly defined as minors who either live on the streets without any parental care or spend a substantial portion of their time working and surviving in public spaces. Many of these children are orphans, runaways, victims of abuse, or come from extremely poor backgrounds, often lacking access to basic necessities such as clean water, nutritious food, safe shelter, proper healthcare, and education. Deprived of adult guidance, they are exposed to numerous risks, including drug abuse, physical and sexual exploitation, involvement in criminal activities, and chronic health problems.

The root causes behind children living on the streets are complex and multifaceted. These include poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, migration due to natural disasters or socio-political unrest, neglect, and child trafficking. Once on the streets, children are often forced to beg, pick rags, perform menial labor, or engage in illicit activities simply to survive. In doing so, they are denied fundamental rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, such as the right to protection, education, healthcare, and a safe, nurturing environment.

Recognizing the seriousness of this issue, both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have implemented various programs aimed at the social rehabilitation of street children. These services include shelter homes, drop-in centers, non-formal education,

vocational training, counseling, healthcare access, and family reunification efforts. However, despite the presence of such services, significant gaps remain between policy and practice. Many children remain unreached, rehabilitation is often temporary, and the root causes of child displacement are rarely addressed. Furthermore, many initiatives suffer from poor coordination, inadequate funding, a lack of trained personnel, and insufficient community involvement.

From a social work perspective, addressing the issue of street children requires more than temporary relief or rescue operations. It demands a rights-based, holistic approach that emphasizes prevention, early intervention, empowerment, and long-term reintegration. Social workers play a crucial role in identifying street children, building trust, assessing their individual needs, and designing tailored rehabilitation plans. Through advocacy, inter-agency coordination, family tracing, and community mobilization, social workers contribute significantly to the holistic development and societal reintegration of these children.

This study aims to critically examine the current status of street children and evaluate the effectiveness of existing social rehabilitation services. It seeks to understand the everyday challenges faced by street children, identify gaps in service delivery, and propose strategies for meaningful and sustainable interventions. Additionally, it highlights the challenges

faced by social workers in this field and explores how policies and programs can become more inclusive, responsive, and impactful.

Historical Background

The phenomenon of street children is not new; it has existed in various forms throughout history, particularly during periods of war, economic hardship, rapid urbanization, and social transformation. Historically, children without families or those affected by poverty and social unrest were often forced to live and work on the streets to survive. However, the term “street children” gained broader recognition only in the 20th century, especially after the World Wars and during phases of industrialization and mass urban migration in developing countries.

In India, the issue of street children came to public and governmental attention in the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by accelerated urbanization and large-scale migration to cities in search of livelihood. Many migrant families settled in slums or informal settlements lacking adequate housing, sanitation, and employment opportunities. Children from these impoverished backgrounds—or those who were orphaned, abandoned, or ran away due to abuse or poverty—began appearing in large numbers on the streets, engaging in begging, rag-picking, vending, or performing odd jobs for survival. Several studies and reports by NGOs and international agencies such as

UNICEF, Childline India Foundation, and Save the Children have documented the growing population of children living in unsafe public spaces. These children face constant exposure to violence, exploitation, and neglect, with limited or no access to education, healthcare, or legal protection.

In response, the Government of India, through the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), initiated a range of child protection policies and programs, including:

- Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS)
- Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 (amended in 2015)
- Street Children Rehabilitation Projects in collaboration with NGOs

Simultaneously, numerous non-governmental organizations began offering rescue, shelter, counseling, and rehabilitation services in major urban centers such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bangalore. Their interventions have included bridge education programs, vocational skills training, and legal support aimed at reintegrating children into mainstream society.

Despite these decades-long efforts, street children remain a persistent and serious issue in urban India. This historical overview highlights that while socio-economic transformations have contributed to the rise of street children, resolving the problem requires a long-

term, rights-based, and inclusive approach. Sustainable solutions must involve coordinated action by government agencies, NGOs, community stakeholders, and civil society.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the socio-economic and familial factors leading children to street life.
- To assess the types and effectiveness of existing rehabilitation services.
- To understand the role of NGOs and social workers in supporting street children.
- To analyze the challenges in reintegrating street children into society.
- To suggest effective strategies for long-term rehabilitation and empowerment.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research approach based entirely on secondary sources. It aims to explore the conditions of street children and assess the effectiveness of existing social rehabilitation services in India. Data has been gathered from a wide range of secondary materials, including government reports such as those published by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, policy documents like the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), as well as reports by international organizations such as UNICEF, Save the

Children, and Childline India Foundation. In addition, the study reviews academic research papers, case studies, books, and media reports related to street children and child welfare. The collected data has been analyzed thematically to identify key issues, service gaps, and the roles of stakeholders involved in rehabilitation efforts. This secondary data-based approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the historical background, prevailing challenges, and policy implications concerning street children in urban India.

Who Are Street Children

Street children are those boys and girls who live and work in public places like footpaths, railway stations, markets, but stops or under flyovers. They often have little or no contact with their families and do not have a permanent home, proper care, or access to basic rights like education, food and safety. Some children are on the street because they have been orphaned, abandoned or have run away from homes due to poverty, violence, or abuse. Others may still have families but are forced to spend most of their time outside the home working to support their family's survival. Street children lead very difficult lives. They face hunger, lack of clean water, no place to sleep and at high risk of exploitation, abuse and health problems. They often earn a small living by begging, rag picking, selling items at traffic signals or doing small labor jobs. Many of them are denied their basic rights and are treated with neglect and disrespect

by society. These children are not just poor or homeless they are children who have dreams, talents and the rights to live with dignity. They need love, care, education, protection, and support from both government and society to lead a better life.

Problems Faced by Street Children

Street children encounter a wide range of problems that severely impact their health, safety, education, and overall development. Deprived of parental care, social support, and legal protection, they remain exposed to numerous risks that often go unaddressed by formal systems. The following sections outline the major challenges they face in their everyday lives.

Lack of Basic Needs

Street children are frequently deprived of essential necessities such as nutritious food, clean water, clothing, and safe shelter. They often resort to eating discarded food from garbage bins or rely on begging for their survival. At night, they sleep on pavements, under flyovers, or in other unsafe public places without any protection from weather conditions or physical harm. Most of them wear torn or unwashed clothes and lack basic items like shoes, blankets, or seasonal garments. This constant struggle for survival makes them more susceptible to illness, injuries, and long-term physical suffering.

Poor Health and Hygiene

Due to unhygienic living conditions and a lack of medical care, street children

suffer from a range of health issues. Malnutrition, skin infections, respiratory illnesses, and gastrointestinal problems are common among them. They often go without vaccinations or basic medical treatment, making them vulnerable to communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. The absence of clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and proper hygiene further deteriorates their health. These children live in constant danger of illness and rarely receive timely or adequate healthcare.

Physical and Sexual Abuse

Street children are highly exposed to violence, exploitation, and abuse on a regular basis. They are frequently subjected to physical beatings by police, older children, or local vendors, and are often exploited by adults or gangs for begging, labor, or illegal activities. Girls are particularly at risk of sexual abuse, trafficking, and exploitation. With no adult guardians or legal protections, these children are defenseless and live in constant fear and insecurity, further deepening their psychological trauma.

Drug Addiction and Substance Abuse

In an attempt to cope with hunger, pain, loneliness, and emotional stress, many street children turn to harmful substances. Glue sniffing, tobacco, alcohol, and drug use are common forms of addiction among them. This substance abuse severely affects their physical and mental health, leading to behavioral

issues, developmental delays, and sometimes involvement in criminal activities. The lack of awareness and access to rehabilitation services exacerbates the problem, leaving many trapped in a vicious cycle of addiction and street life.

Lack of Access to Education

Most street children are deprived of formal education due to poverty, frequent migration, or lack of documentation. Even those who express a desire to study often face rejection from schools because they lack birth certificates, clean clothing, or a permanent address. Consequently, they grow up illiterate or with minimal education, making it difficult for them to access stable jobs or improve their socio-economic conditions. Their exclusion from the education system ensures that the cycle of poverty and marginalization continues.

Mental and Emotional Trauma

The absence of familial care and a safe environment causes significant emotional distress in street children. Many suffer from anxiety, depression, and a deep sense of loneliness due to separation from their families and constant exposure to abuse. The lack of love, guidance, and emotional security affects their self-esteem and mental development. Some children become withdrawn, emotionally numb, or lose all interest in life, highlighting the urgent need for psychological support and trauma-informed care.

Child Labour and Criminal Exploitation

To meet their basic survival needs, many street children engage in informal and often hazardous work. They may be found begging, rag-picking, washing cars, selling small goods, or working in eateries and workshops under exploitative conditions. Some are manipulated by criminal gangs into theft, drug trafficking, or smuggling. Rather than being protected and rehabilitated, these children are often criminalized and punished, which further alienates them from society and prevents reintegration.

Social Exclusion and Stigmatization

Street children are frequently stigmatized and excluded by mainstream society. They are often perceived as dirty, dangerous, or untrustworthy, and are pushed out of public spaces and denied dignity and respect. People avoid interacting with them or label them as “bad children” without understanding their background or struggles. This social rejection leads to further isolation, low self-worth, and a lack of opportunities for social inclusion and development.

Lack of Identity and Legal Protection

Most street children do not possess any form of legal identification such as birth certificates or identity cards. This lack of documentation prevents them from accessing government welfare schemes, education, healthcare, or legal aid. As a result, they remain invisible in official records and unprotected by the state. Their exclusion from the legal and

administrative systems denies them the rights guaranteed under the Constitution of India and international child protection frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Conclusion

The issue of street children is one of the most critical yet often overlooked social problems in our country. These children live on the margins of society, struggling daily for survival and are denied even the most basic rights that every child deserves—such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, and protection. Their circumstances are not a matter of choice, but the result of multiple factors including poverty, broken families, abuse, migration, neglect, and lack of social support. Their lives are marked by suffering, fear, hunger, and insecurity. Despite being children with dreams, potential, and innocence, they are often viewed with suspicion, treated unfairly, and excluded from mainstream society.

This study highlights the multiple and complex challenges faced by street children, ranging from physical and sexual abuse to drug addiction, poor health, and child labour. Girls, in particular, are more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. The absence of identity documents, proper care, and legal protection further exposes them to violence, neglect, and systemic injustice. Moreover, society tends to blame these children rather than understanding their circumstances and offering meaningful support.

Social rehabilitation services provide a pathway to hope and transformation for street children. Interventions such as temporary shelters, bridge schools, vocational training, counseling, de-addiction programs, and family reunification efforts play a vital role in improving their lives. While many NGOs and government initiatives are working towards their upliftment, these efforts remain insufficient and fragmented. There is an urgent need for better coordination, sustained planning, robust policy frameworks, trained personnel, and increased funding to address the issue effectively.

Street children are not the problem—they are the outcome of our collective failure to protect and nurture vulnerable members of society. Every child has the right to live a safe, dignified, and fulfilling life. It is not only a legal responsibility but also a moral duty for all of us—government, civil society, and individuals—to ensure that no child is left behind on the streets.

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