

Abstract

Street life poses numerous challenges, particularly to children, who are the most vulnerable population. Every day, these children must fight for necessities such as food, healthcare, and shelter. The lack of access to these necessities has significant negative psychological impacts on their health, growth, and development. As the most vulnerable members of society, these children are easy targets for exploitation, including forced labour, trafficking, drug abuse, and physical and sexual abuse. These realities hinder their well-being and shatter their innocence.



Inclusive Social Work: Practice with Street Children



To minimize their risks and forms of exploitation, it is vital to analyze the factors responsible for their exclusion from mainstream society. Therefore, it is crucial to reevaluate policies and legal dimensions related to their care and protection. Street children demand more attention to provide them with a safe social, psychological, healthy, and developmental atmosphere for their optimum growth and development. To this end, social work can play a significant role in providing guided interventions at the community, group, and individual levels to rehabilitate street children.

Keywords: *street children, care and protection of children, child care institutions, inclusive social work practice, social work intervention.*

INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing global awareness of children's needs and rights, the phenomenon of street children continues to grow worldwide (Ayub et al., 2016; Kassa & Muche, 2023; Salihu, 2019; Zarezadeh, 2013). Life on the streets is challenging for human survival and worse and even harsher for children. Lack of adult care, supervision, and guidance often leaves street children without proper food, health, hygiene, clothing, shelter, and education. Street children are always associated with violence, crime, and social unrest; As causes and victims, they are socially subject to their environment and vulnerable (Bajari & Kuswarno, 2020). However, changes in social and geographic praxis resulting from factors such as explosive urbanisation, problems of poverty, urban congestion, and the effects of globalisation have led to an increase in the number of children and youth who migrate and often lead a street life.

Henry Mayhew, a journalist and the foreshadower of qualitative research, coined the term "street children" in 1851 (Nunes, 2012; Scanlon et al., 1998; Williams, 1993). The definition adopted by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) describes a street child as "...any girl or boy... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults" (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements [UN-Habitat], 2000, p.189). However, some agencies viewed the term "street children" as inappropriate because it establishes an arbitrary category and draws attention away from the interconnected dimensions of children's vulnerability (Volpi, 2002). In India, according to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, street children are a sub-category under Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP). The Act defines CNCP as children working in contravention of existing labour laws, begging, or living on the street.

Ghosh (1992) grouped street children in India into six categories based on the contexts that left them on the streets such as (1) Children belonging to families who have permanently migrated, (2) Children belonging to families who have temporarily migrated and would go back to their homes after some time, (3) Children coming from suburbs and adjoining villages to the city to work for the day and go back to their homes in the evening (4) Children belonging to low-income families lack care and protection (5) Working children, and (6) Children who are orphans, abandoned, delinquent, and runaway. According to the latest classification, street children fall into three categories, (1) children living alone on the street who have run away from their families, (2) children who spend time on the street to fend for themselves and

return home regularly, and (3) children of street families living with family on the street (Bhaskaran & Mehta, 2011).

On the other hand, World Health Organisation (WHO) identifies four categories of street children based on the classification by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). They are (1) a child of the street, who has no home but the street, (2) a child on the street, who visits their family regularly, (3) a child of a street family, and (4) a homeless child in institutional care (WHO, n.d.). However, academics, researchers, policymakers, and society widely use various terms and typologies for street children, making the concept more debatable and contested. Besides, the changing connotations of geographical boundaries, age, gender, socio-cultural conditions and the changing nature of street migration make it more blurred to establish a consistent definition and conceptualisation.

Street Children: The Global Scenario

Children are considered to be the most vulnerable of the population and are easy targets of various forms of exploitation like forced labour, trafficking, drug abuse, drug peddling, physical exploitation and sexual abuse. Broken marriages, poverty, lack of basic family support, and deceased one or both parents are some of the issues which lead to a sudden collapse of the available support system to the children. Deprived of proper upbringing and development, children are forced to lead a street life. There are many other factors responsible for children living on the streets like runaway from their families, physical abuse, aberrant families, forced migration, sudden displacement of families due to floods, draughts or any other natural calamities, divorce, domestic violence, beating, rebuke, and conflicts in families.

Moreover, children are among the most vulnerable population groups due to the country's changing demographic and sociological landscape. It is important to note that any change in policy, planning and implementation of programmes directly affects children. According to the State of the World's Children report, the proportion of children receiving social protection in the world was only 27.4% during the period 2010-2019 (UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, street children are considered a high-risk social problem. Although street children are not limited to Asian countries, in most Asian countries they are subjected to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of police and other street dwellers (Dabir & Athale, 2011).

The hidden and isolated nature of street children makes it difficult to gather accurate statistics; However, UNICEF estimates that there are approximately 100 million street children worldwide, and their numbers are

constantly increasing (Fantahun & Taa, 2022). Although street children are a worldwide phenomenon, it is more severe in developing countries where inadequate social infrastructure and socio-economic programmes threaten their developmental needs (Issa & Madelyn, 2018). There are 40 million street children in Latin America and at least 18 million in India (Kanth & Harris, n.d.). Balachova et al., (2009) presented a rounded estimate of 5 million street children in Russia, highlighting the lack of a universally accepted definition for street children and inconsistency in data collection.

Street Children in India

The concept of street children in India is blurred and conflated with other categories of CNCP such as child labourers, beggars, and balloon sellers. They are considered as the subset of CNCP. In 2003, an estimated eleven million children were living on urban streets in India, 420,000 of them in the country's six metropolitan cities (Mathur et al., 2009). Street children in India are trapped in a cycle of poverty and degradation and lack access to health care and education (Dutta, 2018). A field study in India indicated that most street children were boys aged 8–12 years and their common means of recreation and relaxation were gambling, watching movies and television, smoking, drinking, and drug abuse (Mathur, 2009).

In general, there has been a sharp increase in crimes against children, which is an important indicator to measure the condition of children in India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2021 report, abduction, and kidnapping accounted for 45%, which is the highest percentage of crimes against children. Meanwhile, cases of physical and sexual abuse under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act were 36.5% (NCRB, 2021). This indicates the vulnerability of children in India; Moreover, street children are more vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse than others.

Factors Contributing to Street Children in India

Rapidly increasing urbanisation has prompted and accelerated the concept of migration, as families leave their hometowns for cities to explore better sources of income and a better standard of living. This has led to an increase in street children in urbanised areas, especially in big cities (Parveen, 2019, Srivastava & Shareef, 2016). Also, the common characteristics of the society and language of the people of India's neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan, have encouraged poor children to cross the border. Conducive local conditions and the availability of petty jobs and services to street children in India favoured the migration of street children

from neighbouring countries (Dabir & Athale, 2011). Without basic support systems such as family care, protection, food, clothing, shelter, education, health, and sanitation, children in this category are forced to seek alternative sources of livelihood. This often leads them to engage in activities such as weaving, begging, working in small shops, and hawking to survive.

Situations with push (unemployment, poverty, conflicts) and pull factors (independence, desire to explore new life, living life as depicted in movies or media) lead to street children. Some of them are described below.

Family violence and neglect

The family is the primary unit for a child's optimum care and development. But families living in poverty often send their children to beg or do petty jobs to support the family's day-to-day survival needs. On the other hand, children are also seen leaving their families due to domestic violence and abuse. Domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, bullying, and traumatic events like the sudden loss of a parent or both parents have a tremendous impact on the psychological health of children. According to a report by UNICEF in 2006, it was estimated that 27.1 million to 69 million children were exposed to domestic violence in India (Dutta, 2018).

Socio-Cultural Factors

The socio-cultural fabric of India also contributes to street children, a mundane social problem. Underdevelopment, extreme poverty, discrimination against girl children, and sociocultural factors leading to landlessness are major push factors for street children in India (Dabir & Athale, 2011). Social evils such as female feticide, child marriage, and discrimination against girls persist despite laws and legislation to prevent them. It demonstrates the strength of the underlying current of the old socio-cultural structure of society. Moreover, research conducted in different parts of the developing world suggests more similarities than differences in street children's socioeconomic and cultural contexts (Mathur, 2009).

Natural Disasters and Health Emergencies

In developing contexts like India, children under adverse circumstances constitute a high-risk group (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020). Natural disasters have a powerful ability to uproot human habitation quickly. Natural calamities such as floods, earthquakes, and landslides cause sudden loss of life and property. Children who lose their parents and homes become street children (Stoklosa et al., 2021). Similarly, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent

financial crisis have intensified child labour, child sex work, trafficking, child marriage, and child sexual abuse (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020). Street children in India have been badly affected by the Covid-19 crisis (Idris, 2020). The sudden urban-to-rural migration of hundreds of thousands of families across India and deaths among them disrupted immediate support systems for children, forcing them into street life.

Forms of Exploitation Faced by Street Children in India

Street life often presents various challenges to both adults and children. However, it affects children more because they are a vulnerable population. Every day of a street child begins with a struggle for basic needs such as food, basic health facilities, and a safe place to stay. These children's conditions often violate their fundamental rights to food, clothing, shelter, essential health, sanitation, and education. Adverse psychological effects, challenging behaviour, and adjustment problems are all too common among children who lack support systems, are orphaned at a young age, and must fend for themselves without adult supervision. Additionally, their health, growth, and developmental needs are often negatively impacted (Dutta, 2018). The innocence of these individuals is abruptly halted by exposure to these harsh realities. The exclusion of street children from mainstream society is a grave issue. In metropolitan India, one can easily spot street children at traffic signals, engaging in activities such as begging, selling articles, or performing acrobatics (Dev et al., 2020).

Street children in India face general abuse and neglect, as well as health, verbal, physical, and psychological abuse (Mathur et al., 2009). They have no mechanism to rescue them or manage their emerging needs, and their optimal and safe development is not a concern, leading them to self-defence situations. They often engage in forced labour or toil long hours in inhumane conditions to earn a daily square meal. Furthermore, the insufficient payment for their long work leads them to find more work to meet their increasing needs for food, clothing and other basic necessities. Even after working for almost a day, they cannot find a safe place to stay, leading them to live on the streets.

Street children who have no place to live are more prone to other forms of brutal and inhuman forms of exploitations like trafficking. Rape and sex trafficking of children remain a severe problem in India. Most at-risk children are street-based, homeless, or in or near brothels (Gupta et al., 2010). Living in these inhuman and unhygienic conditions also exposes them to serious health hazards like deteriorated health, malnutrition, skin diseases, and sexually transmitted diseases (Bal et al., 2010; Gupta et al., 2010). Moreover, street children in India engage in substance abuse right from their early childhood

(Bal et al., 2010; Sharma & Joshi, 2013). This often leads to deviant behaviour in which the child becomes a drug peddler. (Sen, 2009).

Furthermore, street children are prone to various forms of physical exploitation, like beating and sexual abuse by elder children or adults living on the streets and bullying by other street children. This kills their childhood innocence and makes them more mature than their age. When children work at a younger generation with long toiling working hours and are underpaid, it results in demeaning and destruction of the concept of leading a life of positivity and progress. Street children are often found working in hazardous conditions like garment sweatshops, zari making industries where they work for long in poor lighting and infrastructure. This leads them to health and physical hazards like losing eyesight, respiratory diseases and other ailments. Children working in other hazardous conditions often have asthma, bronchitis, and physical deformities. Besides this, working without proper safety standards and equipment makes them more prone to occupational hazards (UNICEF 1993). The life on streets is not easy and is by and large a struggle of survival for these children. They often strive to deal with developmental changes that are witnessed at this stage. Along with these challenges, they are exposed to various forms of exploitation which thwarts their social, psychological, cultural, and economic development. This often leads to loss of their innocence and childhood at a very early age and most of the street children are often seen as mature enough compared to their age.

Policy and legal interventions for street children in India

The Constitution of India, being the most basic foundation for policy making and policy implementation in the country, has laid down provisions about child protection, as shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: *Constitutional Provisions for Children in Street Situations*

Article	Provision
Article 14	Equality before the law
Article 15(3)	The state must make special provisions for women and children.
Article 21	No person shall be deprived of his right to life or personal liberty except under procedures prescribed by law.
Article 21(A)	The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children between six and fourteen.
Article 23(1)	Human trafficking, begging, and any such form of forced labour are prohibited and punishable.
Article 24	No child below the age of fourteen shall be employed in any factory, mine, or other hazardous work.

Article 39(e)	State policy towards securing the children's rights against abuse and against force by economic necessity to choose vocations that do not suit their age or strength.
Article 39 (f) [C]	Assurance that children are given opportunities to develop healthily with freedom, dignity, and protection of childhood against any form of exploitation and moral and material abandonment.
Article 45	Early childhood care and education for all children until they reach six.

Source: NCPCR & Save the Children, 2020

Moreover, India has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, in adherence to UNCRC, which also talks about protecting CNCP. Besides this, the National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC) 2016, and the Commission for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005 specify various provisions that apply to the rehabilitation of children in street situations (CiSS). The standard operating procedure for the care and protection of CiSS developed by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and the Save the Children organisation is also in place in India (NCPCR & Save the Children, 2020).

NPAC, 2016 aims to reach out to the last child first as they are the most vulnerable due to exclusion in terms of gender, sociocultural, economic and geographical levels, including CiSS. CPCR Act, 2005 provides child rights commissions at the National and State Levels and a particular provision of the Children's Court for the speedy disposal of violence-related cases against children. Section 13 of this Act describes explicitly the commission's function as a body to initiate enquiry and ensure that the safeguards provided for children under various statutes are in operation with proper implementation. We are in the 34th year of India's ratification of the UNCRC. Our country also recognizes the universal rights of children, including the CNCP, which covers those living on the streets. Article 19 of the UNCRC states the right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect. Article 32 of the UNCRC refers to the right of these children to be protected from economic exploitation.

Additionally, the contributions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are of immense importance when we look for intervention strategies for working with street children. Various studies done by NGOs and CSOs specifically talk about street children as a phenomenon, along with intervention strategies to deal with it. Though these studies are geographically specific and often give a rapid situation assessment but are of utmost importance to analyse street children as a

phenomenon. These reports also significantly bring out the magnitude and severity of the issue. (Dev et al., 2020)

A Social Work Intervention Model for Street Children in India

The concept of street children is dynamic and changing and it often evolves with the evolution of new concepts and dimensions in the society. This calls for an intervention which is based on the changing connotations of the society of which street children are part. For example, the intervention required for a street child staying with parents is different from a situation where the child stays alone and on the streets. The strategies adopted for prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration of a street child who has just been identified are different from the child who has already been identified as a street child and is living within the institution. Thus the type and form of intervention differ according to the situations under which street children are located.

The below-mentioned social work intervention model (Figure 6.1) not only highlights the uniqueness of intervention strategies that are to be adopted at each level but also highlights the process of systematic intervention for street children according to their needs at different levels.

The uncondusive situations under which street children dwell and the underlying factors that put children in these situations shed light to strategize, create and work on the sustaining support systems that can be provided to these children. The dynamic nature of street children as a concept intertwined with changing connotations of society calls for a dynamic model of intervention. The ABC Model of social work intervention is instrumental at all levels from addressing the immediate needs of street children to creating awareness at the community level to curb the issue of street children. In this model, A stands for Addressing current needs, B stands for Building capacity and C stands for Creating awareness. The detailed explanation of all the three levels is as follows;

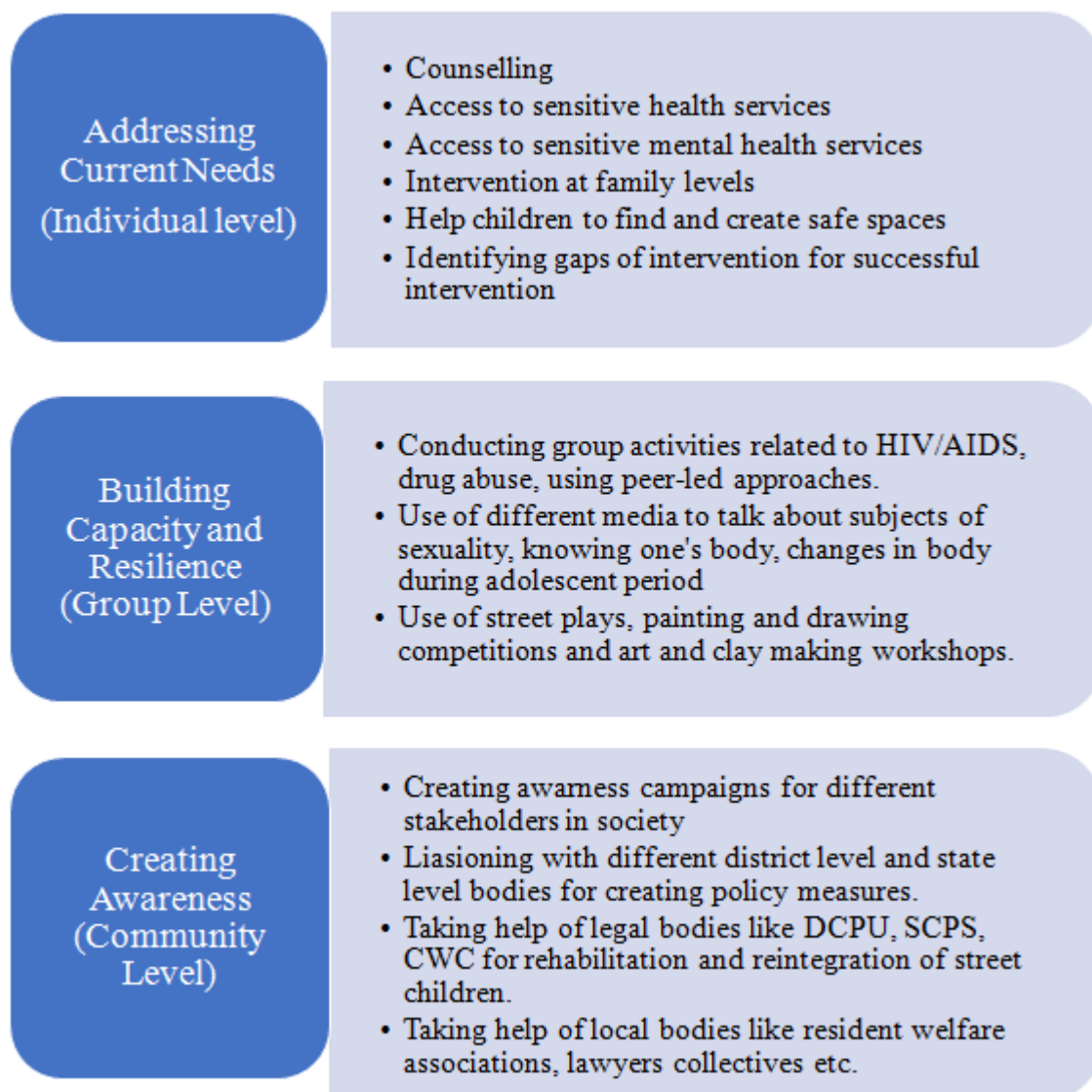


Figure 6.1: *ABC Model of Social Work Intervention with Street Children in India*

Addressing Current Needs (Individual Level): The social work intervention at the individual level starts with the counselling of street children. Counselling can be need-based, preventive, rehabilitative or about any immediately identified area of intervention. Most street children are found in situations where they lack guidance towards the high-risk behaviour that they are often part of during street life. Thus, access to counselling, health and mental health services, establishing a strong bond and contact with the family or immediate support system of a street child, and help in finding and creating safe spaces for children are necessary for intervention at the initial level from a social work perspective.

Building Capacity and Resilience (Group Level): The second level of social work intervention talks about group-level capacity building of street children which includes identification of areas which need intervention and devising group strategies to impart, disseminate and build knowledge among groups of street children. Since peer influence is significant in this group of children, group activities of awareness can be an effective tool in the dissemination of information related to HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, sexuality, puberty, adolescence, violence etc.

Creating Awareness (Community Level): The social work intervention not only talks about intervention at the individual and group level but also talks beyond it from a structural point of view. The individuals and groups are part of the community and for any intervention to successfully perpetuate in the society, intervention at the community level is significant. For this, creating awareness for different stakeholders like groups of industries, small-scale business owners, resident welfare associations, and small and commercial shops association is significant in terms of compliance of non-employing children in any hazardous or forced labour processes. Besides this, interventions can also be made at the policy level through liaisoning at district and state level bodies like the labour department, District Child Protection Unit, State Child Protection Societies, and Child Welfare Committees for prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration of street children.

Street children go through various forms of physical, psychological and social stigma and stress which further thwarts their overall progress. The inhuman conditions in which they live also make them prone to various other social evils like sexual exploitation, infections through Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), HIV/AIDS, skin and other body infections, physical deformities, mental retardation etc. Thus, to bring out these children from this gamut of cyclic exploitation, a guided social work intervention is of utmost importance. Street children being a blurred concept calls for immediate and meaningful intervention and the ABC Model can be instrumental to address this issue at the structural level to bring about changes. Professional social work being a holistic approach to deal with this challenge can be effective to bring these structural changes specifically about the strongly knit socio-cultural fabric of India.

CONCLUSION

The well-being of street children is obstructed by a wide range of exploitation. To minimize the risks and forms of exploitation they face, identifying the contributing factors is crucial. A thorough review of policies and legal frameworks concerning the care and protection of children is necessary.

Providing street children with a secure, social, psychological, healthy, and developmental environment for their optimal growth and development is of utmost importance as they are vulnerable to neglect and lack of protection. Social work must play a significant role in implementing effective and guided interventions at the community, group, and individual levels to rehabilitate street children.

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