

VULNERABILITIES AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDREN IN URBAN SLUMS: A CASE STUDY OF KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract: Urbanization has increased the population across the globe as well as in India. A large number of the rural population are migrating to urban areas in search of employment, and to have a life with enhanced facilities. Due to space scarcity in the city, these populations are residing in areas nearer to the railway station, and also in the neglected part of the city and gradually the slums are developed. Following this, these slums dwellers suffer from a dearth of basic facilities and hence children and women are the worst victims of this migration. Since children are the future of any nation and therefore it is the responsibility of the family, community, state, and country to protect and provide them with the best opportunities to grow and develop. Therefore in a country like India, a developing country, children of this nation are under threat to various types of vulnerabilities be it like abuse, neglect, exploitation and suffer numerous issues related to child protection. The reasons for such vulnerabilities are due to poor socio-economic conditions of the families, unsafe and lack of protective environment in their homes and community, etc. Apart from these vulnerabilities, these children are susceptible to health problems like diarrhea, malnutrition and other issues hampering their growth and development. Henceforth this paper attempts to visualize the vulnerabilities and challenges among the children residing in the urban slums of Kolkata through several case studies.

Index Terms - Children, Vulnerabilities, Slums, Child Protection Issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

The global population in urban areas has increased concerning rural areas. It has grown from 30% to 54% from 1950 to 2014. Therefore it is expected that by the year 2050, about 66% of the world's population is to be urbanized and hence it will supplement another 2.5 billion people to the urban population. Countries like North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe are the most urbanized countries of the world having 82%, 80% both (Latin America, Caribbean) and 73% of people live in urban areas of these countries. Whereas in contrast to these highly urbanized countries, there are countries like Africa and Asia which are mostly having a rural population with only 40% and 48% of them reside in urban areas. However, these countries are expected to urbanize with 56% and 64% urban population by 2050 and are the faster-urbanizing countries than the other regions in the near future. According to the United Nations, there will be an increase in the urban population by 90% in these countries i.e. Asia and Africa. Therefore the highest percentage of urban growth (urban residents) is likely to take place in India followed by China and Nigeria during this period. As per the data of UNFPA, the global scenario states that one billion people live in the urban slums, and they lack basic services (lack of sanitation and water facilities), overcrowded, polluted, dangerous, etc. Therefore the lack of these basic services in these urban slums is a major disadvantaged condition for the children and is vulnerable to the environment in these slums. Furthermore, as per the Global Report on Human Settlements, 43% of the urban population in developing countries live in slums and the least developing countries, this percentage rises to about 78%. Similarly, India accounts for about 11% of the global urban population as per the World Bank report. In the year 2011, the share of urban population of India increased from rural population that is from 18% to 31%. As per the census data 2011, about 377 million people residing in urban areas which will increase to 600 million people by the year 2030. Therefore this increase in urban population also accounts for urban poverty globally. Furthermore, as per the NSSO, 61st round data states in the year 2004-05 about 81 million people in urban India live below the poverty line. As per Census 2011, there are 13.7 million slum households in India, which constitute more than 17% of the urban households living in the country. The slum dwellers lack proper housing conditions, social services, basic amenities, and health facilities, issues related to safety and security and no stable livelihood opportunities. The inhabitants of these slums are vulnerable to several situations and are deprived of their basic entitlements. Hence this urban poverty is one of the increased vulnerability among the slums for both children and slum dwellers. Hence, there is a need to address this issue for improving this situation (Save the Children, 2015).

Vulnerability is defined as a situation or condition where an individual is exposed to harm— physical or emotional. Therefore child vulnerability majorly address issues related to issues like child abuse and other leading health issues among children. It is important to look into the issues related to vulnerabilities against children because they are "human beings" not for the cause since children have human rights or they being future of any nation. According to World Bank, the term child vulnerability has been defined where the children are facing a higher relative risk in terms of infant, child and adolescent mortality, low immunization, low access to health services, high malnutrition, high burden of disease, low school enrolment rates, high repetition rates, poor school performance and/or high dropout rates, intra-household neglect vis-à-vis other children in the household (reduced access to attention, food, care), family and community abuse and maltreatment (harassment and violence), Economic and sexual exploitation, due to lack of care and protection. Following this CHILDLINE also define the concept by listing them as which include age factor, physical disabilities, mental disabilities, provocative behaviors, powerlessness, etc. And UNICEF also views vulnerability associated with children where they are abused, exploited and neglected. Hence, to address

child vulnerability, taking into consideration these varied vulnerabilities related to children, a life-cycle approach was defined. This approach encompasses the varied nature of vulnerabilities faced by children in their different age groups. This would encompass every aspect of children facing vulnerabilities in each category and also an age-wise categorization (Ernst & Young LLP, 2019).

The concept or definition of vulnerability has been defined several times encompassing various issues. Vulnerabilities or stressors are associated with a different section stating the degree or the frequency of risk or threat associated with it. Furthermore Mohapatra. S (2012) in his study, defined vulnerability as the degree to which every system be it the subsystem or system experience harm due to exposure to hazards, either to a perturbation or stress or stressors. Vulnerability is a function of the character, magnitude and rate of climate change and variation to which a system is exposed, its sensitivity, and its adaptive capacity. In continuation, these definitions, and another report-The *Human Development Report 2007* described 'vulnerability' in the context of climate change as "an inability to manage risk" (Mohapatra. S (2012)). Therefore in this paper, the vulnerabilities of children are expressed and highlighted through case studies from the slums of Kolkata. It would help to identify the reasons for such vulnerabilities and their effects on the children.

Vulnerabilities among children in slums: The slums are subject to several vulnerabilities in India as well as globally. This is very much evident from one of the studies conducted stating that children in the urban slums of Salvador, Brazil suffer from the occurrence of diarrhea and are prevalent among the children below one year of age. The factors associated with the issue of diarrhea are malnutrition, early motherhood, missed immunizations, poor sanitation, early exposure to other foods and previous pneumonia episodes, poor environmental conditions, other health-related, etc. (Melo.M & et.al 2008). Kavitha. N (2014), in her study, stated that the slum children suffer from diarrhea, fever, and cough. The study found that the slums are vulnerable to suffer from diarrhea, are malnourished, low birth weight and have higher infant death rates, suffer from anemia which is more among the slum children. Therefore it is very evident from the study that the children living in slum areas are vulnerable to various health hazards with a high risk of anemia, diarrhea, fever, cough and infant morbidity. Jogdand and Naik, (2013), in another study found that the children residing in the urban slums between the age group of 6-18years suffer from various behavior problems. The problems included educational difficulties such as school phobia, failure, and backwardness among these children. The other behavior problems included anti-social behavior such as lying, stealing, gambling, destruction and fire setting. Therefore the reasons related to the educational problems were poor socio-economic conditions of the families, low literacy among the parents, increased number of children in the families, lack of attention by the parents due to their engagement in earning a livelihood. Srivastava et.al (2012) in his study found that malnutrition is highly common among boys and is increasing along with age in the urban slums of Bareilly district. Lack of basic human necessities adversely affects the growth and development of the nutritional status of urban slum children. The study also revealed that malnutrition is also common among families where mothers are literate. Henceforth, as to the best of the knowledge, there have been gaps found in the existing literature regarding the case studies among the slum children, their vulnerabilities and its effects for these slum residing children in Kolkata on the issues related to child protection.

II. METHODOLOGY:

Case Study method has been used for the study. Four case studies from different slums comprising the zones of Kolkata i.e. West zone (Brace Bridge, Indira Palli, no 4), North Zone (Dakshindari and Narkeldanga) and East zone(Tangra) has been taken into consideration to explore the effects and the vulnerabilities associated with them. Therefore several case studies were collected from these slums to study the vulnerabilities related to the children. The present paper includes four case studies from the child protection issues prevalent in the slums of Kolkata.

Case Study: Child Marriage from Brace Bridge, Indira Palli no. 4, West Kolkata

Cases of child marriage are still prevalent in India and other states also and have been one of the major concerns to health, social and psychological issues. Similarly, child marriages are prevalent in slums of Kolkata also.

This is a case study of a young adolescent girl from the city of Kolkata who is a runaway bride and a case of child marriage. Rajani Kora (name changed), a 16year old resident of Brace Bridge, Indira Palli no 4, from a scheduled tribe family and a student of class seven. She is a run-away bride with a young 17years old-an adolescent boy, named as Biswajit Das, working as child labor. Both of them got married about a few days back in a nearby Kalighat mandir of Kolkata. At present both of them are residing in a rented house in the slum area. The girl is the eldest daughter of the couple. The parents have five daughters and one son. Saraswati (mother) is a housewife and Sambhu (father) is working as a daily labor. The girl ran away thrice previously in these few months. But, recently she ran away and was missing for a few hours. Consequently, Saraswati (mother) reported to the police station and the girl was rescued back within a few hours. The girl had made a false allegation against her parents that she is tortured and her parents do not take care of her, she also reported that her rights are also being violated. In this context, the police officials interacted with both of them (the girl and her parents) and advised her to go back to her home and continue her studies. When she was brought back home, the girl again eloped away and finally got married to the young boy. At present, the girl is staying with her husband whereas the families from both sides have not yet accepted the matter and therefore they are residing in the same slum in a rented apartment. The bride's family tried to counsel her so that she can start her studies once again but finally failed in doing so.

From the above case study, it can be analyzed that the lack of awareness and interest among the slum dwellers, this issue was not reported to the competent authority -i.e, reporting to the Child Line. The family tried to protect the girl but the girl was lured by the young boy to have a family of their own, made the girl eloped away with him and get married. Thus these two young children both (both the girl and the boy) married are the victims of violation of child rights, they are prey to several vulnerable activities of the slums, have no knowledge about the ill-effects of child marriage and thus this situation will have severe effects

on these children in future. Presently, the NGO working in this area has taken up issues related to child marriage, conducting awareness programs in these slums and the social worker has taken up this case and is trying to provide the young boy with some livelihood options, providing them with counseling sessions and also conducting sessions with the families so that they can easily accept their children in near future.

Major Highlights:

- The child is having a disturbed and neglected childhood.
- The young girl is under the pressure to look after her younger brother and sisters and take care of her household chores.
- The children in the slum areas are very much exposed to sexual activity at an early age. Therefore it is normal for them to elope away with their male partners and have their own family.
- Lack of acceptance of the various family planning programs in these slums, as a result, increased number of children in the families (large family size) where the children are neglected and are under the threat of numerous vulnerabilities.
- Lack of education among the parents is the major setback for these children.

Case Study: Child Labour from Narkeldanga, North Kolkata

This is also a case study of 13 years old adolescent boy Md. Parvez (name changed) residing in Narkeldanga, a slum of North Kolkata with his other three siblings and parents. The child is a drop-out student of class four. The head of the family is ill and had been suffering from asthma and works very often, whereas the mother works as a rag picker. The family is suffering from the poor financial condition. Thus the insufficient income of the family forced the mother to send her son to work as child labor in a box-making factory. This boy had been working as child labor since last year as a daily labor in a nearby box factory about fifteen minutes away from the slum and earns about Rs.2400 in a month, and working hours include about nine hours a day, which provides support to the family. The poor financial condition of the family is unable to provide the children with two square meal therefore Md. Parvez along with his mother is working to support his family.

Therefore the poor financial condition of the family, lack of interest in studying further, illness of the parents are the driving reasons for the child to work as child labor rather than education. Presently, the child is working in that factory and hence the family can sustain in providing at least two square of a meal for each of the members in the family. Although the NGO working in that area had taken up the case and tried to enrol the child once again back to school, the parents did not support the issue rather lack of interest to send their son to work and support his family. Furthermore, the child was given counselling sessions by the field level worker but failed in motivating the child and his parents so that he could continue his education. The sessions included the importance of education and the ill-effects of child labor to both the child and the parents but consequently failed in enrolling the child in school. Further, it was also reported by the NGO workers that the child was not interested in studies, he was performing very poorly and hence lost his interest in studying. Therefore, the vulnerabilities associated with the child is the poor financial condition of the family, lack of interest in studying further and also the ill-effects of working for long hours in a factory as a child are the problems. This will overall affect the health of the child, lack of proper nutrition which will affect the growth and development of the child are the several vulnerabilities associated with him.

Key Highlights:

- The child is under a vulnerable condition and is working to support his family.
- Lack of interest in studying and hence the child is dropout at a very early age.
- The poor financial condition of the family drives the child to work as child labor.
- The parents are least interested in the education of their children and hence the child is having a disturbing and neglected childhood.
- The children are affected due to the illness of their parents.
- The child is much more interested in earning livelihood for their family due to the poor socio-economic condition.

Case Study: Child Sexual Abuse from Tangra, East Kolkata

This is a case study of a young girl, Kohinoor Khatun (name changed), 7 years old, residing in Tangra slum in East Kolkata with her parents. The girl was sexually abused by a driver, 18years old resident of the slum. It was during the afternoon when Kohinoor Khatun went to a shop in the slum area to buy a packet of chips. The young boy attempted to sexually abuse the girl. This little girl had completely no knowledge about the intention of the perpetrator. The girl felt that something was wrong and she ran away shouting at her home. It was Sahinoor Bibi, the community worker noticed the little girl running back to her home. This was noticed by the community worker, Sahinoor Bibi (name changed) and thus she initiated a community action and caught hold of the boy and threatened the boy, not to repeat any such nuisances any further. On the other hand, the girl was blamed *saying that it was her fault as to why she went to the shop* when she reported the incident to her parents. Further, when the community worker tried to take necessary steps, the victim's family stepped out saying that Sahinoor bibi has ruined the status of his family as well as their daughter's status by taking action, where the community also participated. Consequently, some of the slum dwellers tried to make the family understand the importance of reporting the incident to the police which would provide learning to these perpetrators, who try to defame their daughters. But the victim's family stated that they are

least interested in taking any action and has asked the community not to highlight any such problems which would hamper their daughter's life and status.

Due to the sensitivity of the case, the case was neither reported to the police authorities nor to the NGO working in the slum area. Henceforth the NGO working in this area could rarely take up any action against the culprit, due to lack of interest of the family, as they were very reluctant to take any action related to this case. Therefore any action related to this case would involve several problems, support from the family which was lacking and as such will create a further problem for the girl and also for the family. Thus no further step was taken up by the NGO operational in this area. Thus the children both girls and boys both are under the vulnerable condition of being sexually abused, they lack knowledge about the concept of good and bad touch. Therefore the cases underreported to the respective authorities are also another threat to the children, where the cases are not registered due to several social stigmas and other related problems. Hence, it becomes much accessible for the culprits to continue with their worst form of exploitation against children.

Key Highlights:

- There is no awareness among the children as well as the parents on the issues related to child sexual abuse.
- The cases related to child sexual abuse in these slums are mostly under-reported.
- There are several obstructions like pressure from the families or community, social stigma are the barriers related to child sexual abuse.
- The lack of reporting to the respective authorities (police personnel) keeps the problems continuing and thus the children are under vulnerable circumstances and severe threats.
- Lack of conducive environment for the child to grow and develop in these slum areas.

Case Study: Child Labour and Dropout from Dakshindari, North Kolkata

This is also a case study for a young adolescent girl aged 14years Karishma Khatun (name changed) is a resident of the slum Dakshindari, North Kolkata. She is a daily vegetable seller in a nearby market, of the slum. She earns about Rs.200-Rs.400 per day with this selling of vegetables in the market. She stays in a joint family with her mother, two brothers, one sister-in-law and her niece. She is a drop-out student of class VII and has a lack of interest in studying. She is out of her studies for two years and spends her day playing, gossiping and selling vegetables at the nearby market. Chandni Bewa (mother) (name changed) is working as a domestic maid and the poor financial condition of the family compelled the girl to work. The girl lacks the interest to study and is much more interested to work to earn money for herself and her family. The reason for lack of interest in studying is the poor financial condition of the family, could not provide her with proper tuition classes and as such, she deteriorated in her studies.

At present, the NGO working in this area is trying to enrol the girl to school, so that she is protected from several child protection issues. She is given several counselling sessions regarding the importance of education, the field worker is also having a session with her mother so that the family supports her to get back to school. The fieldworker stated that these sessions have failed and thereby the NGO is keeping a close watch on the girl so that she is not the victim to any such vulnerable issues of child protection. This is due to the fact that would thereby make the situation vulnerable for the girl due to lack of awareness, knowledge and as such the young adolescent is an easy prey to child marriage, child trafficking in these slum areas.

Key Highlights:

- The girl is from a neglected family.
- Lack of education among the family members is also a threat to this young adolescent girl.
- There is a high probability for the girl to get trafficked away and also a victim of child marriage.
- The drop-out cases among the children are threat to the community as they are easy victims of sexual abuse, trafficking, labor and marriage among children.
- Lack of moderate relationship and communication between the mother and child is a serious issue that needs to be focused on.
- Poor socio-economic conditions of the families, low literacy among the parents are the major factors where the children are under vulnerable conditions.
- Lack of attention by the parents towards their children due to their engagement in earning a livelihood is another reason children are vulnerable to several problems.

III. MAJOR FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:

The major themes encompassing these four case studies are from the various issues related to child protection such as child labor, child marriage, child sexual abuse, and dropout cases. Therefore the vulnerabilities and challenges are different at individual levels.

Children: Children are neglected by their parents, they have a distressed childhood, lack of moderate relationship and communication among the parents and children is one of the major issues of concern. These children are overloaded with the issue to look after their younger siblings, take care of their household chores, hence they lack interest in studies and as a result the rates of dropout increases in these slum areas. Moreover, these slum children are exposed to sexual activity at an early age which is another pivotal issue of concern under the child rights domain. Lack of awareness on several child protection issues among these children is the vulnerabilities related to the children.

Parvez (name changed) stated that "*I do not like to study, lack of proper meals for a day and poor financial condition of my family has compelled me to work to supplement the income of my family.*"(Translated in English).

Parents: Through these above-discussed case studies one can conclude that the parents are least concerned about their children. Lack of cordial relationship between parents and children is a serious gap which needs to be focused. Further awareness and lack of education among parents act as a threat for children to address any issues of vulnerabilities against children. Lack of time among the parents due to their work engagement for their livelihood is another challenge for these parents and children.

Stakeholders: The state and the several stakeholders of the slums should provide and make necessary arrangements to provide social services (basic facilities) that are essential for children and families. These services include counseling and advocacy for the victims, alternative arrangements for livelihood options, provide an enhanced protective environment for the children, education programs for the children who are at risk or abused to several child protection issues. Hence these stakeholders need to be much more sensitive to address the issues related to children. This is because several cases are underreported due to lack of education and awareness among the slum dwellers and community people. Hence the cases are not reported by the families, lack of conducive relationship among the police personnel and the common man is another reason for these cases going underreported. Following this, the other barriers for the families not reporting the cases to the respective authorities related to child marriage and child sexual abuse, and other child protection issues are unknown fear among the family members that will involve several proceedings in the court and the stigma associated against their family and children would be a defaming their position of their family in the social status are the major issues where the stakeholders need to focus and conduct several awareness programs on the ill-effects of vulnerabilities against children.

Hence, it can be concluded from the above case studies that the children residing in the slum of Kolkata are under the threat of several vulnerabilities related to child protection issues which have a serious effect on them.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The paper recommended a few suggestive measures to deal with the vulnerabilities related to children. They are as follows:

Awareness, Education, and empowerment of families: There is a need to educate and create awareness of the families concerning the responsibility of the children of their family. Awareness programs on the importance of education among families should be planned. Hence they should be educated, informed and empowered to provide care for their children

Enhanced role of the community: The role of the community, elected representatives are the important pillars for the protection of children. However, it is their sole responsibility that the community should be well informed about the status of each child of their community and ensure that there are no dropouts, children receive health facilities and children are not susceptible to any of the protection issues such as neglect and abuse. Therefore, the communities should be strengthened enough to fight away any issues related to children.

Strengthening the role of Non-Government Organizations: There are several Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working for ensuring child rights. Some children are vulnerable to threats like abuse and neglect. Therefore these NGOs should coordinate among themselves to address these vulnerabilities related to children. They should work to provide children with education, health, development, and protection to ensure that the future of the nation is not under the threat of types of vulnerability.

Role of Government: It is the responsibility of any country to protect children against any vulnerability. For instance, in the year 1992, India signed the United Nations Convention on Child Rights (UNCRC) to protect the children of India against any violence and exploitation. Hence, the government designed numerous policies for ensuring the rights of children such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act 2000 (amended in 2006 and 2015), Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the formation of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (2005), a National Plan of Action for children (2005), Integrated Child Protection Scheme (2009) Right to Education Bill (2009) & Prevention of children from Sexual Offences (POCSO Act 2012), etc. However still, wide gaps are remaining in the policies and implementation/practice & outcome, and millions of children are prey to these gaps and the existing vulnerabilities. Therefore there is an urgent need to make necessary arrangements to address these existing gaps in the policies and help to provide a better and enhanced life for the children of India (Sethi, R, 2013).

V. CONCLUSION:

There is a need to take the necessary steps to address the vulnerabilities related to the children residing in these urban slums of Kolkata. The identified vulnerabilities related to these children are affected due to child marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, irregularity in schools, and children working as a labor force. The major reasons for such vulnerabilities as highlighted above are lack of education issues among children are parents, poor socio-economic conditions among the families are the driving force which places children in a vulnerable condition. Therefore, simultaneous efforts should be made to strengthen the families, community, respective stakeholders and the country to take care of the future upcoming generation of the country, provide them with basic amenities of life and educate them the importance of educating their children and also enable them to grow, develop into a bright citizen of India.

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