Research Article

Breaking Barriers: Understanding the Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Girls in Street Situations in Delhi

Priyanka Chandola*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Central University of Gujarat, India

Corresponding Author:
Priyanka Chandola. Ph.D. Research Scholar, Central, India.

Abstract
This research paper aims to comprehensively understand the socio-economic challenges faced by girls living in street situations in Delhi, India. The study adopts a mixed methodology approach, primarily relying on qualitative methods, to delve into the lived experiences of these girls and provide in-depth insights into their socio-economic realities. Using semi-structured interviews and observations, this paper highlights the challenges faced by girls on the streets of Delhi.

These challenges encompass poverty, limited access to education, inadequate healthcare services, and vulnerability to exploitation and violence. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of the complex social realities faced by girls in street situations in Delhi. Moreover, they inform recommendations for policy and practice, advocating for targeted interventions that encompass education, skill development, and the strengthening of social support networks. Overall, this research paper provides a holistic perspective on the socio-economic challenges faced by girls in street situations in Delhi, offering insights and recommendations to break the barriers they encounter and promote their well-being and social inclusion.

Introduction

Children in street situations are a clear reflection of the deep-rooted inequalities that persist within our society, making them one of the most vulnerable populations. Their presence is a frequent and visible occurrence in cities, as they can be observed begging at traffic signals, wandering near railway platforms, religious places, and shopping areas, engaging in work around bus and auto stands, and seeking shelter under flyovers, bridges, or on road pavements [1]. In metropolitan Delhi, the problem of children living on the streets is particularly pronounced. Delhi, being the capital city of India, experiences rapid urbanization, population growth, and socioeconomic disparities. These factors contribute to the vulnerability of children, pushing them into street situations where they grapple with adversity and limited access to essential resources.

The phenomenon of children in street situations is deeply intertwined with social and economic factors that contribute to their presence and perpetuate their vulnerability. Even amongst these children, the impacts of socio-economic disparities create much hinderances for girls as compared to boys. Girls often face greater barriers in accessing education and economic opportunities, which are vital for breaking free from the cycle of street life. Furthermore, socio-economic basis intersects with gender-based discrimination, worsening the challenges faced by girls. Deep-rooted gender norms and biases perpetuate unequal treatment and opportunities, leading to increased vulnerability and marginalization.

Girls living in street situations in Delhi face numerous socioeconomic challenges that hinder their full participation in society. Street situations refer to circumstances where individuals, including girls, reside or spend a significant amount of time on the streets due to various reasons such as homelessness, poverty, or escaping abusive environments. These girls experience a complex web of barriers that limit their access to education, healthcare, protection from exploitation and violence, and economic opportunities.

It is crucial to understand the specific challenges faced by girls in street situations for developing effective strategies to address their needs and promote their well-being. By shedding light on the socioeconomic challenges faced by girls in street situations in Delhi, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of their circumstances and advocate for effective interventions to break the barriers they face, ultimately promoting their

empowerment and inclusion in society.

Methodology
This work is based on primary research. For this research paper, a sample of 48 girls in street situations was taken from the metropolitan Delhi. Data had been collected from major hotspots of Delhi including busy market areas, railway platforms, near religious places, and slum areas. Fieldwork was conducted with the assistance of two NGOs named, Salam Balak Trust and Jamghat in Delhi and girl children were interviewed taking care of all ethical considerations, taking consensus, and finding safe places to interact, particularly the contact points and day care centres of these NGOs. The age group of sample population was between 12-18 years. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were opted as research tool for data collection. A mixed methodology approach had been applied to get thematic inferences from the data collected.

Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Girls in Street Situations in Delhi
Children in street situations, particularly girls, encounter a myriad of socio-economic challenges that significantly impact their well-being and prospects for a better future. These challenges encompass various dimensions, including higher illiteracy, marginalization, inadequate healthcare, vulnerability to exploitation and violence, and limited economic opportunities. The intersectionality of gender, age, and socio-economic background further compounds these challenges, exacerbating the marginalization faced by these girls. Some of the most prominent socio-economic challenges that girls in street situations experience are

Illiteracy
Illiteracy refers to the lack of basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills. In the context of children in street situations in India, a significant majority of them face functional illiteracy, which is a cause for concern. Functional illiteracy hampers long-term employment prospects and limits access to skill training, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability [2]. Reason for illiteracy among girls in street situations can be many that impede their access to education like limited educational opportunities, unawareness of the importance of education, lack of necessary identification documents such as birth certificates and address proof, taking care of younger siblings while parents go out for work, engagement in informal petty works, etc.

The educational status of girls in street situations in Delhi can be understood with the help of a pie-charts given below, based on the interaction during field work by the researcher.
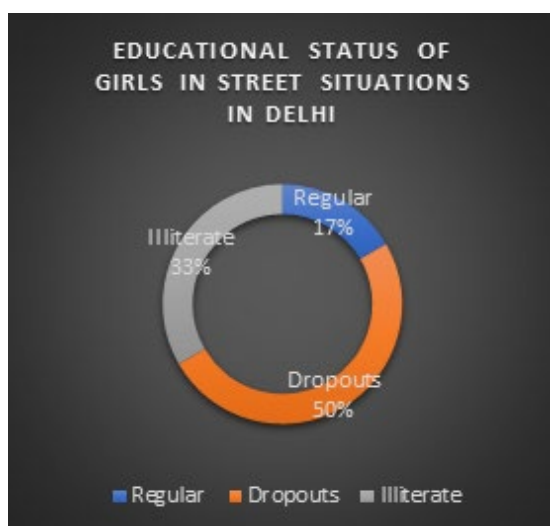

Figure 1 (a)

Figure 1 (b)

As shown in the diagram, Figure 1 (a) illustrates the educational status of girls in street situations reveals a concerning situation. The data shows that 33% of these children in street situations lack essential literacy and numeracy skills required for their daily lives. The intersection of poverty and marginalization amplifies their educational difficulties. A significant proportion (50%) of these children are dropouts, highlighting the prevalent issue of functional illiteracy. Poverty acts as a barrier, impeding their access to education and compelling them to prioritize survival over schooling. It was also observed during the field work that these girls are highly marginalized, and Figure 1(b) suggests that one-fourth of them are not even aware about the importance of education in their lives.

Marginalization
Marginalization encompasses a complex set of circumstances that result in individuals being pushed to the outskirts of mainstream society, detached from its social and productive activities. It manifests in two distinct forms, each contributing to people's marginality within the existing social order. The first kind of people are those who are voluntarily marginalized, and the other type of people who are objects of involuntary subordinate marginality [3]. The former group intentionally maintains a distance from mainstream society for various reasons, including their rejection of the prevailing social order, the creation of their own sub-cultures or alternative communities, or as a means to resist oppressive systems [4].

On the other hand, there are some who belongs to the latter category of marginality wherein the children are marginalized for reasons beyond their control such as gender, caste, mental and physical disability, and other socio-economic identities.

Girls in street situations are victims of involuntarily subordinate marginality due to gender discrimination they face in their everyday lives. This multiplies into social, economic, physical marginalization of these group of children. During field work, different kinds of marginalization are being noticed that girls in street situations relate themselves to. It can be shown with the help of a diagram given below:
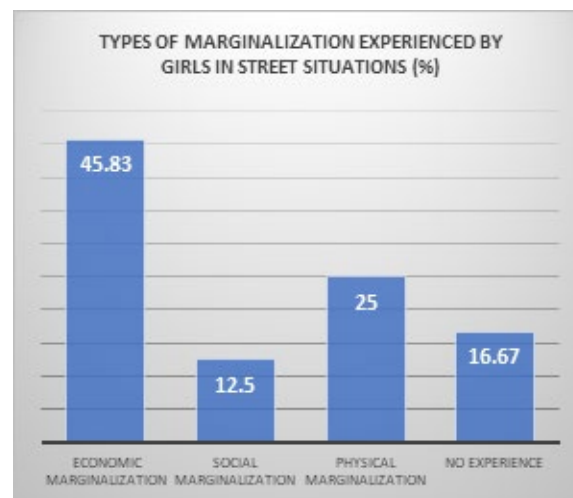

Figure 2

It can be inferred from the diagram shown in Figure 2 that the most common form of marginalization for girls in street situations is economic marginalization. Living in street situations is inherently challenging, and among those affected, children are the most vulnerable. Within this group, girls face additional layers of marginalization, often lacking control over essential resources such as food, money, and education. Their marginalized status stems from multiple factors, which can overlap in complex ways.

For example, a significant portion of girls in street situations described themselves as being physically marginalized. They emphasized the insecurity and instability of their living environments, highlighting the lack of access to safe and stable housing. Consequently, they are exposed to extreme weather conditions, enduring the detrimental effects of extreme heat and cold on their health.

These girls also acknowledged limited mobility and restricted interactions with places and people due to safety concerns. Their social interactions are often confined to their families or small groups where protection is not a primary concern. As a result, their exposure to the outside world is limited, contributing to their social marginalization.

It is worth noting that while some girls in street situations recognize and accept their marginalization as an unfortunate aspect of their lives, there are others who deliberately reject being part of the mainstream society and voluntarily isolate themselves. These children may not have experienced marginalization in the same way, as their rejection of societal norms positions them outside the realm of traditional marginalization. The experiences of these children vary, with some recognizing and accepting their marginalization, while others deliberately choose alternative paths. Understanding the nuanced realities of their lives is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems that address their specific needs and empower them to break the barrier of marginalization.

Exploitation and Violence
Exploitation and violence are pervasive concerns for girls living in street situations. They are highly susceptible to various forms of exploitation, including sexual harassment, trafficking, and abuse. The absence of adequate protection mechanisms, coupled with limited awareness of their rights, leaves them vulnerable to such exploitation. Without the support and safeguards in place, these girls face significant risks and may become trapped in cycles of violence and victimization. According to a study conducted in Delhi, an alarming percentage of children in street situations, approximately 90%, disclosed enduring physical violence. Moreover, more than 50% of these children reported experiencing the deeply distressing issue sexual abuse [5].

In addition to being subjected to violence, street children frequently inhabit abusive environments that profoundly influence the power dynamics within their relationships with adults. Due to their circumstances, these children often become reliant on adults for their basic needs and safety, creating a power imbalance that leaves them susceptible to exploitation and abuse [6]. This is especially true in case of girls who live alone without any guardian to take care of them. Such children sometimes seek protection from adult males in exchange of physical favors. Though it might be a rational decision for them, but these girls are exploited and often left to vulnerability as a result of unsafe sexual behaviors.

Inadequate Healthcare Services
Inadequate healthcare services and sanitation facilities further compromise the well-being of girls in street situations. Access to basic healthcare services is often limited, leaving them vulnerable to illnesses and diseases. According to a baseline study conducted in the year 2018, a considerable population of urban children (8.1 million), and their families live in inadequate and impoverished areas that are unsuitable for human habitation. These areas suffer from various issues such as deteriorated conditions, overcrowding, flawed building arrangements and designs, lack of ventilation, lighting, and sanitation facilities.

These factors, either individually or in combination, pose significant risks to the safety and health of those residing in such situations (NIUA, 2018). These challenges not only affect their physical health but also have detrimental effects on their mental well-being, contributing to a cycle of poor health outcomes. During the field visit, researcher collected certain information on health conditions of these girls as illustrated below.
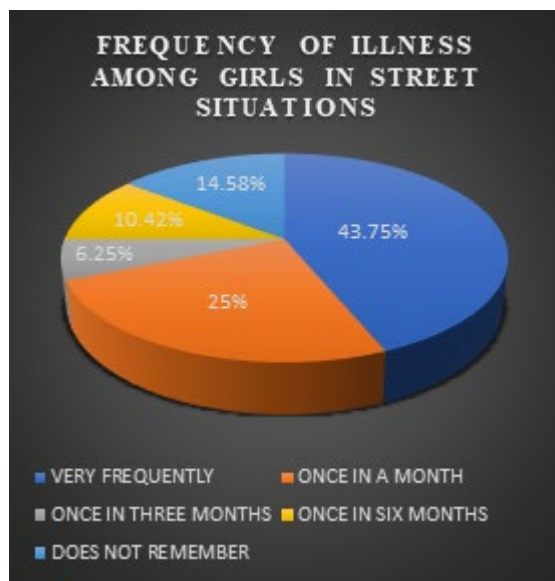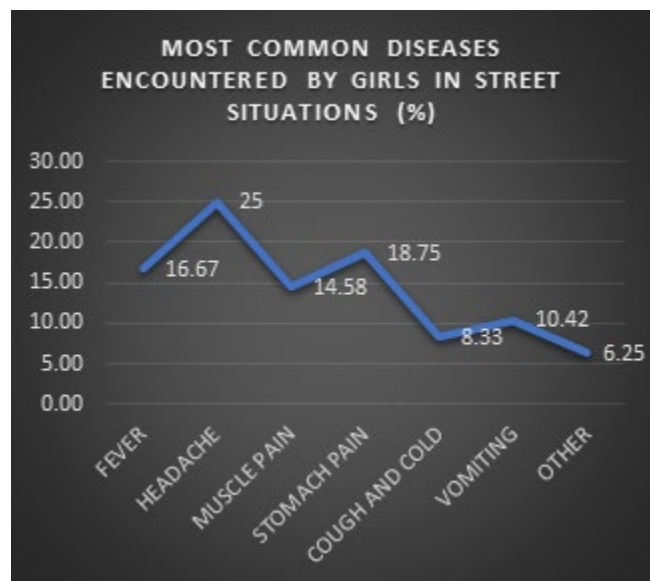

Figure 3 (a)

Figure 3 (b)

Figure 3(a) illustrate the prevalence of illness among girls in street situations based on their responses during the research. The data suggests that these girls are highly susceptible to diseases and often have weakened immune systems, leading to frequent illness. Only a quarter of the children reported feeling physically fit. Additionally, the data represented in Figure 3(b) revealed the most common types of ailments experienced by girls in street situations. Many of them reported frequent episodes of headaches and stomach pain, followed by instances of fever. This data highlights the direct impact of their compromised immune systems on their health.

Moreover, some girls mentioned experiencing fatigue and muscle pain due to long working hours. The living conditions of these children are typically characterized by poor hygiene and sanitation, which further exacerbates their health issues. These findings highlight the urgent need for improved access to healthcare, hygiene facilities, and better working conditions to address the health concerns of girls in street situations. Efforts to enhance their overall well-being should consider the specific health challenges they face and aim to strengthen their immune systems and promote better living conditions.

Economic Struggles

According to study conducted in 1988 by Lewis Aptekar, the primary reason commonly mentioned by street children for being in environment was financial circumstances [7]. There is severe limitation when it comes to economic opportunities for children in street situations particularly girls. They often lack access to skill development, vocational training, and employment possibilities that could help them break free from street situations and improve their socio-economic conditions. The lack of educational qualifications and societal prejudices make it challenging for them to secure stable and decent jobs, forcing them into low-paying and exploitative work.

Addressing these socio-economic challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. It is crucial to empower girls through education, ensuring their enrolment and retention in schools. Additionally, efforts to provide safe and stable shelter, along with skill development programs and vocational training, can offer these girls a pathway out of street situations and towards economic independence.

By recognizing and addressing these socio-economic challenges faced by girls in street situations in Delhi, society can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment, enabling these girls to break free from the cycle of poverty and realize their full potential.

Conclusion

Girls in street situations in Delhi face significant socio-economic challenges that hinder their well-being and overall empowerment. These challenges stem from a complex interplay of factors such as gender inequalities, poverty, lack of education, limited access to healthcare and protection, and societal stigma. Addressing these challenges is crucial for their holistic development and the realization of their rights [8].

Figure 4

Response Areas to Break the Barriers of Socio-Economic Problems Faced by Girls in Street Situations.

There are certain responses that can help to address the socio-economic challenges encountered by girls in street situations as illustrated in Figure 4 as above. As discussed in the paper, many of the girls surviving the street situations lack essential literacy skills and are functionally illiterate. For them, limited access to education perpetuates the cycle of poverty and marginalization. Thus, it is very important to make educational opportunities easily accessible for these girls and maximise their enrolment at schools to reduce the time they spend on streets and similar situations otherwise.

Girls in street situations experience gender-based marginalization in every aspect of their life. Further, these children are vulnerable to violence and exploitation that impact their physical and mental health. To minimise such instances, the State must strengthen various child protection laws and rights so that such children may experience a more equitable and inclusive environment. Street girls are particularly vulnerable against diseases due to various reasons like absence of hygiene, lack of proper sanitation facilities, and improper nutrition. Awareness and access to healthcare services is required for the wellbeing of these girls.

All sorts of challenges that girls in street situations face in their daily life are result of gender-based discrimination and economic limitations that they try to cope up daily. It is the responsibility of the State to provide social security to such marginalized children and their families so that they can break the barriers of socio-economic struggles and reach up to their full potential.

By prioritizing the well-being and empowerment of girls in street situations, society can create a more inclusive and equitable environment that allows them to realize their potential, contribute to their communities, and break free from the cycle of poverty and marginalization. The collective efforts from both the government and civil society to address these challenges are not only a matter of human rights but also a means to create a more just and prosperous society for all.

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