

Editorial

Street Children - A Window to the Reality!

*Stare not at the tattered clothes,
Beneath them lie their shattered dreams.*(1)

Street children, a subset of working children, form a facet, which society would like to hide. In 1986 UNICEF suggested a distinction between real street children and children who are working on the street but return home to their families at night. *Children on the street* are those whose family support base has become increasingly weakened (who) must share in the responsibility for survival by working on city streets and market places. For these children the home ceases to be the center for play, culture and daily life. Nevertheless while the street becomes their daytime activity, most of these children will return home most nights. *Children of the street* are a much smaller number but more unfortunate. They struggle for their survival, alone, without any family support. While often called abandoned, they might also have abandoned their families. Tired of insecurity, rejection, and grown up with violence, their ties with home have now been broken. *Children with their families* on the street are a new group but a common sight in metros like Delhi. These tiny tots are pushed to begging and other vices by their parents and make a significant contribution to the family income. A study carried out among the street children of Delhi(2) showed that majority was rag pickers (48%) or porters (31%). Other street children were engaged as shoe shiners, vendors and working at tea stalls, restaurants, and dhabas.

What are they Missing?

Most of these children miss love, protection and warmth of parental care. They lack supervision and are devoid of education. Losing these legitimate rights they undergo physical and mental stress. They miss the opportunity to grow to

the best of their potential. Instead they may suffer serious and often permanent physical and personality disorders making them vulnerable adults. *Children of the street*, who do not join their parents at night, miss much more. Street is the area of their work, recreation, rest and shelter. They may sleep under the open sky, under a bridge, in a drainage pipe, in an unclaimed shelter or in unused railway compartment. They use newspapers as their mattress and gunny bags as quilt to fight the cold. Few lucky ones get the chance to utilize a night shelter offered by an NGO or the Social Welfare Department.

Legal and Constitutional Protection

International community has, from time to time, shown its commitment to protect the rights of children. An important milestone was the adoption of Convention of the Rights of Child by United Nations in 1989. It recognizes that "the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding and should be fully prepared to live an individual life in a society brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity."

It is fine to have legal and constitutional provisions for protection but it is much more important to look at the reasons that lead the children to be out in the street and face the vagaries of a cruel world. Unless we translate the economic growth and social change in to more families being stable and able to provide the love, protection and opportunities for their children we have a long way to go.

Why are They There?

Most children who work do not have the power of free choice nor do they have career options. The vast majority is pushed into work, that is often damaging to their development, due to *poverty, absence of education* and *dysfunctional families*. There is marginalization

in schools and jobs on the basis of income, sex, race, religion or residence. Urban rural divide leading to migration of families or children to cities for better prospects, is another important reason. Many families of street children are dysfunctional. The parents' inability to provide physical, emotional or economic support and deteriorating interpersonal relationships lead to disintegration of the family. Physical abuse, sexual abuse, feeling of being unloved and unwanted in the family are other factors responsible for the drift. Civil unrest in many countries in past few years and other disasters, natural and man made have further uprooted many families.

Health Problems of Street Children

The life styles of the street children however expose them to a greater than average risk of health problems. They have more infections, accidents, sexually transmitted diseases, injuries caused by violence and substance abuse. It is very difficult to get information from street children particularly on sensitive issues like substance abuse and sexual abuse. However after establishing a relationship based on mutual respect, Focus Group discussions (FGD) are more valuable in knowing these aspects of their lives. It is worth sharing a summary of two such FGDs(2).

FGD on sexual activity: Most of the children gamble during their free time, move around, tease girls, see blue movies and indulge in sex. Every street child in Delhi is aware of a place near Red Fort where several video parlors show blue movies dubbed in Hindi. Girls are also among the audience and are sexually active. Masturbation and rubbing private parts with others for sexual gratification's, during watching movies is very common. Homosexuality is prevalent in at least 90%. Homosexuality experience starts on the very first day a "new child" gets down from a train or bus. They are spotted by older children by their isolation, innocent and pathetic look. Children indulge in various types of sexual activity outside the group as well. This includes exposure to Hijrahs, prostitutes and pedophiles.

FGD on substance abuse: Almost 90% are addicted to smoking, chewing tobacco and gutka. Ganja is the second commonest addiction. About 75% consume alcohol which is available in polypacks costing Rs. 15 to 25. Charas and smack are used less often and are costlier.

An article in this issue addresses some of these problems(3).

What Can We do?

Till the time socio economic changes trickle down to the poor and marginalized and "feel good factor" of economy does not remain in the custody of the few, we have a hard task as a nation. Central Government, State governments, NGO's, Corporate Sector, Funding Agencies and Agencies concerned with child welfare like UNICEF, and individuals will have to put in their efforts to do the damage control. Help is being provided by various agencies to street and working children. *Childline* a toll free helpline number 1098 is now available in 55 cities and can be used by any one concerned, for marginalized children between 0-18 years to provide shelter, medical, repatriation, rescue services, sponsorship, emotional support and guidance. Although IAP is seized with the matter through its CANCL group but street children need special attention, which we can offer at individual level as well. We can become partners with NGOs working with street children and they can use our specialized services.

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