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SHORT COMMUNICATION

Strategies to Ensure the Welfare of Street Children

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Street children refer to a vulnerable section of children who lives on the street in the absence of any guidance of a responsible person, to ensure their own or their family's survival. Multiple determinants have been ascertained in the causation of the menace of street children. In order to address the challenges faced by street children, there is an indispensable need to develop a comprehensive strategy by involving all the concerned stakeholders. To conclude, to counter the menace of street children, there is a definite need to understand the role of heterogeneous determinants that push children towards street life, so that the welfare needs of street children can be safeguarded and the problem can be addressed at the grass root level.

Key words: Street children, abuse, global, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Street children refer to a vulnerable section of children who lives on the street in the absence of any guidance of a responsible person, to ensure their own or their family's survival.[1,2] In other words, street children refer to those boys and girls, aged under 18 years, for whom "the street" (including unoccupied dwellings and wasteland) has become a home and/or their source of survival, and who are left unsupervised.[3] The global trends reflect that around 100-150 million children are currently either living or working on the streets and this number is further increasing.[1,3,4] The existence of street children is very much prevalent in densely populated urban hubs of developing or economically unstable regions, such as countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia.[2,3] In general, street children are devoid of healthy food, clean drinking water, shelter, health care services, toilets and bath facilities, and parental protection.[2-6] The situation becomes further dim for children who live in settings where there is no/minimal support framework of the government and thus exposed to multiple challenges.[5,7] Recognizing the global presence, extensive burden, susceptibility to hazards of different nature, and lifelong impression of those incidences on their lives, the policy makers have identified street children as an endangered section of the society.[8]

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POTENTIAL RISK FACTORS

Broadly, the potential risk factors have been classified on the basis of behavior theory into five interdependent subsystems namely:

1. Micro subsystem — This deals with family, schools, neighborhood, or even childcare institutions. Some of these adversities include poverty, hunger, abusive family life, degradation, violence, orphaned situation, educational status of guardians, child labor at family level, lack of care, negative attitude of the employers, and rigid policies in the child placement centers, etc.;
2. Meso subsystem — This system considers interactions between several microsystems in which individuals shift between various roles as a result of moving between one microsystem to the other (viz., school, the neighborhood, daycare centers, peers, doctors, religious institutions and the family). Issues like divorces, marital problems, substance abuse, child neglect and abuse, ill health and sometimes the death of a parent, most of which are related with lower socioeconomic status, unemployment, poor housing and poverty;
3. Exo subsystem — This system deals with the social settings (viz., structure of the larger community, the community's resources, the workplace, schooling, the education board, community health organizations and welfare services, legal

services, neighbors, friends of the family, mass media, etc.), without considering the individual;
4. Macro subsystem — This system includes the government, policies, laws and customs of society, which generally determine the overall development of the children; and
5. Chrono subsystem — The chronosystem deals with the conditions and changes in individuals and their environments over time. It explores the dimension of time as it relates to the child's development.[1,3,4,8-17]

RISK ASSOCIATED WITH STREET CHILDREN

Childhood has been acknowledged a special phase in the life of an individual, any adverse exposure during this period cast negative impact on the health status.[2] In general, street children are often exposed to all types of abuse;[12] early adoption of high-risk behavior (such as substance abuse, early sexuality, etc.);[1,2,13,18] health problems (viz., skin infections, dental caries, malnutrition, sexually transmitted infections, etc.);[18,19] delayed milestones;[20] adolescent pregnancy;[2] emotional problems;[21] psychiatric conditions;[8] and child labor/trafficking.[2,13]

RECOGNIZED CHALLENGES

Although, problem of street children, mainly results because of the existing shortcomings in the public health sector, the concern of street children is further complicated by minimal sensitization of the health workers regarding the needs of children with special needs;[22] poor awareness among children about importance of personal hygiene or safe sexual practices;[19] minimal contribution of nongovernmental agencies;[21] and placement centers related concerns (limited number, poor attitude of the employees, and no mechanism to supervise the functioning).[15,16]

RECOMMENDED MEASURES

In order to address the above mentioned challenges, there is an indispensable need to develop a comprehensive strategy by involving all the concerned stakeholders.[18] This strategy should essentially comprise of elements like measures to sensitize the respective authorities to the needs of street children;[13] orienting policemen/health workers/society to assist these children;[14,22] ensuring powerful familial bonds by maintaining a nurturing environment;[1,3,8] encouraging enrollment of the children in schools;[1,8] motivating people to adopt contraceptive measures;[11] addressing issues of child placement clinics;[15,16] ensuring strict action against the offenders;[14] fostering linkages with nongovernmental agencies to expand the range of the services;[21] and encouraging further research to identify different community-based solutions to sort out the problems of street children.[7,8]

CONCLUSION

To conclude, to counter the menace of street children, there is a definite need to understand the role of heterogeneous determinants that push children towards street life, so that the welfare needs of street children can be safeguarded and the problem can be addressed at the grass root level.

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