

Education is a Right, Not a Privilege: The Struggle for Inclusion among Street Children in Hastings, Kolkata

(West Bengal)

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Abstract

Children are not only the citizens of tomorrow but also the foundation for sustainable national development, making the protection and fulfillment of their rights a core responsibility of any society. Among these rights, access to quality education is paramount, as it empowers children to break cycles of poverty, marginalization, and exclusion. Although India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, children across the country continue to face critical challenges such as child mortality, malnutrition, abuse, child marriage, illiteracy, school dropouts, and systemic inequality. These issues are particularly acute among street-connected children, who live without stable shelter or access to basic amenities. In Kolkata, a city known for its contrasts between extreme affluence and deep poverty, this reality is starkly visible in areas like Hastings, where street-dwelling families live in precarious conditions under the open sky. For children of families, achieving Sustainable Development, the Goal 4 (Quality Education) remains far from reach. The Right to Development is compromised at every level. This research investigates the complex barriers to educational access for street children in Hastings, focusing on both direct obstacles, such as lack of identity documents, economic compulsion to work, and unsafe living conditions and indirect obstacle, namely, systemic issues including gendered vulnerabilities, social stigma, and inadequate execution of government education schemes. Using a phenomenological and participatory research design, the study employed household enumeration surveys, in-depth interviews with children and their families, and consultations with civil society actors and development professionals. This mixed-methods approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and structural exclusions faced by these children. Data were analyzed through both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and critical gaps. The findings demonstrate how fragmented, short-term, and poorly coordinated interventions often fail to address the root causes of educational exclusion and instead contribute to higher dropout rates and the denial of social entitlements. The study concludes with a strong recommendation for

the development of integrated, rights-based, and child-centered policy frameworks that are informed by the ground realities of urban homelessness. Such policies must aim not only to provide access to formal education but also to create safe, inclusive environments, where every child, regardless of their socio-economic status, can learn, grow, and thrive with dignity.

Key Words: *Education, Street Children, Pavement Dwellers, Sustainable Development Goals*

Introduction: Education is universally acknowledged as both a fundamental human right and a powerful catalyst for sustainable development. It equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values, necessary for personal growth, social integration, economic mobility and political participation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) reaffirm education as an inalienable right for every child, regardless of their background or circumstances (UNICEF, 1989). India ratified the UNCRC in 1992, thereby committing to uphold the rights of children to survival, development, protection, and participation, including the right to free and compulsory primary education. Further reinforcing this commitment, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). However, the translation of these rights from policy to practice remains deeply uneven, particularly for the most marginalized children.

Among those most excluded from the formal education system are street children - a heterogeneous and highly vulnerable group who live, work or spend most of their time on the streets, without consistent access to shelter, care or basic services. These children face multidimensional deprivation stemming from poverty, lack of parental support, unstable housing, social invisibility, and systemic discrimination (Balagopalan, 2011). According to estimates, India is home to over 1.7 million homeless people, a significant proportion of whom are children living in urban public spaces (Census of India, 2011). These children are often left out of national data systems, and their needs are rarely addressed in urban planning or education policy frameworks.

Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal and one of India's major metropolitan cities, reflects these disparities in stark detail. The city is marked by visible contrasts, modern infrastructure and affluence on one hand, and sprawling informal settlements and homelessness on the other. The Hastings area in central Kolkata, located near military installations and commercial hubs, is home to a significant population of street-dwelling families. Here, families live on pavements, under flyovers or in makeshift shelters. They are struggling daily with food insecurity, lack of sanitation, exposure to violence and health hazards. In such contexts, education becomes a distant dream, often perceived as a luxury rather than a right. Children are

more likely to be engaged in begging, vending, rag-picking or domestic chores than attending school (Butera, 2016).

While India has taken legislative strides to ensure educational inclusion, particularly through the declaration of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009; the ground realities reveal significant gaps in implementation. The RTE Act guarantees education for all children aged 6 to 14 years, which includes provisions for disadvantaged groups as well. However, the lack of permanent address, identity proof or birth certificates poses serious obstacles to school enrolment for street children (Jha & Parvati, 2010). Moreover, the absence of safe shelter, frequent migration, the need to contribute to family income and systemic neglect, exacerbate dropout rates and hinder long-term learning. Girls, in particular, face gendered vulnerabilities such as early marriage, sexual harassment and caregiving responsibilities; further limiting their access to education (Save the Children, 2018).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups have stepped in to bridge some of these gaps through informal education centers, bridge courses or advocacy programs. However, these efforts often suffer from short-term funding, fragmented approaches, and lack of integration with the formal schooling system. Without structural policy reforms and targeted inclusion strategies, such interventions remain inadequate to address the deep-rooted causes of educational exclusion among street-connected children (Sinha, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on understanding the barriers to accessing quality education among street children living in the Hastings area of Kolkata. Employing a participatory, phenomenological and mixed-methods research design, the study investigates both direct and indirect factors affecting educational inclusion. Through a combination of complete household enumeration, in-depth interviews with children and caregivers and interactions with community stakeholders, this research aims to map the lived realities of these children and the systemic failures that continue to marginalize them. The analysis also considers how informal urban settlements intersect with issues of identity, citizenship, gender and survival and how these are ultimately shaping the educational trajectories of street-dwelling children.

This study argues that education must be understood not as a privilege available to the few but as a non-negotiable right for all, regardless of socio-economic or legal status. Bridging the gap between policy promises and present ground realities requires rights-based, child-centered, and context-sensitive policy frameworks. It also demands coordinated efforts between the state, civil society, urban planners, and educational institutions to ensure that children living in street situations are not left behind in India's development story.

Review of Literature: The issue of street children's exclusion from formal education systems is well-documented across global and Indian contexts, yet remains under-researched in urban development and education policy discourse. Scholars, practitioners and international organizations have long emphasized that street-connected children represent one of the most vulnerable groups facing systemic denial of basic rights, including the right to education, identity and protection (UNICEF, 2005; Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003). In India, where urban inequality continues to widen, the plight of street children is exacerbated by institutional neglect, administrative barriers and social stigma.

The term street children refer to children for whom the street is both a source of livelihood and place of residence, either full-time or part-time, without adequate adult supervision or care (UNICEF, 2005). While the definition itself varies across contexts, most scholars agree that street-connected children are not a homogenous group but live in varying degrees of disconnection from familial and institutional support (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). In India they are often invisible in formal data systems, making policy targeting and intervention difficult (Sarkar, 2014).

Studies show that street children face multi-dimensional forms of vulnerability including poverty, violence, sexual exploitation, health risks and legal marginalization; which contribute to their educational exclusion (Balagopalan, 2014; Butera, 2016). The lack of birth certificates, address proof, and identity documents renders them stateless in the eyes of the bureaucracy. Thereby denying them access to schools, public distribution systems, and health services (Sinha, 2017).

Although the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 legally guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged between 6 to 14 years; several studies have questioned the Act's ability to accommodate children in non-normative or mobile living conditions, such as those on the streets (Jha & Parvati, 2010; Ramachandran, 2015). The Act primarily caters to children enrolled in formal schooling, leaving gaps for children outside the system. Moreover, schools often refuse admission due to the absence of identity documents or fixed residence, violating the spirit of inclusiveness the RTE is meant to promote (Singh & Mukherjee, 2017).

Research by Save the Children (2018) in Delhi and Kolkata found that more than half of the street children surveyed had never been to school, and those who had often dropped out due to domestic responsibilities, frequent relocation, bullying or economic pressure. These findings resonate with similar studies conducted across Indian cities (Sundar, 2019), which highlight how school infrastructure, pedagogy and institutional behaviour fail to adapt to the lived realities of street-connected children.

The educational experiences of street children are also heavily influenced by gender. Girls face additional risks, including early marriage, domestic labor and sexual violence and trafficking. All of these reduce their chances of accessing or continuing education (UNESCO, 2012; Save the Children, 2018). Balagopalan (2014) notes that gender intersects with class and spatial marginality to create specific forms of exclusion for adolescent girls, particularly in urban slums and street communities.

Several NGOs and civil society organizations have attempted to bridge the educational gap through non-formal education centers, bridge schools, and community-based learning models. While these efforts have been partially successful in bringing children into learning environments, studies argue that they often lack sustainability, fail to integrate with the formal education system and tend to operate in isolation from state mechanisms (Sinha, 2017; Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, these models rarely address systemic issues like the lack of identity documentation or socio-legal protection, which continue to hinder school enrolment and retention.

Urban homelessness and migration are central to understanding the educational exclusion of street children. However, policies targeting urban poverty and education remain fragmented. While the National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM) and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) include street children in their target groups, their implementation is marred by poor coordination, insufficient budget allocation and weak monitoring (Raghavan, 2020). Moreover, urban education policies rarely account for the mobility, precarity and complex family structures of street-dwelling populations.

Gaps in Existing Literature: Although several studies explore the condition of street children in major metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai, relatively few focus on Kolkata, particularly on localized urban zones like Hastings, which represent unique socio-spatial configurations. There is also limited research that adopts a participatory and phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of street children in relation to educational access. Most studies rely on macro-level data or institutional perspectives, often missing the nuanced challenges faced at the community level.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1) To examine the socio-demographic profile of pavement dwelling communities in the Hastings area of Kolkata.
- 2) To identify the key barriers faced by street-connected children in accessing formal educational opportunities.
- 3) To analyze the underlying and indirect factors contributing to school dropout among street children.

Methodology: Research Design: This research adopts a phenomenological and participatory approach to explore and document the lived experiences of pavement dwelling women and children in the Hastings area of the city of Kolkata. The phenomenological orientation of the study allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective realities of homelessness, urban poverty and marginalization, as experienced by those directly affected. By engaging participants in sharing their narratives, life stories and everyday struggles; particularly in relation to housing insecurity and educational exclusion; the study seeks to uncover the multilayered and intersectional nature of urban homelessness.

A key premise of this research is that for homeless individuals, especially women and children, survival becomes the primary concern. Therefore, their lived experiences offer valuable insights into the strategies, coping mechanisms, and negotiations they engage in to navigate precarious urban conditions. The study is exploratory in nature, aiming to unpack the complex interplay between structure and agency that shapes the lives of the homeless. Rather than relying solely on institutional definitions or policy discourses, this study grounds its conceptualization of homelessness in the realities articulated by the participants themselves.

Through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, narrative analysis and household level enumeration, the research captures the daily routines, livelihood strategies and systemic barriers faced by the participants. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding the gendered dimensions of homelessness, especially the experiences of homeless women and girls, whose vulnerabilities are compounded by patriarchal norms, safety concerns, and caregiving responsibilities. The life stories of these participants not only illuminate the factors that cause and perpetuate homelessness but also provide critical insights for designing effective and inclusive policy interventions.

In addition to firsthand accounts from pavement dwellers, the study also incorporates perspectives from civil society actors, development professionals and activists who work closely with the homeless population in Kolkata. Their reflections help contextualize the field realities and bridge the gap between grassroots experiences and institutional responses.

Kolkata, as the capital city of West Bengal, serves as a significant urban context for this study. The city attracts a large number of rural and interstate migrants seeking employment and livelihood opportunities, many of whom end up in informal or pavement based settlements due to the lack of affordable housing. While several government agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations have highlighted the issue of homelessness, there remains a pressing need for grounded, participatory research that captures the actual lived experiences of the homeless population. This study, therefore, attempts to move beyond abstract policy narratives and contribute to a more nuanced and actionable understanding of homelessness as a sociological

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phenomenon embedded in structural inequality, spatial exclusion and everyday resistance.

Research Method: The research employed qualitative research methods combining interviews, surveys with homeless individuals and a thorough review of existing literature and policies related to homelessness in Kolkata to find adequate responses to the research questions.

Population of the Study: The details of the studied area are given below -

Sl No.	Area	Location	KMC Ward No.	Borough No.	Homeless Population
1	Hastings	Under the flyover of Hastings near Khidirpore. Kolkata	75	IX	168

*KMC means Kolkata Municipal Corporation`

As per the survey, there were 36 homeless families at Hastings. The total number of school-age children of these 36 families is 78. All these 78 children along with their family members were surveyed to study their vulnerability and access to quality education.

Method of Data Collection: This study adopted a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and challenges faced by the street-dwelling population in the Hastings area of Kolkata. The qualitative orientation of the research was grounded in the belief that homelessness and educational exclusion are complex, context dependent phenomena best understood through direct engagement with those most affected.

Primary data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with homeless individuals, with a particular focus on women and children. These interviews followed a semi structured format, allowing for guided conversation, while also enabling respondents to elaborate on personal narratives related to their socio-economic conditions, survival strategies, housing instability and access to basic services such as education, healthcare and food security. This format provided the flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews.

To complement individual narratives and facilitate collective insight, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized with groups of pavement dwellers. These discussions created a space for shared reflection and mutual validation of experiences, revealing common patterns of hardship, resource sharing strategies and the social dynamics of life on the street. FGDs also helped to identify community level issues and coping mechanisms that might not surface in one-on-one interviews.

Further, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with a range of stakeholders including local NGO workers, elected ward councilors, school teachers and community leaders from civil society organizations. These interviews offered valuable institutional and policy-level perspectives on homelessness, urban poverty and the barriers to educational access for street-connected children. The insights gained from these informants enriched the contextual understanding of the structural limitations within the local governance and service delivery systems.

To deepen community engagement and enhance the participatory dimension of the study, various participatory appraisal tools were utilized. These included social and spatial mapping exercises, seasonal calendars, and problem-ranking activities. These visual and participatory methods enabled respondents to articulate their lived realities, priorities, and constraints in a way that transcended traditional verbal responses. The visual data not only facilitated deeper discussions but also supported the identification of patterns and perceptions that may have remained unexpressed in formal interviews.

In parallel, interviews were conducted with representatives from relevant government and non-governmental institutions to explore administrative and systemic barriers in delivering entitlements and services to the homeless population. These discussions aimed to identify gaps in policy implementation, bureaucratic challenges and the scope for institutional reform or targeted programmatic interventions.

Additionally, perspectives from everyday community stakeholders, such as, local shopkeepers, traffic police, municipal workers and others who interact with the homeless population in public spaces were gathered to understand the social perceptions, informal support networks and public attitudes towards pavement dwellers. These interactions provided valuable insight into the everyday social environment in which homelessness is both negotiated and contested.

All qualitative data, whether narrative, visual or institutional, were subjected to concurrent thematic analysis, allowing for cross-validation and triangulation of findings across different data sources. This methodological triangulation ensured a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the social, educational, and institutional dimensions of homelessness in Hastings. The approach not only enhanced the reliability of the findings but also foregrounded the voices and lived experiences of the homeless population as central to the study's analysis and interpretation.

Tools for data collection: Interview Guide, Participatory Appraisal tools, Mapping, Diaries/Journals, Existing Secondary Data.

Data Analysis: To analyze the qualitative data collected during the study, a combination of thematic analysis and narrative analysis, was employed. These complementary approaches enabled both the identification of recurring patterns across participants and the retention of individual voices, situated within their unique social and experiential contexts.

All interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant conversations were transcribed verbatim, ensuring an accurate representation of the data. The analysis began with open coding, where the transcripts were segmented into smaller units of meaning. These initial codes were then iteratively refined through axial and selective coding, allowing for the development of higher order categories and the emergence of recurrent themes. This coding process aimed not only to describe what participants said but also to interpret the deeper meanings and social implications embedded in their narratives.

Within the thematic analysis, particular attention was given in identifying shared challenges, such as, barriers to formal education, economic vulnerability, health insecurity, institutional neglect and gender based disparities. These themes were then organized into broader conceptual categories that reflect the structural and systemic nature of urban homelessness and educational exclusion.

Simultaneously, narrative analysis was used to explore how individuals, particularly homeless adults and street-connected children constructed their life stories and made sense of their lived realities. This approach illuminated how personal histories, relationships, spatial displacement and institutional interactions shaped their experiences. Respondents through storytelling, revealed not only the material dimensions of poverty but also the emotional and psychological dimensions of marginalization, offering rich insight into how they navigate their complex urban environments.

To deepen the interpretative depth of the analysis, contextual and comparative techniques were applied. Contextual analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of how themes manifested across different demographic groups, spatial settings and institutional contexts. Comparative analysis further enabled the identification of similarities and divergences in the experiences of children versus adults, women versus men, and institutional actors versus community members. This multi-perspective approach enhanced the comprehensiveness of the findings and underscored the intersectional nature of homelessness and educational exclusion.

Additionally, conceptual mapping and network diagramming were used to visualize the relationships between themes, sub-themes, and underlying factors. These visual tools were instrumental in identifying central phenomena and their interconnected components, namely, the linkages between lack of documentation, administrative apathy, child labor and school

dropout. Mapping also supported the identification of causal pathways and feedback loops that perpetuate cycles of exclusion.

The entire process of data management, coding and analysis was facilitated using ATLAS.ti, specialized software for qualitative research. This tool enabled systematic organization, retrieval, and visualization of data; thereby ensuring analytical rigor and transparency throughout the research process.

Ethical Considerations: All data were collected only after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The confidentiality and privacy of all respondents were strictly maintained by anonymizing personal identifiers in transcripts and reports. Every effort was made to ensure that the analysis respectfully and accurately reflects the voices, lived experiences and perspectives of homeless individuals, without misrepresentation or harm. Ethical sensitivity was upheld throughout the research process, particularly given the vulnerability of the population involved.

Major Findings: An in-depth analysis of the residential conditions of 36 pavement dwelling families in the Hastings locality of Kolkata reveals a persistent and entrenched pattern of homelessness. Of the total families surveyed, 19 (approximately 52.7%) have lived on the streets for less than a decade, while 12 families (33.3%) have been homeless for 10 to 20 years. Most notably, five families (13.9%) have endured life for 20 years without stable shelter. These figures reflect not just prolonged displacement but a disturbing trend of chronic and intergenerational homelessness. For many children, the street is not a temporary shelter but the only home they have ever known, a condition that gravely undermines their right to development, safety and education. Long-term homelessness results in severe instability, making consistent schooling, adequate nutrition and safe childhood development virtually unattainable.

The economic livelihoods of these families are equally precarious. Among the 78 working individuals identified within the surveyed households, the majority that is 49 persons (62.8%) are engaged in unskilled, daily wage labour. These are typically in construction, portering or other informal sectors. Another 10 individuals (12.8%) survive through rag picking; while 8 (10.3%) persons work as domestic helpers. Begging constitutes the primary livelihood for six individuals (7.7%). Three others sell horse racing fixtures informally near the racecourse. Only two individuals reported relatively stable, though still informal, employment. One is an auto-rickshaw driver and the other is a hospital support staff. These occupations are insecure, low-paying and devoid of basic labour protections, leaving families trapped in a cycle of economic stagnation with no opportunity for upward mobility.

The economic profile of these households underscores the severity of their deprivation. The average monthly income per family is ₹4,478, barely sufficient to meet survival needs. A detailed analysis of expenditure patterns shows that ₹2,958 is spent on food, followed by ₹359 on clothing, ₹316 on healthcare, and ₹212 on miscellaneous needs. Strikingly, only ₹36 per month, on average, is allocated to education. This is reflecting the marginal prioritization of schooling in households overwhelmed by the imperatives of daily survival. Education, under such conditions, becomes a luxury rather than a right.

Further complicating the situation is the absence of adult supervision during the day. With the average adult working over 8.3 hours daily, children are often left to navigate the streets alone. This lack of oversight exposes them to multiple risks, including physical insecurity, substance abuse, peer pressure and early entry into the labour force. The environment in which they grow up is not conducive to learning. It is shaped by noise, exposure, stress and constant uncertainty.

Substance abuse emerged as a critical concern within the community. Among those surveyed, 41 individuals (52.56%) were identified as substance users, including five minors. The substances ranged from alcohol and tobacco to more harmful drugs. For children, growing up in households where substance use is normalized increases their vulnerability to trauma, emotional neglect and behavioural issues. These factors directly contribute to academic failure and dropout.

Even when children are enrolled in school, multiple structural barriers remain. Due to the provisions of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, many children are enrolled in age-appropriate classes without any assessment of their learning level. For children who have never attended school or have experienced long gaps in education, this leads to overwhelming classroom experiences. Lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills, they struggle to cope, become demoralized and either formally drop out or exhibit chronic absenteeism. This rigid and one-size-fits-all model of education fails to accommodate their lived realities and learning needs.

The data further indicates that 30.98% of school-age children were not enrolled in any formal education program. Among those enrolled, 63.26% had poor attendance records, attending less than 70% of school days. Additionally, 17 children (22% of the total school-age group) were actively engaged in child labour to support their families. These findings highlight the trade-offs families face between immediate economic survival and long term educational investment, as well as the profound opportunity costs of schooling.

A notable trend emerging from the field was the preference among some children for non-formal educational models. Approximately 33.38% of children expressed reluctance to attend

formal schools, citing a stronger affinity for short-duration; informal classes often run by NGOs. These community based learning spaces typically offer basic literacy instruction, meals, clothing or recreational support and are seen by children as more welcoming, less pressurized, and practically supportive. They provide not only education but a sense of inclusion, dignity and relief from the alienation experienced in formal institutions.

However, the challenges of learning are not confined to the school environment. For street children, the home itself being a pavement, offers no conducive space for study. Most households lack electricity, privacy or any quiet environment for academic engagement. Parents, many of whom are illiterate and physically exhausted, are unable to assist with homework or provide emotional encouragement. The stress and insecurity of street life render education not simply inaccessible but structurally excluded from the daily rhythm of survival. In such conditions, education is not just de-prioritized but it is practically impossible.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, remains far from realization in the lives of Kolkata's Street children. The problem lies not solely in the availability of school infrastructure or enrolment policies but in the systemic and multifaceted exclusion faced by homeless children. Poverty, child labour, substance abuse, academic mismatch, parental illiteracy and unsupportive home environments constitute a dense and interconnected web of disadvantage that perpetuates educational marginalization.

To dismantle this cycle, there is a pressing need to reimagine the education system as more than a series of enrolment statistics or classroom provisions. It must evolve into a flexible, community-integrated and empathetic ecosystem that meets children both physically and psychologically. The Right to Education, if it is to be a transformative force rather than a symbolic promise, must be grounded in the lived realities of the most marginalized. Only then can education serve not only as a legal right but as a pathway to dignity, development, and the genuine possibility of a better future for India's street children.

Policy Recommendations and Way Forward: The findings from the pavement-dwelling community in Hastings, Kolkata, reveal a complex and layered crisis in educational access driven by entrenched poverty, chronic homelessness, academic exclusion and the absence of familial and institutional support. In the light of these challenges, there is an urgent need for a set of context sensitive, integrated and community responsive interventions that can bridge the gap between educational policy and the lived realities of street-connected children. These are given below.

- i) **Bridge Education Programs:** One of the most critical interventions is the implementation of structured bridge education or remedial learning programs for children who have

missed foundational years of schooling. As this study highlights, many children are directly placed in age-appropriate classes under the Right to Education (RTE) framework, despite lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills. This mismatch contributes to frustration, alienation, and eventual dropout. Bridge courses, offering intensive, targeted instruction, can help these children catch up academically before being mainstreamed into formal classrooms.

- ii) **Flexible and Alternative Schooling Models:** Given the irregular routines and economic responsibilities of many children, flexible schooling options are essential. These include evening schools, mobile classrooms and informal learning centres that operate in or near the communities where pavement-dwelling children reside. Such models align with the community's expressed preference for non-formal, short-duration education sessions that offer a sense of familiarity, flexibility and safety. These alternatives can serve as crucial entry points into the broader education system for children engaged in labor or caregiving roles.
- iii) **Community-Based Study Hubs:** The absence of a conducive home learning environment due to lack of electricity, space and parental support, necessitates the creation of community study hubs. These safe, local spaces can provide after school academic support, access to learning materials and a quiet environment for studying. Operated by trained volunteers or educators, such hubs can mitigate some of the most immediate barriers to learning and offer continuity for students struggling to keep pace.
- iv) **Parental Engagement and Sensitization:** Parental attitudes play a pivotal role in educational outcomes. Many of the parents surveyed are illiterate or unaware of how to support their children's schooling. Parental sensitization campaigns, grounded in community dialogue and peer-led initiatives, can help shift perceptions about the value of education and build greater involvement in children's learning journeys. These campaigns should emphasize long-term benefits of education, while also acknowledging and addressing the daily survival pressures faced by families.
- v) **Holistic and Integrated Support Services:** Education cannot be pursued in isolation. Given the high levels of poverty, health vulnerabilities and emotional trauma observed in the Hastings community, education must be integrated with broader social protection services. These include access to regular nutrition, healthcare, mental health counseling and hygiene support. Creating linkages between schools and service providers can help address the nonacademic factors that impact school attendance, performance and retention.

- vi) **Mentorship and Child Monitoring Mechanisms:** Introducing community based mentorship and monitoring systems can play a critical role in identifying and supporting at-risk children. Trained mentors, social workers or education facilitators should regularly follow up with children vulnerable to absenteeism, dropout or psychosocial distress. Personalized attention and emotional support through such programs can re-establish a sense of belonging, motivation and continuity in their education journeys.
- vii) **Substance Abuse Prevention and Rehabilitation Programs:** The presence of substance addiction, especially among minors, requires immediate and sustained intervention. Integrated substance abuse programs, including counseling, awareness sessions and referrals to rehabilitation centres, must be part of the overall support framework. These services should be tailored to children's specific needs and designed to work in tandem with educational and family outreach efforts.

Conclusion:

The study titled “Education as a Right, Not a Privilege: The Struggle for Inclusion among Street Children in Hastings, Kolkata (West Bengal)” brings to light a sobering yet urgent reality. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments, a substantial number of children in urban India remain systematically excluded from the promise of quality education. While schools may exist and enrolment may be facilitated under the Right to Education (RTE), the lived experiences of street children reveal that formal access does not equate to functional inclusion.

Findings from the Hastings community illustrate that the barriers to education are deeply entrenched in chronic poverty, the absence of parental support due to long working hours, unsafe and unstable home environments and the prevalence of substance abuse. These challenges are compounded by an education system that fails to accommodate the disrupted learning trajectories of street-connected children. The rigid implementation of age based grade placement, without any remedial or bridging support, effectively marginalizes children who lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills, often leading to alienation, absenteeism and eventual dropout.

Furthermore, the preference expressed by many children for informal, non-traditional learning spaces, typically run by NGOs or charitable groups, underscores their disconnection from mainstream schooling. This inclination reflects not only a practical adaptation to the harsh realities of their environment but also a deep disillusionment with an education system that does not reflect their needs, pace or life circumstances.

What emerges clearly from this research is that the failure to achieve Sustainable

Development Goal 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education) in such contexts is not simply a matter of inadequate infrastructure. It is a consequence of policy inattention, lack of empathy in program design and insufficient support mechanisms for children on the margins. Unless educational interventions are recalibrated to address the unique realities of street-dwelling populations, efforts to promote universal education will remain structurally flawed and socially unjust.

There is a pressing need for a paradigm shift from an enrolment centric model to a child-centric, context-responsive framework. Such an approach must incorporate bridging education programs, flexible schooling models, integrated social services and active community engagement. True inclusion will not be achieved merely by bringing children into school buildings but by ensuring that they can learn, thrive and complete their education with dignity and hope.

Only by reimagining education as a tool of empowerment, adapted to the lived struggles of the most vulnerable, we can begin to fulfil the transformative promise of the Right to Education for every child, everywhere.

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