

# Health Status of Street Girls in India

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## Abstract

Street children in India, particularly girls, face significant health challenges due to poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and exposure to hazardous environments. This research paper examines the health status of street children, with a special focus on girls with main objective to highlight the key physical health issues such as malnutrition, infectious diseases, reproductive health issues along with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and abuse by using secondary data from government reports, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reports, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) research reports, academic studies and authenticate publications after reviewing the various studies this paper analyses the health conditions of street girls which involve understanding of the unique challenges they face, including exposure to violence, lack of access to healthcare, poor nutrition, and mental health issues. This study found that life on the streets considered to be worst especially for girls who lives in heap of garbage in detrimental conditions with lack of basic necessities such as safe drinking water and toilet facility that deteriorate their physical health and additionally influence mental health of street girls who live under fear of their personal safety and sexual abuse. This study provides the overview of barrier to healthcare access and also recommends some frameworks, intervention and educational initiatives to deal with this emerging public health crisis.

**Keywords:** healthcare, poverty, street girls, malnutrition

## 1. Introduction

Street Children can be considered as most marginalised section of Society and specially girls facing additional vulnerabilities due to gender-based discrimination and Violence. According to UNICEF, 2021 India has an estimated 18 million street children out of which approximately 40% are girls. According to data from the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) Bal Swaraj portal, 19,546 children are currently living on the streets in India, with 882 youngsters surviving entirely on their own without the help of their families. Girls constitute over 30% of street children, making them a particularly marginalized group experiencing compounded vulnerabilities due to their gender, age, and living circumstances. according to (WHO), “Health is a state of complete, physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. The health profile of street girls in India is a complicated web of interconnected concerns that go far beyond simple medical treatment. According to recent studies, 56% of homeless women, including adolescent girls, indicate poor self-rated health, with a much higher rate among those living alone (68%). This population is disproportionately vulnerable to health concerns, with common disorders including depression or anxiety (56%), as well as iron deficiency (anaemia 35%). The precarious nature of street living exposes young girls to harsh

weather conditions, inadequate nutrition, poor sanitation, and limited access to clean water, all of which contribute to their deteriorating health (Rahman, 2024).

Many of these street-children ran from their homes at early age on in order to escape violent or demanding the environment, therefore increasing their exposure to more risk on the streets. physical and sexual abuse, and lack of access to basic facilities are all significant risks for street children. numerous health issues, such as accidents, infectious infections, and injuries, get worse by these external factors. It follows that mental health issues like depressive disorders and anxiety could be driven on by constant risks of violence, abuse, and a generally stressful atmosphere, the harsh reality of living on the streets might cause people to turn to drug addiction as a coping technique, which contributes to their mental health issues, their poor health results are largely caused by socioeconomic issues, such as poverty and illiteracy. Because, they frequently lack access to healthcare, education, and basic utilities, girls from low-income families are more susceptible to exploitation and health problems (Abdi, et al., 2021). Their family's economic circumstances may restrict the educational opportunities accessible to them. Educational achievement might get limited for girls from families with low incomes because they do not have similar access to quality education as those from wealthier families. (Agarwal, 2016). the significance of this study is based on inclusive development, as defined by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve greater social fairness and improve their living conditions, development projects must engage urban migrants, especially vulnerable groups like adolescent girls.

**Objective** - To analyse the health status of street girls and vulnerabilities they face in health perspective in order to suggest some needed interventions.

## 2. Research methodology

This study employs a systematic review approach, analysing a wide range of academic journal articles, government reports, published newspapers, publications available on health status of street girls across different states of country through research studies available on the database platforms like Google Scholar, Research Gate, ESBCO host, Science Direct, etc. it synthesizes data from multiple studies conducted in various Indian cities, including Delhi, Odisha, Mumbai and Kolkata etc. A total of 20 sources were reviewed, covering aspects such as prevalence, causes, health effects, societal consequences, and intervention strategies.

## 3. Physical Health issues among Street girls

Girls living in streets have higher incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity. Individual with untreated mental health conditions are more likely to experience chronic physical health problems due to factors like poor diet, lack of exercise, and inadequate sleep. Major health risk described here.

### 3.1 Malnutrition-

Malnutrition is a major issue for street children, with India having some of the world's highest rates of childhood malnutrition. National figures show that 35.5% of children under five are stunted, 19.3% are wasted, and 32.1% are underweight. Street children had considerably higher rates of stunting, underweight, and wasting, according to studies. The gendered dimension of malnutrition is especially prominent, with 57% of women aged 15-49 being anaemic compared to only 26% of men. Street girls often suffer from chronic malnutrition due to food insecurity. according to a study, by (UNICEF, 2019) street-connected children, especially girls, are at high risk of retarded development and micronutrient

deficiencies. Socioeconomic factors, including poverty and illiteracy, are the major reasons why they perform poorly in regard to their health.

**Table 1. Nutrition among slum people in different cities**

City/Area	Percentage of children (0-5 years)			City/Area	percentage of children (0-5 years)		
	Stunted (%)	Wasted (%)	underweight (%)		Stunted (%)	Wasted (%)	Underweight (%)
Delhi	41	15	27	Kolkata	28	15	21
Slum	51	15	35	Slum	33	17	27
Non-slum	38	16	24	Non-slum	23	14	16
Chennai	25	19	23	Meerut	44	10	28
Slum	28	23	22	Slum	46	9	26
Non-slum	25	18	21	Non-slum	42	10	28
Hyderabad	32	9	20	Mumbai	45	16	33
Slum	32	11	26	Slum	47	16	36
Non-slum	32	9	18	Non-slum	42	17	26
Indore	33	29	33	Nagpur	35	17	34
Slum	40	34	36	Slum	48	18	42
Non-slum	31	28	32	Non-slum	27	16	28

Source: Nutrition in India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), India, 2005-06

### 3.2 Infectious disease

Poor living conditions expose them to diseases like tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and skin infections. due to sexual exploitation and inadequate access to preventive health care, a study reports that HIV is more prevalent in the street girls in sub-Saharan Africa. (Lancet, 2020)

### 3.3 Reproductive health

The reproductive health challenges faced by street girls is a noteworthy communal health problem. A study indicates that street youths are susceptible to sexual and reproductive health problems and early sexual activity exposes them to risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STIs), unwanted pregnancies, and unsafe abortions. Research indicates that over 30 percent of street children have conceived an unwanted pregnancy and most of them end up undergoing unsafe abortion due to unavailability of the right treatment in healthcare facilities. (Farooq, et al.,2023). Such challenges are aggravated by the lack of amenities that control menstrual hygiene, as is shown in studies that were carried out in slums in the city which show that teenage females did not have the necessary knowledge and resources to access proper menstrual hygiene care. In one study, nearly 60 per cent of female respondents said they used sanitary pads with the other 40 per cent using pieces of cloth. In addition to that, approximately 22% of the respondents said they wash their hands solely using water without soap (Deshpande, 2018) Most girls are faced with the issues related to improper disposal of sanitary pads and reliance on a lack of proper amenities that can lead to health challenges. (Roychowdhury, 2023). Girls living on street girls are extremely susceptible to sexual harassment; the study has shown that their vulnerability is enhanced by the social laws that fail to accommodate their presence in the streets (Bhattacharya & Nair, 2017). Sexual health, gender roles and psychological well-being are interrelated. Despite the acceptance of

educational sexual health as important, girls do not have access to credible information (Adelson et al., 2016).

**4. Mental health & Abuse**

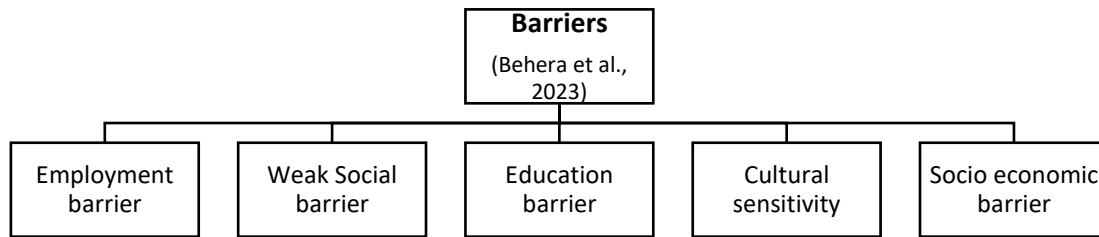
Street-associated girls are usually left with a mental disorder in India, which is mostly due to abnormal living conditions and trauma. Female juveniles who are street-associated are usually left with a mental disorder in India, which is mostly due to abnormal living conditions and trauma. Empirical studies show that such people are more likely to be depressed and have psychopathological conditions because of their vulnerable position. (Sharma & Verma, 2013). For street girls, abuse and violence are major health determinants. According to national data, girls between the ages of 12 and 18 make up 99% of victims under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) Act. It follows that mental health issues like depressive disorders and anxiety could be driven on by constant risks of violence, abuse, and a generally stressful atmosphere, the harsh reality of living on the streets might cause people to turn to drug addiction as a coping technique, which contributes to their mental health issues. (Diwakar, 2017).

**Table2: Factors influencing Physical and mental health with their Impacts**

Health Outcome	Impact	Citation
Chronic Disease Risk	Increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity.	(Powell, et al., 2021), (Conley, 2023), (Alberta, 2024)
Mental Health Challenges	Higher prevalence of untreated mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety.	(Sparbanie, 2019) (Noor et al., 2024) (Hodgkinson et al., 2017)
Social Determinants	Exacerbation of health disparities due to socioeconomic and structural factors.	(Sparbanie, 2019) (Mercado et al., 2024) (Noor et al., 2024)
Barriers to Access	Stigma, cultural beliefs, and limited access to healthcare services.	(Andary et al., 2023) (Brown et al., 2023) (Sparbanie, 2019)

**5. Barriers to Healthcare access**

Street girls continue to have limited access to healthcare due to a variety of constraints, according to studies, the most significant barriers to getting reproductive health treatments include cost, long wait times, discrimination by health care providers, a lack of identifying documents, and stigma. The unmet healthcare requirement among homeless women is 41%, with considerable differences among health problems. Government hospitals are frequently characterized as "unwelcoming and discriminating because of their unclean, unwashed bodies," while private treatment remains financially unreachable. Girls whose linkages to the streets are less likely to seek medical attention unless their problems worsen according to a study, Global Health Action, 2018.



## 6. Interventions suggested-

**Awareness program-**The lack of awareness on physical and mental health presents an overwhelming impact in health outcome, which has varied effects on both individuals and community. This program includes educational programs that deal with reproductive health, mental health, and personal hygiene, therefore, trying to alleviate these shortcomings.

**Community Engagement-** To create a healthier and well-informed community, seminal studies have subscribed to practical solutions, including educational interventions by working with adolescents and their mothers and integrating families in health education. Further, a community approach would be aimed at reducing stigmatization and strengthening the support system of street girls.

**Education and Empowerment-** This aspect offers educational activities and professional skills that will allow the street girls to get out of the vicious cycle of poverty, as well as develop self-sustainable lives.

**Counselling Centres-** Counselling services to street girls services provide trauma-informed care and psychological support and safe spaces where clients can address aspects of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder caused by abuse and exploitation.

**Legal Protection-** A study that was published in 2020 about Violence against Women showed that there is a lack of legal protection of street girls in many jurisdictions. It is necessary to reinforce the laws that would protect these vulnerable groups against abuse and exploitation.

## Bridging Programs of Non-Governmental Organizations –

An integrated healthcare model of street girls provides easy-access, non-judgmental, healthcare that is able to cater to the unique physical, reproductive, and psychological health needs of street girls. Such a model includes mobile clinics, outreach programs, and partnerships with non-governmental organizations, hence making healthcare comprehensive with no stigma and supportive networks to help reintegrate into the society.

## Conclusion

The health of the street girls is negatively affected significantly by malnutrition, infectious diseases, psychological problems and violence and exploitation. There is a higher likelihood of trafficking and exploiting street girls to have sex. The resilience of adolescent females in urban slums is low with 34% experiencing poor nutritional diversity and 34% experiencing underweight, which leads to mental health challenges. (Kanougiya, etal, 2024) A study undertaken by the International Labour Organization ((ILO), 2021) Research indicates that street girls tend to get battered physically and psychologically due to the forced participation in survival sex, which also contributes to the poverty-ill health pipeline. These issues need legal protection, community-based interventions, mental health assistance, and integrated healthcare services to tackle the problems. Education and career training is required to empower the

street girls in order to withstand change. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and communities should collaborate in order to improve their overall well-being and health outcomes.

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