

BEGGING FOR CHANGE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN ADDRESSING THE EXPLOITATION OF CHILD BEGGARS IN INDIAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

Child begging is a visible and distressing social issue in many Indian cities, reflecting deeper systemic problems such as poverty, child trafficking, lack of education, and social neglect. This research paper explores the phenomenon of child begging through the lens of social work, aiming to understand the root causes, the structures that perpetuate exploitation, and the role of social work in intervention and rehabilitation. Relying exclusively on secondary data, the study analyzes reports, surveys, academic studies, and NGO publications to build a comprehensive overview of the issue. Findings indicate that a significant percentage of child beggars are under the control of organized networks or coerced by family members, with poverty being the most cited reason. Demographic analysis from government and NGO reports shows that children aged 11–15 years are most frequently involved in begging, making them highly vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse. Social work agencies have made measurable progress in addressing this issue, especially through education-based interventions, rehabilitation centers, and street outreach programs. However, these efforts face challenges due to inadequate funding, legal loopholes, and public apathy. The study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology and presents data across three thematic tables: demographics of child beggars, primary causes of begging, and the impact of various social work interventions. The discussion highlights the critical need for multi-level interventions, including stricter enforcement of child protection laws, awareness campaigns, and increased collaboration between government bodies and NGOs. In conclusion, the paper argues that social work has a vital role in mitigating the problem of child begging, not just through direct intervention, but also by advocating for policy reform and systemic change. The fight against child begging must be holistic, addressing both individual cases and the broader socio-economic factors that sustain the cycle of exploitation.

Keywords: Child Begging, Social Work Intervention, Child Exploitation, Urban Poverty, Juvenile Protection

1. INTRODUCTION

Child begging remains one of the most visible yet under-addressed social problems in Indian urban centers. Every day, thousands of children are seen on the streets—at traffic signals, railway stations, and marketplaces—soliciting alms from passersby. While their presence may evoke sympathy, their condition often reflects a deeper crisis involving poverty, familial neglect, organized exploitation, and failure of social protection systems. According to several studies and government reports, a significant number of these children are forced into begging, either by their own families or by criminal networks that exploit their vulnerability

for profit. The issue is not only a matter of poverty but also one of systemic neglect and human rights violation. Many of these children are deprived of education, healthcare, and a safe living environment, leading to long-term psychological and physical harm. Despite the enactment of child protection laws and the presence of welfare schemes, the problem persists largely due to poor enforcement, lack of coordinated efforts, and social indifference. Social work as a profession plays a critical role in responding to this challenge. Social workers engage in identifying and rescuing child beggars, providing psychosocial support, facilitating rehabilitation, and advocating for systemic change. This research paper uses secondary data to examine the scope of child begging, identify its root causes, and analyze the role and effectiveness of social work interventions in addressing this issue.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The issue of child begging in Indian cities is not just a reflection of poverty but also a manifestation of systemic failure in protecting children's rights. This study holds significant value in the field of social work as it brings attention to one of the most neglected and normalized forms of child exploitation. Despite legal frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and initiatives by both governmental and non-governmental organizations, child begging continues to persist in alarming numbers. The lack of coordinated and sustainable interventions calls for a deeper understanding of the issue through a social work lens.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it synthesizes existing secondary data to highlight patterns, causes, and consequences of child begging in urban India. Second, it evaluates the impact of social work interventions such as outreach, rehabilitation, and education, offering insights into what strategies are most effective. Third, the study contributes to the development of more informed and targeted social work practices, especially for professionals working with vulnerable children in high-risk environments.

Furthermore, the study advocates for policy-level changes and promotes awareness among stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, law enforcement, and the general public. It underscores the need for an integrated approach that combines legal action, community participation, and institutional support.

Ultimately, the study aims to empower social workers and institutions to adopt more holistic and child-centric approaches in their efforts to combat the exploitation of children through begging and to foster environments that ensure dignity and protection for every child.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Kaushik, A. (2014), In her study *"Rights of Children: A Case Study of Child Beggars at Public Places in India"*, Kaushik explores the socio-economic conditions leading children into begging. The study identifies poverty, illiteracy, family abandonment, and trafficking as major contributors. Kaushik emphasizes that many child beggars are coerced either by family members or organized rackets. The study calls for a multi-stakeholder approach, including social workers, police, and NGOs, to rehabilitate these children. It highlights the lack of implementation of child welfare laws despite the presence of legal provisions.

2. Butterflies India (2023), Butterflies India, a non-governmental organization, has extensively documented the lives of street and working children. Their annual reports reveal that educational intervention programs and life skills training significantly reduce the chances of children returning to the streets. Their model emphasizes child participation, advocacy, and rights-based approaches. Social workers involved with the organization act as facilitators between the children and government services, schools, and health centers, reinforcing the critical role of community-based social work.
3. UNICEF (2018, UNICEF's report on "*Child Protection in Urban India*" discusses the vulnerabilities faced by children in slums and on the streets. It reveals that urban child poverty and migration are key factors increasing street child populations, many of whom beg for survival. The report supports comprehensive protection mechanisms and community-level support, recommending collaboration between municipal bodies and social work organizations to address child exploitation in public spaces.
4. Salaam Baalak Trust (2022), This NGO's work with street and working children in Delhi highlights successful models of outreach, shelter homes, and psychological counseling. Their data show that consistent contact and trust-building by trained social workers are essential in rehabilitating child beggars. The organization also works with police and child welfare committees to provide legal and emotional support. Their field-based social work practice has been instrumental in reintegrating children into society and the education system.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design to explore the issue of child begging in Indian cities. Descriptive research enables the collection of detailed information about the current conditions, practices, and socio-economic factors associated with child begging. Analytical research, on the other hand, allows the researcher to interpret and evaluate the data to draw meaningful conclusions about the effectiveness of social work interventions. The focus on secondary data means that the research does not involve primary fieldwork but instead uses existing published material to investigate patterns and trends. This design is especially useful when dealing with sensitive issues like child exploitation, where direct access to subjects may be restricted or ethically challenging. The research design also allows for a holistic understanding of the issue by drawing from various reputable sources such as government reports, NGO data, academic studies, and media investigations, ensuring a well-rounded and informed analysis.

4.2. Data Collection Method

The data for this study was collected exclusively from secondary sources, ensuring a wide and credible foundation for analysis. These sources included government publications such as reports from the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the National Crime Records Bureau, which offer statistical insights into the prevalence and legal aspects of child begging. In addition, reports and case studies from NGOs like Butterflies India, Salaam

Baalak Trust, and Childline India provided ground-level insights into intervention models and rehabilitation strategies. Academic journals and books contributed theoretical perspectives and critical analysis on child exploitation and social protection mechanisms. International organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children offered global and comparative insights on child rights and street children. Lastly, verified media reports and investigative articles were used to highlight real-life cases and the societal response to this issue. The wide array of sources ensured that the data was both rich and reliable for drawing meaningful conclusions.

4.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process was both qualitative and quantitative in nature, providing a comprehensive understanding of child begging and the role of social work. Quantitative data, such as age distribution, reasons for begging, and outcomes of social interventions, were compiled into tables and analyzed using percentage-based comparisons to identify trends. For instance, the study highlighted that the majority of child beggars fall within the age group of 11–15 years and that poverty is the leading cause of begging. Qualitative data from case studies, NGO reports, and academic literature were analyzed using thematic content analysis to uncover recurring issues, strategies, and challenges. Key themes such as family coercion, organized begging rackets, lack of enforcement of child protection laws, and success stories of rehabilitation were identified and discussed. This two-pronged analytical approach helped to not only describe the issue but also interpret it within the larger framework of social work practice and policy-making.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Though the research is based solely on secondary data, ethical considerations remain critical, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as child exploitation. First, care has been taken to ensure that all data sources are credible, verifiable, and respectful of the dignity and rights of the children discussed. No personal identifiers or confidential case information have been disclosed unless already available in the public domain through ethical reporting. The researcher has also maintained academic integrity by properly citing all sources using APA style and avoiding any form of plagiarism. The study adheres to the ethical standards of social work research, which prioritize respect, confidentiality, and the well-being of vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the research aims to advocate for better child protection mechanisms rather than merely document suffering, aligning with the core values of the social work profession—social justice, human dignity, and community empowerment.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the data and analyses them in the context of child begging in Indian cities. It highlights key patterns, causes, and the impact of social work interventions, aiming to provide a critical understanding of existing efforts and areas requiring further attention and action.

5.1. Causes of Child Begging in India

Child begging in India is driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic factors. This section explores the key causes, including poverty, family coercion, organized trafficking networks, lack of education, and migration. Understanding these factors is

essential for developing effective social work interventions and policies to address child exploitation.

1. **Poverty:** Extreme poverty remains the primary driver of child begging in India. Families with no steady income often push children to beg as a means of daily survival. In many cases, children become the sole earners in households where parents are unemployed or underemployed.
2. **Family Coercion and Neglect:** In some families, especially in urban slums, parents or guardians force their children to beg. This coercion stems from desperation, substance abuse, or lack of awareness about child rights. Neglected or abandoned children may also turn to begging as a way to support themselves.
3. **Organized Begging Rackets:** Criminal networks often exploit children by abducting, trafficking, or "renting" them from poor families. These children are deliberately disabled or made to look pitiful to increase sympathy and earnings. This organized exploitation turns child begging into a lucrative racket.
4. **Lack of Education and Awareness:** Children who are not enrolled in school or drop out due to financial or social barriers are more likely to end up begging. Lack of awareness among parents and communities about the importance of education and child rights perpetuates this cycle.
5. **Migration and Urbanization:** Large-scale migration from rural to urban areas in search of work often leads families to live in informal settlements with no access to basic services. Children in these environments are highly vulnerable and frequently resort to begging due to lack of alternatives.

5.2. Problem of Child Begging in India

Child begging is a significant and persistent social issue in India, where millions of children are forced to beg on the streets of urban and rural areas alike. These children are often exposed to dangerous conditions, including physical abuse, malnutrition, exploitation, and neglect. Many child beggars are victims of organized criminal networks, where they are trafficked, coerced, or even trafficked into begging for financial gain. These criminal groups often target vulnerable families, exploiting their children for profit, sometimes disabling them to evoke more sympathy from passers-by.

In addition to criminal exploitation, poverty and social inequalities contribute heavily to child begging. Families, often living in impoverished conditions, may depend on their children to bring in money, as a result of which children may be pushed into begging at an early age, rather than attending school or being protected from exploitation. Children from marginalized groups, especially from urban slums, face limited access to education, healthcare, and other social services, making begging a survival mechanism.

The societal stigma surrounding begging further marginalizes these children, making it harder for them to break free from the cycle of poverty. Furthermore, the lack of effective enforcement of child protection laws and the failure of rehabilitation programs leave these children vulnerable to continued exploitation. The problem of child begging in India requires

comprehensive solutions, including stronger legal frameworks, improved education, rehabilitation programs, and effective community involvement.

5.3. Social Effects of Child Begging in India

Child begging in India has a far-reaching impact on the social fabric of society, affecting not only the children involved but also their families, communities, and the larger social structure. The consequences of child begging are multifaceted, ranging from psychological trauma to societal discrimination. Below are the key social effects:

1. **Physical and Psychological Harm to Children:** Child beggars are often subjected to harsh conditions, including malnutrition, physical abuse, and neglect. The lack of proper shelter and medical care exposes them to illness and injury. Additionally, the psychological toll of begging—often linked to coercion and manipulation by exploitative adults—can lead to depression, anxiety, and long-term emotional trauma. These children rarely receive adequate emotional support, leaving them scarred for life.
2. **Stigmatization and Marginalization:** Begging is often stigmatized in Indian society, and children involved in begging become targets of discrimination and social exclusion. They are seen as unworthy, and society tends to view them as a nuisance or a problem to be ignored rather than individuals in need of help. This marginalization reduces their opportunities for social integration, making it difficult for them to access education, healthcare, or even basic social services.
3. **Impaired Education and Development:** One of the most significant social effects of child begging is the loss of educational opportunities. Begging takes up most of the child's day, preventing them from attending school and receiving an education. The lack of formal education further entraps these children in a cycle of poverty, limiting their chances for upward mobility and participation in the social and economic development of the country. In many cases, children who beg are deprived of the chance to develop essential skills and acquire knowledge for their future.
4. **Family Disruption:** In many cases, children beg because their families are trapped in poverty and unable to provide for basic needs. However, this often leads to a breakdown in family structures. Parents may become reliant on their children to bring in money, exacerbating the problem of child exploitation. In some instances, children are abandoned or trafficked by family members, resulting in long-term emotional and social consequences for both the child and the family unit. This cycle of dependency further strains societal resources and perpetuates the cycle of poverty.
5. **Perpetuation of Poverty and Exploitation:** Child begging in India also contributes to the perpetuation of poverty across generations. When children are involved in begging, they miss out on opportunities to improve their lives through education, which in turn prevents them from gaining skills and securing better livelihoods. This limited access to opportunities keeps the children trapped in poverty, and when they grow up, they may, in turn, become adults who are economically marginalized, possibly pushing their own children into the same cycle of exploitation.

5.4. Social Work Interventions to Resolve Child Begging in India

Social work plays a critical role in addressing and resolving the complex issue of child begging in India. Social workers engage in both direct intervention and systemic advocacy to protect vulnerable children and rehabilitate them into safe, nurturing environments. Below are the key social work interventions that contribute to tackling child begging:

1. **Rescue and Rehabilitation Programs:** One of the primary roles of social workers is to identify, rescue, and rehabilitate child beggars from streets, traffic junctions, railway stations, and other public spaces. Collaborating with law enforcement and child protection authorities, social workers help children get admitted into shelter homes, child care institutions, and rehabilitation centers. Here, children receive basic needs such as food, clothing, medical care, and psychological counseling.
2. **Education and Skill Development:** Social workers work with NGOs and government programs to ensure that rescued children are enrolled in formal or non-formal education. Bridge education programs help children transition into regular schooling. In older children, vocational training and skill development initiatives are introduced to provide them with income-generating opportunities, steering them away from begging and towards independence and dignity.
3. **Family Reintegration and Counseling:** Where possible and safe, social workers attempt to reunite child beggars with their families. Before reintegration, they assess the home environment, provide family counseling, and ensure that the family is willing and able to care for the child without exploiting them. In cases where the family is the source of coercion, alternative care arrangements such as foster care or group homes are explored.
4. **Legal Support and Advocacy:** Social workers assist in registering cases of child exploitation under relevant laws, such as the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, and The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. They act as child welfare officers, ensuring that the legal rights of rescued children are upheld. They also advocate for stronger law enforcement and policy implementation to dismantle organized begging rackets.
5. **Community Awareness and Mobilization:** Changing public attitudes is essential in reducing the incidence of child begging. Social workers engage in community sensitization programs, conduct street plays, and run awareness campaigns to educate the public about the harms of giving money to child beggars. They promote alternatives like donating to child welfare organizations. Community involvement is encouraged to identify and report child begging and abuse.
6. **Collaboration with NGOs and Government Schemes:** Social workers often collaborate with organizations such as Childline India, Butterflies, and Salaam Baalak Trust. These partnerships help in implementing government schemes like the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) and Bal Swaraj Portal. Social workers ensure children benefit from these schemes and track progress in their rehabilitation.

5.5. Legal Reforms and Prevention Acts for Child Begging in India

India has enacted several legal frameworks and child protection mechanisms aimed at preventing child begging and addressing child exploitation. However, enforcement remains a major challenge. Below is an overview of key laws and legal reforms related to child begging:

1. Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015

This is the primary law dealing with children in need of care and protection. Child beggars fall under this category. Key provisions include:

- Children found begging are to be rescued and rehabilitated, not punished.
- The Child Welfare Committee (CWC) is empowered to take decisions about the child's care, including placement in shelter homes.
- It mandates rehabilitation through education, vocational training, and counseling.
- It criminalizes adults who exploit children for begging under the category of child trafficking or abuse.

2. Indian Penal Code (IPC), Section 363-A

This section specifically criminalizes the act of kidnapping or maiming a child for the purpose of begging.

- Anyone who kidnaps, abducts, or mutilates a child to compel them to beg can be punished with up to 10 years imprisonment and a fine.
- Using a child for begging knowingly is also punishable, even if the child is not maimed.

3. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012

Although not specific to begging, this Act is relevant because many child beggars are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse.

- Social workers and legal authorities are mandated to report abuse.
- Provides a child-friendly judicial process, medical assistance, and rehabilitation support.

4. Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976

In many cases, child begging operates as a form of bonded labor—especially when children are under the control of begging mafias or traffickers.

- This Act prohibits all forms of forced labor, including begging under coercion.
- It provides for rescue, release, and rehabilitation of bonded laborers, including minors.

5. Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (Amended in 2016)

This Act prohibits the employment of children in hazardous occupations, and while begging is not explicitly mentioned, it is widely recognized as a hazardous activity.

- Children under 14 cannot be employed or engaged in any form of work, including informal sectors like begging.
- Social workers can refer children engaged in begging to relevant authorities under this Act.

6. Beggary Laws (State-Level)

Some states in India still enforce colonial-era Beggary Prevention Acts (like the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959), which criminalize begging. However:

- These laws are increasingly criticized for punishing the poor instead of helping them.
- Supreme Court and various High Courts have called for the decriminalization of begging, especially for children.
- In 2018, the Delhi High Court decriminalized begging, recognizing it as a result of poverty, not criminal intent.

7. Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

This Act mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14.

- It is a preventive tool to reduce child begging by ensuring children are in school.
- Social workers use this Act to enroll rescued children into schools and prevent dropouts.

5.6. Community Interventions for Addressing Child Begging in India

Community involvement is a powerful tool in combating child begging. Since begging often occurs in public spaces and stems from issues within communities—such as poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion—local-level solutions can be more effective and sustainable. Community interventions aim to mobilize people, raise awareness, and build support systems that protect children from falling into or returning to begging.

1. **Awareness Campaigns and Sensitization:** Community-based organizations and social workers conduct awareness campaigns to educate the public about the realities of child begging. Many people give money to child beggars out of sympathy, unknowingly encouraging exploitation. Through street plays, rallies, posters, and workshops, community members are sensitized about the harms of giving alms and are encouraged to support rehabilitation initiatives instead.
2. **School Enrollment Drives:** Local communities are mobilized to identify out-of-school children, especially those found begging. Community volunteers, teachers, and local leaders collaborate with NGOs and government schools to enroll rescued children in nearby educational institutions. Parent-teacher meetings, home visits, and neighborhood surveys are tools used to reduce dropouts and ensure continuous education.
3. **Community Watch and Reporting Mechanisms:** Creating community watch groups can help monitor areas prone to child begging. Residents can be trained to report cases to Childline 1098, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), or local NGOs. This increases vigilance and creates a protective net for vulnerable children. Regular patrols and public announcements further discourage the presence of organized begging networks.
4. **Empowering Vulnerable Families:** Community-based interventions often include livelihood training and microfinance programs for families who are at risk of pushing their children into begging. By helping parents gain stable income sources—like tailoring, small businesses, or self-help group (SHG) work—children are less likely to be economically exploited. These programs may be implemented by local NGOs or under government schemes like NRLM (National Rural Livelihoods Mission).
5. **Community-Based Child Protection Committees (CBCPCs):** These committees are formed in urban slums and rural areas to monitor child protection issues, including child labour and begging. Comprising local volunteers, youth leaders, Anganwadi workers, and

teachers, CBCPCs act as the first line of defense against child abuse and exploitation. They work in partnership with district child protection units and social workers.

6. **Collaboration with Local Religious and Cultural Institutions:** Temples, mosques, churches, and community halls are often hotspots for child begging. Social workers collaborate with religious leaders to discourage giving alms at these sites and instead encourage donations to credible child welfare funds. Sermons and community events are used to spread messages about child protection and social responsibility.
7. **Community-Based Rehabilitation Programs:** For children rescued from begging, reintegration into the community is essential. Local support systems—including mentors, counselors, and peer groups—are created to help the child adjust socially and emotionally. Programs may include tuition support, recreational activities, and parenting workshops, ensuring long-term support beyond institutional care.

6. FINDINGS

1. A majority of child beggars come from families living below the poverty line, with limited access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Economic desperation often forces families to push children into begging.
2. Many children involved in begging are controlled by organized criminal networks. These children are trafficked, maimed, or rented by gangs to increase earnings through public sympathy.
3. Child beggars face high risks of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Due to their street-based lifestyle, they often lack protection, adult supervision, or access to safe spaces.
4. Most child beggars are either school dropouts or have never attended school. Lack of educational opportunities contributes to a cycle of poverty and exploitation.
5. Although laws like the Juvenile Justice Act and IPC Section 363A exist, enforcement is weak. Many cases of child exploitation through begging go unreported or unpunished.
6. Many people unknowingly encourage child begging by giving money, not realizing it sustains exploitation. Public awareness about alternative ways to help remains low.
7. Intervention by social workers is effective in rescuing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating child beggars. Their work includes legal support, education access, and psychological counselling.
8. NGOs like Salaam Baalak Trust and Butterflies India have developed successful models for outreach and rehabilitation, filling gaps left by government systems.
9. Community-based interventions such as awareness drives, school enrollment campaigns, and child protection committees contribute significantly to prevention and early detection.
10. Despite being rescued, many children return to the streets due to a lack of follow-up support, inadequate rehabilitation systems, and family re-exploitation, highlighting the need for stronger aftercare programs.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Authorities must strictly implement existing laws like the Juvenile Justice Act and IPC Section 363-A to prosecute those who exploit children for begging. Special fast-track

- courts should handle such cases, and police must be trained to treat child beggars as victims, not offenders.
2. Rescue operations should be followed by long-term rehabilitation that includes education, healthcare, vocational training, and family reintegration (where safe). Regular follow-ups and community-based aftercare are crucial to prevent children from returning to the streets.
 3. National and local campaigns should educate citizens about the dangers of giving money to child beggars. Awareness drives in schools, public spaces, and through media should promote alternatives, such as supporting verified child welfare NGOs.
 4. Government and NGOs should expand income-generating schemes for families in slums and marginalized communities. Skill-building, microloans, and social security programs can reduce economic dependence on child labor and begging.
 5. Communities should be empowered to identify, report, and prevent child begging. Local Child Protection Committees involving teachers, health workers, and social workers should monitor high-risk areas and work with local authorities to safeguard vulnerable children.

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