

Problem and Situation of Girl Ragpickers in National Capital Territory of Delhi

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Abstract

This research was an endeavor to closely study the situation of rag picker girls. An effort was made to understand their work conditions, impact of the present occupation on these girls and the problems faced by them. In other words, this study provides an overview of their lives in totality. The researcher looked at the situations these girls faced in everyday life and understood that everyday was a struggle for them and they had to survive in such unfavorable environment for livelihood of themselves and their families.

Objective

The study was conducted to understand the socio-economic background of girls engaged in rag picking, highlight the factors forcing them to get into this work, and analyze the implications arising out of this work on the development of these girls.

Technique and Method

The data was collected in the year of 2005-2006 at the central area of Delhi. The present study has used exploratory research design.

Setting

Total of 100 girl rag pickers were interviewed from the central Delhi. The high density of rag pickers was found due in the central area of Delhi due to industries and market. Therefore the data was collected from Chandni chowk, Old Delhi railway station, Lajpat Rai market, I.S.B.T, Red fort and Petti market.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was done with help of SPSS.

Result

The findings highlighted that most of the rag picker girls belong to the age group of 10-12 years. Majority of the children {98 per cent} fell under the category of 'on the street', in which 7 per cent of the girls had single parents. Majority of the children were illiterate, and the level of literacy was found very low in those cases who had attended school. Early involvement in the economic activity and apathy towards girl's education by the parents were the main reasons of high dropout and illiteracy among girls.

Conclusion

It is a harsh reality that children start working as rag pickers very early and are subjected to all kinds of negative environment because of which their mental, physical and emotional development is at stake.

Keywords: Statistical analysis; Rag pickers; Non-formal education

Introduction

India's booming urbanization brings the problem of waste management. As more people are migrating towards the cities, the amount of waste is increasing at a high pace and waste management is likely to become a critical issue in the coming years [1-3]. Rag pickers play an important, but usually unrecognized role in the waste management system of Indian cities. They collect garbage in search of recyclable items that can be sold to scrap merchant (paper, plastic, tin...). This activity require no skills and is a source of income for a growing number of urban poor's. There are two types of scrap-collectors: the rag pickers, mostly children especially girls, who collect garbage on dumping grounds, in residential areas or in street bins, and the itinerant buyers who purchase scrap directly from households, offices and shops. Children are the most marginalized groups of the population and often live in unauthorized slums in the poorest neighborhood. Studies also show that rag pickers are most of the time migrants who had fled their city or village because of hard living conditions [4].

The Rag pickers

The most vulnerable among street children are those who are engaged in rag picking work, which are called as such though they pick up anything but rags. They collect scraps from streets, market places, garbage bins, and waste dumps, picking up material such as paper, cardboard, plastic, iron scrap, tin containers, and broken glass, in fact anything thrown away by households, shops, workshops, or other establishments that can be sold to dealer who buy these for the

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recycling industry. Children, both boys and girls, begin their rounds early in the morning slinging huge sacks on their slender shoulders as they scrounge places for scrap, traveling 8 or 10 kilometers, even more, in a day. Very young children usually move in groups, as also the girls who are sometimes accompanied by an adult female who, too, is a scrap picker [4].

Some of the child rag pickers are very young, hardly 6 years of age, moving along with older children and learning to identify scrap items to be collected. The children come from a very poor socio economic background. Not all have families. Some have come to the city alone and sleep on pavements or shacks along with other street children, while many others have rather weak links with their families and are, by and large, on their own. Rag picking is an extremely hazardous occupation [5]. The children constantly expose themselves to the danger of accidents, injuries, and disease through contacts with sharp material and poisonous substances as they scrounge with bare hands and sometimes even bare feet. It is not only their working environment that is very unhygienic and disease prone; their living environment is equally bad. Rag picker children, thus, rank among the most vulnerable category of working children. A matter of great concern is that with urbanization, and the increased volume of throw-away packing and waste material, the number of such children is growing. In Delhi thousands of street children are engaged in rag picking, especially it is one of the area where large number of girls are found to be working (as per the information given by NGOs working with street children) and apart from being exposed to several types of health hazards they are also exposed to risk of sexual harassment and physical exploitation by the people of outside world. Because of which their moral and psychological development is at stake [6-10].

The present study sought to reveal the situation pertaining to the magnitude and the problems of girls engaged in rag picking is very much wanting. The present study aims to explore and analyze the situation and problem of girl rag pickers with the aim of understand the socio-economic background of girls engaged in rag picking [11], the factors forcing them to get into this work, the implications arising out of this work on the development of these girls and suggest measures to improve the conditions of the girls engaged in rag picking work.

For the present study, the term rag picker girl means, a girl between 10 to 18 years who is engaged in collection of rags and other waste materials since last 6 months from the date of data collection. Children below 10 years were not considered mature enough to provide information in the light of the objectives of the present study; hence they were not included in the sample [12-14].

Materials and Methods

The present study has used exploratory research design. Since it is the least explored area of research, therefore, the researcher would attempt to explore the problems of girl rag pickers and their struggle for survival in the outside world. The scattered nature of the universe, absence of a definite framework and high mobility of the sample posed problem in adopting a probability sampling procedure for the purpose of study. Therefore, non-probability-sampling procedure was used, as there were no means of estimating the probability of units being included in the sample. Purposive sampling had to be used for drawing the sample. Factors like age and duration of work were considered for the final selection. The total 100 girl rag pickers were covered and only those respondents were interviewed who were willing and gave time for the interview.

Statistical analysis

An interview schedule was prepared keeping the aforesaid objectives in mind. The schedule contained closed and open-ended questions. This was to elicit objectives and subjective information. The schedule was divided into many sections in keeping with the objectives of the study; i.e., background information of the respondents, family background, migration and other details, etc. The interview schedule was pre tested so that any deficiency could be identified and corrected before embarking on actual data collection [15,16]. There were 58 questions in the interview schedule. In-depth interview was carried out with each individual personally by the researcher.

Results

The sample has been classified into three age groups ranging from 10 to 18 years. It is observed that majority of the respondents, i.e., 41 per cent, are in the age group of 10 to 12 years. Most of them start rag picking from the age of 10 years, which is indeed a very tender age and is critical for their growth and development. Thirty four per cent of them are in the age group of 13-15 years and 25 per cent fall in the age group of 16-18 years [17-20]. It can be seen that Majority of the girls were found at the age of 10-12 years (Tables 1,2).

Table 2 presents the analysis of the sample according to the different categories of the girls. They have been identified on the basis of the availability of shelter to them and, their level of contact with their families [21,22]. The first category is 'child on the street' which consists of those children who have continuous family contact. The second category is 'child of the street' which comprises of those children who spend all their days, some of their nights on the streets and in public places [23-25]. These children have occasional family contacts. The third category comprises of those children who do not have family or contact with them. These include orphans, run away, refugees and displaced persons. This is the most critical group, as these children do not have any protection from the vagaries of nature and of the society [26-30].

Analysis of Table 2 shows that large majority (98 per cent) of the children were under the category of 'on the street' i.e. those who have continued family contact [31]. Remaining 2 per cent of the sample belonged to children 'of the street', which is the most vulnerable category [32,33]. These children are either neglected or orphan. It was difficult to identify whether the children were abandoned or were 'of the street' because these girls mostly stayed in groups with the elder women of that particular area or some time they did not want to

S. No.	Age Group in years	No. of Girls
1.	10-12	41
2.	13-15	34
3.	16-18	25
	Total	100

Table 1: Categorization of children by age

Nature of contact with family	Kind of street child	No. of girls in per cent
Continuous family contact	On the street	98
Occasional family contact	Of the street	Nil
No family contact {abandoned and neglected}	Of the street	2
No. of Total no. of cases		100

Table 2: Category of the street children on the basis of family relations

S.No	Standard	No. of Girls
1.	1 st -2 nd	24
2.	3 rd -4 th	7
3.	4 th -5 th	-
4.	Above	-
5.	Total	31

Table 3: Educational status of dropout children, in percent

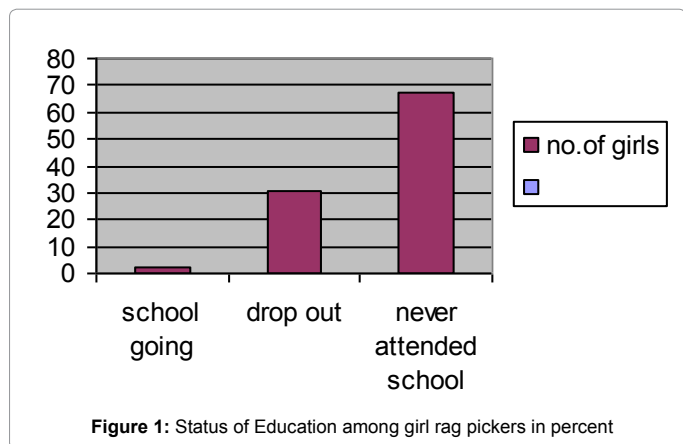


Figure 1: Status of Education among girl rag pickers in percent

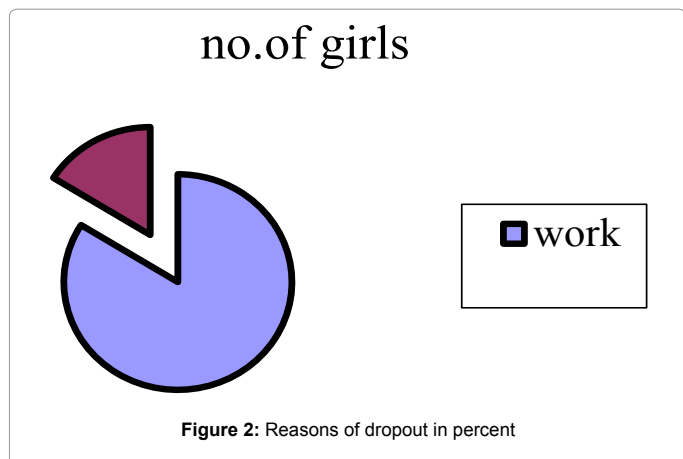


Figure 2: Reasons of dropout in percent

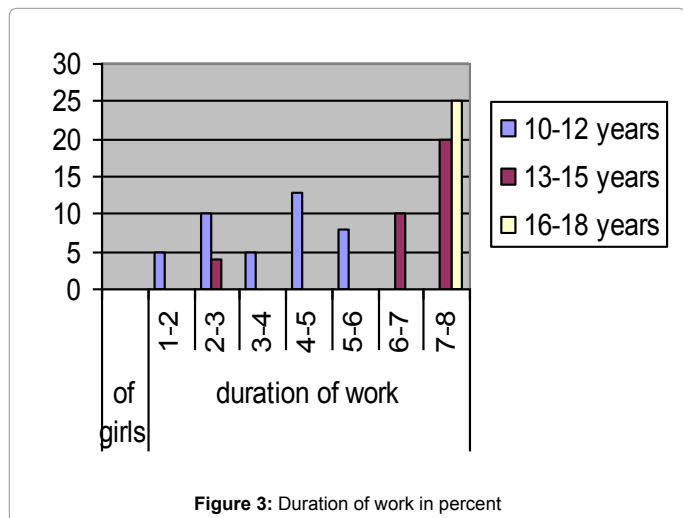


Figure 3: Duration of work in percent

disclose their real identity that they were living alone on the street [34-38] (Figure 1, Table 3).

Figure 1 revealed that out of 67 percent girls who have never attended school, 46 per cent girls were made literate through the NGO's programmes [39,40]. It was found that after coming into the rag picking occupation some voluntary organizations give them basic education through the programmes specifically designed for street children, such as, Non-Formal Education (NFE) through contact points, Aganwaries, etc. Some NGO's like Child Watch India, Butterflies etc. provide education through N.F.E classes through contact points in old Delhi area. Majority of the girls attend these classes [41-44]. Twelve per cent girls study through Aganwaries which are run by Navjyoti and Child Watch India at Yamuna Pustajhugi cluster. Through non formal education 20 per cent girls could read little bit, 10 per cent girls could read and write their names and Hindi alphabets, 9 per cent could only write, and 7 per cent knew basic mathematics [45,46] (Table 4, Figure 2).

Formal system of education with its rigid school hours and course structure is not suitable to the working children [47]. The analysis of Table 4 revealed that the majority, i.e., 26 per cent amongst the total drop out children {31 percent} are unable to continue their education because of work as they start rag picking at a very early age, 5 per cent left their school because of migration from native place to Delhi (Table 5).

Although 97 percent of the girls stay with their parent(s) yet Table 5 shows that their relationship with the parents is not satisfactory. Ninety five percent reported that they were physically abused by their own parents if they earned less than their expectations or if they refused to do work [48].

The proportion of the respondents getting affection by their parents is relatively small only 4 per cent. It was hearting to note that none of the girls reported any sexual exploitation by the members with whom they were staying [49,50]. The findings of the study do indicate that the children, by and large, seem to be deprived of parental affection (Figure 3).

It is a matter of great concern that 55 percent of the children in the age group 10-15 years have been working as rag pickers for the past 2-6 years and 45 percent of the children in the age group 13-18 years are working as rag pickers from past 7-8 years [51] (Figure 4).

The majority of the children i.e., 94 per cent are forced to do rag picking by their parents as a source of livelihood. Only 3 per cent reported for the better income and rest of the population, i.e., 3 per cent reported other reason such as rag picking does not require any skills and poor performance in study [52-54]. This is the major area of concern that children are forced by their parents to choose rag picking as an occupation, which indicates their physical and emotional exploitation at home. Most of the children reported that they are being forced by their parents to bring back specified amount of money with themselves otherwise they are being brutally assaulted at the end of the day. These factors increase the likelihood of girls getting involved in prostitution for easy money which further ruins their physical and emotional development [55,56]. Majority of the girls feels that they are used as an instrument of income by their families which reflect their frustration towards their parents (Table 6, Figure 5).

The duration of working hours in the organized sectors are governed by the Factories Act, 1948. Unfortunately, the children working in the 'informal sector' are not governed by any regulations whatsoever. It is

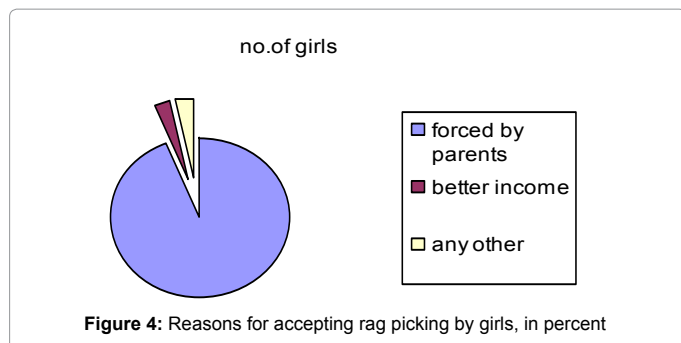


Figure 4: Reasons for accepting rag picking by girls, in percent

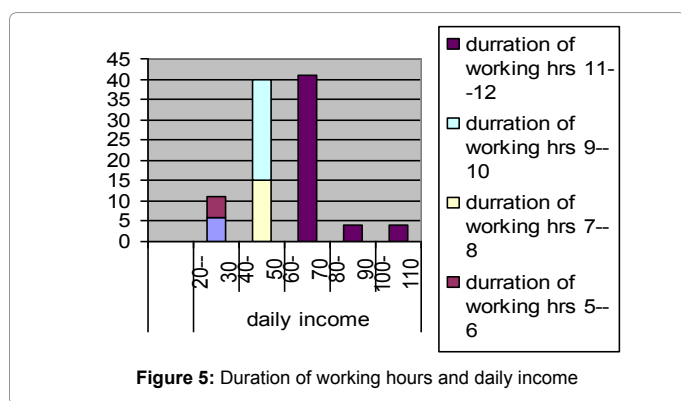


Figure 5: Duration of working hours and daily income

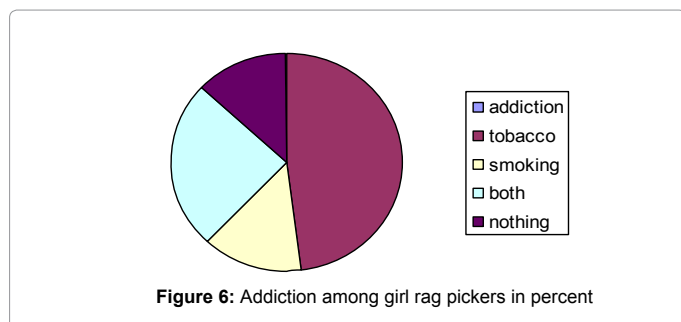


Figure 6: Addiction among girl rag pickers in percent

ironical that, while the society has not accepted children to work no such body of rules for those working in the ‘informal sector’ has been constituted [57]. Nor is there any supervision by the government of the kind of ‘informal sectors’ in which the children are engaged.

The consequence as revealed by the study are that majority of the children i.e. 63 per cent, work 11-12 hours a day, 29 per cent work 9-10 hours, 5 per cent work 7-8 hours a day and only 2 per cent work for 5-6 hours a day. It also reveals that 1 per cent children are working more than 12 hours a day and that is more than the working hours prescribed under the Factories Act and that too is for adults. These girls also reported that not only do they have to work outside the home but also they have to do all the house chores such as cooking, looking after siblings, collection of wood etc. As revealed by Figure 3.4, the more the hours of work greater is the income. The children are forced to work for more hours as they are surrounded by uncertainties and rags are scattered in different areas of old Delhi. The daily income for working for more than 11 hours ranges between Rs.60-70, although 8 per cent girls are also getting Rs. 80-100 for the same hours of work. Only 5 per cent disclosed that they are also involved in prostitution for easy earning (Table 7).

The study reveals that these girls pick all the stuff of rags such as plastic, iron material, rope, paper, boxes, needles etc. The main sources from which they collect the rags are streets in front of shops and refuse dumps in old Delhi. This is evident from the picture. As stated earlier the girls have to walk long distance often covering 10-15 km seventy six percent girls go alone in search of rags because of which several types of risks are much higher. Undoubtedly, the present occupation exposes these children to several types of risks and health hazards like physical weakness, infection from coming into contact with fecal contaminants, dead animals and hook worm, gastrointestinal infections because of spoiled food found in the garbage, skin infections. The risk of sexual harassment and physical exploitation by the people are also prevalent which affect their overall future development.

The girl children are most vulnerable group as they do not have any status and voice in the eyes of society, they are most exploited. The girls mentioned that they were punished, beaten and abused for small mistakes, especially by Municipal Corporation. In the words of a 10 year old girl ‘people think we are thieves, pests and nuisance and so drive us away from street corners, extort money from us regularly for allowing us to pick the rags from the street’. Girls also have fear of sexual abuse (Table 7).

Analysis of the Table 7 shows that majority of the children i.e. 65 per cent, reported eve teasing, sexual abuse and physical abuse, 10 per cent children stated only physical abuse and 5 per cent spoke about only sexual abuse by the outside people which include watch men, guards, sweepers, tea shop or dhaba owners, shop keepers and general public also. The girls mentioned their work is never ending as they have to see the household work in addition to rag picking. The girls feels society is indifferent, uncaring and treats them very harshly (Table 8).

Most of the children reported that their fathers were used to drinking, fifty seven per cent girls stated that their fathers were hardcore alcoholic and while intoxicated they used to beat their children and wives. They would not work but would expect their wives and children to work and give them money for their drinks, even if there was nothing to eat in the house. Fifteen per cent reported that their fathers were substance abusers, and another 15 per cent reported that their father and mother both were substance abusers (Table 9).

As is evident from Table 9 one regular meal seems to be the normal pattern among the rag picker girls. Seventy one percent were able to get only one regular meal and only 25 per cent were able to take their meals twice. Only 4 per cent were fortunate to eat thrice a day. The fact that large number of children did not get regular meals or got only one meal is an important point to note. It is unfortunate that majority of them worked long hours and walked 10-15 miles each day virtually on empty stomach. This badly affects their health status especially because they are in growing age (Figure 6).

Figure 6 deals with the type of addiction, it reveals that out of total sample size i.e., 100, only 22 girls were not addicted. Rests of the girls were subjected to different kinds of addiction. The data shows that 39 girls were addicted to tobacco chewing, 14 to smoking and 25 indulged in both smoking and tobacco chewing (Table 10).

Table 10 is a cross- table between the age group and type of addiction. The total sample was divided into 3 categories of age groups {10-12 years, 13-15 years and 16-18 years}. Below the age group of 12 years there were 15 girls who indulged in tobacco chewing. Second category is of 13-15 year of age group. Out of the total 34 cases 20 girls indulged in tobacco chewing and 13 of them indulged in both smoking and tobacco. Next category is of the age group of 16-18 years in which

S.No	Reasons	No. of Girls
1.	Employment	26
2.	Migration	5
3.	Poor health	-
4.	Any other	-
	Total	31

Table 4: Reasons of dropout, in percent

	Satisfactory	Not satisfactory		Total
		Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	
No. of girls, in Percent	4	95	-	99

Table 5: Relationship with person with whom the child is staying

S. No.	Hours of work	No. of girls, in per cent
1.	5-6 hours	2
2.	7-8 hours	5
3.	9-10 hours	29
4.	11-12 hours	63
5.	More than 12	1
	Total	100

Table 6: Hours of work

S. No.	Problem	No. of cases, in per cent
1.	Physical abuse	10
2.	Sexual abuse	5
3.	Eve teasing	-
4.	Eve teasing and physical abuse	20
5.	1,2 and 3	65
	Total	100

Table 7: Problem faced at work

S. No.	Addictive parent/guardian	Addiction	No. of girls, in per cent
1.	Only father	Alcohol	57
2.	Only father	Drugs	15
3.	Only mother	-	-
4.	Both	Drugs	15
5.	Father and mother	Nothing	12
	Total		99

Table 8: Parent's addiction

S. No.	Regular meal	No. of girls, in percent
1.	One regular meal	71
2.	Two regular meal	25
3.	Three times	4
	Total	100

Table 9: No. of regular meal in a day

S. No.	Age group, in years	Smoking	Tobacco	Smoking and tobacco	Nothing	Total
1.	10-12	-	15	-	26	41
2.	13-15	-	20	13	1	34
3.	16-18	-	10	15	-	25
	Total	-	45	28	27	100

Table 10: Age and Addiction

	Ache 1	Cough 2	Weakness 3	Skin infection 4	Cuts/injury/body pain 5	1,2,3	3,4,5	Vaginal infection 6	Total
No.	25					35	33	7	100

Table 11: Nature of work effects on the health of girl rag pickers, in percent

10 indulged in tobacco chewing and remaining 15 girls indulged in both smoking and tobacco chewing. It is evident from this that the children in the age group of 13-16 years and above are most vulnerable to addiction of one or the other type and need focused intervention. The major circumstances responsible for addiction were found to be the environment in which they work and live, and condition of their work such as long hours of work, lack of adequate food, etc (Table 11).

Table 11 indicates that almost all the children engaged in rag picking have poor health status. Thirty three per cent have cuts/ injuries, joint and finger pain, skin infection and stomach pain 25 suffer from different kinds of aches e.g. headache pain in legs and eye ache, 35 per cent girls are suffering from skin infections, cuts, cough and weakness and remaining 7 per cent are suffering from vaginal infections. Majority of the children reported accidents {75 per cent}. The possibility of suffering from AIDS, STD and other infectious disease could also be prevalent as out of these girls, 10 per cent girls are also reported to indulge in prostitution. Rag picking work is most unhygienic as children are prone to skin disease, accidents, cuts and injuries of different kinds. However, no permanent disability was observed in girl rag pickers other than cuts and injuries. As regards the change in the behaviour of girl rag pickers, majority of the girls i.e., 87 per cent, talked about the negative changes in the behaviour. These included using abusive language, addiction and, in few cases gambling and prostitution too. Remaining, 13 per cent girls talked about positive changes as they are becoming responsible and learning the adult behaviour. Apart from the positive quality of the behavioral changes that took place after children were put into work and their support to society in general, by giving labour to clean the city, reducing the volume of urban waste and providing raw material to several production units, one cannot deny the negative aspects which affect and hamper their development in the interest of future generation.

Summary and Conclusions

Child labour is not a new phenomenon, but what is new is its perception as a social problem. Various ancient Indian studies have described how children in Indian families shared the work load of their parents and of the gurus during their Brahmacharya period. The practice of child labour has been flourishing throughout the length and breadth of the world with degrees of difference and it is deep rooted. With the many competing demands on their resources, the developing societies are often unable to do everything that is necessary to give the children their rightful place in the community. The result is that many children in their tender age are exploited for work. While this could be ascribed to many social-economic and cultural considerations, yet it cannot be over looked as there is widespread employment of children, both open and disguised, in environments and professions which are most detrimental to their health and growth.

Ragpicking is a form of child labour. Ragpicking is one of the most inferior economic activities in the urban informal sector, largely undertaken by children belonging to weaker sections of the society, for the survival and for supplementing their family income. Ragpicking is the profession mostly dominated by children aging 6 to 15 years who do not have any other skill and thus by way of refuse collection contribute to household income or own survival. These are

mainly children of slum dwellers and poor people. Some of them are abandoned or runaway children.

In this study, the socio-economic background of the girls was examined. In doing so, attention was focused on the age group of the girls, category of the child, their literacy level and the background of their family, which included size of the family, familial relations and exploitation of the children, by parents [58].

The findings highlighted that most of the rag picker girls belong to the age group of 10-12 years. It is a harsh reality that children start working as rag pickers very early and are subjected to all kinds of negative environment because of which their mental, physical and emotional development is at stake. Majority of the children {98 per cent} fell under the category of 'on the street', in which 7 per cent of the girls had single parents. Majority of the children were illiterate, and the level of literacy was found very low in those cases who had attended school. Early involvement in the economic activity and apathy towards girl's education by the parents were the main reasons of high dropout and illiteracy among girls [59]. By focusing upon the family milieu, it was found that majority of the girls belonged to large sized families which indicates number of dependents on the earning member of the family. It was found that majority of the girls (28 per cent) are the sole bread earner in the family.

Majority of the fathers were rickshaw puller and mothers were unemployed. The merge income earned by both the parents is not sufficient [60]. The girls are, by and large, working on the streets to earn a living for themselves and for their families.

The girl rag pickers are under terrible stress and strain as for them it is a question of day-to-day survival. They are compelled to make adjustments to varied circumstances, which change, almost every day. Hence, adjustments with the social conditions become one important condition of survival on the streets. The researcher tried to study their attitudes towards parents, and towards society [61].

Suggested action strategies

1. As per the family background of the girl rag pickers, poverty is the main factor which compels these children to undertake this work. Therefore, income generation programmes to raise economic background of these families would be the most pertinent solution to the problem.
2. The study has confirmed that the present work is not free from health hazards. Many respondents have stated that rag picking has affected their health and hampered their development. Therefore, it is felt that rag picking should be recognized as an occupation so that measures for minimizing the hazards can be taken up and also steps to improve the status of girl rag pickers into the society, including their working and living conditions.
3. While formulating welfare policy and programmes for children, care should be taken that poorer and needy rag picking children in particular and others, in general, who are likely to join rag picking {because of the economic condition of their family} are given due priority in the welfare programmes.
4. A social service center, well equipped with the facilities of health check up, treatment and other services need to be opened in the urban slums and rural poor areas which would cater to the treatment of child rag pickers also. Infact periodical medical checkup of these girls would help.

5. Governmental and voluntary welfare agencies need to start formal and non-formal education for the child rag pickers. Teachers of these centers should have proper training and area based understanding to teach these children. The policy of these educational centers should be simple and according to the need of the child rag pickers, especially time flexibility should be there.
6. In the urban slums, vocational training centers with the availability of skill training in different areas requiring minimal education should be opened. This will help the children to find out other alternative jobs and also provide a planned future to the poor and the needy section of the children.
7. There is a greater need for awareness building among the voluntary welfare agencies regarding specific problems and needs of rag pickers that are distinct from the other categories of street children so that the problems and welfare needs of the rag pickers children are properly understood and need based measures are introduced by these agencies.
8. Social work intervention is necessary at the family level especially where the fathers are drug addicts or unemployed. Voluntary Organizations need to work closely with these families, and provide counseling and referral services as per need.
9. Awareness generation programmes should be started to create awareness among the general public with a view to reduce the gender biases and to make the people understand the importance of girl's education and also the special needs of girl rag pickers.
10. Modern methods of garbage disposal and their linking up with non-conventional energy sources would automatically bring down the problem of rag picking. Intervention by the government in this regard would be a great support which will save the lives of many young children and improve their health condition all over the country.

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