



The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations: Protection of Vulnerable Children in India

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Abstract: Child protection remain critical concerns in India. The concepts of childhood and child-rearing vary based on socio-cultural, economic, religious, and political factors. While several laws and policies to safeguard and promote children's well-being were introduced by the government, millions of children still do not have equal access to their rights and protection. Among all sections of society, children are considered as the most neglected and vulnerable. Many children remain vulnerable to risks such as poverty, exploitation, abuse, lack of education and healthcare, child marriage, trafficking, and child labor etc. To address the gaps in government interventions, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role by offering support services, advocating child rights, and contributing to policy development to ensure protection for vulnerable children. The paper is based on secondary sources including both conceptual and empirical data. It attempts to explore the contributions of NGOs in the protection of children. It emphasizes their role in various programs and strategies to provide care, education, legislation, policies and advocacy for children at-risk. It also examines the challenges faced by NGOs. The paper thus examines the role of NGOs in protecting vulnerable children from the perspective of child rights, outlines key findings on this major issue, and highlights the need to protect India's children while promoting their holistic development in a secure environment.

Keywords: *Children, Non-Governmental Organizations, Protection, Rights and Vulnerable*

1. Introduction

India is home to millions of children who face severe vulnerabilities due to poverty, abandonment, abuse, child labour, homelessness, street life, trafficking, and limited access to education and healthcare. India has a large population of children, estimated to be roughly 39 percent of the total population (1.21 billion), as per the 2011 census of India. Vulnerable children often lack essential needs such as food, shelter, education, and medical care, making them more exposed to exploitation, neglect, and discrimination. Many of these children come from marginalized communities and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, facing systemic inequalities (Chandrakant & Priyavadan, 2008). Meanwhile, Yadav (2023) highlight that vulnerability in young individuals refers to those at higher risk compare to their peers, particularly in areas like food insecurity, lack of parental care, education, abuse, neglect, exploitation, violence, and diseases like HIV. Although the government has introduced various laws, policies and initiatives for child protection, many children remain vulnerable. To address these significant gaps, NGOs play a crucial role and safeguard vulnerable children by engaging in advocacy, creating awareness programs, and providing direct intervention to address issues such as poverty, abuse, education and rights, thereby creating a safer and nurturing environment for these children. Thus, ensuring the well-being of vulnerable children requires comprehensive policies, effective child protection laws, and the active involvement of governments, NGOs, and society to safeguard their rights and future opportunities. Addressing these challenges is crucial for securing India's future and fostering an inclusive society.

2. Historical Aspects of NGOs

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are non-profit institutions recognized by governments for their role in advocacy, service provision, activism, and research on social and human development issues. In India, NGOs have historically contributed to health and education, with religious groups establishing institutions and charities before independence. Many NGOs emerged in response to crises, focusing on relief and rehabilitation. Since independence, their influence has grown, marked by three key shifts: (1) increased professionalization, (2) diversified funding from national and international donors, and (3) the rise of secular NGOs (Vikram et al., 2010). Meanwhile, Dutta (2020) highlights that the World Bank defines NGOs as private organizations dedicated to alleviating suffering, advocating for the poor, protecting the environment, and supporting community development. Dutta (2020)

adds that over 14,000 NGOs in India are registered under the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act, while the total number may exceed 30,000. According to NGO DARPAN (2023) report, India has around 1.87 lakh registered NGOs. Uttar Pradesh records the highest counts of NGOs, followed by Maharashtra and Delhi. In Northeast India, a total of 9,636 NGOs is actively operating.

3. Understanding Vulnerable Children in India

3.1. Definition and Categories of Vulnerable Children

Identifying and understanding different categories of vulnerable children is essential for providing effective support and intervention. UNICEF considers children as vulnerable when they are "at risk of or experiencing violations of their rights to survival, development, protection, and participation." Meanwhile, as stated by Arora et al. (2015), the World Bank's "Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC)" toolkit defines vulnerability as "the group of children that experience negative outcomes, such as the loss of their education, morbidity, and malnutrition, at higher rates than do their peers". The primary categories of vulnerable children identified in this toolkit includes: (1) street children, (2) child labor, (3) children affected by armed conflict, (4) HIV/AIDS children, (5) disabled children, and (6) orphan and vulnerable children's groups.

3.2. Causes and Impact of Vulnerability

Bhatt and Singh (2022) observe that in India, caste and class discrimination contribute to the marginalization of children. Social exclusion also impacts parenting and increases the risk of child maltreatment. The 2011 census estimated that 40% of Indian children face vulnerability or hardship, including those without family support, engaged in child labor, trafficked, abused, homeless, or affected by substance abuse, conflict, or natural disasters. Chandrakant and Priyavadan (2008) highlight those children between 5–12 age is highly exposed to abuse and exploitation. Further, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) also mentioned that children subjected to exploitation, abuse and neglect are at risk of shortened lives, poor physical and mental health. Similarly, vulnerable street children, often victims of abuse and face neglect at school, their mental and physical development are affected (Sharma & Samina, 2023). However, successful protection helps a child to grow physically and mentally healthy (Chopra, 2015).

4. Roles of NGOs in Child Protection

NGOs play a vital role in addressing various issues, and their efforts are crucial in assisting shelter, rehabilitation, and holistic development services for child protection in India. For further exploration details are given below.

4.1. *Providing Shelter and Rehabilitation*

NGOs such as Rainbow Homes and Save the Children provides shelter, education, and protection from exploitation, focusing on empowering street children. Rainbow Homes operates in 10 cities, offering residential care and educational opportunities. Both the NGOs work to address the developmental challenges encountered by street children, who are frequently subjected to exploitation (Sharma & Samina, 2023). Meanwhile, Udayan Care NGO has modelled 13 Children's Homes and 3 Aftercare facilities on a holistic group care model for vulnerable children in India. It enables children to live in small groups, fostering a family environment with supports healing from trauma, and also helps children to develop attachments with their care givers. Additionally, Udayan Care NGO has shown positive outcomes in the emotional and social growth among these children (Modi et al., 2014).

4.2. *Education and Skill Development*

Rainbow Homes and Door Step School are NGOs that work for the marginalized children, including street children of migrant laborers, and they offer education. Their initiatives are to make education accessible, inclusive, and adaptable for children who are often neglected and excluded from formal education system. The “*Every Child Counts*” campaign by Door Step School is one of the successful initiatives, that aim to enroll children in schools. This model highlights the potential for expansion and local adaptation to educate and enhance more disadvantaged children (Dabir et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Bhattacharyya (2022) highlights that many NGOs provide non-formal education and vocational training to especially child laborers and school dropouts children enabling them to obtain better livelihoods, and eradicate child labor. Similarly, the Salaam Bombay Foundation NGO also implemented programs that include education and vocational training to address the challenges encountered by children from economically constrained families, equipping adolescents with the skills needed for the job market (Galliara et al., 2022). Additionally, Save the Children organization has educated over 406,200 children across 18 states in India (Sharma & Samina, 2023).

4.3. *Health and Nutrition Support*

NGOs have been instrumental to combat health and nutrition and malnutrition challenges among the vulnerable children through community programs, especially in urban and tribal areas of India. A study in Mumbai showed that an NGO initiative program applying community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) approach reduced 28% child malnutrition in intervention areas, compared to 5% in non-intervention areas (Chanani et al., 2019). Similarly, Prasad and Sinha (2015) reported that in tribal regions, NGOs have implemented innovative strategies such as crèches, community mobilization, and system strengthening to combat malnutrition. Program's success includes tailored nutrition counselling, regular field visits by staff, and holistic case management. Further, Chauhan et al. (2024) point out that NGOs, in collaboration with the government under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) have strengthened services and expanded coverage to improve health and nutrition. Additionally, underweight children were reduced by 9-12% with the help of ICDS between 2016 and 2021.

4.4. Rescuing and Rehabilitating Victims

NGOs are essential in rescuing and rehabilitating victims of vulnerability such as child labour, child sexual abuse and child trafficking in India, it focuses on both immediate assistance and long-term intervention.

4.4.1. Child Labor

Sen (2006) explains that NGOs primary concern is education and skill development to help children escape from poverty and child labor. By providing essential learning and training, they support rehabilitation and empower children to access better opportunities. Meanwhile, Bhatt and Singh (2022) found that many rescued children did not return to school due to family poverty. Some who enrolled later dropped out and went back to work and child labor was found to be short-term but recurring issue. Additionally, NGOs play a crucial role in rescue operation and rehabilitation, acting as a bridge between the government and families while providing support and services.

4.4.2. Child Sexual Abuse

Das (2017) highlights that a 2007 report in India found that over half of the children surveyed had experienced sexual abuse, often by someone they knew, with most cases going unreported. He states that NGOs play a vital role in outreach, making them the first point of contact for many child sexual abuse (CSA) victims. By building trust, they encourage children to disclose abuse. NGOs also focus on holistic care, prevention, case management, and psycho-

social counselling. In contrast, public hospitals primarily handle CSA cases referred by the police or Child Welfare Committees and are responsible for medical examinations and evidence collection for legal cases. Further, Das (2017) study highlights challenges faced by NGOs and public hospitals, including limited resources and the need for better training in handling CSA cases. Many NGOs experience burnout and require more support to manage their workload. It also emphasises the importance of timely intervention to prevent long-term psychological effects, as early support can aid recovery and reduce future trauma.

4.4.3. Child Trafficking

Prerana, an NGO established in 1986 located in Mumbai, fights human trafficking and intergenerational exploitation in sex trade. Prerana NGO is part of South-Asian Anti-Trafficking movement. It rescued child beggars, victims of sexual abuse, and at-risk children from marginalized urban communities. To combat human trafficking and protect vulnerable children, Prerana has been a strong advocate for the rights of marginalized women and children, earning national and international recognition for its work. Under Priti Patkar's leadership, the organization has tackled child trafficking through advocacy, institutional care, and rehabilitation programs, providing a model that could be adopted in other areas facing similar problems (Gurneet, 2023).

4.5. Advocacy and Awareness for Children's Rights and Policy Influence

NGOs play a vital role in advocating and influencing legislation to protect children's rights. Their efforts contribute a significant change in protection of vulnerable children.

Basu (2015) discusses the dual role of NGOs in both service delivery and empowerment. According to him NGOs not only implement government programs but also educate communities about their rights. Additionally, NGOs in India actively advocate for children's rights by shaping policies through research, and direct engagement with policymakers. They assess government programs, identify implementation gaps, and offer valuable recommendations to improve child welfare and protection efforts. Meanwhile, Dutta (2020), citing Goel and Tripathi (2010), highlights the significant role of NGOs in upholding human rights. The authors emphasize that NGOs working for human rights in particular, have a crucial responsibility in enforcing these rights at both national and global scales. In India, several prominent NGOs including Forum for Crèche and Childcare Services (FORCES), Concerned Action Now (CAN), and Child Rights and You (CRY) focuses on child rights.

6. Major NGOs Working for Vulnerable Children in India

Some of the major NGO's working for the vulnerable children in India includes:

(a) *Childline India*

CHILDLINE India Foundation (CIF) runs the CHILDLINE 1098 helpline under the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development. It sets up and manages the service, monitors its work and finances, trains staff, conducts research, raises awareness, and gathers resources. CHILDLINE 1098 is a free, 24/7 emergency helpline that helps children in need such as trafficking, child labor, abuse and runaway etc. It not only provides immediate support but also connects children to long-term care and protection services. So far, it has helped three million children across India.

Meanwhile, the Integrated Child Protection Schemes utilize existing machinery like CHILDLINE services and institutions under the Juvenile Justice Act, including Child Welfare Committees, Juvenile Justice Boards, and various homes for vulnerable children. These mechanisms offer protection depends on the specific needs of each child. The MWCD reported that Childline operates in 74 cities and towns across India, providing child protection services. Since its launch in June 1996, it has built a referral network involving over 3,000 civil society organizations, academic institutions, and state governments (Chopra, 2015).

(b) *Child Rights and You (CRY)*

CRY was founded with the vision of providing happier childhoods for all children. CRY is an organization established in 1979 by Rippan Kapur, an Indian Airlines purser, started CRY with six friends, CRY originated at a dining table with a humble Rs 50. CRY's approach focuses on working with vulnerable and underprivileged children to promote education, improve health and nutrition, prevent child labor, support girl child education, stop child marriage, and prevent child trafficking. Over four decades later, CRY collaborates with 144 project partners across 20 Indian states, positively impacting the lives of over 4.7 million children. CRY also contributing to progressive legislation for substantive childcare through advocacy efforts. (Chopra, 2015).

7. Government and NGOs Collaboration

7.1. *Policies Supporting NGOs Initiatives for Child Protection in India*

Bajpai (2006) notes that, in India a number of policies initiative relating to children have been undertaken. Some major policies are highlighted in the following:

1. Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act (2015)
2. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)
3. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (1986)
4. The Immoral Trafficking Act (1956)
5. The National Policy for children 1974
6. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights Act (2005)
7. Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, (2012) and
8. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.

7.2. Child Protection Measures Supporting NGOs

1. The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS)
2. Integrated Child Development Service Scheme (ICDS)
3. Mission Vatsalya (Child Protection Services & Child Welfare Services)
4. CHILDLINE and
5. The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP).

8. Child Rights And Protection

According to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), every child has a right to protection. The UN and the UNCRC has defined child rights. These rights are basic freedoms and entitlements for everyone under age 18, regardless of origins, fortune, birth, language, religion, ethnicity, colour, gender, and opinions or ability (Chopra, 2015). Further, Centre for Child Protection Report (2012) highlights that UNCRC has outlined basic human rights that every child ought to be granted. These rights are primarily classified into four groups, encompassing civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights of every child which includes: 1. Right to Survival 2. Right to Protection 3. Right to Participation, and 4. Right to Development.

Furthermore, Gibbs et al. (2022) highlights that children have a fundamental right to health, safety, and wellbeing, as introduced by the 1989 UNCRC. This framework underlines the importance of ensuring that children can thrive in a supportive environment. They further highlight the importance of protective measures at various levels, including family, community, and policy, to safeguard children's health and well-being. Deb (2018) adds that the UNCRC serves as a foundational framework for child protection globally. This convention influences national legislation and policies in India, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding

children's rights. Additionally, Dutta (2020) states that children are a nation's most valuable asset and future.

9. Challenges faced by the NGOs

NGOs in India play a crucial role; however, they encounter several challenges in implementing shelter and rehabilitation interventions. According to Dutta (2020), financial instability is NGOs biggest challenge in Lakhimpur District, Assam, where irregular government funding is the contributing factor. Other issues include uncommitted and irregular employees, illiteracy among the local population, lack of awareness about the importance of childhood development, resistance from the community, and inadequate transport facilities in remote areas. Some of the major challenges faced by the NGOs includes:

1. Funding Constraints: In India financial constraints is a major challenge for many NGOs. Modi et al. (2014) note that Udayan Care has experienced challenges in recruiting and training volunteers as a result of inadequate funding. Additionally, to expand programs NGOs need resources and funds which is not easy to access.

2. Scaling and Reach: Expanding intervention programs to reach out broader population presents several challenges. Especially in remote regions, NGOs struggles due to inadequate infrastructure (Gupta, 2014).

3. Awareness and Community Engagement: Another challenge is NGOs often spent considerable time and resources to educate communities and address cultural barriers to create awareness on child protection and involve communities in rehabilitation (Bhandari, 2016).

4. Regulatory and Institutional Challenges: NGOs also frequently face bureaucratic challenges and inefficiencies within institutional systems, which hinder their intervention programs (Bhandari, 2016).

Although NGOs play a crucial role in protecting vulnerable children, they encountered various challenges and issues such as funding constraints, inadequate scaling and reach, inadequacy of awareness among the community and societal norms, and bureaucratic obstacles. Thus, join efforts by NGOs, the government and stakeholders are crucial to tackle these issues and promote child protection across India.

10. Recommendation

Strengthening NGOs-government collaboration: To mobilise resources and ensure effective child protection, building collaboration and fostering collective efforts between the NGOs and the government is essential. Additionally, to support NGOs in implementing their projects and programs effectively, the government must ensure regular fund allocation.

Monitoring and evaluating child Rights: conducting field studies by the NGOs to understand the child rights issues and challenges faced by children, and evaluating these findings will help in formulating policies and programs effectively.

Strengthening participation in child protection: Engaging communities, children, and stakeholders in active participation in child protection is essential for integrating support services and interventions programs.

Strengthening awareness programmes: Organizing awareness programs in schools and communities, and educating children, parents, and community members about child rights, protection and related programs, can help ensure better access to child protection services and policies.

Trainings and workshops for the NGOs Employees: NGOs and the government should collaborate and organize timely trainings and workshops to equip NGOs employees with knowledge and skills needed to effectively address children's issues.

11. Conclusion

NGOs play a crucial role in bridging gaps by providing essential services, advocating for children's rights, and implementing programs that support children's overall development. They also offer shelter, rehabilitation, and other interventions for vulnerable children in India, using diverse strategies to address their specific needs. Despite challenges such as financial constraints and difficulties in expanding their reach, NGOs have made a significant impact by improving education, livelihood opportunities, and social inclusion. Strengthening partnerships with government agencies, fostering community participation, and adopting innovative solutions will be key to enhancing the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of these initiatives.

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