

In conversation with Arathi Kannan (CRY - Child Rights and You, Delhi)

1. What is the process of getting street children enrolled in schools?

Identifying street children is step one. Step two would be to report about the child to CWC (Child Welfare Centre). CWC will investigate further. They will take action to reintegrate the child back home. In a different scenario, supposing the street children and family live on the street, then the CWC can ask a nearby school to enroll the child after document verification and counseling. Organizations that work closely with street children will attempt to mobilize the parents, and get the children enrolled in school, keeping CWC in the loop.

2. How are street children roped into the RTE system when they lack identification? How is the problem of lack of identification dealt with?

According to RTE (Right to Free and Compulsory Education), right to school below 14 in any state, location is accorded, irrespective of identity cards like Aadhar. The dilemma is that this piece of information hasn't been disseminated to the teachers, most of whom think identity card is mandatory for admission in school. This is a hurdle for the unempowered children and families as they might not know it's their right. A bigger challenge on ground is rural to urban migration for livelihood. A lot of the rural population leave their province and venture out to urban areas looking for jobs. This makes keeping track of their lives difficult. For them too, they are left confused about what their basic rights and how to claim them. Awareness regarding these factors are important where both children and the family are concerned. Another challenge comes in the form of the facilitator's (school principal in this case) willingness to make these arrangements. Identification is a problem, however, even without identification, no school can deny admission. As per the RTE norm, the child should be admitted in a school within a radius of 4-5 km from her home. DCPU (District Child Protection Unit) and the police could help with the procedures.

3. Street children are often taken off the streets and put into shelters to keep them from begging and provide them with education. However their safety here is often reported to be compromised with occurrences of sexual abuse and violence. How much of a reality is this, and what are the mechanisms in place to ensure their safety?

Shelter homes are run by government as well as NGOs. For the longest time, these homes weren't registered under the JJ Act (Juvenile Justice Act), perhaps because of which standards weren't set or maintained. The decree to get them all registered under JJ Act was issued recently, and the SOP was developed 2 years ago. There are other concerns as well; budget allocation has been a persistent problem. Monitoring these homes (CWC, DCPU, CPO), capacity building and lack of skilled professionals are also significant factors that don't ensure safety of children in these homes. Right person in the right job: Often, the personnel-in-charge at these homes would be on additional duty; this job not being their priority makes the situation even graver. There has to be performance indicative measurements to assess the efficacy of systems.

4. Do begging help children on the streets actually earn a livelihood? Or are they exploited by begging rackets?

Whether begging helps children earn a livelihood cannot be answered objectively, as it's wholly dependent on the circumstances of the child and his/her family. Children are, indisputably, exploited by a bigger racket. How else can we surmise the staggering number of trafficked, abducted and missing children in the country?

5. How effective is the RTE Act and child right laws in getting children off the streets and keeping them in schools?

RTE doesn't talk about begging children. It talks about all children below 14 who have the right to free and compulsory education. The onus is on the government and civil society to put in their efforts and ensure that children claim their right. For this, more efforts are required in designing programmes for street children, and to get them off the street completely.