



Human Rights and Destitute Children in Keralam: A Case Study of SOS Village

Always

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intersection of human rights and the lived realities of destitute children in Keralam, with a focused case analysis of SOS Village in Always. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), India is committed to ensuring that children enjoy a comprehensive set of rights essential for their survival, development, protection, and participation. While most human rights applicable to adults extend to children, their realization is uniquely dependent on external support systems, as children often lack the awareness and agency to claim these rights independently. Consequently, the responsibility for safeguarding children's rights rests fundamentally with the family, society, and the state. However, destitute children represent a particularly vulnerable group, as they are deprived of familial support structures that typically ensure access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, protection, and emotional well-being. In such contexts, the role of non-governmental organizations becomes critical in bridging this gap and facilitating juvenile justice. This paper explores how institutional care models contribute to upholding the human rights of destitute children, using SOS Village as a case study. SOS Village stands out as a significant example of community-driven intervention, offering comprehensive rehabilitation services tailored to the needs of destitute children. The organization adopts a comprehensive approach that integrates physical care, emotional support, and



educational opportunities, thereby fostering overall development. Its emphasis on individualized attention ensures that each child's unique needs and potential are recognized and nurtured. Additionally, the institution's outreach initiatives contribute to broader societal awareness about child rights and responsibilities, encouraging community participation in child welfare. Through this case study, the paper highlights the importance of collaborative efforts between civil society and state mechanisms in protecting and promoting the rights of destitute children. It underscores that ensuring human rights for such marginalized groups requires not only legal frameworks but also compassionate, sustained, and context-sensitive interventions. Ultimately, the study affirms that institutions like SOS Village play a pivotal role in transforming vulnerability into opportunity, contributing to a more just and inclusive society.

Introduction

India is a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which recognizes that every child is entitled to fundamental human rights necessary for survival, development, protection, and participation. These rights are universal and inherent, extending to all children without discrimination. While most human rights applicable to adults are equally relevant to children, with the possible exception of certain political rights, children require additional care and protection due to their age, vulnerability, and dependence. The distinct nature of children's rights lies in the fact that children may not fully comprehend the meaning or significance of these rights. As a result, they depend heavily on their families, communities, and the state to ensure that these rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

The realization of children's rights is, therefore, not solely an individual matter but a collective responsibility. Families play a primary role in nurturing and safeguarding children, while society and the state are expected to create an enabling environment for their growth and development. However, this framework becomes significantly challenged in the case of destitute children. Destitute children, who are deprived of parental care and family support, face extreme vulnerability and marginalization. Without the protective structure of a family, these children are often left exposed to exploitation, neglect, and abuse.



Consequently, the responsibility for safeguarding their rights shifts more heavily onto society, non-governmental organizations, and the government.

In India, destitute children represent one of the most disadvantaged and neglected sections of society. They often lack access to basic necessities such as adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. The absence of these fundamental resources severely hampers their physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Moreover, destitute children are frequently subjected to various forms of violence, including physical abuse, emotional neglect, and exploitation in hazardous labor. Many are forced to survive on the streets, where they encounter unsafe living conditions and are deprived of opportunities for a dignified life.

The situation of children's human rights in India presents a paradox. On one hand, there exists a robust constitutional and legal framework aimed at protecting children. The Constitution of India provides several provisions to ensure the welfare and development of children. Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for children, recognizing their need for additional protection. Article 24 prohibits the employment of children in hazardous occupations, thereby safeguarding them from exploitation. Article 45 mandates the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of fourteen, emphasizing the importance of education as a fundamental right. Furthermore, Article 39 directs the state to formulate policies that ensure children are given opportunities to develop in a healthy manner and are protected against exploitation and moral abandonment.

Despite these constitutional safeguards and the existence of various legislative measures, such as laws prohibiting child marriage and child labor, the ground reality remains concerning. The implementation of these provisions often falls short due to factors such as poverty, lack of awareness, weak enforcement mechanisms, and social inequalities. As a result, a significant number of children, especially those who are destitute, continue to be deprived of their basic human rights.

India's commitment to international conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989 in New York, further reinforces its obligation to uphold and protect the rights of children. However, the persistence of issues such as child neglect, exploitation, and lack of access to essential services highlights the gap between policy and practice. Addressing the challenges faced by destitute children requires a comprehensive approach involving legal reforms, effective implementation of existing laws, community participation, and the active involvement of non-governmental organizations.



The condition of destitute children in India remains deeply distressing and reflects a serious challenge to the realization of human rights. A significant proportion of children are engaged in labour, with estimates suggesting that nearly six crore children are part of the workforce (Kulkarni, 1979). These children are compelled to work in various informal sectors such as railway stations, tea stalls, hotels, and construction sites, often under unsafe and exploitative conditions. Many are also employed in hazardous industries, where they are exposed to physical danger and deprived of a healthy environment necessary for their growth and development. Such circumstances not only violate their basic rights but also deprive them of opportunities for education and a dignified childhood.

The problem of child labour is especially severe among destitute children, who are among the most neglected sections of society. They are commonly found working in industries such as match factories, lock manufacturing units, carpet weaving, and construction, where exploitation and abuse are prevalent. The term “destitute child,” as defined by Saksena (2003), refers to a child who lacks parental care or adequate support, even if one or both parents are alive but unable to provide proper attention. Globally, it is estimated that around 143 million children are orphaned due to the absence of one or both parents, placing them at a higher risk of neglect and exploitation. This data underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to protect the human rights and overall well-being of destitute children.

Keralam is a state with the lowest positive population growth rate in India, with a density of 819 people per square kilometer. The state of Keralam has the highest Human Development Index in the country, as reported in the 2011 Human Development Report. Keralam is recognized for its achievements, such as a near-100% literacy rate, the highest life expectancy, a favorable sex ratio, and the lowest infant mortality rate among Indian states.

Keralam has made significant strides in reducing child labor, primarily by making primary education compulsory and accessible to all. The state has reported fewer violations of the rights of destitute children, due to the working of a large number of non-governmental organizations focused on their protection and rehabilitation. However, this progress does not mean that child labor and other forms of exploitation have been entirely eradicated.

Compared to other states in India, the percentage of child labor in Keralam is relatively low. There is a strong relationship between poverty and child labor. In many cases, destitute children grow up without schooling, resulting in unskilled labor and social powerlessness. Poverty and the lack of social security are primary causes of child labor in Keralam.



The SOS Children's Villages of India is an important non-governmental organization committed to providing family-based rehabilitation for destitute children in India.

Established as part of a global movement, SOS Children's Villages operates on the principle that every child has the right to grow up in a caring family environment. In India, the organization has expanded its reach through a network of 39 villages, supporting approximately 50,000 children and 15,000 young adults. The SOS model is distinct in its emphasis on creating a family-like environment, where children live in small groups under the protection of a mother or caregiver who provides emotional, social and developmental support to the inmates. This approach is consistent with the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which underscores the child's right to family life, protection, education, and development (United Nations, 1989).

This study focuses on the SOS Children's Village Alwaye, located in Keralam, which serves as a rehabilitation centre for destitute children. Established in 1990, the Alwaye institution has been instrumental in providing both residential care and community-based interventions aimed at supporting destitute children. The institution operates not only as a residential facility but also as a social development centre that addresses the root causes of the destitution of children, including poverty, lack of education, and inadequate family support systems.

A key feature of the SOS model at Alwaye is that in conditions where children cannot remain with their biological families, the village provides an alternative family-based environment within its residential facilities. The Alwaye village consists of 15 family homes, each accommodating around 10 children of different ages and backgrounds, under the care of a trained SOS mother.

The physical infrastructure of the village further enhances the quality of care provided. Spread across approximately 8.5 acres, the campus includes a community centre, kindergarten, clinic, playgrounds, and residential facilities designed to meet the developmental needs of children. Access to education is ensured through enrollment in local schools, promoting social integration and reducing stigma associated with institutional care in traditional orphanages. Additionally, the village provides healthcare services, nutritional support, and extracurricular activities, ensuring a comprehensive approach to child development.

Beyond basic facilities, the institution places significant emphasis on value-based education and character building. Children are encouraged to develop self-respect, leadership skills, and independence through participation in various activities and responsibilities. The institution also implements structured



mechanisms to address behavioral and emotional challenges, such as anger, isolation, and low self-esteem. These efforts contribute to the overall personality development of children, preparing them for successful integration into main stream of the society.

Importantly, the SOS model also addresses the transitional needs of children through specialized youth facilities, enabling them to pursue higher education, vocational training, and employment opportunities in future. As a result, many inmates of the SOS Village have successfully established careers in fields such as education, engineering, medicine, and public service.

In the state of Keralam, the SOS Children's Village at Alwaye stands out for its transparency, accountability, and commitment to child rights. The institution has implemented mechanisms to ensure equitable distribution of resources and equal opportunities for all children.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the human rights conditions of destitute children residing in SOS Village Alwaye, with a focus on access to basic needs such as shelter, education, healthcare, and emotional support.
2. To explore the experiences of destitute children in the institution, including their perceptions of care, protection, dignity, and opportunities.
3. To assess the role of SOS Village Alwaye in safeguarding and promoting child rights.

Research questions

1. How do children at SOS Village Alwaye experience access to basic needs such as shelter, education, healthcare, and emotional support?
2. What are the perceptions of children regarding care, protection, dignity, and opportunities within SOS Village Alwaye ?
3. How does SOS Village Alwaye support or limit the realization of child rights, and what challenges exist in implementing a rights-based approach?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the human rights conditions and lived experiences of destitute children residing in SOS Village Alwaye . A qualitative approach is appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of children's perceptions, emotions, and experiences related to care, protection, dignity, and access to basic rights. The research follows a case study method,



focusing on SOS Village Alwaye as a single institutional setting, allowing for a detailed and context-specific analysis of how child rights are implemented and experienced within the institution. Primary data is collected through semi-structured interviews involving destitute children, as well as selected caregivers and staff members within the institution. A purposive sampling technique is employed to identify participants who can provide relevant and meaningful insights into the research objectives. The semi-structured interview format ensures flexibility while covering key themes such as access to basic needs, including shelter, education, and healthcare, as well as emotional support and overall well-being. In addition to primary data, secondary data sources are used to support and contextualize the findings. These include government reports and policy documents related to child welfare and rights in India, publications from organizations such as UNICEF, legal frameworks like the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, and various academic journals, books, previous research studies, and reports from non-governmental organizations working in the field of child protection.

Case Analysis

This case study examines the role of **SOS** village at **Aluva**, in safeguarding the human rights of destitute children. As a non-governmental organization, SOS Children's Villages is committed to providing care and protection to orphaned, destitute, and homeless children. The institution functions on a family-based care model, aiming to ensure not only survival but also holistic development, dignity, and social integration of children. This study focuses on key dimensions such as institutional functioning, protection of child rights, access to education, provision of food and healthcare, prevention of child labor, development of self-respect, and adequacy of infrastructure.

The case analysis reveals that the organization plays a crucial role in rescuing children from vulnerable conditions, including life on the streets. Staff responses highlight that this initiative is a significant contribution toward child welfare in the state. The institution provides career guidance and encourages children to interact with the outside world, which is essential for their social integration. A significant proportion of respondents (92.9%) reported that the institution has received international recognition, reflecting its credibility and adherence to international child welfare standards. Importantly, all respondents affirmed that the organization ensures equality of opportunity, which is fundamental to achieving human rights within institutional care settings. Furthermore, the institution extends support even after children leave its care, with 71.4% indicating assistance in job placement. The universal response that children are supported in accessing government welfare schemes demonstrates the organization's commitment to long-term rehabilitation and mainstream social inclusion.



With regard to living conditions within the institution, both staff and children reported overwhelmingly positive experiences. All respondents confirmed that the institution consciously fosters interpersonal relationships, thereby promoting emotional bonding and social skills among children. Recreational activities are consistently available, contributing to the psychological well-being and comprehensive development of the inmates. A majority (92.9%) noted that the infrastructure is adequate, including spacious rooms and sufficient sanitation facilities. Children's responses mirrored those of the staff, with all indicating that the institution provides a family like atmosphere. This sense of belonging is critical in addressing the emotional deprivation often experienced by destitute children. Additionally, while 60% of respondents acknowledged specific programs for inculcating human values, the universal presence of recreational and relational initiatives suggests an embedded culture of value-based upbringing among the children.

The study also highlights a strong awareness of child rights among the children. All respondents indicated that they are informed about their legitimate rights, which is a key indicator of empowerment. Access to support systems, such as child helplines, is universally available within the institution. Equal opportunity is consistently ensured, and all children expressed satisfaction with the availability of basic necessities such as food and water. These findings underscore the institution's alignment with fundamental human rights principles, including the right to survival, protection, and development.

Education emerges as a central pillar of the organization's intervention strategy. All children are enrolled in formal schooling, with full support from the organization. A majority (85%) reported experiencing social integration within educational settings, indicating that they are not marginalized despite their backgrounds. The institution also emphasizes vocational training, extracurricular activities, and the use of modern technology in education. This comprehensive approach not only enhances academic competence but also equips inmates with practical skills necessary for independent living. Such initiatives reflect an understanding of education as a tool for empowerment and social inclusion.

In terms of self-respect and emotional well-being, the organization demonstrates a strong commitment to nurturing the psychological health of children. All respondents confirmed that the organization actively promotes self-esteem and ensures emotional security. Most children reported that they do not feel alienated within the institution, which is a significant achievement given their vulnerable backgrounds. Furthermore, all children affirmed that they enjoy freedom of expression and freedom of conscience, indicating an inclusive environment promoting democratic values. These aspects are crucial in shaping confident individuals who can participate actively in society.



Overall, the responses from both staff and inmates reveal that the SOS Children's Village at Aluva provides a conducive environment for the comprehensive development of destitute children. The institution not only meets basic needs but also goes beyond by fostering interpersonal relationships, promoting education, ensuring awareness of rights, and nurturing self-respect. The family-like atmosphere, combined with structured support systems, enables destitute children to rebuild their identities and prepare for meaningful lives. This case study demonstrates that with a rights-based and holistic approach, institutional care can effectively uphold the dignity and human rights of destitute children, transforming them into empowered and socially integrated individuals in future.

Conclusion

Under the auspicious of the United Nations in the 20th century many important initiatives have been taken to secure the best interest of the child especially the destitute child. A major milestone in the history of the children was the adoption of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989. Which says that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse. According to this Convention, such a reintegration of the destitute child shall take place in an environment which ensures the health, self-respect and dignity of the neglected child.

The findings of this case study reveal that the realization of human rights for destitute children is not merely a matter of legal recognition but one of effective, and context-sensitive implementation. Guided by the principles of the United Nations and the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the study demonstrates that children's rights to survival, development, and participation can be meaningfully upheld when institutional care is rooted in a rights-based and child-centric approach. The experience of SOS Children's Village Aluva illustrates how an alternative family-based model of care can successfully address the needs of destitute children, ensuring not only access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare, but also fostering emotional security, dignity, and self-respect. The qualitative insights from children and caregivers reveal that the presence of stable relationships, participatory spaces, and supportive infrastructure plays a decisive role in transforming vulnerability into resilience.

At the same time, the study highlights that the effectiveness of such organization lies in their capacity to go beyond custodial care and actively promote empowerment. By ensuring awareness of rights, encouraging freedom of expression, and facilitating social integration through education and community engagement, the organization contributes to the comprehensive development of inmates as active



members of society. The emphasis on value-based upbringing, vocational preparedness, and post-care support further strengthens the transition of children from institutional settings to independent adulthood. These findings suggest that institutional care, when designed with sensitivity and accountability, can serve as a viable mechanism for safeguarding child rights, particularly in contexts where family-based care is absent.

Non-governmental organizations in Kerala have demonstrated significant capacity, flexibility, and commitment, their efforts must be complemented by stronger state support, effective policy implementation, and sustained community participation. The gap between constitutional guarantees and ground realities continues to persist due to structural issues such as poverty, social inequality, and uneven access to resources. Therefore, a collaborative framework involving the state, civil society, and local communities is essential to ensure that the rights of all children, especially the destitute children, are fully realized.

The case of SOS Children's Village Alwaye underscores that ensuring human rights for destitute children requires more than institutional provision—it demands an integrated approach that combines legal safeguards, social responsibility, and humane intervention. Institutions that create nurturing, inclusive, and empowering environments can significantly alter the life of destitute children. Strengthening such models, while simultaneously addressing systemic challenges, is vital for building a just and equitable society where every child got the opportunity to live with dignity, security, and self-respect.

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