

Socio-Cultural Factors Leading to Vulnerability among Children: A Special Reference to Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society (Boys' and Girls' Homes) in Kochi City, Kerala State

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ABSTRACT

Children's vulnerability is a complicated problem that is impacted by many different things, such as social structures, cultural norms, and socioeconomic circumstances. Children in areas where these variables come together are especially vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and neglect. The issue of vulnerability among children is reported by both government and NGOs in Kerala State, Kochi City in particular. Many children are roaming around in streets in search of food and they are engaging in child labour and prostitution. It is a concern considering that the future of these children is being ruined. Different NGOs in Kochi are caring these children by providing shelter, food, education and protection. One such prominent NGO is Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society. However, there has never been a study exploring causes of this at the organisation. This study therefore delves into the complex issue of child vulnerability in Kochi City, particularly focusing on the socio-cultural factors that contribute to this problem at the organisation. The study used qualitative research approach through an explanatory research design. Data sources were both primary sources (direct interviews) and secondary sources (existing reports and studies). The study's main objectives were: 1) To identify the background of vulnerable children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society in Kochi, Kerala and 2) To explore socio-cultural factors leading to vulnerability of children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society. The researcher used purposive sampling. Total sample size was 11 (6 males and 5 females) both children and staffs. The data was collected using In-depth interviews (4 boys & 4 girls) and Key informant interviews (2 males & 1 female). The thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The study found that children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society typically come from poor families and lack parental care, often due to abuse, parental alcoholism, separation or divorce of parents, or the death of one or both parents. To mitigate these issues, the study concludes by recommending that the government prioritize welfare programs and provide adequate support to children in need. This would help prevent homelessness and protect children from exploitation. By addressing the underlying socio-cultural factors, we can work towards creating a more secure and nurturing environment for vulnerable children in Kochi.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Children, Socio-cultural factors, NGOs etc.

INTRODUCTION

Worldview on Children (Global Scenario)

Globally, there are over 7 billion people, including 2.2 billion children. Millions of these children and young people lack parental care or face the risk of losing it (UNICEF, 2012). They are the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society. **Asia and Africa are home to more than half of the world's children, with Africa's child population expected to grow by 30% in the next 15 years.** The number of children without parental supervision is on the rise. At least 13 million of the 151 million children who have lost one or both parents worldwide have lost both parents (UNICEF, 2014). **Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest**

proportion of children without parental care. Additionally, millions of children are at risk of losing parental care. **Socio-cultural factors noted worldwide by different scholars include: migration, single parenthood, family breakdown, divorce and remarriage, teenage pregnancy, gender inequalities and ethnic discrimination.** Children, whose parents have separated, divorced or remarried, are often placed in alternative care or encouraged to leave the family home (SOS Children's Village International, 2015 and UNICEF, 2010). Discrimination and exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, race, gender or disability are also driving children into alternative care (UNICEF, 2010). Violence has also been noted as one of the main reasons many children end up in alternative care. The kind of violence include; psychological, physical or sexual violence, or neglect. For example, social service society (SOS) data shows that 73% of children in SOS families in Venezuela had prior experiences of physical or psychological violence. In Eastern Europe, the same experience is reported by 88% of children in SOS families in Croatia, 75% of children in Belarus, and 55% of children in Lithuania (SOS Children's Village International, 2015).

Vulnerable Children in India (Indian Scenario)

India, with a child population of 440 million (37% of the total), has a significant number of children facing challenging circumstances. According to the (2015-16) Annual Report of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, around 170 million children (40%) are vulnerable due to social, economic, and geopolitical factors. These children experience vulnerabilities such as malnutrition, lack of education, child labour, abuse, and exploitation. Census data from 2011 revealed that 10.13 million children aged 5-14 and 33 million children aged 5-18 were involved in child labour. UNICEF India's 2018 Annual Report estimates that 1.5 million girls are married before the age of 18. The UNICEF State of the World's Children 2016 report estimates the number of orphans in India to be 29.6 million. Concerned citizens, social organizations, or police often identify children in difficult circumstances and report them to government authorities. India's national helpline, CHILDLINE, provides a platform for reporting children in distress. The high number of calls received by CHILDLINE, 6.2 million in 2018-19, indicates the significant number of vulnerable children in India. These calls led to 300,000 cases, with the majority (17%) related to abuse, followed by child labour (13%), education (12%), runaways (11%), and missing children (11%) (TISS, 2019). Some of the key factors leading to the vulnerability of children in India include: **poverty, lack of education Child Marriage, Child abuse and Child Labour** (Campaign against Child Labour, 2021, National Family Health Survey, 2021 and UNICEF, 2010).

Vulnerable Children in Kochi, Kerala State (Kerala Scenario)

As of 2021, the total number of children in Kerala was 34,72,955, with the highest number (5,74,041) in Malappuram and the lowest (92,324) in Wayanad. Malappuram also has the highest growth rate of child population (4.08%) while Pathanamthitta has the lowest (-23.76%). It is estimated that child population will continue to grow higher. The vulnerable children in the state include destitute, abandoned and orphaned children, children infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, child drug abusers, children of substance abusers, child beggars, children of prisoners and street and working children <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/karuthal-for-childvulnerability-mapping-in-kerala/articleshow/60167956.cms>

In Kochi, a city located in Kerala state of India, the estimated population as of 2024 is 853,000, while Kochi metro population is estimated at 3,009,000 (Population Census Data, 2024). The Population Census Data (2024) also estimates that, children's total population in Kochi city is 532,492 of which 264,067 are males while 268,425 are females. More than half of these children are vulnerable who needs care and support. The causes of vulnerability of children in Kochi are as follows: **Poverty, Loss of Caregivers/Parents, Family Dynamics, Child Labour, Trafficking, lack of protection and social discrimination** (TISS, 2019).

Non-governmental Organisations in Kochi

The world has 1 (one) crore Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and India has 33 lakh NGOs, thus according to The Central Statistical Institute of India (Waychal, 2023). **As of 2023, there are over 3,000**

registered NGOs in Kerala State and Kochi has several of these NGOs which focus on helping children (Waychal, 2023 and Give India, 2023) and one such organisation which stands out is Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan.

Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society (Boys' and Girls' Homes- An NGO)

In 2024, children's estimated population in Kochi city is 532,492 of which 264,067 are males while 268,425 are females and more than half of these children are vulnerable who needs care and support (Population Census Data, 2024). Many children in the state are vulnerable due to poverty, abuse, and other factors. This includes children in Kochi, a city with over half a million residents. The Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society was founded in 1974 to address this issue. They run homes for boys and girls, providing care and support to hundreds of vulnerable children. Over the years, they have helped thousands of children build a better life and integrate into society. Currently, Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan has over 40 staff members caring for around 140 children across seven centres (Don Bosco,n,d). They strive to create a safe and nurturing environment for these vulnerable children.

Significance of Study/Gaps in Literature

While numerous studies have examined state responses and legal frameworks for children in conflict with the law, there's a significant gap in research on the socio-cultural factors leading to vulnerability among children in institutions like Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan in Kochi. Despite the institution's long-standing commitment to caring for vulnerable children, a comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors contributing to their vulnerability remains elusive. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the socio-cultural factors that make these children susceptible to vulnerability, such as poverty, family dysfunction, and abuse. By shedding light on these factors, the study seeks to inform policymakers and practitioners to develop effective interventions and strengthen support systems for vulnerable children.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Causes of Vulnerability of Children in India

According to the study done by **TISS (2019)**, the major causes of vulnerability of children are **poverty, abuse, neglect, orphanhood, disability, child prostitution, and child trafficking**. Child abuse and exploitation can be physical, sexual, and emotional. Another study done by **Bajpai (2012)** titled, Protecting India's Children: Vulnerabilities and Challenges. The study estimated 600,000–700,000 children are sexually abused annually in India. Child sexual abuse occur when a child is used for sexual gratification by an adolescent or adult. Regarding physical abuse, incidents of brutal corporal punishment in schools are on the rise. There is no national prohibition in law of such corporal punishment and NGOs play a role help out.

A study conducted in the city of Bihar by **Prasad (2022)** in understanding the role that Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in rehabilitating vulnerable children and in particular street children in the city of Bihar specially by looking at how they conducted this activity leading to reintegration. He observed that, NGOs use a variety of methods for locating and rescuing street children. In order to get to know the child, interviews are conducted, children are taken to drop-in centres, and medical screenings are conducted to determine the children's health state. Finally, counselling is provided in order to help the children modify their streetwise behaviour. Aside from this, the NGOs also use a variety of other methods to help rehabilitate the street children they rescue, including family tracing and reunion, outreach initiatives, welfare meetings, and day programs. He further noted that, children who have been rehabilitated get both official and informal education, including vocational training and talent development programs, in addition to the usual social assistance. Donor organizations, commercial corporations, people, and the government all contribute generously to the NGOs that provide these services. The NGO's attempts to fulfil its objective are hampered by a variety of issues. Some of the difficulties include a shortage of cash. Providing help to the street children in fulfilling their aims and developing their personality is not only beneficial for them but also for society as a whole.

A study conducted by **Dutta (2020)** in Assam, India titled 'The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Protection and Promotion of Child Rights in the North Lakhimpur Subdivisions of Lakhimpur District of Assam' has put things in order. The objectives of the study were to review the role of NGOs in protection and promotion of child rights, and to identify the problems being faced by the NGOs in their effort towards protection of child right. This study used to the quantitative and qualitative methods. The study was based on both theoretical and empirical data. North Lakhimpur Sub-Division of Lakhimpur District was selected as the study area. The investigator selected four NGOs and data was collected by interviewing key persons and other members of the selected NGOs by using both formal and informal methods of interview. w. The investigator also visited the District Child Protection Office for the collection of relevant data. The investigator relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. For collection of primary data from the NGOs interview schedules were used. The questions were structured and comprehensive. The findings of the study are: the selected NGOs are engaged in providing shelter to children who are vulnerable, differently abled and are in need of care and protection. Currently the organisation is running eight creche centres where all together 200 children below 6 years of age are provided with educational facilities. Jagriti Sanmilita Unnayan Kendra: Presently running a project called "Specialised Adoption Agency" (SAA) to provide educational and other facilities to the orphaned, abandoned, surrendered children and also to the children in need of care and protection (CNCP) below the age of 6 years. Kachajuli Physically Handicapped (Deaf & Dumb) School & Training Centre is providing recreational facilities to students staying in its hostels. The students are encouraged to take part in sports competition and are also taken out for educational tours. The Jagriti Sanmilita Unnayan Kendra and Kachajuli Physically Handicapped (Deaf & Dumb) School & Training Centre are providing counselling to the children and youths.

METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research approach through an explanatory research design. It focused on "why" and "how" questions rather than just describing the situation. Data collection involved both primary sources (direct interviews with staff and children) and secondary sources (existing reports and studies). The researcher used purposive sampling, deliberately choosing participants who could provide valuable information. This included: In-depth interview of 8 children (4 boys, 4 girls) and Key informant interviews with 3 staff members (director, administrator and social worker). In total, the sample size was 11. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data. This approach involves identifying recurring themes and patterns in the responses, then organizing the information based on those themes. The study's main objectives were: **1) To identify the background of vulnerable children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society in Kochi, Kerala and 2) To explore socio-cultural factors leading to vulnerability of children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society.**

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) which posits that human development is influenced by interactions between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Bronfenbrenner's EST emphasizes the interconnectedness of various systems that influence development, including: **Microsystems:** Immediate environments like home, school, and work, **Meso-systems:** Interactions between different settings, such as home-school relationships, **Eco-systems:** Indirect influences like a parent's workplace or a sibling's friends, **Macro-systems:** Cultural and societal factors like politics, economics, and religion and **Chrono-systems:** Changes over time, such as life events or societal shifts. EST challenges the focus on individual behaviours and emphasizes the importance of examining interconnected systems to understand human development. Thus, the discussion and findings of this study are connected to this theory.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This chapter extensively discussed the findings of the study by subjecting them to the previous studies and theory for this study. The chapter authenticated each argument based on the themes related to the objectives.

Background of Vulnerable Children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society in Kochi, Kerala

The study conducted in-depth interviews with the 8 (4 males and 4 females) participants so that to get their background. The questions on this centred on the how they grew up and things they were lacking. Common themes based on responses to this were as follows;

Poor Family

All the 8 children who were participants in this study, showed that they are coming from poor families where they lack basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare and clean water. For instance, IDI-1(female) said that, *“we could hardly eat food twice a day and mostly we depended on help from other people”*. *Being here has made my life easy and I am happy*.

Abusive Family

IDI-7 (female)- *“my father whenever is drunk, was physically abusing us, he could reach a point of moving us out of the house at night and we felt this treatment almost every day”*. **IDI -8 (male) said**, *“I wish I could not speak this to you because it pains me to realise that my own parents could mistreat me, it does not sit well with me*. This response was common to 4 children out of 8 in this study.

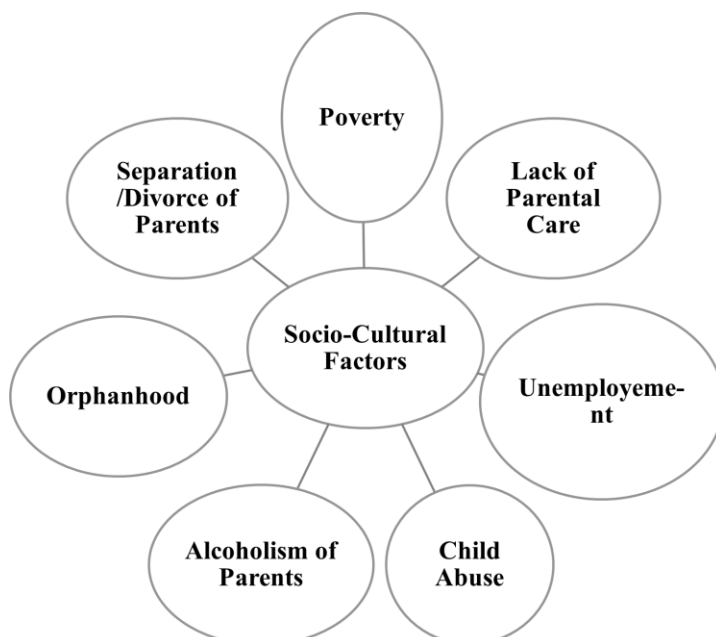
Orphanhood

Out of 8 participants, 2 were orphans and their life was more miserable as IDI-2(male) said *‘when my father died, life became so difficult, it even got worse when my mother became mentally ill. The experience of losing a bread winner and knowing that no one will take of me pains me a lot’*. *You see, the love that parents have to their children is taken for granted when they are alive but when they are dead, one wonders how I would I live without them*.

Socio-Cultural Factors Leading to Vulnerability among Children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society

The study set forth to get to understand the causes of the vulnerabilities among children who are taken care at the Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society (Boys’ and girls’ homes).The study conducted in-depth interviews with 8 children (4 boys and 4girls) and KI with 3 participants (Don Bosco staffs). According to the responses from the participants, the socio-cultural factors are as shown in the figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Socio-Cultural Factors



Poverty

IDI-1(female) - *“my father depended much on daily wage which could not support us, we had a big family and poverty made our lives miserable”*. *“If my parents were able to provide basic needs like food, shelter, clothing I would be not be here I believe”* (**IDI-2, male**). These narratives were cited by all the participants in this study. Poverty is main cause of the vulnerability of the children in Kochi and other states. This is in tandem with the findings that Prasad found in 2012.

Orphanhood

IDI-2(male)- *‘when my father died, life became so difficult, it even got worse when my mother became mentally ill. The experience of losing a bread winner and knowing that no one will take of me pains me a lot’. You see, the love that parents have to their children is taken for granted when they are alive but when they are dead, one wonders how I would I live without them. I remember I was in the 5th Standard when my parents died, it was a bad experience and since then, my life has never been the same* (**IDI-4, male**). Parents provide care, love and all the support to their children and this care is undoubtedly unconditional one. Many of the children who lose the parents begin a life of uncertainty even when they had enough before their parents died. The loss of parent’s means, you need someone to be assuming a role of your parents and this is not something simple to think of. Today, we see that many of orphans are maltreated and others ended up being killed due to abuse.

Child Abuse

IDI-7(female)-*“my father whenever is drunk, was beating us, he could reach a point of moving us out of the house at night and we felt this treatment almost every day”*. **IDI -8 (male) said**, *“I wish I could not speak this to you because it pains me to realise that my own parents could mistreat me, it does not sit well with me”*. **KI-1, male** said that, *as we seek to help and rescue these children, we provide foster care to them and they stay safe in our hostels. He continued saying that, the hostels are separate, boys only and girls only*. This information show that abuse physical, emotional, sexual or financial is bad, from the participants’ common abuse that children face was physical and emotional. This is tandem with the UNICEF (2010) put that many children worldwide are under threat by those they call close relatives and strangers.

Alcoholism of the Parents

IDI-5 (female) - *in my family, my father is a drunkard and due to this his daily wage was not reaching home, it was a main reason my mother filed for a divorce*. Alcoholism is seen as of the theme in this paper as a cause of vulnerability of children in Kochi and other districts. The Don Bosco takes care of children from different districts. The theory of this study **Ecological System** put to us that micro-system -thus family members should behave in the way that provide haven to the children, the irresponsibility of the parents makes life of children to be in danger. In this case, alcoholism is a dangerous habit in the families. The director said that, the children are kept under Christianity faith; they pray and ensure that they grow up to become responsible citizens; hence issue of drug abuse is highly prohibited at the institution.

Separation of Parents/Divorce

IDI-6 (male) - a participant said, *“for the big part of my life, the separation of my parents negatively affected my life, because even when I feel like going to both parents, the thought of having step mother and step father bothered me, and the separation of parents meant that we suffer for basic needs, especially that everything which was in the house shared”*. **IDI-4 (male)**-*was forced to be in orphanage because his parents separated as his mother just moved out of the family since then he never heard from her*. This finding is equated to the theory **Ecological System on its Micro-systems**: immediate setting or environment of the person (i.e., home, day care Centre, playground) of this study that when immediate environment is not supportive, the results are bad. Mother is backbone of love and affection in the family, and this made the home to be incomplete to care for the children.

Unemployment

As one girl (**IDI-7**, female) said, 'I come from a family where my father has no job, he is uneducated and above all is alcoholic. Due to this, the whole money he earned is just misused instead of taking care of us'. Another respondent said, *the death of my parents was a serious blow to my future. My grandmother could not afford to take care of me (we could sleep for days without food), if not Don Bosco, I do not know where I could be by now. Maybe I could have been killed, because I was just moving up and down in the street in searching for food* (**IDI-1**, female). (**KI-1,male**).The education which this institution incorporate is flexible as we also allow technical education whereby they can be mechanics or other technical professionals(**KI-2,female**).The training in life skills session is also done in several areas such as leadership skills, self-awareness, self-esteem, stress management ,conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships just to mention a few(**KI-3,male**).

Lack of Parental Care

IDI-1(male)-is 16 years old boy from Odisha, India. He is fourth child in his family. After his parents separated, he was staying with his step mother and father. The father depended on the casual to labour feed his family. "We have more than half of children here that their parents showed negligence in caring for them, others are due to death while others due to divorce or separation" (KI-2, female) said that, living and knowing that you do not have anyone to care for you is painful thing as a child, so as organisation, we make sure within our capacity to give parental love and care to these children.

The findings above are showing that in Kochi, there is high level of poverty despite that the city is considered touristic and commercial city. From the results of this study, many children who seek help and those being taken care of at the Don Bosco are from the Ernakulum district where the Kochi city is located. **The ecological System theory (EST)** for this study propounded by **Uriel Bronfenbrenner** also helps us to understand the vulnerability and how the Don Bosco's care is vital in this regard. Firstly, **micro-systems** which talks about immediate systems like home, we see in this study that many homes are poor, abusive and also their lack of parental care due to death of one or both parents. The micro-systems are thus causes of vulnerability among children. The Don Bosco here acts as **meso-systems** where children are kept but also, they are not living in vacuum, the school and society in Kochi city influences their attitudes. Thirdly, **Eco-systems** in which children at Don Bosco depends on the support from donors that support the organisation to which they are a part, these donors are religious people, we have noted that all the children at the Don Bosco are kept under one faith (Christianity) according to the Director. Furthermore, **macro-systems**, the children at Don Bosco are influenced by cultural backgrounds, morals and code of conducts both from their own families and that of institution and lastly, **chrono-system** is seen by how the children at Don Bosco especially those who faced abuse like beating, sexually abuse have been psychologically affected in their everyday life. The Don Bosco therefore, sees these factors as well interconnected and children being delicate in nature, they need proper attention and support from their vulnerabilities. If these are not well coordinated, the vulnerability of children will continue to rise.

CONCLUSION

The background of children and socio-cultural factors are highly noted in this study and it has shown that Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society keeps children and they are supporting them. The study further found that children at Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society typically come from poor families and lack parental care, often due to abuse, parental alcoholism, separation or divorce of parents, or the death of one or both parents. In response, Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan Society provides various services to these vulnerable children, including education, foster care (covering basic needs such as shelter, nutritious food and clothing), reintegration, recreation services, healthcare and counselling services. This study therefore argues that, the children who come from the poor families, thus those living below poverty line and those mainly their parents' job is for daily wages, abusive families and orphans, suffer consequences of being highly vulnerable and in need of care. To mitigate these issues, this study concludes by recommending that the government prioritise welfare programs such as social cash transfers and provide adequate support to children in need. This would help

prevent homelessness and protect children from exploitation. By addressing the underlying socio-cultural factors, we can work towards creating a more secure and nurturing environment for vulnerable children in Kochi City, Kerala State.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data were collected from the field through individual interviews.

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