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## Saga of child rag pickers - obstructions and constraints

**Vandana Sisodia and Piyush**

**Abstract**

Under the purview of the growing problems pertaining waste management and its disposal in the nation, with major involvement of children in this sanitation field this area was selected to study and gain fuller knowledge for their conditions. Thus, this research was an endeavor to closely study the situation of the 'Child ragpickers' of Bhalswa, a landfill in the Jahangir Puri area of North-West Delhi. An effort was made to understand their work conditions, impact of the present occupation on these children 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 children 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.

**Keywords:** child ragpickers, child labor, poverty, education, health and hygiene, empowerment

**Introduction**

Urbanization in recent days has led to the problem of waste management. As more people are migrating towards the cities for livelihood, contributing to the amount of waste generation at a high pace, underlining the fact waste management evolved as a critical issue for metro city in India. In this regard Rag pickers play an important role to maintain the health and hygienic of local environment, but usually have unrecognized status in the waste management system of Indian cities. These people are usually having no skills and are a source of income and they are the parts growing number of urban poor's. There are two types of scrap-collectors could be seen: 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 as Delhi in a epicenter of India especially for the northern part of India that attract the people from various diverse background for employment and minimum livelihood but they are unable to sustain their life and trapped in various unhealthy activities. 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. According to various reports, in Delhi the issue of child rag picking is evolving very fact, as Over 9,500 tons per day (TPD) of garbage is generated per day in Delhi. About 8,000 TPD of waste is collected and transported to three landfill sites at Bhalswa, Okhla and Ghazipur. Actual waste generation in the city could be much higher, as a bulk of the waste is managed by the informal sector. According to an estimate, there are about 1, 50,000 rag pickers in Delhi ([www.downtoearth.org.in](http://www.downtoearth.org.in)). These rag pickers are slum dwellers living and working in inhospitable conditions without any proper safety gear or special clothing thus, leading to their deteriorating health.

Despite the fact that rag picking is an inferior economic activity that is not even regulated in our country many have come to take up this job as a profession due to poverty, lack of education, skills, knowledge, etc. and also the fact that this profession fulfill most of their basic needs. Out of the many rag pickers many happen to be children who have gotten involved into rag picking from a very tender age of 5-6 years, they work from morning to evening collecting enough waste like plastic, bottles, metals (tin, aluminum, iron, brass, and

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copper), rubber, cardboard, etc. and then sell it for sustaining the lives of their family or their own.

According to a study by Savita G. *et al*, 2013, it is profession largely undertaken by children belonging to weaker sections of the society for their survival and for supplementing their family income and 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.

The involvement of children in rag picking depicts the failure of many law implementation machinery as well as the policy maker who are unable to provide the conducive environment to prevent the children of the weaker section of the society that are working in severe and hazardous conditions to attempt to fulfill their daily needs. As there are various acts like Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, Child Protection Act 1999 is available to deal with the existing problem but it is unable to protect the children's basic rights.

Although the role of rag pickers are very crucial in a developing country like India where they play a pivotal role in manual waste segregation and recycling to maintain the health and Hygiene of the ecology but it is also seriously affecting the daily life of the children working in this field. There is an emergent need to address the problems of the rag pickers and regulate this sector in area of health, education, sanitation, skill development, economic activity, etc so that the population involved in this sector could get the support.

Delhi is experiencing the child rag picking issue as for the children of various slums, it is an easy profession to work and gain some monetary resources to sustain their family. Delhi has various rag dumping sites among of which Bhalswa landfill is one of the biggest, in order to gain improved knowledge and understanding of child rag pickers at the level of institute and to address their problems, the Bhalswa landfill site is chosen for study the grim scenario. Bhalswa landfill site is in the northwest region of Delhi where tonnes of waste flows in from various parts of the city. Today, the inflowing waste has turned into a mountain of waste that is still growing. On this mountain, that is emitting methane, stench, and is a breeding ground of various disease causing microbes, are a home to many rag pickers that are not only working on this landfill site but also living on it.

According to the 2011 census of India there are a total of 39,097 slum dwellers in Bhalswa, Jahangir Puri area. Out of which the formal population of rag pickers is not known, but according to informal estimate there are approximately 1500 rag pickers that are living on the landfill.

Among these rag pickers many are children who rag pick and live and work in severe conditions, due to which not only their childhood and health is at stake, but at large the future of the nation is at stake. In order to address and gain better knowledge into the lives of the child rag pickers the present study has been conducted. The site undertaken for this study is still growing and is often known as the hub of rag pickers.

### Present study

This research is an endeavor to closely study the situation of child pickers in Bhalswa – a Jahangirpuri landfill site in the northwestern region of Delhi. An effort is made to understand their work conditions, impact of the present occupation on these children and the problems faced by

them. In order to understand their condition following objectives were formulated to conduct the study:

1. To assess the socio-economic status of child rag pickers in Bhalswa.
2. To gain better understanding of their health issues.
3. To assess the perceptions of child rag pickers towards work and education.
4. To institutionalize the problems faced by child-pickers.

### Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of this study a sample size of 85 children in the age group of 6 to 14 years using purposive randomization technique. The data was collected with the help of a structured schedule and calculations were made using IBM-SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 23.

The secondary sources like books, journals, government manuals, websites and published and unpublished works related to the subject were also used.

### Result and Discussion

#### Migration Trends

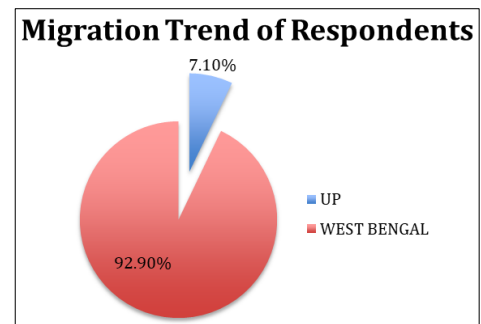


Fig 1: Migration Trend of Respondents

Figure 1 shows that a significant portion of child rag picking respondents were migrants of West Bengal with a percentage of 92.9% and a minor group of 7.1% were migrants of UP. They migrated with their families to the city from rural settlements to urban settlements. The families came in search of work after suffering from unemployment, lack of daily wage, poverty, etc. Many of these children came to the city with extended family and some of them had run away from their homes with the other migrants. Tripathi (1997) during his study explained, about the family conditions of rag pickers of Bangalore, where most of the rag pickers had run away from their homes due to disturbed family conditions. This shows that there persists a migrating behavior among most of the rag pickers, which could be due to various reasons ranging from poverty to disturbed families.

#### Age Structure

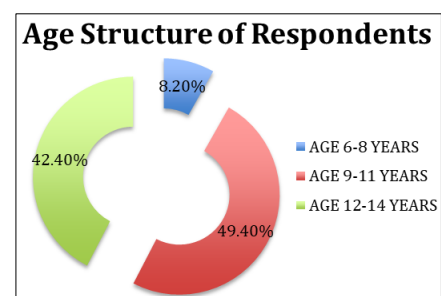
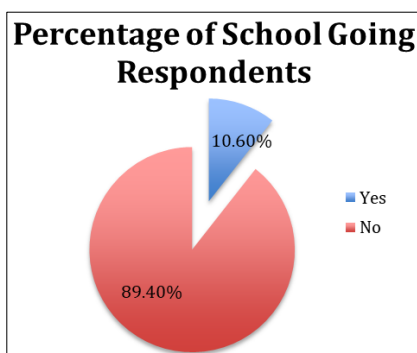


Fig 2: Age Structure of Respondents

The data was collected from children on being divided into 3 age groups: 6-8 years of age, 9-11 years of age, and 12-14 years of age. The figure above shows that the 49.4% of the total respondents belonged to the age group of 9-11 years, 42.4% belonged to the age group of 12-14 years and, only 8.2% belonged to the age group of 6-8 years. Out of the child rag pickers it was observed that most of them were young boys. Similar results were found in past studies like, Kamat (1999) in his study revealed that many commence their profession at a young age of 5 to 8 years; and according to a study by Venkataiah (2001), he explained that in rag picking mostly boys between the age group of 8 to 14 years are employed.

This engagement of young children is seen due to various reasons like poverty in the family, motivation of the child to earn because at this young age they get economic freedom, peer motivation and pressure, etc.

**Envolvement in School**



**Fig 3:** Percentage of School Going Respondents

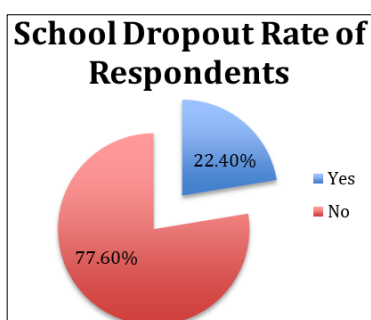
Figure 3 shows that a mere 10.6% of the total respondents went to school. On the contrary a large section of 89.4% of the children did not go to school. Due to various reasons like, poverty, etc.

Despite the implementation of Right to Education an alarming 89.4% of the children do not go to school. This also puts a question on this promising scheme that these children are not being able to benefit from.

An earlier research by Deepak Saxena, 2012, also showed similar results. In his research report analyzing educational status of Ragpickers found that most of (94%) the Ragpickers are illiterate. Other 5 percent of them are educated between 1st to 5th standard.

To gain better understanding another question was incorporated to see if any of the students were dropouts (the graph below gives the details).

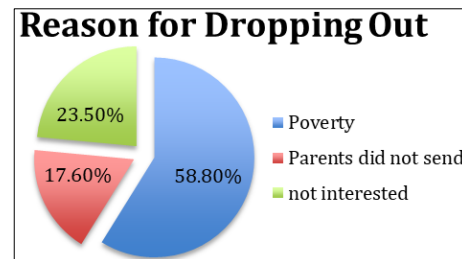
**Dropout from School**



**Fig 4:** School Dropout Rate of Respondents

As shown in figure 4, out of 89.4% of those who did not go to school 22.4% of those children were dropouts, meaning that they had gone to school at some point in life and dropped out of school due to various reasons (the graph below sheds light on the reasons). Where, the remaining 69.4% did not go to school at any point in life.

**Reason for Dropout**



**Fig 5:** Reason for Dropping Out

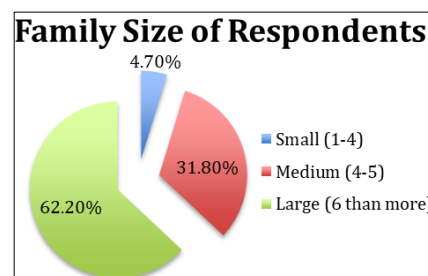
Figure 5: shows reasons for dropping out, 11.8% dropouts of them dropped out of school due to poverty, 4.7% of them were not interested in going to school hence, dropped out, and 3.5% dropped out as their parents did not wish to send them to school.

The observed other reasons explaining children not going to school and the dropout trend are: Parents not wanting to send their child to school as this results in loss of the total garbage collected when the child would also be involved in rag picking; another shocking revelation during the course of the study was the discrimination the children witnessed due to their hygiene and occupation of parents, which is an factor playing a role in dropping out of school; lack of self-motivation to go to school plays a crucial role - as the parents and the child are motivated to rag pick for the money they make per day on selling off the waste they collect.

Misra (2004), mentions about Economic freedom at an early age, particularly among boys encourages them to develop bad habits.

According to findings of the present study this economic freedom at an early age also leads to de-motivation to go to school.

**Size of Family**

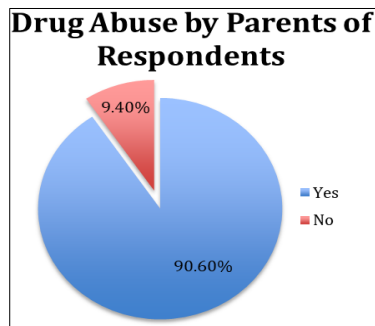


**Fig 6:** Family Size of Respondents

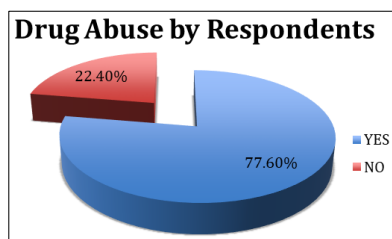
Three groups were made, namely, small family consisting of 1-4 members, medium family consisting of 5-6 members, and large family consisting of more than 6 members in the family. Figure 6 shows the following percentage 4.7%, 31.8%, and 62.4% respectively. Thus, showing that most family size consisted of more than 6 members per family. This also shows lack of knowledge in regard of family

planning in the community. A study by Balkumar *et al.* (2001) also showed that the average size of the family was 5.4 members which were above the national average of 5.1 members per family.

**Parents and Children involvement in Drug Abuse:**



**Fig 7:** Drug Abuse by Parents of Respondents



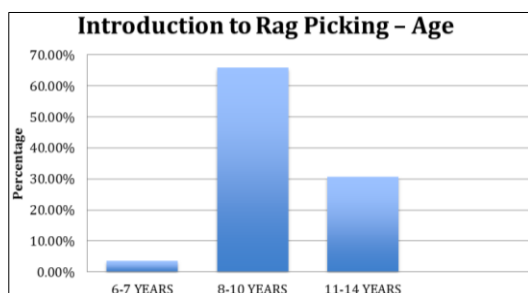
**Fig 8:** Drug Abuse by Respondents

Figure 7 and 8 show the use of drugs by the parents of the child and the child itself. From figure 7 it can be noted that 90.6% of the parents were using drugs with a minor segment of 9.4% of those who did not indulge into drug use. On the other hand, figure 8 shows that 77.6% of the children also were indulged into drug abuse with only 22.4% not indulging into drugs. On speaking to them they said that their peer group influenced them and that they took upon the habit on seeing their parents. They were in a habit of chewing tobacco, smoking beedi, consuming alcohol and using hard drugs like heroine and opium.

Misra (2004) explains about anti-social activities of child workers. Economic freedom at early age, particularly among boys encourages them to develop bad habits like gambling, drinking of country liquor, smoking, frequent visit to cinema and other cheap sources of entertainment. Similar patterns were also observed during this study.

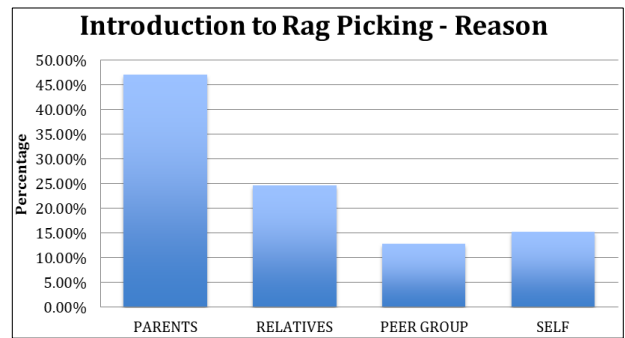
Similar observations were made in the present study where the children were found smoking beedi, chewing tobacco/guttka, inhaling some kind of solutions.

**Age group involve in Rag Picking**



**Fig 9:** Introduction to Rag Picking – Age

**Enforced for Rag picking**



**Fig 10:** Introduction to Rag Picking – Reason

Figure 9 and 10 above show the tender years of age they started rag picking in and by whom were they introduced into this job.

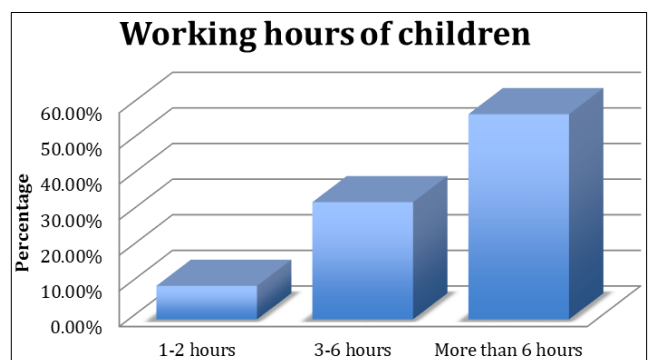
Figure 9 shows that 65.9% of the respondents got involved into rag picking during the age of 8-10 years of age. The remaining 30.6% and 3.5% started rag picking in the age of 11-14 years and 6-7 years respectively.

Figure 10 portrays that 47.1% of the total respondents were introduced to rag picking by their parents. Whereas, 24.7%, 12.9%, and 15.3% were introduced to rag picking by their relatives, peer group and by themselves respectively.

Kamat (1999) in his study described the child Ragpickers health, education, exploitation and their failure of rehabilitation programmes. According to him child Ragpickers are extremely poor, illiterate and belong to rural immigrant families. Many commence their profession at a young age of 5 to 8 years. Most of them never attended school or have any formal education.

Above findings of the study also support the study of Kamat (1999), that with the prevailing poverty and illiteracy the parents could have introduced their children to this profession. Other observed reasons show that it could be due to the fact that the children were taken to work along with the mother due the tender age of the child.

**Hour Involve in Rag Picking**



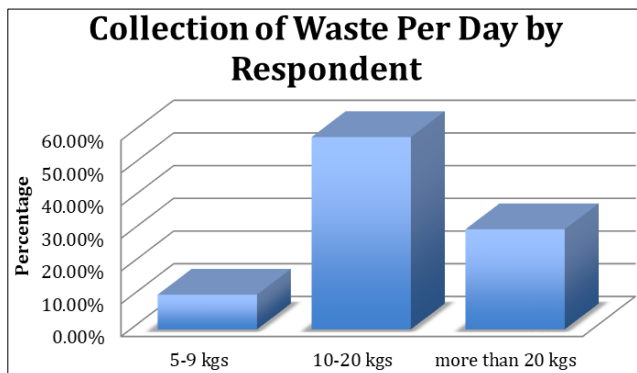
**Fig 11:** Working hours of child rag picker

As shown in the figure 11 above, on an average 57.6% of the child rag pickers work for more than 6 hours in a day. Likewise, 32.9% of the child rag pickers work for 3-6 hours per day and 9.4% of them work for 1-2 hours per day.

Bharati Chaturvedi in her article revealed that the rag picker would have to begin work as early as 4 am. Because otherwise miss the waste.

According to the observations made of the present study it was noted that the children work as early as 5 am. As the more they would delay they would miss the more valuable waste as it would be picked up by someone else. They often missed their meals so that they can gate enough waste to make enough earning for themselves and the rest of the family. So number of hour is simply related with amount of waste collected.

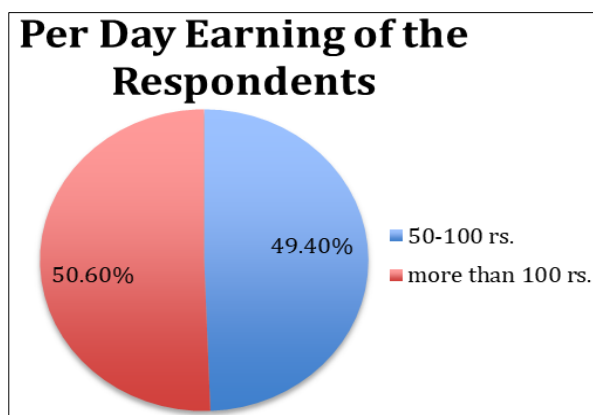
**Weight of west collected per day**



**Fig 12:** Collection of Waste per Day

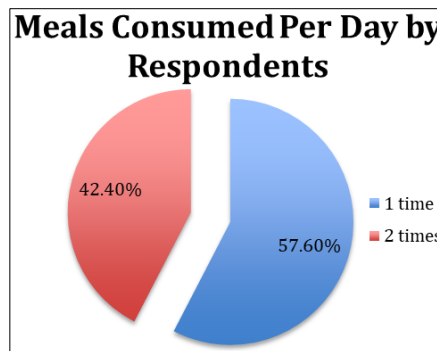
As shown in figure 12 above, a child rag picker after working for long hours 58.8% of them manage to collect 10-20 kegs of waste per day. 30.6% and 10.6% collect more than 20 kg per day and 5-9 kg per day, respectively. This fetches them enough money for one day, which is one motivating factor to not study. The collection mainly included metals and plastics; and also very recently collection of hair was focused upon as that earned them a decent amount of money in comparison to plastic.

**Daily Earning of Rag Pickers**



**Fig 13:** Per Day Earning of the Respondents

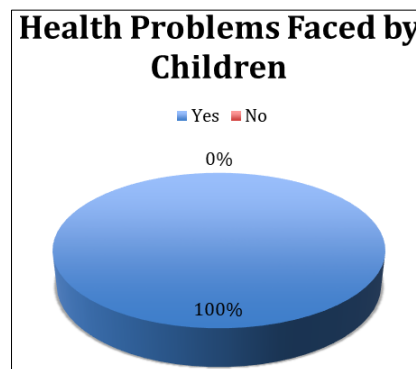
From figure 13 we derive that 50.6% of the child rag pickers earn more than 100 Rs. per day according to the amount of waste they are able to collect from the landfill site. 49.4% of them earn in the range of 50-100 Rs. per day. According to an article by Scroll in namely, ‘Unpaid and shunned, Ragpickers are critical for waste management in India’, it was revealed that on an average a sack of rag fetches around 300 Rupees but also showed that the rates have dropped recently fetching them lesser money per rag. Meals taken in a Day:



**Fig 14:** Meals Consumed Per Day

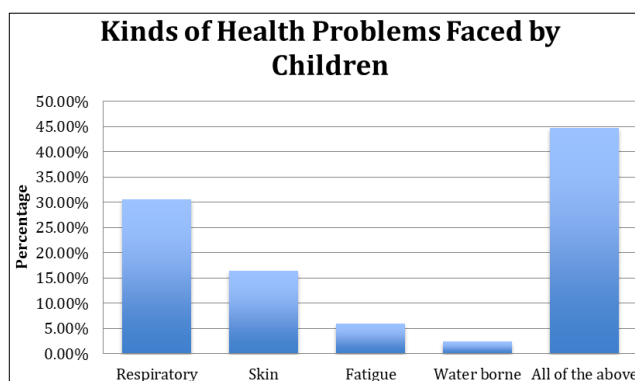
Figure 14 shows that, 57.6% of the child rag pickers eat 1 meal a day in spite of the per day earning they make. Only 42.4% of them eat 2 meals a day. Meaning that most of them lacked in nutrition. Bhosale & Korishetti, 2013 [1] reveal that 70.4 percent of child rag pickers are getting meals twice a day and it is sad to note that 29.6 percent of them are no able to get square meals a day. They are so poor that they have to beg for food.

**Health Issue**



**Fig 15:** Health Problems Faced by Children

**Kinds of Health Problems**



**Fig 16:** Kinds of Health Problems Faced by Children

Figure 15 and 16 shows the number of respondents facing health issues and the kind of health issues the children faced. From figure 15 it can be clearly drawn that all the respondents faced health problems of some kind. Thus, from figure 16 we draw that 44.7% of the respondents faced all health issues (respiratory, skin, fatigue, and water borne-typhoid, etc. problems). 30.6% complained of respiratory

problems, 16.5% complained of skin diseases, 5.9% stated fatigue as a problem, and 2.4% complained of water borne problems like – typhoid, etc.

Upadhyay *et al.* (2005), in their study reveal that the poor waste management is associated with increased health problems ranging from epidemics of water born or food borne disease to the adverse effects due to contamination of ground water. The effects of such health hazards are difficult to quantify because of limited epidemiological studies.

Tripathi (1997), Steiner Mari, *et al* (2007), in their respective studies revealed that the child Ragpickers develop several kinds of skin diseases. While collecting rusted iron pieces, they may receive cut on their hands and susceptible to tetanus. The sharp glass pieces lying hidden in the garbage may injure. Their bare feet and injury may develop into festering wounds and they often get cuts, burns, different body aches, allergies, dog-bites and respiratory problems.

Kamat (1999) reveals that rag pickers are subjects to chemical poisons and infection. The Ragpickers are very susceptible to diseases like tuberculosis and cancer due to their exposure to hazardous materials. Similar findings were also observed in the present investigation.

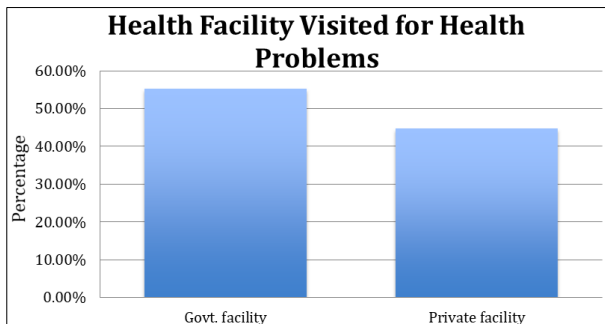


Fig 17: Health Facility Visited for Health Problems

Figure 17 show that 55.3% of the respondents visit governmental hospitals for health problems in serious scenario. 44.7% visit a private clinic or dispensary for when they feel that the problem does not require serious attention. On speaking with the respondents it was known that most of them visited the governmental facilities in the region, but that was mostly when the medication prescribed by private clinics and dispensaries did not work. They availed the government health facilities in serious cases only, as the government facilities were farther than the private ones and also they had to stand in long queues to get attended too, this meant loss of work for that day for a rag picker.

**Awareness about Child Labour**

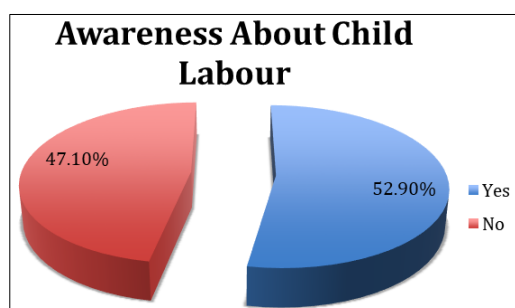


Fig 18: Awareness about Child Labour

Child labour is an offence; this fact is also known to 52.9% of the respondents, as shown in figure 18 above. On the contrary 47.1% are still not known to this fact due to lack of awareness and literacy. With an NGO working for their welfare in regard to their non-formal education most of them were aware that child labour was an offence but yet indulged into rag picking for fulfilling their daily needs and survival.

**NGO for welfare**

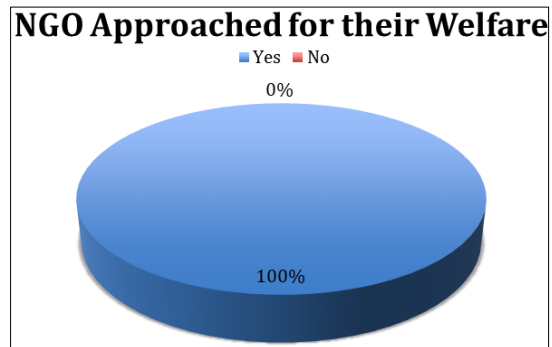


Fig 19: NGO Approached For Their Welfare

As shown in figure19, 100% of the respondents were aware of an NGO that approached to them for their welfare. But at the same time complained that the help extended by the NGO was not enough, as the NGO is working for their education mostly which has led to their awareness to some extent, it can be supported by the fact that a majority of 52.9% of the respondents were aware that child labour was an offence.

**Conclusion**

Protection of the children from adverse condition and avail them the right to realize the self development is a very huge task for the global world, especially for the south Asian countries. Children are the future of the globe and the future flag bearer of the society. As on one hand nations are talking about the sustainable human development on the other it is unable to provide the environment to children to realize the human right. Although various national and international policies has been formulated along with UN to move a step, but gripping poverty and population explosion, force these children to engage in hazardous activities. Above result and discussion present the way it is dealt with negligence it can be anticipated that the future of the coming generations are not safe. Analysis reveals that the rag pickers are facing various problems related Education, diseases, hygiene, nutrition, drug addiction etc., they have been victims of child labour for very long time and their future generations will fall prey to the same problems and child labour for a very longtime and their future generations. Despite these issues there is not enough importance being paid to resolve ad address the rag pickers community. Until and unless this subject is not addressed to formally by the governmental and the non governmental bodies, educated communities the issues cannot be resolved, it is evident from study that the issue of Child rag picking is associated with socio-economic issues pertaining in the society and it became an obligation as well as duty for the society to act with the coordination various functionaries to deal with these problem.

### Suggestion

1. **Public Awareness:** Due to the extreme mobility of the target group, and to the fact that rag pickers originate from all areas, large-scale awareness campaigns on the dangers, causes and various issues related to it should be organized with certain time intervals.
2. **Education:** Education is compulsory for 6-14 years student, universal to all, so these children should be encouraged to opt for education and reduce the drop rate of slum children.
3. **Role of government and policy makers**  
*Sensitized Law Enforcement:* Law-enforcing agencies are not sensitized to children's rights and the protection of children working in risky conditions.  
*Rehabilitation and Reintegration:* Rehabilitation is necessary for all child rag pickers so they can find their place in society.  
*Income Generating Programmes:* Income generating programmes should be launched for those families who are unable to send their children to school as an alternative to making their children work.
4. **Role of adult education department:** sites and target groups like the rag pickers can be incorporated in the field visit curriculum of the department. This would lead to awareness among the literates, as the problems would be institutionalized. The youth along with the professors would come up with legit and organized plans to help the particular community. The department with its students could organize various sensitization camps and health camps for the people.
5. **Role of educated community:** Though this community of child lives in a slum near about the big affluent area, it is this regards educated community have a huge role to play in day to life to shape the issues of Child Rag Picking. it may act as a chain for children in terms of providing motivation to parents of the children to engage it in education, it can also act as an agent to encourage the employability skills needed to the parents, so that minimize the impact on children, educated community can also provide the insight about the role of education for long term empowerment of children.
6. **Role of Municipality Corporation of Delhi (MCD):** the MCD could recognize and formalize these rag pickers and the work done by them. This would provide for the accountable work to accountable income. They could also provide for their safety gears, which made the job less hazardous for the rag pickers.

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