



CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILDREN FROM HOMELESS FAMILIES IN ACCESSING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

All people in the world have basic needs such as food, water, air, clothing, shelter, and security. Fulfilling these basic needs is essential for maintaining the quality of life. Among them, having a permanent place of residence is one of the fundamental necessities, and it is a vital requirement for every family. However, many people in society are unable to meet this basic need, and this condition significantly affects various aspects of their lives, including social, cultural, economic, psychological, and educational dimensions. Among these effects, the influence of homelessness on the education of children from homeless families is particularly significant. Accordingly, the main objective of this study was to examine the impact of homelessness on the education of children belonging to homeless families. A qualitative research methodology was adopted for the study, utilizing a descriptive research design. The field of study was the Koralawewa area in Moratuwa. The study sample was selected using a purposive sampling method, consisting of fifteen homeless families. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focused group discussions, and observation. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. According to the findings, homelessness has adversely affected the access of children from homeless families to education in various ways. These include the lack of a stable place of residence, frequent migration, social labeling, lack of parental expectations and awareness regarding their children's future, limited access to competitive and private education, and lack of social support. As a result of these barriers, children from such families face a range of psychosocial issues, which have negatively influenced their educational development. Furthermore, the study identified that addressing these problems requires a broader involvement and responsibility from the field of social work.

KEYWORDS: Homelessness, Homeless families, Children, Education, Psycho-social impact, Social Work

Introduction

Human beings have basic needs such as food, water, air, clothing, shelter, and security. Fulfilling these basic needs is essential for maintaining the quality of life. Having a permanent home is extremely important for any family; however, at present, fulfilling this basic necessity has become a challenge. Globally, people can be divided into two groups—those who have homes and those who do not. This condition is also visible within Sri Lankan society. Due to this situation, many people face numerous hardships, and in Sri Lanka, these problems have become increasingly severe in recent times. The lack of permanent housing affects various aspects of human life, including social, cultural, economic, health, psychological, and educational dimensions (Rewathi, 2018).

Socially, homelessness creates problematic situations for the entire society. Culturally, homelessness affects the concept of family, which is a significant unit of culture. The concept of family, and the ideas of “ours” and “belonging,” are often sustained through the existence of a home. Therefore, when a family becomes homeless, it creates a cultural crisis. From an economic point of view, homelessness is often caused by poverty, leading individuals to experience severe economic difficulties. In terms of health, homelessness obstructs the maintenance of both physical and mental well-being, contributing to the spread of various physical and psychological illnesses (Kisser & Hulton, 2018). Psychologically, homelessness causes mental disorders and emotional distress (Anomben, 2023). In the sphere of education, homelessness affects children by creating barriers and challenges that limit their access to education.

It is therefore important to deeply examine homelessness, as it creates obstacles for children from homeless families to access education. Homelessness is generally defined as a condition of lacking adequate shelter or protection. It can include living on the streets, staying in temporary shelters, or residing in unsafe places without proper security. Those who experience homelessness often lack legal ownership of land or housing. According to definitions given by various scholars (US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2023), homelessness refers to “the absence of a permanent, regulated, and adequate place of residence,” which includes living in unsuitable locations, temporary shelters, or transitional housing. Another definition describes it as “a condition in which individuals live in public or transitional places not intended for habitation” (San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Urban Development, 2023).

In Sri Lanka, non-permanent housing situations can be observed in the form of unauthorized constructions, informal settlements, semi-permanent dwellings, shanties, and unplanned or poorly regulated housing areas. Unauthorized settlements refer to housing built without approval from relevant authorities and in violation of legal or urban planning regulations. Informal settlements are those constructed without legal governance or proper regional planning. Semi-permanent settlements are built under

conditions between temporary and permanent housing and usually lack basic facilities. Shanty settlements are small, temporary housing areas created by low-income communities. According to national housing surveys, although there is no exact number for homeless people in Sri Lanka, it is estimated that about 1.5 million Sri Lankans are landless, contributing to homelessness. Common features of these settlements include lack of awareness regarding basic infrastructure such as water, electricity, and sanitation, as well as construction in unplanned and unsafe environments that often lead to social problems such as violence, abuse, and exploitation (Patton, 1980).

Poverty, underdevelopment, and natural disasters have significantly contributed to homelessness. Although more than a decade has passed since the end of the civil war, many internally displaced families still live in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. According to the most recent housing needs survey conducted by the government in 2016, out of six million households in Sri Lanka, about 800,000 families did not own a home. Therefore, it is important to interpret in depth the key concepts relevant to the topic how homelessness affects the education of children from homeless families.

Children are the most valuable asset of any society and are considered the future of the entire nation. In some cases, children are individuals who are still developing physically or mentally and are not yet fully independent. Generally, a child can be defined as a person who undergoes mental, physical, and social development from birth. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted on November 20, 1989), a child is defined as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, 2020).

From a psychological perspective, childhood is considered a period of significant psychological development a stage in which an individual’s physical, mental, and social growth occurs rapidly. As the future of society, children have the potential to continue our generations and contribute to the preservation of happiness, humanity, and social harmony (World Health Organization, 2021). They are also individuals who can be molded into capable and responsible citizens. From birth, parents and society have the responsibility to provide children with education, love, and protection, which influence their personality development. The skills and abilities developed during childhood form the foundation for the various roles they will play in society. However, children from homeless families experience social isolation and marginalization due to their living conditions. The situation of homelessness has significantly affected children, especially because education is a mandatory aspect of child development. As a result, these children experience physical, psychological, and social impacts (National Child Protection Authority, 2019).

Education can be defined as the process of developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes within an individual. Education is a broad concept encompassing learning, teaching, evaluation, enjoyment, and training. It can take several forms—formal, informal, and non-formal education. Formal education refers to structured learning received through established institutions, from primary to higher education levels ((United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization, 2022). Informal education is the learning that occurs unintentionally through life experiences, such as through television, social interactions, or social media. Non-formal education, on the other hand, is targeted education provided to specific groups for specific purposes, often through organized courses (World Vision, 2023).

According to Plato's definition, education is “the capacity to feel pleasure and pain at the right moment; it develops all the beauty and perfection of body and soul that a person is capable of.” Education is therefore essential for achieving life goals and future well-being. It teaches reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, thereby enhancing communication abilities. Furthermore, education fosters critical thinking, supports sound decision-making, and facilitates social interaction. It also helps individuals gain basic employability skills and achieve better job security. The benefits of education include problem-solving skills, self-confidence, empowerment, and the promotion of equality.

Having a stable home is vital for the smooth continuation of a child's education. However, homelessness creates barriers to educational access. It severely affects children's mental health, leading to loss of relationships, lack of care, and feelings of insecurity. Such experiences result in psychological distress and negatively impact their nutritional well-being. In some cases, due to temporary housing or frequent relocation, children's education faces severe disruptions. Studies reveal that homelessness causes psychological and physical hardships for children (Vostanis et al., 1998). Homelessness also contributes to social, health, and economic problems (Mabhala et al., 2017; Lewis, 1968; Kissner & Hulton, 2018).

These conditions have created serious challenges for both parents and children within homeless families. The impact of homelessness on children's education is particularly significant because it affects them both directly and indirectly. Therefore, examining how this issue influences both schooling children and those who have dropped out is crucial to understanding its broader educational consequences. Homelessness creates painful circumstances for children and disrupts their education. Education is a fundamental right for every child, and although Sri Lanka provides free education, homelessness still serves as a major barrier to access.

Homelessness gives rise to numerous problems such as mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and school dropouts (Caldo & Gama, 2024). In countries like Sri Lanka, such issues are rarely addressed seriously, and authorities often

fail to explore or assist affected populations. Consequently, these issues worsen over time. Government attention to developing planned housing and providing guidance for these families remains minimal. This lack of attention also negatively impacts children's education (Macmillan, 2001).

If proper guidance and focus were given to these children, it would contribute significantly to improving the education of homeless children. The lack of attention toward this population exacerbates existing problems and their effects on children and education. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how children experiencing homelessness manage their education amidst such challenges.

Furthermore, due to homelessness, children often face social isolation or exclusion (Anomben, 2023). The lack of parental support for education has worsened this situation, leading to greater inequality. In Sri Lanka, there is a lack of comprehensive research on this issue. Studying homelessness, developing informed policies, and identifying solutions to the challenges faced by homeless children are crucial steps toward creating a more just society. Accordingly, this study aims to examine how homelessness affects the education of children from homeless families.

Methodology

The ontology of this study is constructivism, while its epistemological basis is interpretivism. The methodology adopted is qualitative. The study was conducted in the Kollawella area, which falls under the Moratuwa Divisional Secretariat Division in the Colombo District of the Western Province. The selected study area is a coastal region, where most houses are not permanent structures. The main livelihoods of the people in this area are fishing and wood-related production industries. The area was chosen as the research site primarily because it represents a community that experiences the problem of homelessness to a considerable extent. For the study sample, fifteen (15) homeless families living in the area were selected using a purposive sampling method. Data were collected from these participants through in-depth interviews, focused group discussions, and observation. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Challenges Faced by Children from Homeless Families in Accessing Education

The Requirement of a Permanent Residence When Enrolling in Schools

One of the major challenges faced by children from homeless families in accessing education is the requirement of a permanent place of residence at the time of school admission. This becomes a serious obstacle because, during school admissions, a certain number of marks are allocated for having a permanent or legally recognized place of

residence. As these families do not possess legal proof of residence, their children do not receive these marks, which are crucial for admission to popular or nearby schools.

Consequently, during the school enrollment process, children from homeless families lose all marks allocated for permanent residency, and the opportunity to gain admission to schools diminishes compared to children who have proper legal documentation and permanent housing. This situation was clearly expressed by one of the study participants as follows:

“Since we don’t have any legal documents, we face many difficulties when enrolling our children in schools. Schools tell us to bring proof of residence when we admit the children, saying it is mandatory. But where can we find such documents, miss? We don’t even have a proper place to stay.”
(Interview No. 02, Field Study 2024)

The above statement highlights that the lack of proof of residence creates a challenging condition for children when accessing education. To explain how this becomes a challenge: when a child enters primary education, schools require verified documentation to confirm permanent residence. Therefore, due to the lack of legal documents, some children are unable to enroll in schools and, in some cases, even drop out of education at the primary level.

Every child should have the right to access education without facing such barriers. However, within the context of homelessness, these children encounter numerous difficulties that hinder their educational journey. It is evident that the requirement for permanent residence has created a significant obstacle for homeless children to enjoy their right to free education. This challenge often prevents them from gaining admission to the schools of their choice.

This situation can be further explained using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. According to Maslow, self-actualization can only be achieved after fulfilling the lower-level needs—physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, and esteem needs. Having a home is therefore an essential part of meeting safety and belonging needs. In most countries, including Sri Lanka, legal proof of housing is necessary to demonstrate ownership and eligibility for various social benefits.

A stable and legal home provides not only safety and security but also a sense of belonging to a community, social recognition, and opportunities for personal development. However, among homeless families, the absence of a legal residence results in the loss of social respect, recognition, and stability. Thus, by applying Maslow’s theory, it becomes evident that homelessness severely affects the fulfillment of these essential human needs.

Accordingly, it can be clearly understood that the lack of a permanent residence requirement during school admission creates a serious challenge for children from homeless families in accessing education. The absence of stable housing prevents them from enjoying equal educational opportunities, thereby turning this issue into one of the most significant barriers to educational access.

Frequent Migration

In this context, frequent migration refers to the situation where families without permanent housing repeatedly move from one place to another — either to nearby locations or to more distant areas — due to their unstable living conditions. In most cases, this situation arises because, in the Kollawella area of Moratuwa, families living without permanent housing have built temporary shelters or huts near the seashore or along the railway line. These conditions have directly contributed to the occurrence of frequent migration.

This problem is more severe among families living in houses built near the seashore. Due to the impact of sea waves, these temporary shelters are often swept away. As a result, their houses are completely destroyed. Following the destruction of their homes by the sea, these families move to the houses of relatives or friends until they can rebuild their shelters. These houses, too, are usually temporary or makeshift structures. When rebuilding, they often relocate to a different place instead of the original location.

This situation becomes a serious challenge for children's access to education. One participant explained it as follows:

“When the houses we built get washed away by the sea waves, the children stop going to school until we build another place to stay. Until then, we live in relatives' houses.” (Interview No. 03, Field Study, 2024)

Frequent migration creates a significant barrier to consistent school attendance among children from homeless families. Because they frequently move from one location to another, children stop attending school until a new place to live is found or built. This discontinuity in attendance results in children missing out on lessons and being reprimanded by teachers for their irregular participation. Furthermore, due to these frequent relocations, children are sometimes transferred from one school to another.

Thus, a major challenge to educational access arises because these children lose the opportunity for continuous education and require time to adjust to new school environments. Additionally, frequent migration often leads to the destruction or loss of school materials, and families are unable to afford replacements. This further disrupts the children's ability to continue their education consistently.

This situation can also be analyzed through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to Maslow, having a home fulfills a basic or physiological need. When even their temporary homes are destroyed due to various reasons, it severely affects their safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs. Therefore, although housing is a fundamental requirement for achieving self-actualization, in this context, families are unable to fulfill that need. As a result, children cannot consistently pursue education, which is essential for their full potential development.

Hence, the lack of permanent housing and the resulting frequent migration create a major challenge for children's continuous educational access. This ongoing instability further intensifies the barriers these children face in realizing their potential through education. Consequently, it is evident that frequent migration is a significant factor contributing to the educational challenges faced by children from homeless families.

Social Labeling

When examining how social labeling becomes a challenge affecting the educational access of children from homeless families, it can be explained as follows: within their immediate living environment, these children are not labeled by those around them. However, outside their community, they experience labeling by society. This labeling has created substantial challenges to their access to education.

In particular, it was found that the children in this area attend only three specific schools. They are not admitted to other nearby schools. Based on the information gathered, it was revealed that when these children apply for admission to schools outside their usual ones, they are often rejected. This has created a deeply distressing situation for both the children and their families.

The interviews revealed the following statement:

“Miss, they don’t take our children to big schools. Even when we apply, our children don’t get a chance.” (Interview No. 05, Field Study, 2024)

This situation can be explained through Labeling Theory. As theorists like Howard Becker have stated, when individuals are labeled by society, they tend to behave in accordance with that label. Similarly, when homeless families are labeled by society, children develop negative self-evaluations as a result. Because of their living conditions, they are not given respect or recognition by society. Consequently, both the children and their parents may come to believe that there is no value or purpose in pursuing education.

Society perceives them as people who are incapable or unworthy of support. As a result, they begin to internalize this social label, which can lead to school dropout or withdrawal

from education. Therefore, this labeling process directly creates challenges in accessing education for children from homeless families.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that social labeling is a major challenge faced by children from homeless families in accessing education.

Limited Access to Competitive and Private Education

One of the major challenges faced by children from homeless families in accessing education is the limited access to competitive and private education. The main reason for this situation is the low-income condition of such families. Because the parents of these families often engage in unstable forms of employment and lack permanent sources of income, their children are frequently forced to discontinue schooling and take up work to support their families. As a result, their access to competitive and private education is severely limited.

Children living in homelessness have almost no opportunity to receive or participate in private education. In contrast, other children in society — due to the increasing competitiveness of modern education — are directed towards private tuition and competitive educational programs. Homeless children, however, do not have access to such opportunities and are therefore unable to compete on equal terms. This situation leads to educational inequality.

When compared to other children, those living without permanent housing show noticeable deficiencies in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and motivation. They display little or no interest in academic competition. This limitation in access to competitive and private education is well illustrated by a statement made by a child from one of these families:

“We don’t have money, So we only go to school. We learn everything from school. To go for classes, we need money. My mother doesn’t have enough money to spend that much.” (Interview No. 15, Field Study, 2024)

This situation can also be explained through Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. According to Maslow, the inability to fulfill basic needs creates obstacles to educational engagement. Because competitive education requires children to dedicate extended time and effort to learning, those who cannot meet their fundamental needs are unable to devote sufficient time or energy to study.

In addition, access to private education often requires payment of tuition fees, which families without stable housing cannot afford. As a result, these children are deprived of a safe and supportive educational environment. Under the need for love and belonging, these children face social rejection and marginalization due to their poverty, which

further limits their opportunities to engage in competitive or private education. The esteem need is also unmet because their living conditions hinder self-confidence and recognition, thereby reducing their access to advanced educational opportunities.

Thus, the inability to adequately fulfill these different needs ultimately hinders their movement toward self-actualization. The scarcity of resources within the context of homelessness prevents these children from realizing their full potential. Consequently, the limitation in accessing competitive and private education stands out as a significant challenge faced by children from homeless families.

Lack of Parental Expectations and Awareness Regarding Children's Education

Another major challenge faced by children from homeless families in accessing education is the lack of parental expectations and awareness. The parents of these families show little or no interest in their children's education. They do not hold future aspirations for their children nor recognize the value of education. Instead, they tend to encourage their children to engage in income-generating activities rather than guiding them toward achieving their future goals through education.

During school vacations or on days when children do not attend school, parents often make them engage in various forms of labor — such as fishing and assisting in carpentry work. Moreover, it was observed that these parents generally show indifference toward their children's educational progress. Field observations revealed that many children spend time idly on the streets, hang out with peers, or wander around using mobile phones, while their parents show little concern about where they are or what they are doing.

These children are usually very young, yet their parents neither supervise them nor take responsibility for their education. The lack of parental concern has become a major barrier to educational access. If parents had shown interest in their children's learning, educational challenges could have been minimized. However, some children have completely stopped attending school, and others have entered into early marriages.

Even though ensuring children's education and safeguarding their future aspirations is a fundamental parental responsibility, these duties are largely neglected. The parents' sole focus appears to be on earning money for survival. This attitude is clearly reflected in one parent's statement:

“When there's no money to study, the children should learn to do some kind of job. We send them to work because if we don't earn something, we won't even have food to eat. We don't have time to look into what they do in school.” (Interview No. 07, Field Study, 2024)

Thus, it is evident that the lack of parental expectations and awareness has led to serious challenges in children's access to education. The indifferent attitudes and limited understanding of these parents have become key obstacles to their children's educational participation and overall development.

Lack of Social Support

When examining the challenges faced by children from homeless families in accessing education, it becomes evident that the lack of social support has led them to face a multitude of difficulties. The absence of social support has been a major factor that prevents these children from overcoming the barriers to education.

In this context, one of the major challenges faced by such children when enrolling in schools is that their families live in unauthorized or informal settlements. As a result, they encounter many difficulties in obtaining the necessary facilities and resources required for education. In these situations, neither the responsible authorities nor society provides adequate social support. Because of this lack of social assistance, these families remain isolated and powerless, unable to rise above their circumstances. Although social support is essential, they are often rejected or excluded by society.

This rejection leads to social labeling, which further distances them from receiving any kind of support. Consequently, this lack of social support becomes a major obstacle to children's access to education. Without the necessary resources or assistance, these children are unable to attend school regularly and often drop out entirely. If they had received proper social support, many of these challenges could have been mitigated. However, at present, the lack of such support has become a significant social problem.

A statement made by one of the children clearly illustrates this situation:

“Before, we used to get books and pens from the church. But now we don't get them anymore, so when we don't have money to buy books, we just don't go to school.” (Interview No. 02, Field Study, 2024)

This condition can also be explained through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Due to homelessness, these families are unable to fulfill their physiological or basic needs, which directly affects their safety needs. Without stable housing, their sense of security is diminished, and they are also unable to fulfill their love and belonging needs—that is, the human need for acceptance and belonging within society. Moreover, they are deprived of esteem needs such as dignity and social respect.

As a result, these children lose the necessary foundation for self-actualization. Their ability to realize their potential is hindered due to the absence of social support. Thus, it

is clearly evident that the lack of social support is a major challenge faced by children from homeless families in accessing education.

Discussion

Having a home is essential to maintaining the quality of life. A home encompasses many aspects—it supports the relationships that exist within the family and connects individuals to the wider society. Moreover, a permanent home provides a sense of safety, psychological stability, and the necessary environment for a stable lifestyle.

The study on the impact of homelessness on the education of children from homeless families revealed that in Sri Lanka, homelessness has become a deeply problematic social condition. It affects numerous aspects of human life, including economic, social, cultural, environmental, and health dimensions, creating widespread social issues.

In particular, homelessness has negatively influenced children's education. The lack of residential stability is a key factor that disrupts children's regular schooling and mental well-being. Children without permanent housing struggle to form long-term educational goals or future aspirations. Because their living environments frequently change, they are forced to transfer from one school to another and continuously adapt to new settings. This constant adjustment process hinders their learning progress and creates additional stress.

The absence of a suitable learning environment also contributes to emotional distress. The lack of facilities such as electricity reduces their ability to study at night. Additionally, because of unstable housing, children often spend most of their time engaging in income-generating activities to support their families rather than focusing on education. As a result, their motivation for learning declines, and their aspirations for the future gradually fade.

Homeless children also face severe psychosocial challenges. They have no proper place to store school materials or study comfortably. In some cases, several families live together under one roof, creating overcrowded conditions that make it nearly impossible for children to concentrate on their studies.

Due to limited space and lack of privacy, children are deprived of a peaceful and comfortable learning environment. Moreover, homelessness is directly linked to economic instability, reducing the families' ability to spend on educational needs.

When all these factors are considered together, it becomes clear that lack of permanent residence, frequent migration, low income, lack of parental expectations and awareness, social labeling, transportation difficulties, and lack of social support are the main challenges to educational access for children from homeless families. Furthermore, issues

such as poor housing conditions, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, disturbed sleep, insecurity, governmental pressures, economic instability, poor sanitation, and the spread of diseases have all contributed to the psychosocial problems faced by these children.

Hence, homelessness significantly affects children's access to education, their academic progress, their psychological and social well-being, and their regular school attendance. It can therefore be concluded that homelessness exerts a profound and negative influence on the educational development of children from homeless families.

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