

ABSTRACT

This dissertation engages with the everyday lives of homeless street children (hereafter, children in street situations, or CISS) in Sealdah Railway Station in Kolkata, West Bengal. The study was conducted over the period of five years (2014-2018) using a long-duration qualitative research approach with non-participant observations, informal discussions, participatory play activities, document analysis, and interviews with CISS and government and NGO functionaries. Aligning with a social constructivist paradigm that provides a critique of a universal normative understanding of childhoods, the study explores identity, stigma, street subculture, and intra-group and inter-group dynamics as evident from the lived experiences and belief systems everyday activities of CISS. The dissertation also explores the gaps in the perspectives of support and rehabilitation programmes for CISS and how CISS understand and respond to these from their own situated contexts.

The study traces the multitude of processes through which CISS negotiate their identity as ‘outsiders’ to reinforce and challenge ideas of normative childhood, and how they cope with the stigmatisation through different mechanisms of posturing, with gender-based differences. For CISS, the ‘street’ forms an essential element framing their subculture, with a sense of safety and security deriving more from performative gestures of friendship and solidarity with peers, and through surrogate families, while simultaneously rejecting the normative imagination of a ‘sheltered life’ as offering safety and security. Intra- and inter-group dynamics among CISS show the presence of strong leadership abilities, with male leaders using both instrumental and emotional competencies as a means of ‘trust’ to mediate these dynamics and maintain a group hierarchy that serves the needs of survival on the streets. Finally, the study analyses and unravels the gaps between the imagination and implementation of rehabilitation programmes for CISS among NGOs and lived realities of CISS to underline the inadequacy of current approaches, both in terms of perspectives and institutional arrangements.

Keywords: homeless railway street children (CISS), identity, stigma, subculture, socialisation, trust, paternalism.