

# From streets to podium: addressing early pregnancies and health challenges

Debapriya Bhattacharyya <sup>1,2</sup>

**To cite:** Bhattacharyya D. From streets to podium: addressing early pregnancies and health challenges. *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 2024;**8**:e002867. doi:10.1136/bmjpo-2024-002867

## TANISHA PASWAN, 17-YEAR-OLD STREET CHAMPION, KOLKATA, INDIA

*Namaste!* (Greetings in Hindi), I am Tanisha from Kolkata, and I am the captain of my school. You will be happy to know that a few days ago, I met the Mayor of my city and spoke to him about the need to ensure that children like us would not have to separate from their parents to get a safe shelter and could live with their families. You must wonder what I meant by saying, 'Children like us.' I am speaking about children who live on the streets, like I do; who eat, sleep, study and play on the streets. With my parents and three siblings, I live on the pavement throughout the year, despite the floods, heat waves or cold.

My family has lived on the pavement for three generations, near government offices and bustling markets. When I was younger, I noticed the discrimination and abuse we faced, as people walking by the pavements kicked at or threw away our books and belongings and looked at us as if we were trespassing into their spaces. With my mother working most of the day as household help in nearby buildings and my father working as a van puller, I always felt curious about whether children living inside the buildings were facing the same struggles to access basic rights such as food security, sanitation and water, school enrolment and safety.

When I learnt about the concept of child rights and United Nations General Comment 21 from the training provided by CINI (Child in Need Institute), I could relate the abuse and discrimination to the violation of child rights commitments that the adults had decided on a long time, before I was born. I wanted to bring about a change, and I started speaking about child rights and entitlements with my peers, our community members and even the elected local representatives. I became known as a Street Champion—a peer leader in my community.

When the COVID-19 vaccination was introduced in India to prevent children between

## My suggestions

- ⇒ All street-connected children should get valid legal identity documents to access essential services such as healthcare, education and vaccinations.
- ⇒ There is a need for specialised support for pregnant, street-connected girls, offering safe spaces, antenatal care and assistance with obtaining birth certificates for their babies.
- ⇒ Street-connected children need to be educated about available services so that they can access them.

the ages of 15 and 18 from getting COVID-19, I observed that the information about the vaccination as well as the legal documents required for vaccination was limited among my street-connected peers. Many of them were not able to get the vaccine since they did not have the legal documents due to the lack of a fixed address. I started speaking to my local healthcare providers from the Government and other Government officials about how my peers connected to the street could get the vaccine. After many such conversations with the uncles and aunts from the Government and NGOs, 500 children without legal identity documents living on the streets from various parts of the city received vaccinations between January and February 2022 by registering with the legal identity documents of government service providers.

In the area where I live, I come across many girls of my age who are below the age of 18 and are pregnant. Many of them have become pregnant after facing immense sexual abuse, or in return for things such as food or space to live that they needed to survive on the streets, and have been abandoned by their families or partners. At the same time, they are too scared to get help from the duty bearers or ask for help from primary healthcare providers due to the fear of being blamed and judged for their early pregnancy. Being young and without any support system, these girls and their soon-to-be-born babies are at very high



© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2024. Re-use permitted under CC BY-NC. No commercial re-use. See rights and permissions. Published by BMJ.

<sup>1</sup>CINI Kolkata, Child in Need Institute, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

<sup>2</sup>Head Office, Child in Need Institute, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

## Correspondence to

Ms Debapriya Bhattacharyya; debapriyab50@gmail.com



risk for their lives. This is why I try to assist and link them to the health centres so that they get adequate antenatal care from there, and the babies are born in the hospitals. (Cases of teenage pregnancies and sexual abuse are responded to with immediate reporting to the local police, and/or Childline and Child Welfare Committee (CWC), and there have also been cases where street champions themselves took their peer to be produced before CWC. However, in this particular speech, the health aspect was highlighted by the street champion since the participants of the workshop were majorly paediatricians. The need to come up with specialised healthcare to adequately respond to cases of teenage pregnancies with adequate mental health support as well as a non-judgemental and accepting service delivery was highlighted by the youth in this speech.) Also, they ultimately get birth certificates, without which they would not be able to get vaccines or go to school.

Like me, there are thousands of children living, working or depending on the streets for survival, and many of them are left out because they do not have a fixed place to stay. We do not want to leave our families that love us and care for us to stay in homes (A Children's Home is a Child Care Institution set up either by the Government or by NGOs for a district and group of districts and is registered under the Juvenile Justice Act. It houses children in need of care and protection. In West Bengal, there are Children's Homes set up exclusively for Children with Special Needs.) or shelters. I feel that all the street-connected children like us need you to speak about us and think about us when you provide healthcare or plan healthcare services for children.

## APPENDIX A: STREET CHAMPIONS AT THE 30TH IPA CONFERENCE

On 19 February 2023, during the 30th International Pediatric Association (IPA) Conference run by ISSOP (International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health) and ICANCL (Indian Child Abuse, Neglect

and Child Labour), Street Champions, that is, peer leaders living or working on the streets of Kolkata, shared their experiences on the streets related to early pregnancies, health issues associated with child labour and the risks of living near leather tanneries, as well as the role of street champions in advocating for increased access to services by their peers and families. One of the speakers, 17-year-old Tanisha Paswan (the adolescent's parent provided consent to share her identity and narrative), is a Street Champion living on a pavement in central Kolkata, while she studied in 10th grade at that time. In her school, she is the school captain, as she has extraordinary leadership skills and a strong sense of responsibility towards ensuring children's participation in decisions concerning their lives. Tanisha is passionate about dance and often teaches it to younger children at her school and in her neighbourhood. A translation of her speech, originally given in Hindi, is provided in the extract above.

**Contributors** DB has contributed to the planning and reporting the work described in this article. Her role encompassed the translation of the speech of the youth Tanisha Paswan and integration of the content to ensure coherence. DB is the guarantor for this work, taking full responsibility for the overall content, access to the information and the decision to publish.

**Funding** The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Competing interests** No, there are no competing interests.

**Patient consent for publication** Consent obtained from parent(s)/guardian(s).

**Ethics approval** Not applicable.

**Provenance and peer review** Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

**Open access** This is an open access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC BY-NC 4.0) license, which permits others to distribute, remix, adapt, build upon this work non-commercially, and license their derivative works on different terms, provided the original work is properly cited, appropriate credit is given, any changes made indicated, and the use is non-commercial. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

### ORCID iD

Debapriya Bhattacharyya <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-9236-4280>