



Voices of the Chennai Congress

It's the implementation of rights that we seek, not the existence of them.

We have something important to tell you. Come and see what is happening on the ground. Listen to our voices, pay attention to the issues we have to deal with, and take the time to understand.

When we are dressed in dirty street clothes, people do not listen to us or respond to what we are saying. People talk down to us. Sometimes they beat us and push us into the street, because they think we are different and not like their own children.

We feel afraid, ashamed, and depressed when this happens and then we struggle to express our opinions and raise our voice. But we have the right to be heard and we are ready to become changemakers.

So listen to us - we are not invisible or voiceless.

1. Our identity is our right

Street-connected children's births have often not been registered so we don't have a birth certificate and therefore cannot get an ID. This prevents children from being able to enrol in school as they need ID.

It prevents us from accessing healthcare as we need an ID. It stops us from being able to get work or rent property. Our options in life are limited in life because we don't have an ID.

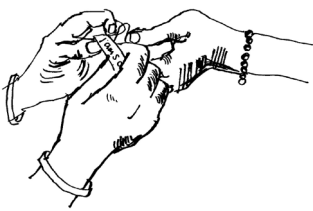
There is no simple process for street connected children to get their birth certificate and ID. Thankfully, some NGOs help street connected children people get identity documents so that we can go to school or travel and these also educate officials on the importance of ID's

We call on governments to come up with simple systems that will help us to acquire IDs. We want there to be campaigns for the public on the importance of registering a child immediately after birth. We want NGOs to organise awareness sessions with parents to help them understand the importance of identity documents.

2. Keep us safe

Our parents should know how to care for us.

Many children end up living on the streets because they have no parents and no one to take care of them. Most children on the streets were abandoned by their relatives or ran away because they were being abused. We have experienced domestic violence, parental drug and alcohol misuse, family breakdown, sexual abuse/violence by step parents and neglect. Many families have no work and we are denied basics such as food. So we live with no food, no love, no affection and no care from our parents



and have either been thrown out of home or ran away.

Children should be allowed to be children.

There are no safe spaces for street-connected children. Many street-connected children end up sleeping in sacks for warmth in the night. We cope by building shelters or living under bridges, or by using drugs as we are cold, hungry and afraid. Drug abuse is a big problem and we must end drug abuse before it ends us.

We encounter so much violence which sometimes leads to children on the streets dying. This forces us to join gangs to protect ourselves and to have a sense of belonging.

When girls live on the street people sexually abuse and sometimes rape them. At night when children, especially teenage girls, are lying on the roads, strangers especially men approach us. People do this because they have no respect for us and feel that we can be used as commodities. We try to run and escape, but often fail and have to succumb.

Children should not be victims We need protection from physical, mental and sexual abuse, from child labour, from abuse at home, from adults using drugs and alcohol around them and using children to buy drugs.

Communities need to be more alert to what happens to children especially at night. Children need to know the dangers of gangs and gang violence. We want former gang members to

warn children in schools. We need the police to protect us and we must be able to trust the police. We want access to night shelters so we can avoid sexual abuse.

People need to receive sex education so that they do not have children they do not want. We want parents to respect us and to be responsible.

- Our parents need to be taught how to bring up their children.
- Our families need economic empowerment and help to find employment.
- Our families need help and access to psychosocial services

3. Education should be a priority! We need access to free quality education

When we go to school but don't learn anything because the quality of the education is very poor. Schools are not fit for purpose as teachers do not explain when a child does not understand and they criticise rather than praise.

Many children do not stay in school. They not have food before school and are hungry. They don't have access to appropriate materials like other children and get bullied. So they find other things to do outside of school, such as football, social media or drug and alcohol abuse

Parents are not aware of the importance of education. They require convincing that education needs to be prioritised in order to gain the skills to access higher paying jobs, especially for girls.

Children are forced to work from a young age due to poverty and lack of attention by authorities. Child labour robs our childhood and violates our basic human rights

Children do not know their rights and that we have the right to education.

We want free education for all children, regardless of whether they have IDs. We want the Government to bring more schools closer to the slum communities so that all the street connected children have access to free and quality education. We want NGO's to help convince parents that education needs to be prioritised.

We want the implementation of children's labour rights and strict legislation protecting children which is enforced by the authorities.

We need to raise children's awareness of their rights. We need to run campaigns and form child rights clubs to speak about children's rights.

4. Health and Sanitation for all

Many children do not have enough food to eat and go to school without eating and suffer with malnutrition. Many of us do not have access to enough clean water, we have poor sanitation and end up drinking dirty water. There are not enough clean toilets and there may be sewage running in the roads. When there are toilets they are locked at night time and sometimes we have to pay for them. We have to wash on the streets and at night go

the toilet on the street. Girls who are menstruating feel helpless and ashamed and men often watch us as we wash.

We need access to healthcare for all. Our families cannot access health care and we often do not receive the vaccinations and correct medication that we need so children do not develop healthily. Many children miss school because they feel ill and do not receive proper treatment.

Street-connected children face many health problems and cannot access health care. It is difficult for us to access hospitals and medicine, as we are discriminated against and don't have identification documents.

Teenage pregnancy is very common, especially on the streets and girls as young as 12 face unwanted pregnancies.

Government needs to provide money and resources to feed communities, Those in power need to take water and sanitation seriously. To invest in new water pipes and clean water points, to allocate funds for the construction of more free toilets and open them longer We want community centres with specialist medics and free medical services for all. We need to be able to access healthcare even without ID's. We need sex education for boys and girls, and we need free condoms.

5. Give us equal respect

Street-connected girls, are not listened to or included in decision making because women are not considered equal to men in society. The lack of gender equality leads to more violence against women.

Parents are still not aware of the importance of education for girls and therefore send off their girls to early marriages or make them stay at home to look after young children while they work.

Girls are often not allowed to take part in sports and other activities.

There are still lots of widely-held superstitions about menstruation and girls often do not have access to sanitary products – especially on the streets. We demand education for gender equality through campaigns that break stereotypes and ancient traditions. We want more widespread education to raise awareness and understanding about menstruation. We want free sanitary products in all public institutions and classes about menstruation and hygiene. We need NGO's to speak to parents about their responsibilities to prevent early marriages and to help them understand the importance of education. Girls must be able to take part in sports- - all children should have the right to play. We want laws that establish equal access to jobs and equal wages for men and women.

I am somebody.

In Qatar in 2022, 290 children and young people, representing 25 countries, produced the Qatar Commitment which called on governments to act on the issues that affect us.

In 2023, 158 children and young people, representing 12 countries came together in Chennai for the Street Child Cricket World Cup. We spent 5 days listening to one another. We talked about the issues that affect us and what the root causes are. We talked about what we and what the NGO's that we are involved in can do. What all those in power must do to transform the future for children like us.

We will continue to fight for our rights. Please listen to our voices.

Signatures of the Chennai Congress

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Sopna Akter,
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Anjali Paswan,
Kolkata, India

Millie Singh,
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John Wroe,
Co-founder, CEO, Street Child United

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Nawabzada Mohammed Asif Ali,
Dewan to Prince of Arcot

Oliver Ballhatchet MBE,
British Deputy High Commissioner, Chennai