

# Youth contribution

Changing perceptions,  
changing roles exploring self,  
peer and public perceptions  
and changing roles and  
responsibilities of street-  
connected peer researchers  
and advocates in Kolkata  
during the Covid-19  
pandemic

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We are a group of 30 young people (aged 11–18) from Kolkata, India, who have been supported to be peer researchers by the Child in Need Institute (CINI) and StreetInvest (now CSC) since September 2019. Some of us live full-time on the street, with or without our families. Others work on the street, live in slum areas and/or otherwise rely upon the street. In this chapter, we explore our experiences of the evolving roles and responsibilities of being street-connected peer researchers and advocates in communities in Kolkata before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time we systematically gathered information with our peers, identified key issues and problems facing street-connected young people and secured the support from duty bearers that was required for the survival of our communities. Drawing on diverse and inclusive mediums such as comics and participatory focus group activities, we reflect upon the changes in self, peer and public perceptions of our role alongside our ability to exercise agency in relation to involvement in community-level Covid-19 relief, advocacy and awareness programmes.

## THE KOLKATA STREET CHAMPIONS PROJECT

In January 2019, CINI and StreetInvest began a participatory research project funded by Wellcome Trust focused on the vulnerabilities faced by street-connected young people and the services available to them. The project was designed to reflect Article 24 (Health and health services) and General Comment No. 21 (on Children in Street Situations) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Sustainable Development Goal No. 3 (Good health and wellbeing). The project also aimed to meet the demands for improved data for marginalised populations that underlie these, by providing a substantial evidence base that can: (1) inform alternative policies relating to street-connected children's rights, health and well-being; and (2) inform the design of programme interventions which support and promote street-connected children's rights, health and well-being.

The project trained street-connected young people to be 'Street Champions'. We – the Street Champions – became researchers and advocates who would collect information on the health and other issues facing our peers and communities. We conducted a 'Vulnerability Assessment and Service Mapping' with our peers to assess the situation of street-connected children in Kolkata from a child rights point of view, ensuring that the project prioritised our voices and those of our peers and effectively enabled our participation.

The initial project trained 30 Street Champions in each ward (the smallest administrative division of a city) in Kolkata. We each then reached out to 15 of our peers, so that the experiences of 450 young people were included in

the project. The methods we used for the research combined action healthcare research with participatory ethnographic research to develop young person-centred and cost-effective responses to the healthcare needs and other issues facing street-connected young people and our families. These methods needed to reflect our experiences and be appropriate to our lifestyles. We were then supported to lead the analysis of the findings, develop appropriate responses and then advocate for the policy and practice change necessary for the new approaches to be implemented.

We were selected by street workers who visited target areas of Kolkata that had the highest concentration of street-connected children according to a city-wide census conducted by CINI in 2019. They collaborated with street-connected children and young people who were members of children's groups or local governance platforms, such as Ward Level Child Protection Committees, to share information about the project and identify potential peer researchers. We were eventually democratically selected by members of the children's groups. We were selected because of our ability to act as representatives of street-connected young people.

We have developed a connectivity to the streets, as well as to other street-connected young people. Our knowledge and lived realities of the street allow us to understand the street and street situations more intimately and extensively. We were trained as researchers and spokespeople using purpose-designed materials from StreetInvest and CINI. They taught us focus group facilitation, participatory group management, advocacy and participation and peer health education. The peer health education focused upon building the capacity of street-connected children and young people as peer educators on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights. We were then a channel for information to be shared between the community and street workers for immediate responses to the needs of street-connected young people and their referral and linkage to government services.

We were encouraged to share the information we learned with at least 15 of our peers as well as the wider community and to conduct rapid assessments of their lives as part of the project. Once we analysed the data, we were able to advocate for policy and practice changes by sharing our findings with duty bearers and the public through local and international networks. We discuss examples of this later in the chapter.

The pandemic hit in the middle of the project. As Street Champions, we were in a unique position to be able to access the areas of Kolkata that the street workers could not visit because of the lockdowns. Our training in the project therefore meant that we were already prepared for what was needed for CINI to understand local community needs and target support to where it was needed, as we discuss below.

## REFLECTING ON OUR ROLES AS PEER RESEARCHERS IN A PANDEMIC

In reflecting on our roles as peer researchers, we felt that it was important to focus on our transformation into Street Champions. Discussing these transformations helped us to reflect on our work and the changes that we have contributed to in our communities. The first method we used to reflect on our roles as peer researchers involved creating comic strips that shared our interactions with family and duty bearers and how becoming a Street Champion enabled us to gain the confidence to bring about a change in these interactions. Two of the comic strips are shown below.

### আমাদের কথা (OUR VOICES)

In scene 1, M is crying as she lost all her legal documents and will not be able to get any ration or benefit from the local government without them. In scene 2, she goes to the police station for help but they tell her that they do not have time to listen to her problems. M feels that there is no one to listen to her.



FIGURE 6.1  
Comic strip illustration.



FIGURE 6.2

Comic strip illustration.

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Scene 3 shows how becoming a Street Champion helped M and her fellow Street Champions to visit the police station (facilitated by CINI) and discuss children's rights – especially the right to be heard. The police listen to them and agree to help in the future. In scene 4, M helps other children from her neighbourhood to visit the police station to lodge complaints. The police are now more respectful, and they listen to the children attentively.

## আমার জীবন, আমার মতামত (MY LIFE, MY VOICE)

In scene 1, D hears her parents discussing her marriage. Her father tells her mother that it is time to get their daughter married. Her mother asks him to discuss this with D so that she can have an opinion, but she gets ignored. In scene 2, D attends CINI's trainings for Street Champions where she gets to know that every child has the right to be heard and participate in decisions concerning their lives.

Scene 3 shows that D tells her mother that she does not want to get married. She wants to study instead. Her mother supports her and tells her to complete her education first. In scene 4, D informs other children in her own





FIGURE 6.3  
Comic strip illustration.

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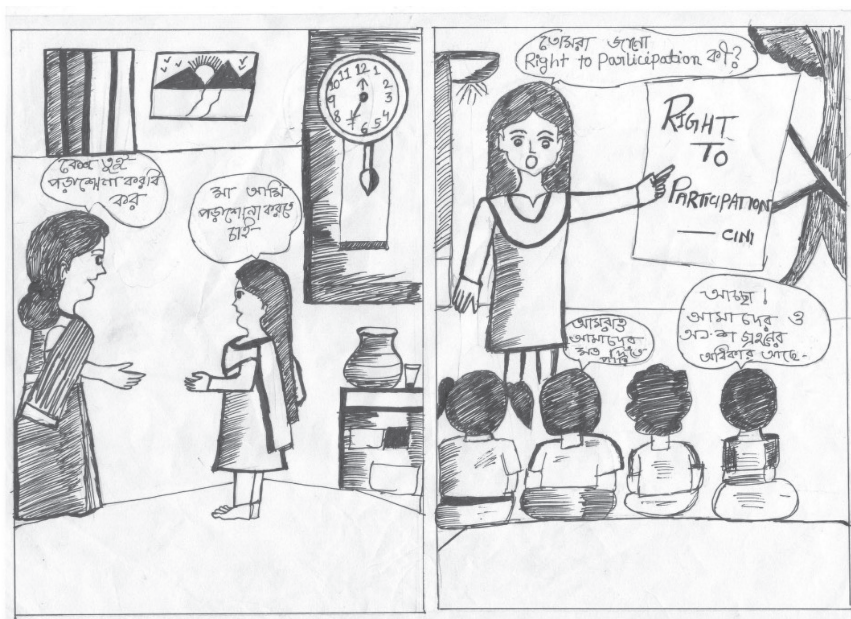


FIGURE 6.4  
Comic strip illustration.

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community about their Right to Participation. The children get to know that they have the right to make decisions concerning their own lives and to participate in the decisions made.

The comic strips provide a simplified view of the process. In practice, some of the situations described became points of discussion during focus group activities that developed to help us deepen our collective reflections – and discuss the limitations of just having an awareness of our rights. We must also learn how to deal with difficult situations and backlash when duty bearers are not easily convinced. The focus groups used an engaging participatory approach that involved us going ‘through the portal’, as we will now explain. We divided ourselves up into smaller groups according to the areas of Kolkata that we live in. To set up the ‘portal’ for each group, four participants hold a string/rope to form a square. When our facilitator introduces the portal to the participants, she adds a little drama or theatre to create the right atmosphere. The idea is that we have the opportunity to step through the portal and reflect upon the situation that we are imagining ourselves stepping into. In this case, stepping through the portal was symbolic of the process of becoming a Street Champion and when we stepped through it was our turn to reflect on the process we had completed to share our learning.

The groups were asked to nominate one member to go through the portal and play out the changes that they observed within themselves after becoming a Street Champion. The group then discussed the changes that were played out. Each time someone stepped through the portal, we focused on more specific areas of change such as:

- a Meeting their peers – did it change the ways in which we interact with peers or community members?
- b Meeting duty bearers – did we become more comfortable/confident to meet and speak to duty bearers after becoming Street Champions?
- c Making decisions in families – did we start to take more part in decisions in our families?
- d Experiences during COVID-19 – what changes did we observe within ourselves and our communities during the pandemic?

At the end we reflected on the game, discussing how it felt to step through the portal and what happened to us. We discussed what helped us in our transformation into peer researchers – reflecting on the trainings/workshops/information/resources that we found to be useful. We also discussed the qualities that we developed that were not there before, for example, being non-judgemental, being good listeners, and being confident while speaking in front of an audience. While we were taking part in the focus group

discussions, we wrote notes about our reflections. We have chosen to share three focus group discussions with you here.

### **FOCUS GROUP 1 (WARD 36, KHALDAR) JUNE 2022**

Five of us held the rope to form the portal, and we nominated B to be the one who goes through the portal of change. At first, we role-played the situation in which he had not been engaged as a Street Champion. He acts walking through his locality and spots his friends on the streets, having a chat in the evening. B asks them if they want to have some tea from the nearby roadside stall, and they enjoy the tea together. They discuss the online games they play and compare each other's game scores. B shows less responsibility towards his peers when he oversees how one of his peers is skipping school to play online games. In becoming the Street Champion, B's body language changes when he meets his friends. He asks questions and listens carefully to his friends' responses. He informs them about a camp to be held in their area soon, where they would be linked with social security schemes. He chats in a friendly manner with his peers, and his friends ask for his help to get admitted to school.

In the second situation, B talks with an elected councillor. Before being a Street Champion, B shares that he is scared to meet the councillor, as he is less confident about what he has to say. He is meeting the councillor to ask for help processing his legal identity document, but he is anxious about how he will be treated and whether he will get an opportunity to meet the councillor at all. The people in the councillor's office do not let him meet the councillor and sent him away three times. When he finally gets to meet the councillor, his appeal is not heard properly as he feels unwelcome and becomes hesitant and loses his hope. After he becomes a Street Champion, B becomes more confident. He is now well-informed about his rights and is well-acquainted with the people in the councillor's office. They let him enter the office on the first try. B shares with the councillor that he and many of his peers are facing difficulty accessing food security and social security schemes due to their lack of legal identity documents. He also reminds the councillor that if the children in his own jurisdiction are unable to access schemes and services, they will be more involved in casual labour to earn their living and eventually they will drop out of school. The councillor becomes alarmed by this statement and refers B to the proper channels for processing legal documents.

In the third situation, B's parents are discussing whether his older sister should be married now as she is 17 years old. They decide to search for a groom since it is getting difficult to pay for the education of all the children.



B feels guilty about being allowed to study while his sister is taken out of school and married off, but he does not have the courage to speak against this decision. As a Street Champion, B feels able to object to the decision. He informs his family that if his elder sister continues her education, she will get a scholarship from the government each year after passing each standard, which will be enough to support her education. He also explains that it is a punishable offence to marry off children at an early age. He shows solidarity with his elder sister and encourages her to speak up against the decision of marriage.

When we asked him about going through the portal, B explained how he became more confident speaking with people. He felt more informed about what exactly to speak about. As a group, we all felt that this transformation was supported by the training and workshops that helped us to develop communication skills and gather knowledge about our rights and the duty bearers who are responsible for ensuring access to those rights. We discussed how after being supported to visit the police and other duty bearers, we were more acquainted with how to advocate for our rights and who we should contact:

We are now much more well-informed, and it felt as if a bridge was made between us and the people who provide us with services. It was as if this bridge was not there beforehand, and we could not reach the services due to the lack of this bridge.

The qualities that we can describe ourselves as having because we are Street Champions include being confident, responsible, informed, a good listener and non-judgemental.

## **FOCUS GROUP 2 (WARD 47, JADUNATH DEY ROAD) JUNE 2022**

We discussed how we were less informed and had less interest in knowing about our rights before we became Street Champions and that our parents and community members were often doubtful about our capabilities. After becoming Street Champions, we realised how much information we had been missing out on, especially information about the government schemes and services that would be helpful for us to survive on the streets. With this information, we were able to access those benefits and help our family members and community to access these entitlements. As a result, we observed marked changes in the behaviours of our family and community members towards us.

Overall, we can identify key areas of change:

- 1 We have noticed how the women or mothers we know can be reluctant to attend meetings, and they used to give excuses to avoid being a part of the meeting as they were unsure of how helpful the meetings would be. As Street Champions, we shared the information we gained from our training with women in our families and community and described the processes for accessing the benefits from the Government. This changed attitudes and, as a result, the women attended meetings and information sessions more frequently.
- 2 The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) worker in the community did not enrol children without documents or who were living without parents into ICDS centres where benefits such as supplementary nutrition, immunisation and pre-school non-formal education are provided to children from vulnerable communities. She also ignored children who approached her to enrol their siblings. We met with the child development project officer and the district programme officer who are the chief service providers and decision makers for the services under the ICDS Scheme to relate the issues with enrolment and access to scholarships. As a result, the service providers communicated the issues with the grass-roots ICDS workers and suggested solutions, which significantly changed these service providers' attitudes towards street-connected children.
- 3 Youth group members, who are the political representatives of the elected officials in the wards, were previously ignorant about the street-connected children in their areas and a vast majority of local development decisions excluded these children. We met with elected local representatives and shared the issues they faced, which were then communicated with the youth club members. As a result, the youth group members identified the locations where street-connected families reside and provided them with food support and shelter during the lockdown periods. They also provided space for us to conduct meetings with our peers.
- 4 A children's group visited the local councillor to request that a light post be built, but the councillor did not respond to their request. As Street Champions, we are more confident, can make eye contact and know how to communicate with different stakeholders. This changes the behaviour of the stakeholders we talk to, and they are more likely to start taking action when we ask them to.
- 5 One of us wanted to pursue higher education but her parents wanted her to marry. As a Street Champion, she understood her right to education and that underage marriage is illegal and is punishable by law. She was able to change their minds.

## **FOCUS GROUP 3 (WARD 65, INDIRA GARDEN) JUNE 2022**

We reflected on how we had changed after becoming Street Champions. At first, we felt slightly anxious about the responsibilities we were being given. But we developed a sense of maturity, especially when we identified ourselves as responsible for bringing changes to our community. With training, workshops and various activities, we developed communication and leadership skills that made us much more confident about our capabilities. The skills we developed in the process contributed towards taking actions on the basis of our own judgements, trusting our own instincts and enabling our peers to take informed decisions about their rights. We were able to overcome our fears and hesitations and thus voice our issues, and possible solutions, to duty bearers such as the police, elected local representatives, district and state functionaries as well as international policymakers.

Our training and the activities we facilitated helped to further enhance our skills. Through Ward Level Child Protection Committee meetings, we learnt who is responsible for different services and how to clearly communicate with them about the issues faced by our communities. Visits to police stations and other duty bearers helped us to develop skills in advocating for our inclusion into different schemes and services. A five-day training on Vulnerability Assessment and Service Mapping research taught us about essential qualities such as being non-judgemental, being an active listener, asking the right questions and letting others speak.

From the training, I have learnt how we need to ask the right questions in order to get the information that we need. It made me realise that just speaking is not enough, it is also necessary to listen what the other person is saying, and you need to respond to that in a meaningful way as well.

Peer health education training helped us to break a lot of the misconceptions we and our families had and bring about behavioural changes, especially in terms of menstrual health.

Most of my peers used clothes during their menstruation, and it resulted in a lot of health issues since we do not have space to wash the clothes properly or dry them in a clean place. After peer health education sessions, most of my peers shifted to sanitary pads in order to avoid infections.

Conducting research and sharing its findings with duty bearers responsible for health, protection and nutrition helped us to develop skills in acquiring data that is essential for effective advocacy. For example:

Previously we used the term ‘many’ and it did not work as we were unable to make people understand the extent of the issue we faced. After

learning about the way in which we can gather data, we were able to communicate with the duty bearers about the magnitude of the issues we faced. This made them much more responsive and also they took quick actions.

We were asked to role-play a period of time when we learned the most and observed the greatest amount of change within ourselves and in the behaviour of the community. We nominated A to go through the portal. Playing out the first few days, she went through various stages of fear, grief, helplessness and loss of hope as she watched her father count the last few coins he had left after losing his job in the lockdown. She also went through the trauma of losing all her belongings in the cyclone that occurred during the lockdown period. She portrayed how she saw children younger than herself being married because their families could not afford to bring up the children anymore. The rest of us played the roles of community members and peer groups portraying their desperation to earn at least one meal a day, standing in lines and travelling for hours in order to get subsidised rations or relief support provided by NGOs.

During this time, we felt that the constant contact made by street workers, even if for a few minutes during the times when the curfews were lifted, served as a ray of hope. During those brief periods, we accompanied street workers in informing street families about available support from the government, ways to be safe from COVID-19 and the helpline numbers that can be contacted for support. This contributed towards us building a lot of strength between our Street Champion groups as we saw peers and family members finding solutions from those brief visits.

We started keeping a count of the people who needed help, for example, street-dwelling pregnant mothers who could not register in hospitals or adolescents living on the streets who could not afford sanitary pads during menstruation. We shared this information with street workers, who in turn shared the issues with service providers present in those areas. Localised solutions were achieved, as the ground-level government duty bearers such as health workers or local police came with immediate responses. This further motivated us to identify and build a database of the names and contact details of our peers, so that they could be tracked about their safety through phone calls. By keeping in touch with them we developed solidarity.

I felt lonely and hopeless even if the street worker could not come for a day, and this made me realise how lonely my peers would feel as they could not move from one place to another.

We discussed our fears, anxieties and feelings with each other and our peers to extend our emotional support to them. Within this context, we decided

to gather data about the mental health status of our peers, focusing upon their experiences of anxiety, abuse, anger, feeling of neglect and the coping mechanisms they undertook during this period. We gathered information from 150 peers and used the findings to advocate for mental health support among street-connected children from different platforms ranging from the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Children Rights as well as the High Level Political Forum of the United Nations.

In the focus group activity, we role-played how we identified the children who live without parents, or children living with single mothers; so that they received relief support from Government and NGOs. We also conducted a needs assessment and suggested relief items other than food, such as water drums and tarpaulins for children settled on the streets.

All these actions we took during that period – it made us realise the extent of capabilities and also the trust we have gained from our community as well as duty bearers. We acted as a bridge of communication between our peers, families and the uncles and aunties of the Government and NGOs.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENT VOICE, AGENCY AND POWER**

Our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in changes in our roles and responsibilities in the community, and how the perceptions of our peers, duty bearers and community members changed since we took on these new roles. Our role as agents of change in the wider community started to change. Prior to this, the community saw us as only street-connected and now we are seen as young people having capabilities to inform, influence and bring changes in the lives of us and others. In 2019, we conducted a ‘Vulnerability Assessment and Service Mapping’ with our peers as part of a two-year research project to assess the situation of street-connected children in Kolkata from a child rights point of view. During our research, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

While adapting to the safety protocols necessary during the pandemic, we not only continued the research but also acted as a support network for our peers and the wider community, providing crucial information about available services and support from the government and distributing relief kits with the support of StreetInvest and CINI. We also spoke to Government officials about the issues we were facing and facilitated the adoption of effective solutions. Our collective reflection on our actions of support to our community during that period brought about changes in how we see ourselves as well as how others see us – as the focus group discussions above show.



The key factors that contributed to the changes in our roles and responsibilities were built on our confidence in the knowledge we received during training. This, and our observations of the effects of COVID-19 on our communities, motivated us to bring about changes to our roles during the pandemic period. We aimed to understand which actions did or did not make any impact on the people around us and the government officials we interact with. Identifying what contributed to positive change helped us to plan how we can continue or improve our activities in the long term to promote support, solidarity and change in our community.

By identifying how other young people, especially those like us who are often excluded from being engaged as agents of change or power, we can then support them with crucial information and the means to develop trustworthy relationships with the adults in their lives. This type of support is important because we learn to trust ourselves as capable and powerful agents and as experts in our own lives. We can identify ourselves as changemakers in the lives of other young people like us and in our communities.

*Our contributions to this chapter have been facilitated and translated by Debapriya Bhattacharyya, Peer Research Coordinator at CINI, and supported by the authors of chapter 32 who have helped with the editing process.*