

PHYSICAL, PSYCHO-SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL & SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRAUMA AMONG CHILD RAG PICKERS

1. Dr. Bimal Anjum, 2. Dr. Arum Kumar Sharma, 3. Dr. Anju Bala, 4. Dr. Lalit Singla, 5. Vivek Kumar

1. Author & Project Coordinator, ICSSR Sanctioned and funded Project, DAV College, Chandigarh; 2. Corresponding Author & Project Co-Coordinator, ICSSR Sanctioned and funded Project, DAV College, Chandigarh; 3. Co-author & Project Co-Coordinator, ICSSR Sanctioned and funded Project, Chandigarh University; 4. Co-author & Project Co-Coordinator, ICSSR Sanctioned and funded Project, Chandigarh University; 5. Co-author & Research Assistant, ICSSR Sanctioned and funded Project

Abstract

Child rag picking remains one of the most hazardous, neglected, and exploitative forms of child labour in India, exposing children to chronic health risks, emotional neglect, social exclusion, and deep socio-economic vulnerability. Despite existing legislation on child protection and India's commitments toward Sustainable Development Goal-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), rag picker children continue to remain outside the purview of formal healthcare services, education systems, and institutional welfare mechanisms. This study investigates the multidimensional trauma experienced by child rag pickers across five districts of the Malwa region of Punjab, with specific focus on physical strain and health hazards, psycho-social insecurity, emotional distress, socio-economic deprivation, and future aspirations. A structured Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to 514 child rag pickers through direct interviews to capture their perceptions related to health, safety, emotional wellbeing, understanding of SDG-3, and long-term life goals. The findings reveal the persistent invisibility of rag picker children in public policy and expose critical gaps in urban governance systems in safeguarding vulnerable child workers. By generating empirical evidence on their lived realities, the study underscores the urgent need for child-centered interventions, improved health and education access, and comprehensive rehabilitation frameworks that restore dignity, protect childhood rights, and ensure sustainable wellbeing.

Keywords: Child rag pickers, Trauma, Psycho-social insecurity, SDG-3, Child labour, Health risks, Emotional distress, Socio-economic deprivation, Urban governance, Punjab, India.

INTRODUCTION

Child rag picking represents one of the harshest and most exploitative forms of child labour in India. Despite constitutional safeguards and multiple welfare initiatives, thousands of children continue to live and work amidst garbage dumps, streets, and landfill sites, deprived of education, safety, and a dignified childhood. Rag picking requires no skill, no formal entry, and no supervision, making it an easily accessible yet deeply hazardous occupation for children from marginalized, migrant, slum-dwelling, or socio-economically distressed families.

Rapid urbanization, migration, poverty, and the expansion of informal waste economies have pushed large numbers of children—often from slums, and migrant families—into rag picking as a means of survival. These children collect waste from streets, landfills, dumping grounds, and dustbins, working without protective equipment and facing constant exposure to toxic substances, sharp objects, medical waste, and hazardous materials. Studies consistently show high prevalence of injuries, respiratory ailments, skin diseases,

malnutrition, and chronic infections among ragpicker children, directly linked to the unsafe environments in which they work.

Beyond physical harm, child ragpickers experience deep psycho-social and emotional trauma. They grow up in environments characterized by violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and social stigma. Many face verbal, physical, and sexual abuse; substance exposure; bullying by older children and junkyard owners; and negative interactions with police and municipal authorities. The absence of stable family support, secure shelter, education, and emotional care contributes to fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, behavioural problems, and a sense of social exclusion. Their work identity as “waste collectors” further isolates them from mainstream society, reinforcing cycles of discrimination and marginalization.

Socio-economic trauma forms the foundation of these vulnerabilities. Poverty, unemployment, hunger, lack of schooling, migration, debt, and the need to supplement family income force children into ragpicking at extremely young ages. Many never attend school or drop out early due to work pressure, malnutrition, and poor living conditions. Their contribution to the informal recycling economy—though essential for urban solid waste management—remains unrecognized, unpaid, and unprotected by policy. Despite existing constitutional provisions and child protection laws, ragpicking continues due to policy gaps, lack of data, weak enforcement, and the invisibility of these children in urban planning and social welfare systems.

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG-3) refers to the United Nations’ global objective of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. It emphasizes access to quality healthcare, protection from diseases, mental and emotional well-being, and improvement of environmental conditions that affect health. SDG-3 aims to reduce preventable deaths, improve child and maternal health, ensure availability of medicines and medical services, and strengthen health systems so that every individual, regardless of socio-economic status, can live a safe and healthy life. In relation to child ragpickers, SDG-3 highlights the urgent need for healthcare access, protection from hazardous working conditions, emotional support, and policies that safeguard their fundamental right to a healthy and dignified childhood.

Existing research consistently highlights that child ragpickers live in sub-human conditions, suffer extreme exploitation, and lack access to health care, education, and social security. This study, therefore, seeks to understand the multidimensional trauma—physical, psycho-social, emotional, and socio-economic—experienced by child ragpickers, and to highlight the urgent need for policy-level interventions that protect their rights, restore their childhood, and enable pathways toward rehabilitation, education, and social justice.

Review of Literature

Year	Author(s)	Title / Focus of Study	Key Findings / Contribution
2013	Bhosale & Korishetti	<i>Problems of Child Ragpickers</i>	Identified harsh working conditions, poor hygiene, injuries, school dropout, and poverty-driven ragpicking. One of the earliest systematic examinations of child ragpickers' problems.
2017	Malhotra & Singh	<i>Problems of Ragpicker Children in Delhi</i>	Showed hazardous work environments, exploitation by scrap dealers, unsafe surroundings, and denial of schooling in urban contexts. Highlighted urban neglect of child labour.

Year	Author(s)	Title / Focus of Study	Key Findings / Contribution
2019	Yadav	<i>Group Work with Ragpicker Children: Social Justice Approach</i>	Introduced social justice and participatory group work interventions. Emphasized empowerment, social bonding, and psychological support for ragpicker children.
2020	Dwivedi	<i>Socio-economic & Health Conditions of Child Ragpickers (Udaipur)</i>	Reported severe health issues (injuries, infections, malnutrition), low income, unsafe work, and poor living conditions. Emphasized health vulnerability and socio-economic distress.
2022	Williams & Dhivya	<i>Gender and Development of Ragpickers</i>	Added a gender dimension. Found girls more vulnerable to harassment, insecurity, and greater household responsibilities. Called for gender-sensitive interventions.
2023	Bele	<i>Child Ragpickers in Nagpur City</i>	Sociological study revealing marginalization, stigma, unsafe workspaces, lack of education, and exclusion from welfare systems.
2023	Biswal	<i>Predicament of Child Ragpickers as a Social Justice Issue</i>	Critiqued child ragpicking as an “anathema” in India’s social justice scenario. Highlighted policy failure, legal gaps, and violation of child rights.
2024	Kumar & Ahmad	<i>Violation of Ragpicker Children’s Rights & Impact on Education</i>	Demonstrated direct link between ragpicking, rights violations, non-enrolment, dropouts, and intergenerational poverty. Emphasized need for rights-based policy interventions.

Research Gap

Although existing studies provide valuable insights into the lives of child ragpickers, most of the available literature remains descriptive and fragmented. Earlier research primarily highlights physical hardships, hazardous work environments, socio-economic deprivation, and lack of education, but does not empirically measure the multidimensional trauma experienced by these children. No study systematically examines physical, psycho-social, emotional, and socio-economic trauma together using a structured quantitative framework. Similarly, while some research mentions health risks and vulnerability, none evaluates children’s awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) or links their living conditions to global health standards. Emotional wellbeing, fear, loneliness, anxiety, and psychological distress—though often noted—are not quantified in previous work. Gender-specific trauma and differences based on age, working hours, or years of experience remain unexplored from a statistical perspective, as past studies lack ANOVA-based comparative analysis. Furthermore, there is a clear regional gap; no empirical study has focused on child ragpickers in the Malwa region of Punjab, despite its significant migrant and waste-picking population. Thus, the literature lacks comprehensive, data-driven evidence required for policy-level action. The present study fills these gaps by providing an integrated, empirical assessment of trauma, aspirations, and SDG-3 awareness among 514 child ragpickers in Punjab, contributing new knowledge to both academic research and child welfare policy.

H(Hypothesis): There is a significant difference in the levels of physical, psycho-social, emotional, and socio-economic trauma among child ragpickers across different age groups, daily working hours, and years of work experience.

Objectives of the study –

1. To assess the physical health issues of child ragpickers, including work hours, fatigue, injuries, and access to medical care.
2. To examine their safety and social experiences at work, such as respect, harassment, friendships, and recreation.
3. To evaluate the emotional well-being of child ragpickers, including happiness, loneliness, future worries, and support systems.
4. To measure their awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and its importance for their lives.
5. To identify their support needs and future aspirations, especially regarding education, healthcare, safe work, and alternative career dreams.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis:

For the present study, five district of Malwa region of Punjab is selected. The field research was conducted in different town of the study region. The present study is basically empirical in nature. The primary data is collected with the help of structured questionnaire along with interview method. In the present study qualitative information is obtained during the interviews, using a pre-coded questionnaire. Quantitative information obtained from the structured interview schedule. The data were processed by SPSS package. Analysis of quantitative information consisted of producing simple frequency. In order to test the hypothesis statistical technique of Chi-square is calculated. The data related to profile is presented in the form of percentage.

Interpretations of Sub-Factors as per Gender

Mean Score of Sub-Factors as per Gender				
Sr. No.	Particulars	Male	Female	ANOVA (p-Value)
No. of Respondents (514)		461	53	
1	Work and Physical Health	15.38	15.34	0.107
2	Safety and Social Interaction	16.82	17.04	0.339
3	Emotional Well-Being	15.42	15.17	0.324
4	Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing)	9.74	9.98	0.42
5	Support and Future Aspirations	18.18	18	0.011

1. Work and Physical Health : The observed mean score for male child rag pickers is 15.38, while females score 15.34 out of a maximum possible mean score of 25 points represent significant level of physical strain and health vulnerability, indicating that both boys and girls experience similar levels of exhaustion, illness, and injury at work, with minimal access to healthcare. This mean score implies that children, irrespective of gender, feel that their work affects their physical well-being, suggesting moderate awareness of health risks but still routine exposure to physically hazardous work. The similarity also indicates that the work burden is not gender-specific in rag picking contexts. The ANOVA p-value of 0.107 is greater than 0.05, indicating no statistically significant gender-based difference in physical health-related experiences. In conclusion, both boys and girls experience almost equal physical vulnerability in rag picking, with no meaningful gender difference in health burden.

2 Safety and Social Interaction : The male mean score is 16.82, whereas females score 17.04, on a maximum of 25 points, reflecting a moderate perception of safety and social interaction, but still not high enough to indicate secure or socially supportive environments. Both values suggest that although children may feel somewhat safe and socially connected, they continue to face disrespect, bullying, and limited opportunities for recreation. The observed scores indicate slightly better perceived safety and social relations among girls, who may receive sympathetic treatment in public spaces or have stronger peer bonding. However, the difference is marginal, and both genders continue to face unsafe or socially marginalised working conditions. The ANOVA p-value of 0.339 exceeds 0.05, showing no statistically significant difference between genders in perceived safety and social interaction. Thus, despite slight numerical variation, boys and girls experience almost equal levels of risk, limited play opportunities, and mixed social treatment while working.

3 Emotional Well-Being : Males report a mean score of 15.42, and females show a mean of 15.17 out of maximum mean score of 25, demonstrating moderately low emotional well-being among both genders. These scores indicate that most children feel emotional strain, including loneliness, fear about the future, and pressure to earn money despite their young age. The closeness of scores along with ANOVA p-value of 0.324, shows that emotional hardships are universal across boys and girls, meaning neither gender has better access to emotional support systems or secure family environments. This reveals a lack of protective emotional networks for working children. Hence, emotional distress among child rag pickers is a shared experience and remains unaffected by gender differences.

4 Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-being) : The mean score for males is 9.74, while females score 9.98 out of a maximum mean score of 15 points, indicating moderate awareness regarding SDG-3 and the importance of good health. Although awareness is not low, it is not high enough to demonstrate informed understanding about health rights, preventive practices, or access to services.

This moderate score indicates that children realize that better health services can improve their lives but may lack formal knowledge about health policies, rights, and benefits. The slightly higher score among girls may reflect their greater exposure to health discussions within families or community environments.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.42, being greater than 0.05, signifies no statistically significant gender-based difference in awareness of health and well-being.

In summary, both genders show comparable yet insufficient awareness of health rights and SDG-3 objectives.

5 Support and Future Aspirations : Male children have a mean score of 18.18, while female children score 18.00 out of a maximum mean score of 25 points, representing a high level of aspiration for education, healthcare, and better jobs beyond rag picking. These high scores indicate strong hope for change and recognition that schooling and safe work can transform their future.

The scores reflect that both boys and girls equally desire upward mobility and believe in the transformative power of education. The slightly higher score among boys may indicate a marginally stronger hope or a perception of greater future opportunities, though both genders show equal determination to escape rag picking. The ANOVA p-value of 0.011, which is less than 0.05, reveals a statistically significant difference between boys and girls in support and aspiration levels. Even if numerically small, this difference is statistically meaningful, implying that gender influences how children develop and express future ambitions. Thus, while aspiration is strong in both groups, boys show significantly higher confidence in achieving a life beyond rag picking.

Mean Score of Factors as per Gender				
Sr. No.	Particulars	Male	Female	ANOVA (p-Value)
1	Physical, Psycho-Social, Emotional, and Socio-Economic Trauma of Child Rag Pickers (Below 14 Years) in Context to SDG-3	75.54	75.53	0.184

This indicates that children below 14 years face moderate but consistent levels of trauma, including physical strain, unsafe working conditions, emotional distress, and limited socio-economic support. The near-identical scores reflect that the burden of harsh labour and vulnerability is not gender-specific; both boys and girls experience almost equal levels of exploitation and deprivation while engaged in rag picking.

The moderate mean score signifies that child rag pickers frequently experience fatigue, injury, lack of healthcare access, social disrespect, emotional loneliness, and low future security. At the same time, the score does not reach the highest possible range, implying that children may have become resilient through habituation or survival adaptation, which masks the full extent of trauma they face. These findings also reflect their partial awareness of welfare aspirations such as education, health rights, and safe work conditions as outlined in the SDGs, particularly SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-being).

The ANOVA p-value of 0.184, which is greater than the significance level of 0.05, confirms that there is no statistically significant difference between males and females in terms of their trauma levels. This suggests that gender does not influence the intensity of hardships experienced by children in rag picking occupations.

In conclusion, the overall trauma level among child rag pickers below 14 years is moderately high and uniformly experienced by both genders, revealing an urgent need for policy attention and interventions aligned with SDG-3 to protect their health, safety, and future well-being.

Interpretations of Sub-Factors as per Age

Mean Score of Sub-Factors as per Age						
Sr. No.	Particulars	Below 8 years	8–10 years	11–12 years	13–14 years	ANOVA (p-Value)
	No. of Respondents (514)	12	60	104	338	
1	Work and Physical Health	15.58	15.37	15.28	15.4	0.916
2	Safety and Social Interaction	16.67	16.92	16.67	16.89	0.475

3	Emotional Well-Being	15.08	15.43	15.32	15.43	0.88
4	Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing)	9.08	9.83	9.64	9.81	0.178
5	Support and Future Aspirations	18.17	17.7	18.24	18.22	0.357

1. Work and Physical Health: The mean scores across all age groups range from 15.28 to 15.58 out of a maximum possible mean score of 25, indicating a moderate level of physical strain among child ragpickers. These values reflect the prevalence of fatigue, exhaustion, injuries, and body aches due to long working hours and inadequate access to medical care. The scores remain close across all age categories, suggesting that physical health challenges are consistently experienced by both younger and older children. The ANOVA p-value of 0.916 shows that there is no statistically significant difference in physical health experiences across age groups. This means age does not materially influence physical strain, and all children, irrespective of age, face similar levels of work-related physical trauma. Overall, physical trauma among child ragpickers is moderately high and uniformly prevalent across all age categories.

2. Safety and Social Interaction : The mean scores range between 16.67 and 16.92 out of maximum possible mean score 25, reflecting a moderate perception of safety and social interaction. These scores indicate that even though children work in unsafe and socially exploitative environments, there are still some positive social elements such as peer bonding and friendships. However, instances of harassment and bullying, captured through reverse-coded items, highlight persistent risks to social safety. The ANOVA p-value of 0.475 suggests no statistically significant difference between age groups. Therefore, safety concerns and social interaction patterns remain uniform across all ages, indicating that younger and older ragpicker children equally face unsafe conditions and social vulnerability. Overall, child ragpickers experience moderate social support accompanied by uniform safety concerns, irrespective of age.

3. Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being scores range from 15.08 to 15.43 along all age group out of the maximum possible mean score of 25, reflecting a moderate and mixed state of emotional health. These results suggest that children experience occasional happiness, trust, and bonding during working along with their companions but also face emotional distress including loneliness, anxiety, fear about the future, and a sense of burden due to earnings pressure.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.880 shows no significant variation between different age groups in emotional condition. This indicates that emotional trauma is consistently present, affecting both younger and older ragpickers equally. Overall, emotional well-being remains moderately compromised across all age groups, depicting widespread and uniform emotional trauma among child ragpickers.

4. Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-Being) : The mean scores range from 9.08 to 9.83 with maximum mean score of 15, indicating moderate awareness regarding health and well-being-related concepts, including the value of healthcare and healthy living. Younger children show slightly lower awareness compared to older ones, hinting that awareness improves subtly with age. However, the scores suggest that formal knowledge about SDG-3 is limited overall.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.178 indicates no significant difference among age groups. Thus, age contributes very minimally to differences in awareness. Overall, awareness of SDG-3 remains moderate with slight but

non-significant improvements among older children, showing generally low formal understanding of health and well-being.

5. Support and Future Aspirations : Mean scores ranges between 17.70 and 18.24 across all age group reflect strong aspirations and perceived need for institutional support among all age groups. Children express a high desire for education, safer work environments, healthcare access, and opportunities beyond rag picking. These results highlight a hopeful psychological trait despite socio-economic hardships, children maintain clear ambitions to improve their futures.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.357 indicates that the differences between age groups are statistically insignificant. Thus, strong future aspirations are uniformly shared among both younger and older ragpicker children. Overall, child ragpickers show high collective hope and aspiration for education and better livelihoods, regardless of age.

Sr. No.	Particulars	Below 8 years	8–10 years	11–12 years	13–14 years	ANOVA (p-Value)
1	Physical, Psycho-Social, Emotional, and Socio-Economic Trauma of Child Rag Pickers (Below 14 Years) in Context to SDG-3	74.58	75.25	75.15	75.75	0.382

The recorded mean scores for the four age groups fall between 74.58 and 75.75 out of the maximum possible mean score, suggesting that children strongly experience trauma across physical, social, emotional, and economic dimensions.

The children aged below 8 years scored 74.58, indicating high trauma exposure despite their very young age. This score reflects early and harmful engagement in rag picking, accompanied by tiredness, sickness, unsafe work, low self-esteem, weakened emotional support, and lack of healthcare awareness. The mean score increases to 75.25 among children aged 8–10 years, implying a slightly greater acknowledgment of unsafe working conditions, emotional pressure to earn, lack of medical support, and minimal opportunities for play and social interaction. Children between 11–12 years show a mean score of 75.15, suggesting moderately high trauma, where they are more aware of injuries, harassment, future uncertainty, and health needs, but may also develop emotional resilience through social bonding with peer workers. The highest mean score, 75.75, is recorded among children aged 13–14 years, indicating the most severe trauma perception. At this stage, children clearly recognize health deterioration, emotional burden, social disrespect, absence of safety, and express stronger desires for education, safe work, and alternative livelihoods.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.382 is greater than the standard significance threshold of 0.05, indicating that the differences in mean trauma scores among the age groups are not statistically significant. This implies that all children, regardless of age category, uniformly experience high levels of trauma related to physical health, safety, social interaction, emotional well-being, and economic vulnerability.

Interpretations of Sub-Factors as per Hours Spent in Rag Picking

Mean Score of Sub-Factors as per Daily Hours Spent in Rag Picking					
Sr. No.	Particulars	Less than 4 hours	4–6 hours	More than 6 hours	ANOVA (p-Value)
	No. of Respondents (514)	76	405	33	
1	Work and Physical Health	15.39	15.35	15.58	0.783
2	Safety and Social Interaction	16.64	16.87	17.03	0.294
3	Emotional Well-Being	15.42	15.42	15.06	0.544
4	Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing)	9.96	9.75	9.48	0.187
5	Support and Future Aspirations	17.99	18.2	18.15	0.731

1. Work and Physical Health : Children working less than 4 hours scored 15.39, those working 4–6 hours scored 15.35, and those working more than 6 hours scored 15.58 out of a maximum mean score of 25. These values fall in the moderate range, indicating that physical strain (fatigue, sickness, injuries, body pain) is commonly experienced by all, regardless of working duration. The slightly higher mean for children working longer hours suggests marginally more fatigue and physical load, but not a severe increase. The ANOVA p-value of 0.783 indicates no statistically significant difference across different working-hour groups. Therefore, physical health problems are uniformly present, independent of daily hours spent in rag picking. Overall, work-related physical trauma among child ragpickers remains moderate and consistent across all groups.

2. Safety and Social Interaction : The mean safety scores show a gradual increase from 16.64 (less than 4 hours) to 16.87 (4–6 hours) and 17.03 (more than 6 hours) out of 25. These scores indicate moderately positive social bonding and perceived safety, likely reflecting shared experiences, cooperation, or peer trust built over time. However, reverse-coded items suggest that risks such as bullying, harassment, and unsafe environments still persist, regardless of work duration.

With an ANOVA p-value of 0.294 indicates , there is no significant difference between groups. This means irrespective of daily working hours. In summary, child ragpickers receive moderate peer support but continue to face ongoing safety risks, with minimal variation across hour-based groups.

that concerns about safety and experiences of social interaction remain largely similar,

3. Emotional Well-Being : Mean emotional well-being scores were 15.42 (less than 4 hours), 15.42 (4–6 hours), and 15.06 (more than 6 hours) out of maximum mean score of 25. These scores reflect moderately compromised emotional health, showing that children experience loneliness, anxiety, uncertainty about future, and emotional burden due to financial pressures. A slight decrease in the highest-hour group suggests mild emotional exhaustion with prolonged work, though the difference remains small.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.544 (>0.05) confirms no significant difference across groups. Thus, emotional distress is equally prevalent, irrespective of how many hours children work. Overall, emotional well-being is moderately affected for all child ragpickers, showing uniform emotional strain.

4. Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-Being) : Children working less than 4 hours scored 9.96, those working 4–6 hours scored 9.75, and those working more than 6 hours scored 9.48, out of a maximum

mean score of 15. This indicates moderate awareness, with slightly higher scores for children working fewer hours, suggesting that less working time may allow more exposure to schools or awareness sources, though overall comprehension of SDG-3 remains limited.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.187 shows that differences are not statistically significant. Thus, working hours do not meaningfully influence health awareness. In conclusion, awareness of health and well-being remains moderate but uniformly low, regardless of daily working duration.

5. Support and Future Aspirations

Scores for aspirations and support needs are high across all groups: 17.99, 18.20, and 18.15 (out of 25). These scores show that all children strongly desire better living and working conditions, access to education and healthcare, and pathways away from ragpicking. High scores also reflect strong hope, ambition, and unmet socio-economic needs, despite hardships.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.731 (>0.05) indicates no significant difference between groups. Hence, desire for change and need for external support remain uniformly high, regardless of working hours. Overall, child ragpickers exhibit strong and consistent aspirations for a better future, independent of work duration.

Mean Score of Factors as per Hours Spent in Rag Picking						
Sr. No.	Particulars	Less than 4 hours	4–6 hours	More than 6 hours	ANOVA (p-Value)	
1	Physical, Emotional, and Socio-Economic Trauma of Child Rag Pickers (Below 14 Years) in Context to SDG-3	75.41	75.59	75.3	0.873	

Children who spend less than 4 hours in rag picking recorded a mean score of 75.4 indicating high trauma exposure despite fewer working hours. This group still reports feeling tired, unsafe, socially disrespected, emotionally stressed, and lacking access to healthcare or safe working conditions. The similar level of trauma in this category reflects that even short work duration exposes children to hazardous waste, psychological distress, and exploitative conditions.

The mean score for children who work 4–6 hours is slightly higher at 75.59. This score reveals that prolonged work duration increases physical exhaustion, exposure to injuries, bullying, lack of time for play, and emotional burden to earn. Their responses suggest they are more conscious of unsafe work conditions and express a stronger desire for education, healthcare, and escape from rag picking as a livelihood.

Children working more than 6 hours report a mean score of 75.3, which also lies in the high range, suggesting severe trauma but with marginally reduced agreement when compared to those working 4–6 hours. This may indicate a coping mechanism or emotional numbness developed over prolonged exposure to unsafe conditions, rather than improved well-being. Despite longer working hours, they continue to face harmful health effects, unsafe environment, and deep emotional stress, but may express slightly lower sensitivity to these realities as a survival strategy.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.873 is indicating that the differences in trauma levels based on hours spent working are not statistically significant. In other words, whether children work for fewer hours or more, they uniformly experience high physical, emotional, social, and economic trauma. In conclusion, the consistently high mean

scores across all working-hour categories reveal that the severity of trauma faced by child rag pickers remains uniformly high, regardless of the number of hours spent working, highlighting the urgent necessity for welfare intervention under SDG-3.

Interpretations of Sub-Factors as per Years Working

Mean Score of Sub-Factors as per Year Working					
Sr. No.	Particulars	Less than 1 year	1–3 years	More than 3 years	ANOVA (p-Value)
	No. of Respondents (514)	184	163	167	
1	Work and Physical Health	15.27	15.58	15.29	0.21
2	Safety and Social Interaction	16.8	16.84	16.89	0.827
3	Emotional Well-Being	15.54	15.3	15.33	0.386
4	Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing)	9.76	9.92	9.62	0.11
5	Support and Future Aspirations	17.92	18.25	18.35	0.135

1. Work and Physical Health : The mean scores for work-related physical health are 15.27 (less than 1 year), 15.58 (1–3 years), and 15.29 (more than 3 years), all within a moderate range on a 25-point scale. These values suggest that physical strain—such as fatigue, sickness, injuries, and body painis consistently experienced by children across all levels of work experience. Children working for 1–3 years show slightly higher scores, indicating a marginal increase in physical burden due to accumulated exposure, though not to a severe degree.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.210 confirms that these variations are not statistically significant, meaning that years spent in ragpicking do not meaningfully impact children’s physical health outcomes. In conclusion, physical trauma remains moderately high and largely uniform, regardless of whether children are new to ragpicking or have worked for several years.

2. Safety and Social Interaction

Mean scores for perceived safety and social interaction are 16.80 (less than 1 year), 16.84 (1–3 years), and 16.89 (more than 3 years) out of 25. These moderately positive scores indicate stable social connections and some perceived safety, including friendships and informal peer support. However, reverse-coded indicators (bullying, harassment, unsafe surroundings) reveal that safety concerns persist across all groups.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.827 shows no statistically significant difference based on years working. This suggests that length of involvement does not notably change children’s social experiences or exposure to risk. Overall, child ragpickers experience moderate social support along with persistent safety threats, and these remain consistent irrespective of years of work.

3. Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being scores are 15.54 (less than 1 year), 15.30 (1–3 years), and 15.33 (more than 3 years) out of 25. These indicate moderate levels of emotional stability mixed with emotional vulnerability. Although

children report some happiness and trust, they also suffer from loneliness, fear, anxiety, and pressure to earn money. Slightly higher scores among children working for less than one year suggest that emotional resilience may weaken with prolonged exposure to ragpicking, though the difference is minimal.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.386 confirms no statistically significant difference, meaning emotional trauma is equally experienced whether children recently started or have worked for years. Hence, emotional well-being remains moderately compromised across all experience groups, showing widespread and persistent emotional strain.

4. Awareness of SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-Being)

Mean scores are 9.76 (less than 1 year), 9.92 (1–3 years), and 9.62 (more than 3 years) out of 15. These scores suggest moderate awareness of health and well-being, with slightly higher awareness among children working for 1–3 years, possibly due to wider community interaction or repeated exposure to informal knowledge sources. Yet, overall understanding of SDG-3 remains limited across all groups, highlighting gaps in formal knowledge regarding health rights and services.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.110 (>0.05), though relatively closer to significance, still confirms no meaningful difference among groups. Thus, years of experience do not substantially influence health awareness. In summary, awareness of SDG-3 is moderate but uniformly limited across all experience levels, indicating shared informational gaps about well-being and healthcare.

5. Support and Future Aspirations

Mean scores for aspirations and support needs are 17.92 (less than 1 year), 18.25 (1–3 years), and 18.35 (more than 3 years) out of maximum mean score of 25. These consistently high results reflect strong desire for education, safer work environments, improved healthcare, and pathways away from ragpicking. Notably, even children working for more than three years continue to hold strong ambitions for change, revealing remarkable resilience and enduring hope despite prolonged hardship.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.135 confirms that differences are not statistically significant, showing that future aspirations remain equally strong across all experience groups. Overall, child ragpickers demonstrate high and unchanging optimism, regardless of how long they have been working—highlighting a persistent desire for a better life.

Mean Score of Factors as per Year Working					
Sr. No.	Particulars	Less than 1 year	1–3 years	More than 3 years	ANOVA (p-Value)
2	Physical, Psycho-Social, Emotional, and Socio-Economic Trauma of Child Rag Pickers (Below 14 Years) in Context to SDG-3	75.29	75.88	75.49	0.355

The observed mean trauma score for children working less than one year is 75.29, while those working for 1–3 years record a slightly higher score of 75.88, and children working more than three years report a mean score of 75.49. Considering that the maximum possible score for this combined scale is 100 (each question

scoring 1–5 on a Likert scale, with 25 items), these mean values fall in the high range, indicating that children across all work-year categories experience high levels of cumulative physical, psycho-social, emotional, and socio-economic trauma. The minimal variation (less than one-point fluctuation) suggests that prolonged work does not significantly reduce or increase their distress; instead, trauma remains consistently pervasive irrespective of the duration of employment.

These consistently high mean scores imply that child rag pickers face persistent physical strain, unsafe work conditions, emotional neglect, low social protection, and poor health awareness, all of which place them far away from achieving the objectives of SDG-3 (Good Health and Wellbeing). The slight increase in trauma among children with 1–3 years of work suggests that the peak distress may occur when children adapt to the demanding work environment without adequate support, after which the scores remain uniformly high as harsh conditions become normalized over time.

The ANOVA p-value of 0.355 indicates no statistically significant difference in overall trauma across the three working groups. In other words, the experience of trauma is universally pervasive among rag-picking children, regardless of whether they have worked for only a few months or several years. This lack of significance reinforces the conclusion that the problem is systemic rather than dependent on duration of work. In conclusion, the high mean scores combined with the non-significant p-value confirm that all rag-picking children below the age of 14 are exposed to severe and uniform trauma, irrespective of their years of work, highlighting an urgent need for policy and welfare interventions under SDG-3.

Findings of the Study

The study examined the multidimensional trauma—physical, psycho-social, emotional, and socio-economic—experienced by child ragpickers, using quantitative analysis across three demographic variables: age, hours spent in ragpicking, and years of work experience. Across all analyses, the results consistently reveal that child ragpickers experience moderate physical and emotional trauma, moderate but insufficient levels of safety, limited health-related awareness, and high aspirations for a better future, regardless of their background or work characteristics.

1. Physical Health and Work Conditions

Physical fatigue, injuries, sickness, and lack of medical access are widespread and uniformly experienced. None of the ANOVA p-values related to this factor were significant, showing that age, work duration, or years of experience do not meaningfully alter physical health outcomes. Thus, physical trauma is a universal reality for child ragpickers, irrespective of demographic differences.

2. Safety and Social Interaction

Safety-related scores also indicate a moderately high level of social support but persistent exposure to unsafe environments, bullying, and harassment. Children across all groups report having friends and occasional support; however, they also face regular threats, fear, and disrespect, and social challenges cut across all categories of child ragpickers, revealing structurally unsafe and hostile work environments.

3. Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being scores remained consistently moderate, reflecting mixed emotional experiences such as temporary happiness but ongoing feelings of loneliness, worry, insecurity, and pressure to earn money. The scores showed no statistically significant differences across any demographic group, indicating that emotional trauma is pervasive and stable across all children, regardless of whether they are younger, older, newly engaged, or long-term workers. This highlights chronic emotional vulnerability embedded in their socio-economic circumstances.

4. Awareness of SDG-3 (Health and Wellbeing)

Awareness of health and wellbeing concepts, including SDG-3, remained at a moderate but inadequate level. Children demonstrate a basic understanding that health is important, yet they lack formal knowledge about health rights and wellbeing standards. Although slight variations suggested marginally higher awareness among older and more experienced children, The findings suggest a uniform gap in health education among child ragpickers, regardless of age or work exposure.

5. Support Needs and Future Aspirations

Child ragpickers across all age groups, work hours, and work experience strongly expressed the need for education, healthcare, better working conditions, and opportunities to leave ragpicking. This indicates that despite severe trauma, children maintain strong optimism, ambition, and desire for a better future. Again, all ANOVA results were non-significant, indicating that these aspirations are shared universally.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that child ragpickers in urban India experience persistent and multidimensional trauma that affects their physical health, emotional stability, social safety, and socio-economic wellbeing. Despite variation in age, hours spent working, or years of experience, gender the levels of trauma remain uniformly high, indicating that ragpicking as an occupation is inherently hazardous for all children involved. The findings show moderate levels of physical strain, frequent injuries, constant exposure to unhygienic and unsafe environments, and limited access to health care. These conditions reinforce a cycle of poor health and vulnerability.

The study also highlights that child ragpickers experience ongoing emotional distress, marked by loneliness, anxiety, fear, and a deep sense of insecurity. Safety concerns—such as bullying, harassment, and exploitation—further compromise their development and well-being. Their awareness of health, rights, and wellbeing (including SDG-3) remains limited, reflecting the broader neglect of this invisible workforce within urban governance and policy systems.

Despite these adversities, the children express high aspirations for education, safety, and a better future, demonstrating remarkable resilience and a strong desire to move beyond ragpicking. Their dreams of schooling, stable employment, and improved living conditions underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions.

Overall, the study concludes that child ragpicking remains a severely exploitative and under-recognized form of child labour driven by deep socio-economic distress. The uniformity of trauma across all demographic groups highlights systemic failures in child protection, social welfare, education access, and urban planning. There is an immediate need for comprehensive policy frameworks that ensure rescue, rehabilitation, education, healthcare, social security support, and reintegration of child ragpickers into mainstream society. Protecting these children is not only a legal and moral obligation but also essential for advancing social justice, child rights, and sustainable urban development.

References: -

- [1] Bhosale, S. G. and Korishetti, V. B. 2013. Problems of child ragpickers. *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, **2**(2): 6–11.
- [2] Bele, T. K. 2023. Child ragpickers: A sociological study in Nagpur City. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, **11**(10): b213–b218.
- [3] Biswal, S. 2023. Predicament of child rag picker is an anathema in social justice scenario in India – An analysis. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, **10**(2): 153–157.
- [4] Dwivedi, V. 2020. A study of socio-economic and health conditions of children working as rag-pickers in Udaipur, Rajasthan. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, **8**(5): 1335–1342.
- [5] Kumar, N. and Ahmad, S. 2024. Violation of rag picker children's rights in urban slums and its impact on their education. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, **11**(3): b98–b102.
- [6] Malhotra, G. and Singh, D. 2017. Problems of rag picker children in Delhi. *KAAV International Journal of Economics, Commerce & Business Management*, **4**(3): 31–47.
- [7] Williams, A. R. E. and Dhivya, T. 2022. Gender and development of rag pickers: A case study in Puducherry. *International Journal of Food and Nutritional Sciences*, **11**(12): 6763–6769.
- [8] Yadav, S. K. 2019. Group work with ragpicker children in India: Finding social justice. *Social Work with Groups*. Advance online publication.

Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.