

The International Day for Street Children, 12 April 2016

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/apr/12/street-children-legal-identity-basic-human-right-international-day-street-child>



Young people celebrate after the UN-style 'general assembly' for street children in Rio de Janeiro, in March, where Usha Elumalai addressed the congress.
Photograph: Malachy McCrudden/Street Child

Most people ostracise and stigmatise those of us who live on the street. They treat us like lesser human beings and blame us for the way we are forced to live. But, because we lack any form of legal identification, we can't get the support we need to improve our situation.

I am a third generation pavement dweller – my grandparents lived with us on the street in Chennai, on the Bay of Bengal in eastern India, until they passed away two years ago. Now, I live with my parents and one of my two sisters. We live on Barracks Street, in an area called Mint. We don't have a real roof over our heads. We live in dread, all day, every day. We never know what might happen to us when night comes.



Usha Elumalai speaking at the Street Child Games ‘general assembly’ in Rio de Janeiro, 18 March 2016. Photograph: Gustavo Oliveira/WBR

My family has no basic facilities, not even a bathroom. We have no place to take care of our personal needs – we have to go to the toilet early in the morning, before dawn, before the streets are crowded. People say, “There are public toilets,” but people have to pay to use them and we don’t have the money.

Welfare, education and healthcare are all impossible for us to access because we have no legal identity, leaving us with no way out.

The lack of a legal identity severely limits what you can achieve in life. People talk about public education, which they say is free. But it is not. Whenever someone from the street tries to enrol in school, they are asked for documents such as a birth certificate, which we simply don’t have. Without a legal identity, we are powerless. That’s how we lose our access to basic education.

I am now in my second year of studying for a maths degree at Bharathi Women’s College. The NGO Karunalaya Social Service Society came forward to support me and other children living in our street to get an education. We did not have electricity, so we used to study under street lights. Karunalaya also helped us with school uniforms, education materials, bags, notebooks and school fees. Five years ago, we got electricity after we all approached the electricity department.

There is a lot of talk about issuing identity records to people who do not have any – and this is very important to us. However, in practice these processes are expensive and complicated. The government is always talking about its intention to issue records, but in reality this requires a huge amount of bureaucracy and there is a lot of resistance to granting documents to people who live on the streets.

Getting a legal identity should not be expensive, tough or complicated. All families, including those on the streets, should be given a family card and documents so that they can receive the benefits of social security programmes.

I have a legal identity because I received special assistance so I could travel to Brazil to take part in the Street Child Games, where I spoke about children's rights. I feel proud and lucky to have an identity now, but I am also sad to know that many, many children around the world aren't as lucky as me.

There is so much that needs to be done for children and families living on the street and so many stories that need to be counted. They are backed up by a lifetime of experience.

When I am older, I want to work to improve the conditions in my community so that other children can also go to school and study.

Now, I want to send a message to the government that will be elected in May that it should act so that no child has to live on the streets.

I want to raise my voice for the rights of street children and street-dwelling families. And I demand that governments around the world ensure that all street children have a legal identity.

We aren't begging for this, or asking for it as a favour. It's our human right.

As told by Usha Elumalai to Jo Griffin from *The Guardian*