Policy Research Journal
ISSN (E): 3006-7030 ISSN (P) : 3006-7022 Volume 3, Issue 12, 2025

RECONCEPTUALIZING REHABILITATION: INSTITUTIONAL CARE AND EMPOWERMENT OF STREET GIRLS IN PAKISTAN

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18066113

Keywords
Street girls, rehabilitation, social welfare, psychosocial development, reintegration, Pakistan

Article History
Received: 29 October 2025
Accepted: 13 December 2025
Published: 27 December 2025

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Abstract
Street girls in Pakistan face compounded vulnerabilities, including poverty, gender-based violence, family breakdown, and social exclusion. While state-led interventions have expanded, the extent to which institutional rehabilitation is transformative rather than custodial remains underexplored. This study critically evaluates services at Zamung Kor Model Institute for State Children, Peshawar, focusing on psychosocial recovery, educational reintegration, vocational skill development, and long-term social inclusion. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, a qualitative case study was conducted involving in-depth interviews with fifteen street girls, five institutional staff, and five family members. Findings indicate that Zamung Kor provides safety, routine, and educational access, enhancing emotional regulation and learning motivation. However, gaps persist in trauma-informed counseling, gender-responsive vocational pathways, and post-discharge follow-up. The study underscores the need to reconceptualize rehabilitation as a continuous, gender-sensitive, and community-linked process extending beyond institutional walls.

1. INTRODUCTION

Street girls in Pakistan occupy an exceptionally vulnerable position, facing risks distinct from boys, including sexual exploitation, early marriage, restricted mobility, and social stigma (UNICEF, 2023; [WHO], 2000). Street life erodes safety, identity, and cognitive and emotional development, making rehabilitation a multifaceted process that extends beyond shelter provision (Hussain & Sadiq, 2013). *Zamung Kor* Model Institute in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a state-led initiative providing shelter, education, health services, psychosocial support, and vocational training for street children. Despite its prominence, systematic, gender-sensitive evaluation is limited. Existing studies often generalize across street children, overlooking the unique vulnerabilities and needs of girls (Abro, 2017; Kuparadze, 2010). This study interrogates the effectiveness of *Zamung Kor's* rehabilitation services, examining how institutional practices intersect with family and community systems to facilitate holistic development and sustainable reintegration. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, rehabilitation is conceptualized as a relational, multi-level process encompassing emotional healing, educational recovery, skill acquisition, and social inclusion (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Methodology

A qualitative case study design captured the lived experiences of street girls and stakeholders whose

perspectives are often excluded from evaluation (Creswell, 2014). Bronfenbrenner's ecological lens enabled analysis across micro (individual), meso (institutional/family), and macro (structural/community) levels. Purposive sampling selected twenty-five participants: fifteen girls aged 13–18 years, five institutional staff, and five family members involved in reintegration planning. Semi-structured interviews prioritized trauma-sensitive engagement, confidentiality, and informed consent. Thematic analysis identified patterns in psychosocial support, education, vocational training, and reintegration preparedness, with attention to gendered experiences and institutional power dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Discussion

Participants emphasized that *Zamung Kor* provides a predictable, secure environment, addressing immediate vulnerabilities related to hunger, neglect, and street exposure. Provision of shelter, food, clothing, and routine established foundational stability, aligning with evidence that material security is a prerequisite for psychosocial recovery (UNICEF, 2023). However, emotional safety, including trust and relational continuity, required time and consistent caregiving, underscoring the limits of material-focused interventions.

Girls reported gradual improvements in emotional regulation, confidence, and peer interaction, facilitated by counseling and structured engagement. Nonetheless, staff limitations, high caseloads and limited counseling personnel constrained trauma-focused interventions, particularly for girls with histories of abuse. Sustainable rehabilitation necessitates intensive, sustained psychosocial support to foster resilience and agency (Fazel et al., 2012; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019).

Structured classrooms and supportive teachers rekindled learning motivation among girls with disrupted schooling. Yet age-grade mismatches and learning gaps hindered full academic reintegration. Flexible remedial strategies and individualized learning plans are essential to bridge these gaps, restoring not only knowledge but also self-efficacy and future orientation (Kuparadze, 2010).

Vocational programs, including tailoring and embroidery, enhanced competence and orientation toward future work but reflected entrenched gender norms. Girls expressed interest in diversified skills aligned with labor market opportunities. Transformative rehabilitation requires expanding vocational options to enhance autonomy and economic empowerment (Abro, 2017).

Reintegration emerged as the weakest dimension. Post-discharge follow-up was minimal, and families often faced persistent economic pressures that initially pushed girls onto the streets. Without structured aftercare and family-level support, institutional gains risk erosion, reinforcing dependency rather than promoting autonomy. Effective rehabilitation requires integrating continuous support, community engagement, and economic assistance (Ashraf et al., 2020).

From an ecological perspective, institutional gains are constrained by vulnerabilities at family and community levels. While Zamung Kor ensures safety and foundational psychosocial support, the transformative potential of rehabilitation remains limited by structural, gendered, and economic constraints. Gender-responsive programming, trauma-informed counseling, diversified vocational pathways, and sustained reintegration mechanisms are essential to reconceptualize rehabilitation as a continuous, relational, and developmental process rather than a time-bound institutional intervention (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fazel et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Effective rehabilitation extends beyond institutional stability or service provision; it requires restoring agency, emotional resilience, and social inclusion while mitigating structural vulnerabilities. Zamung Kor demonstrates the capacity of state-led welfare to stabilize highly marginalized girls. Yet, without sustained psychosocial engagement, family-centered economic support, and structured post-discharge follow-up, rehabilitation risks reproducing dependency.

Rehabilitation should be reframed as an ecosystem of care encompassing institutional, family, and community dimensions. Integrating trauma-informed interventions, diversified vocational opportunities, and continuous reintegration

mechanisms can transform institutional stabilization into sustainable empowerment. *Zamung Kor* holds potential as a national model for gender-responsive rehabilitation, illustrating that true transformation hinges on continuity, relational depth, and socio-economic integration rather than expansion of institutional capacity alone.

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