

## The Disadvantaged Position of Children in Urban Areas: Shaping Their Lives in the Shadows of the City

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### Abstract

Urban transformation is a process that rapidly changes both physical and social structures, directly affecting children. Children's lives in cities should be seen not only as individuals but also as an essential part of the social fabric. However, in traditional urban planning, children's needs are often overlooked. Fundamental rights such as children's access to safe play areas, educational opportunities, and spaces for social interaction should be prioritized in urban planning. Furthermore, rapid urbanization can create greater risks, especially for children from disadvantaged groups. Child-friendly cities not only enhance children's safety but also strengthen social solidarity and improve overall quality of life. Making the "city and child" relationship an academic agenda is important for social justice and sustainable development. Policies that take this relationship into account contribute to creating more equitable and livable cities.

### 1. Introduction: The Importance of Making the Urban and Child Dyad an Academic Agenda

Urbanization processes have rapidly changing dynamics, both physically and socially. This transformation has brought forth a series of issues that directly affect not only adults but also children living in cities. The way children live in urban environments reflects a complex structure that necessitates viewing them not only as individuals but also as an essential part of the social fabric. It can be argued that making the urban-child dyad an academic

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agenda holds critical importance in terms of social equality, social justice, and sustainable urbanization. Cities have a significant impact on children's physical and emotional development. However, in traditional urban design and planning processes, the needs of children have often been overlooked. Children are rarely a part of adult-centered agendas, and their living spaces are often relegated to secondary consideration. This omission neglects the important role urban environments play in children's development. The right of children to access safe play areas, educational opportunities, and spaces for social interaction is a critical issue that requires a re-evaluation of urban planning and design. Therefore, making the relationship between "city and child" an academic agenda facilitates a proper understanding of children's position and role within urban contexts.

Urbanization is not just a physical transformation but a process that profoundly affects social and economic structures. Rapid urban growth can deepen social inequalities and expose children, especially those in disadvantaged groups, to greater risks. Poverty, poor-quality education, difficulties in accessing healthcare, and unsafe living environments are some of the primary issues faced by disadvantaged children in cities. Such challenges not only hinder individual child development but also lead to long-term socio-economic issues for society as a whole. Understanding children's place within urban life allows for the identification of these problems and the development of strategies to address them through academic research.

Children's basic rights, such as the right to play, receive education, access healthcare, and grow up in a safe environment, are critical for ensuring social justice. Making the urban-child relationship an academic agenda contributes to the development of policies that support the defense and implementation of these rights. Moreover, advocating for the rights of children in cities can help prevent social exclusion, discrimination, and inequality.

Sustainable development should be viewed not only as an environmental but also as a social phenomenon. Sustainable urban growth can be achieved through child-friendly designs and policies. Child-friendly cities are those that enhance not only children's safety and well-being but also foster social solidarity and improve the overall quality of life in society. Such cities ensure strengthened social relationships, increased environmental sustainability, and equal opportunities for all individuals. Making cities more livable for children will not only impact the current generation of children but also influence the quality of life for future generations. For this reason, addressing children's needs within urban life from an academic perspective is crucial for building a sustainable and equitable society.

Making the urban-child relationship an academic agenda not only improves children's lives but also supports the well-being and social equality of all individuals in society. The living conditions of children in cities can lead to widespread issues affecting the entire population, but these problems can be addressed through appropriate policies and designs. Defending children's rights, implementing the principles of social justice, and creating sustainable urban designs by academically addressing the "city and child" relationship will be the first step toward building more equitable, livable, and socially cohesive cities.

## 2. The Relationship Between Children and Adults in the City

The city has the potential to place all individuals, in different ways but with similar dynamics, into disadvantaged positions, making them vulnerable or fragile. In this context, a series of situations where children are affected and disadvantaged just like adults signifies not only a social inequality but also a significant violation of children's specific rights and needs. Studies on the socio-economic structures of cities and their effects on children highlight inequalities in children's quality of life (Ortiz et al., 2012). The dynamics of urban life systematically exclude children in the same way as adults. One of the points that needs to be addressed is class-based inequality. Children are directly affected by class-based socio-economic inequalities (Bassok, 2016). Issues such as inadequate income, limited education, and healthcare services can negatively affect children both physically and psychologically. Socio-economic disadvantages are a significant factor that prevents children from leading a qualified and prosperous life. Children are exposed to class-based inequalities within social structures, whether in family or institutional care (Fotso, 2006). Regardless of their social structure, children may become subjects of class-based inequality. This indicates structural inequalities that affect children in the same way as adults' economic pressures (Amso & Lynn, 2017).

Secondly, spatial discrimination is similarly felt in children's living spaces in cities. The accessibility of children's living spaces is directly connected to the public areas provided by the urban environment. Public spaces are important places for children's physical, social, and psychological development. These spaces offer various opportunities, ranging from playing to receiving education, engaging in social interactions, and developing social skills (Chawla, 2015). Research on spatial discrimination has shown that the quality of life for children living in low-income neighborhoods is negatively affected in a manner similar to that of adults (Mela & Toldo, 2019). Spatial discrimination has two dimensions. One is the confinement

of children in low-income neighborhoods to poor living conditions, similar to adults, based on their income level. This situation exposes the direct impact of urban planning on social inequalities (Sarkar, 2024). Public spaces in cities reflect the dynamics of urban life and shape individuals' social interactions. For children, these spaces are not only places to play and have fun but also places where they shape their social identities, learn, and acquire social skills. Public spaces support children's physical and emotional development while enabling them to build social connections. In urban areas, children face significant inequalities in accessing basic services such as schools, parks, and healthcare, preventing them from fully benefiting from the opportunities available in the city. The way spatial discrimination affects children mirrors the class-based and spatial divides experienced by adults (Troutt, 2017). The second dimension of spatial discrimination is the failure of cities to create safe spaces for children. Difficulties in accessing safe spaces for children lead to increased social exclusion and security threats (Johnston, 2008). Environmental pollution and the lack of green areas in urban areas threaten children's health, negatively affecting their quality of life in the same way as adults. Studies on the effects of environmental factors on children's health indicate that elements such as air pollution and water pollution lead to serious health problems for children (Sram et al., 2013). Factors such as air pollution, water contamination, and noise pollution have harmful effects on children's physical health, just like adults. When children are deprived of sufficient play areas and outdoor activities, they may experience developmental delays. Environmental threats negatively impact both adults and children. While environmental threats make adults' lives difficult, children are similarly affected by these threats.

On the other hand, violence in urban life, particularly in neighborhoods with high crime rates, directly affects not only adults but also children. Witnessing violent events has long-term psychological effects on children, and such traumas can negatively impact their social development (Milam, 2010). Just as adults try to cope with violent crimes, children witness violent events in their environments, and this threatens their safety (Riggio, 2002). Children, like adults, may face dangers such as drug use, street conflicts, and other hazards. Studies have shown that such environmental threats jeopardize children's safety and lead to psychological trauma (Hillis et al., 2016). These security threats prevent children from growing up and developing healthily while exposing them to psychological trauma. The impact of unsafe environments experienced by adults also threatens children similarly.

Children's access to educational rights is also subject to social and economic pressures in urban areas, just like adults. Children living in poor neighborhoods face educational inequalities. Studies have shown that obstacles to children's educational rights lead to their social exclusion (Tieken, 2017). Particularly in areas with high dropout rates, children may, like adults, be forced into mandatory work life. This situation increases the risk of being deprived of educational rights and further contributes to social exclusion.

The inadequacy of transportation infrastructure in urban areas similarly affects children as much as it affects everyone else in the city (Hillman et al., 1990). Several studies indicate that transportation creates a significant barrier, especially for disadvantaged children, negatively impacting their quality of life (Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012). Children living in neighborhoods far from city centers may have to travel long distances to go to school, access healthcare, or participate in social activities. Those living in city centers may also get lost among the crowds due to inadequate infrastructure, limiting their access to services. This situation makes children's daily lives more difficult, offering an experience similar to the transportation struggles adults face. The barriers faced in transportation deprive children of the opportunities available in the city and place them in a disadvantaged position.

The situations in which children are similarly affected and disadvantaged as adults in urban areas not only represent violations of children's fundamental rights but also limit their opportunities as subjects. In this context, it is emphasized that children's rights and needs should be taken into account in urban planning (Bartlett, 2002). To combat these inequalities, it is crucial to develop fair and inclusive policies in urban planning that address children's needs. Developing equitable policies in the design of children's living spaces in urban planning plays a critical role in reducing future social inequalities (González-Carrasco, 2023). The living spaces and opportunities for children in cities should not be shaped in the same way as for adults; instead, solution-oriented steps should be taken, considering the specific inequalities faced by children.

### **3. Which Child Are We Talking About?**

Children form one of the most dynamic and variable groups within society. However, children defined by the age range of 0-18 years possess vastly different conditions, experiences, and capabilities. The contexts in which children find themselves shape their physical, psychological, and social development processes, and at the same time, social inequalities and

opportunity disparities can also affect these processes (UNICEF, 2019). To understand that children have different living conditions, it is necessary to recognize that each child's capabilities, access to resources, struggles against gender inequality, social class, status, geographical conditions, cultural practices, and political structures all constitute distinct contexts (Nussbaum, 2011).

Capabilities refer to the extent to which children can access the opportunities and resources available in their environment (Sen, 1999). Families' economic and social situations directly affect children's access to education, healthcare, housing, and basic needs (Bourdieu, 1986). Accessibility, on the other hand, describes how reachable these opportunities are for children, depending on geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. The concept of cultural capital highlights that children from low-income families often grow up with fewer educational opportunities, limiting their learning processes. Similarly, Mehra (1997) indicates that economic opportunity inequalities are a significant factor shaping children's long-term health and educational success. Children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, like adults, have differing levels of capability and accessibility. Social class is a critical factor that determines children's life opportunities (Thomas, 2012). Children acquire specific positions within social class structures. Children from low-income families may have fewer opportunities compared to those from wealthier families, leading to inequalities in education, healthcare, and social services (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). However, capability is not solely related to economic status. It is important to evaluate all the conditions necessary for an individual to take any step that would improve their well-being (Sen, 1999).

In this context, the discussion of capability can be expanded to address gender inequality. Gender plays a significant role in children's development, and gender norms dictate which behaviors children can or cannot exhibit (Butler, 1990). According to gender performativity theory, gender is not merely a biological difference but a culturally and socially constructed characteristic. Boys and girls socialize in different ways according to the roles society expects from them (Skinner & McHale, 2022). These gender-based differences impact children's educational processes, play areas, and social participation. Such gender discrimination restricts how children express themselves and limits their potential (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

Another important factor shaping children's living conditions is the political context (UNICEF, 2016). The existence of national and international policies regarding children's rights directly impacts their access

to basic rights such as health, education, and security. In many countries, legal regulations and government policies regarding children's rights are among the key factors determining children's quality of life. However, political frameworks are often more limited in environments where children's rights are not adequately protected, insufficient resources are allocated, and social inequality increases (Save the Children, 2016). Children in developed countries generally have better-protected rights, while those affected by phenomena such as war, poverty, and migration are deprived of basic rights.

The geographical and cultural contexts in which children live directly affect their developmental processes. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children's development is shaped through social interactions, and that the cultural context plays a determining role in this process. Children live according to the norms and values dictated by the cultural and geographical environment they are in. Geographical factors can lead to inequalities in children's access to basic rights (UNICEF, 2016).

Although children form a common group in the age range of 0-18 years, they undergo vastly different developmental processes according to the contexts and conditions they experience. The contexts they are in may prevent children from growing up with equal opportunities, leading to the reproduction of social inequalities (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). Therefore, policies aimed at children's development processes must be shaped according to the specific context in which each child finds themselves.

#### **4. Differences in Services Between Urban and Rural Areas and Their Impact on Children's Quality of Life**

The differences in services between urban and rural areas are one of the significant factors that directly affect children's quality of life (UNICEF, 2016). Children's development is directly dependent on the quality and accessibility of the services offered in their environment. The fundamental differences between urban and rural areas shape how these services impact children. Basic services such as education, healthcare, social services, transportation, and infrastructure are among the most important factors determining children's quality of life. The disparities in services provided in urban and rural areas can create significant inequalities that hinder children's growth with equal opportunities (Mehra, 1997).

In urban areas, educational services are more accessible and diverse. Schools in cities are generally better equipped and furnished with a variety of educational materials and technologies. Additionally, urban schools usually have more educators, better-qualified teachers, and a broader curriculum

(Lareau, 2011). Children in cities can more easily access extracurricular tutoring programs, cultural and artistic activities, sports events, and other developmental opportunities. However, overcrowded classrooms in urban educational institutions, teachers dealing with larger student groups, and discrepancies in the quality of education may lead to opportunity inequalities for some children. On the other hand, access to educational services in rural areas is generally limited. Schools in rural areas are often fewer in number, and teachers' qualifications may be restricted (Thomas, 2012). Infrastructure shortages and the distance to schools can make it difficult for children to attend regularly. Access to educational materials and technology is very limited. Additionally, participation in extracurricular education and social activities is also more restricted in rural areas. This situation limits the educational opportunities for children in rural areas, preventing them from fully realizing their potential.

In urban areas, access to healthcare services is generally easier and more diverse. Hospitals, clinics, and health centers are more widespread and better equipped (UNICEF, 2016). In cities, it is possible to access doctors with broader specialties and quality healthcare services. Children in urban areas can more regularly access early health screenings, vaccinations, and other healthcare services. Moreover, the quicker and more accessible emergency healthcare services in cities provide a significant advantage for children. In rural areas, access to healthcare services is much more limited compared to cities. Rural areas often have fewer hospitals and clinics, and healthcare staff is frequently insufficient. Children may need to travel to urban centers for emergency and specialized treatment, but this can lead to time delays due to geographic distance. Moreover, health knowledge and awareness in rural areas are often limited, which exacerbates issues related to healthcare access (Save the Children, 2016).

Urban areas offer various social and cultural opportunities for children. Cultural activities such as theater, cinema, museums, and art galleries, as well as sports events and social organizations, are more widespread and accessible in cities (Lareau, 2011). Children in cities have the chance to develop social skills, engage with cultural richness, and explore various interests by participating in such activities. Additionally, social support services for children (such as psychological counseling and child support centers) are more common in urban areas. Access to social and cultural services is limited in rural areas. Children in rural areas often find it harder to participate in social activities, cultural organizations, and recreational events. In rural settlements, children generally interact more with the natural environment, but this may limit their social and cultural development. Additionally, social



support networks are narrower in rural areas, making it more difficult for children to access services for their psychological and social needs.

Transportation in urban areas is more widespread and systematically organized. Public transportation facilitates access to schools, hospitals, and social services. Additionally, due to the better infrastructure, children can easily reach schools, social events, or healthcare services (UNICEF, 2016). The infrastructure in urban areas is also generally more reliable in terms of basic services such as water, electricity, and the internet. In rural areas, transportation and infrastructure services are generally insufficient. Children may have to travel long distances to attend school, which can lead to interruptions in their education. Additionally, infrastructure deficiencies (such as roads, electricity, water, and internet) in rural areas make it difficult for children to access basic services. The geographic isolation of rural settlements also restricts children's access to healthcare or social opportunities (Sen, 1999).

Gender inequality in urban areas may be more noticeable than in rural areas. However, cities generally develop more policies regarding women's rights and gender equality (Butler, 1990). This can particularly increase girls' access to education and other opportunities. Social services in urban areas may offer programs to help break down gender roles. In rural areas, gender roles are more rigid, and it may be more difficult for girls to access education, work, or engage in other social activities. This can particularly limit the social and economic opportunities for girls in rural areas. In rural settlements, gender inequality may be a significant factor affecting children's quality of life.

There are significant differences in the impact of urban and rural services on children. Urban services offer more education, healthcare, social, and cultural opportunities, while rural services offer these opportunities to a more limited extent. These inequalities greatly affect children's development, their access to education and healthcare, their social interactions, and future life opportunities. To ensure that children grow up with equal opportunities in both urban and rural areas, it is necessary to improve the quality of services in both contexts and implement more inclusive policies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the urban and child dyad is essential for creating a comprehensive understanding of how cities influence children's development. Children's interactions with their urban environments significantly shape their physical, social, and emotional well-being. As

we've explored, the relationship between children and adults in urban spaces often reflects broader societal structures, with children experiencing varying levels of support, opportunity, and protection based on their socio-economic and cultural contexts. The differences in services between urban and rural areas further exacerbate the inequalities that children face. While urban areas tend to offer better access to education, healthcare, and social services, these resources are not always equitably distributed, and issues such as overcrowded schools and limited community resources still persist. In contrast, children in rural areas often lack access to basic services, which hinders their development and future opportunities. The question of which child we are talking about is crucial—children from different socio-economic backgrounds, gender identities, and geographical locations experience vastly different opportunities for growth and development. Thus, it is vital that policies not only address these inequalities but also consider the specific needs of children within the context of their environment. Ultimately, to ensure that all children have the chance to thrive, it is necessary to bridge the gap between urban and rural service availability, enhance the quality of services, and implement inclusive policies that cater to the diverse realities children face in both settings. By doing so, we can promote a more equitable society where every child, regardless of their environment, has the resources and opportunities to reach their full potential.

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