

Committee on the Rights of the Child

Day of General Discussion

Friday, 28 September 2001 – OHCHR (Palais Wilson, Geneva)

Violence Against Children within the Family and in Schools

Submission by Population Council-Pakistan

Population Council

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We are an international, nonprofit institution that conducts research on three fronts: biomedical, social science, and public health. This research and the information it produces helps change the way people think about problems related to reproductive health and population growth. Our research makes a difference in people's lives.

Population Council has worked in Pakistan since 1958, establishing a permanent office in 1991. With a regular staff in Pakistan of about 60, the Council works to expand the country's research base in reproductive health and related population issues; provides research-based technical assistance to the ministries of population welfare, and health; and seeks to improve Pakistan's population policies through utilization of appropriate research findings.

Subject:

Why adolescents in developing countries are increasingly gaining the interest of researchers, policy makers and programmers? One aspect of this issue is the large number of adolescent's population makes necessary their involvement for human development sustainability. The strongest demand expressed today, by young people themselves is that for participation. They want to be considered as full and equal citizens. Adolescents need to be consulted and involved in all aspects of social interchange.

In Pakistan, out of 135.6 millions, more than 22.5 millions are adolescents, which is a major proportion of the whole population. This proportion is important than that other population, because high percentage of Pakistani are already either in their adolescence years or will be entering it in the next five years, and are also dependent of coming generation and can play a role as guardians or trainers for this coming generation.

We all are discussing on children's rights but we are still missing one major side in the field of Street Children's rights in the world. In Pakistan the situation of this component is very bad due to low interest of respective STATE for their Rights. Let us see, the situation of Street Children's in Pakistan.

(THE SITUATION OF STREET CHILDREN'S IN PAKISTAN)

There is no one definition of street children. Peoples and Organizations hold different views of what exactly is a street child. The two central themes distinguish between the ' real' street children and children who are working on the street but return home at night. The first one is based on the premise that:

Street children are those for whom the street, in the widest sense of the word: i.e. unoccupied dwellings, wasteland etc., more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults.

NATURE OF STREET CHILDREN:

Pakistan does not have many children who live on the streets but there are

many living off the streets. The number of children frequenting streets and public places to earn, beg and "hang out" with their peers both by day and night is growing.

Street children is an urban problem. High population growth and smaller landholding in the rural areas has led to high rates of rural urban migration. Pakistan's urban population is growing at a fast pace. Urban centers do not have the infrastructure to house or employ this influx. This has resulted in high rates of adult employment with a large number of families living on the edge of poverty.

These conditions have serious implications on the lives of children who have to learn to fend for themselves and their families at a very early age. For many of these children, family ties become increasingly weakened and the home plays less part in their lives.

FAMILY BACKGROUND:

The majority of such children are boys who mostly go out or are sent out to earn. Some have been sent from the village to seek work or have run away to a town. They may or may not return home. But most come from urban slums and townships, and often from broken homes or households headed by a woman. Some of them may have been abandoned by their families but most of them run away from home because of abusive and exploitative family relations, bus stops, railway stations and marketplaces become their homes and workplaces.

JOBS:

Once on the streets, these children end up doing odd jobs, drifting from one to another. They are mostly involved in jobs like car washing, newspaper selling, street vending, rag picking and scavenging, shoe shining, running errands and carrying bags, and often resorting to begging in between. Some drift into prostitution to make extra money. There are children that specialized in one occupation while others do different jobs in one day. There are some who only steal and prostitute.

The largest number of children on the streets are those who beg. They prefer begging because it does not require hard labor and sometimes they can make good money in a day. At times, begging runs in the family where the children are taught early in life, even as infants, the art of getting sympathy. But many families that have suffered socio-economic disasters end up asking their children to beg for money or food.

Many economic activities of the street children are controlled by "territories" which are guarded by members or gangs. A number of these children are terrorized by such gangs and they end up working for the gangs that use them for selling drugs, stealing and giving information for purpose of theft and robbery.

LIVING CONDITIONS:

The problem of street children is different from the other child laborers. While most child workers have homes to go back to after work, the street children are completely alone and are at the mercy of their employers, night and day. Their number of meals is from one to three daily, often getting leftover meals from restaurants and eating-places in the areas that they hang around.

Many are also found in the vicinity of religious shrines where people donate food for the poor. Some live in the places of their work, on the payment, in the bus stations or near the railway stations, and thus are exposed to various risks. Such children obviously are at the mercy of criminals, drug addicts and the police. This kind of existence, many a time, pushes these children into a life of crime, often under the control of organized adult criminal and anti-social groups.

HEALTH PROBLEMS:

The living and eating patterns of these children create a variety of health problems, most of which are related to the unhygienic, overcrowded, surrounding and exposure to extreme weather and even, in some cases, to STDs, Skin ailments, bacterial and parasitic infections and malnourishment is common among them. They neglect their health due to financial constraints and avoid using the facilities of the government hospitals because they know through experience that they will not be cared for there. The long procedures to procure of first-aid is difficult. Lack of health information and education further aggravates these children's problems.

Among the most serious threats to the health of street children is their high degree of exposure to drugs and sex abuse. There are street children that use cigarettes, alcohol and different drugs. Drugs that are easily available are solvents, marijuana, at time, crack. These children also have a higher risk of acquiring STDs and HIV, because of their early exposure to both heterosexual and homosexual sex.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS:

The street life is unstructured and destabilizing where nothing is guaranteed, not even the next meal. This erratic existence sometimes produces distortions of the mind in the younger children who lose track of time, distance and how long they have been wandering. They live on groups security, companionship, and affection; it gives them a sense of belonging. They have a strong sense of family amongst each other and regard friendships as very important.

Street children are often looked upon as delinquents and trustworthy. Not many people are willing to employ them in either homes or workplaces. This rejection by the society takes its toll on the children who therefore feel no obligation to the society. These children have no faith in the system of education, law enforcement officials or government to solve their problems. However, in spite of all this and their critical situation, these children manifest an irrepressible determination and valor. They remain spirited and display resourcefulness and independence.

With rapid population growth and rampant poverty and urbanization, it can be assumed that Pakistan may soon have to deal with the problem of children living of the street. With the deteriorating situation of the country, many may soon be forced to adopt the ways of the "street". The situation demands that the government starts to dwell and analyze the state of street children before it is too late.

PAKISTAN, SIGNATORY TO INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS:

Pakistan is a signatory to several international commitments, which cover basic human rights. Two of these which are binding instruments with legal dimensions are:

- CRC (1990)
(Adopted by the Un General Assembly in 1989)
- CEDAW (1996)
(Adopted by the Un General Assembly in 1979)

The other international commitments, to which Pakistan is also a signatory, are the following declarations:

- Health for All by the Year 2000 (1978)
- Education for All by the Year 2000 (1990)
- Universal Access to Reproductive Health Information and Services by the year 2015 (1994)

Pakistan ratified the CRC with a general reservation stating that the provisions will be interpreted in the light of Islamic injunctions.

Subsequently, the Government has completed its process for formally withdrawing the reservation at the UN has not been completed. CEDAW was ratified by Pakistan in 1996, more than fifteen years after its adoption by the UN General Assembly.

The National Commission for Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD) within the Ministry of Women's Development and Social Welfare has been given the task of coordinating national efforts for implementation of the CRC in collaboration with the Provincial Commissioners for Child Welfare and Development (PCCWD). The Commissioners have been given a huge mandate but they lack adequate manpower and resources to play this role effectively. Despite plans to raise the status of the Commissioners and to give them more resources, necessary action is still pending.

The mid-decade as well as the year 2000 goals set in the NPA formulated after the World Summit for Children (WSC) and their achievements are constantly referred to during the course of the Situation Analysis. The NPA for CEDAW is still in the process of being developed, although a Commission of Enquiry on Women, headed by a Supreme Court judge, which was set up in 1994 has completed reviewing legislation discriminatory to women and proposed measures to improve the status of women in Pakistan. NGOs, particularly those involved in advocacy and consciousness rising in favor of women, played a vital consultative role in the participatory process of drawing up the NPA.

The NGO Movement in Pakistan for Children's and Women's Rights

It is now widely recognized that communities needs to be involved in the development process as equal partners through Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). But the NGO sector is weaker in Pakistan than in other countries of South Asia. Traditionally, local organizations led by community activists or philanthropists have concentrated predominantly on social welfare activities. However, this is beginning to change with some NGOs, particularly urban ones, concentrating on advocacy and lobbying. Other NGOs have fostered and strengthened village organizations in order to implement development activities through them.

A promising feature of the NGO initiatives in Pakistan is that about half of the total number of NGOs are committed to some form of women's development. Comparatively speaking, NGOs addressing children's needs are to a fairly recent phenomenon and are still few. The NGO movement has gained further support from international donor agencies who direct funds and provide technical support to the communities through them. Currently, NGOs are too "donor dependent" and they need to develop a stable, independent financial basis and a supporting constituency within Pakistan.