

International Day for Street Children opportunity to review situation in Pakistan

Amir Murtaza

The International Day for Street Children was celebrated for the first time on 12 April 2011. The success of the International Day for Street Children 2011 provided a platform to discuss and deliberate the issues of millions of these vulnerable children all around the world, including Pakistan. The International Day for Street Children was launched in 2011 by the Consortium for Street Children (CSC) in more than thirty countries, with a view to create a broader awareness about the issue. In 2012, the theme for the day is “Challenging Perceptions”. The day is celebrated by street children, child rights activists, social workers, NGOs, policy makers, and individuals across the globe.

Occasions such as the International Day for Street Children have given us the opportunity to review the situation and adopt more practical strategies to tackle the issue of street children in Pakistan, especially in cities like Karachi and Lahore. It is a fact that the number of street children in big cities of Pakistan, such as Karachi and Lahore, have grown in recent years. Though there is no official data available regarding the number of street children, it is widely assumed that thousands of children are living and working on the streets of Pakistan, without any proper protection mechanism.

A large portion of Pakistani society consists of children; however, they fall in the category of vulnerable sections of the society. The ratification of UN and international protocols and conventions, and the enactment of domestic legislation for the protection and promotion of child rights have not made much change in the situation as it has been confirmed that children, especially vulnerable groups such as street children, face serious challenges in the area of security and development.

At the tender age of seven, Tanoo found himself at Karachi Railway Station, where his father deserted him, to face the harsh realities of life. Tanoo is now thirteen and understands the realities of daily life. Being an unprotected child living on the streets of Karachi, Tanoo faced all sorts of violence, including physical, sexual and mental. “Life on the street is not bad as you can easily get delicious food from charities established in the city; however, night time always frightened me,” said Tanoo.

His initial days on the streets were terrible, as he was not able to find any safe place to spend the night. Later, while realizing the grim realities of the life on the streets, he joined a local gang of street kids. “At one night when I was trying to sleep under the board of a newspaper cabin, I suddenly realized that someone is rubbing my back. He was Raja, leader of a street children gang at a local bus station in Karachi. I tried to resist, but he placed a knife on my back,” Tanoo recalled.

Living in a group was a good experience, but Tanoo found it difficult to get some work to bear his daily expenses. “I was always surprised how some of my fellows managed to earn good money despite the fact that they don’t do any work.” His curiosity ended when one day Nata, his fellow group member, introduced him to Basher, a local milk supplier. Basher invited him at the backside of his milkshop and

gave him one hundred rupees. “It was not at all hard work and I got a good amount.” Since that day, Tanoo has never been short of money. However, once police personnel caught him when he was with his regular friend at a deserted park. The policeman took some money from his friend and took Tanoo with him at a nearby hotel. “I really paid a very heavy price, and for the next two days was not even able to walk,” Tanoo said.

Dr. Ali Murtaza, a Public Health Expert, observed that street children are a reality and a complex problem. In the last decade their number has increased many folds, poverty and illiteracy being the two foremost reasons. Influenced by a push or pull factor these children seek opportunities outside the home environment or parental control. But their dreams are shattered very quickly once they face the naked brutalities of the real world. Transition from family life to street life puts all sorts of pressure on these children, and in order to survive they end up doing all kind of jobs, drifting from one place to another. This vulnerability exposes them to take drugs as an outlet. It was also observed that most of these kids are aware of their problems but are usually coerced by their friends to continue with their habits. A major reason for this persistence is the children’s activities at night. Being the most vulnerable time, children are usually carried away with natural desires or social pressures.

Dr. Ali Murtaza further said that there was some evidence that children spending the nights either at home or under some kind of supervision, were at significantly lower risks of drug addiction and sexual exploitation. Though different government departments and non government organizations are presently running some good programs, this study found that visits to a drop-in center usually has no direct or lasting effect on the drug addiction of a child. Though there have been some success stories, for larger benefits there is a need to devise a holistic and prolonged approach for providing shelters to these children over a significant time so as to properly rehabilitate them in society.

Thousands of street children are living and working on the streets of Karachi, Lahore and other big cities. Due to their vulnerability, these children need to be given protection and introduced to an environment that facilitates their basic needs. Additionally, a child’s right to life, security and health facilities should be accepted, and the government and non-government entities should introduce community led care and residential facilities for these children. There is also a need to orient political will and allocate resources to the structured development of child rights-based comprehensive prevention policies as outlined in the UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. Involvement of all stakeholders including government, non-governmental organizations, donor agencies and street children is essentially required to solve this problem on a sustainable basis.

[Footnote text for first page] Amir Murtaza is a regular contributor to the AHRC and can be reached at amirmurtaza@hotmail.com.