

Extending a hand to child workers in Pakistan

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Ali visits the Stoori Drop-in
Centre with other child
workers every day.

Mardan, Pakistan, 31 May 2007 – Ali¹ is a lively boy who is not sure about his age. He thinks he is about twelve. He is full of energy and loves being the centre of attention. He has the confident demeanour of children who live in the street, where he works with a donkey cart transporting goods in the markets of Mardan, a large city in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Ali can not read or write.

"My parents sent me to school but I ran away", he says. "The teacher used to beat me". He has five brothers and one sister. His father sells cattle. Ali makes between 100 and 150 Pakistani rupees a day (about 1.5 and 2.5 US dollars). He buys food from the small street restaurants and some nights he goes home to his family."

As many children working on the streets, Ali takes drugs. He inhales glue, a habit he picked up from his cousin. "My father beats me because I take drugs and because I feel so bad about it, I inhale more glue". Some nights he sleeps in a shrine with other street children. There is music and free food. The boys are approached by men who share drugs with them and some of the children are sexually abused.

Ali's story is not unique. Hundreds of children work and live in the streets of Mardan and like Ali are at risk of exploitation and abuse.

Fatima², for example, is about eleven years old but looks younger than her age. She sells sweets in the street and is the only breadwinner of a family of eight. She is the eldest child of a poor family and her father says he is not healthy enough to work.

¹ The real name of the child was changed to protect the child's identity.

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Fatima sells sweets in the streets of Mardan to support her family.

Unlike Ali, Fatima never had the chance to get an education. 'My parents prevented me from going to school because they thought that it would not be of any use to me. I have to feed my parents and my brothers and sisters because my parents don't work'. It is something that hurts her: "Whenever I see children going to school, I feel extremely unhappy. I would also like to wear a school uniform and have books, pencils and a school bag. But when I look at the life I have, I feel helpless".

Fatima earns 50 to 100 Pakistani rupees a day (about 0.8 to 1.6 US dollars), which is not enough to feed her family. The streets are full of risks for a girl like Fatima. "Men chase me and tell me they will give me money if I kiss them, if I go with them. I hate it when they approach me this way".

In Pakistan, most children who are sexually abused are boys and girls from poor families and working on the streets. Limited access to information, life-skills and education, also increase the vulnerability of these children.

With the support from IKEA, UNICEF is establishing five new Drop-in Centres for street children in Mardan and in the provincial capital Peshawar with the aim of assisting 5,000 vulnerable children. Every day, Ali and Fatima visit the Stoori Drop-in Centre run by the local non-governmental organization, Step. The Centre's facilitators provide them with family and individual counselling and information to protect themselves from abuse and exploitation, encourage the children to give up drugs, offer legal aid if they get in trouble with the police and teach basic literacy.

The children are the main ambassadors for the Drop-in Centre. Ali brings one of his younger brothers there, when he is not going to school. "I want to protect him so that he does not start taking drugs", he points out.

At the Centre he gathers with other adolescents, who like him live and work on the streets and are most at risk. There, some of his friends are learning how to read and write in Urdu. They also get a chance to play cricket in the courtyard. Fatima brings her brother Abdullah and her friend Nageen.



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Ali explains to his brother how to protect himself from HIV.

Without the Centre, children like Ali and Fatima would not get a safe refuge from the dangers of the street, a chance to get information and support to lead safer lives. Ali is proud of what he has learned at the Centre. He shows his brother how HIV and AIDS is transmitted using the pictures from a poster. Since coming to the Centre, Ali says he is trying to inhale less glue and has asked for help to give up drugs. Fatima is learning how to read and write and is proving to be a fast learner.

With IKEA's support, UNICEF will also provide technical and financial assistance to the newly-created Child Protection and Welfare Bureau in the North West Frontier Province. The support will also strengthen the capacity of selected NGOs to provide specialized individual and family counselling and protective services, including family tracing and reunification, legal assistance, detoxification under medical supervision for child victims of violence, sexual abuse and exploitation.