

“All they felt was shame”- disability in northern Ethiopia

BY GEORGE MORRIS

Within the picture-postcard setting of rural Tigray in northern Ethiopia, two schools are struggling to help traumatized children and young people, many of whom have been rejected by their own families and communities. The school administrators often have no more than \$1 to spend per pupil, per year.

But, for children who are born blind or deaf, these schools are the only source of hope for some 300 miles. As part of a new campaign to help disabled children, UNICEF is trying to raise more than US\$180,000 to help these schools become safer, happier places.

Adigrat School for the Deaf, North-Eastern Tigrey

My Parents? They couldn't stand me. All they felt was shame, shame that God had cursed them with someone like me, signed Kiflay, a deaf student, relating his childhood through his newly-acquired sign-language skills. His hands are moving with astonishing dexterity; the sharp, vigorous gestures relating not only his words but also his anger.

Before Keflay joined the specialist school in the town of Adigrat, he lived in a typical village in Western Tigray. The people were mostly subsistence farmers with little in the way of education. Deafness is often seen as the Devil's work; Kiflay soon learned how cruel this superstition can be.

Only the animals knew me, he signs. The other children could go to the village school, but not me. I was kept in doors, away from everyone.

School Director Ato Kiflee says that this is a common problem. "There is a real denial amongst communities here. Deaf children are kept inside as parents think producing a deaf child is shameful. We have seen rickets and skin problems among them due to sunlight deficiency."

Ato Kiflee says that out of 32 teachers, 10 have been trained to assist deaf children. New arrivals are placed in grade zero, where sign-language is taught intensively for six months before beginning standard lessons.

The Adigrat School for the Deaf helps up to 181 deaf children as well as 950 students with no disabilities. The director believes mixing the children helps the deaf students integrate into society. Integration is something they must learn quickly, as classes for the deaf are only taught up to grade eight.

Unfortunately, teaching is all they can offer. Budgets are so tight that extra support of any kind for this vulnerable group is impossible. This has created a very serious problem, giving many children a difficult choice.

If a deaf child wishes take advantage of what the school can offer, he/she must trek as much as 300km to Adigrat from the surrounding countryside. As there is no food or shelter at the school, these children usually sleep on the streets. They support themselves through menial jobs, such as shoe shine or

braiding hair.

Street life is tough enough without being unable to listen for its hazards. Emphasizing the gravity of the situation, Ato Kiflee describes how less than one year ago two pupils were knocked down and killed by a car they were incapable of hearing.

Many who make the journey discover that there is no room in the class. The local woreda (district) estimates there could be over 300 deaf children within its boundary; there are perhaps thousands in the vast region of Tigray itself.

Despite the school's poverty and shortcomings, young people like Kiflay are proof of what a bit of determination and sacrifice can do. He is now literate, speaks sign language fluently and is studying to complete high-school examinations which his teachers expect him to pass with excellent results.

His next ambition is university, and perhaps a good job to gain the equality and the respect that is his due.

Mekele Boarding School for the Blind

The Italian-built road from Adigrat on Ethiopia's northern frontier leads south to the bustling town of Mekele, the region's capital.

The rainy season has given way to the dry season. The mud, once hardened by bouts of rainfall followed by sunshine, has become a thick coat of dust covering the unpaved highways and tracks. Trucks and 4X4s hurtle along, whipping up yellow dust storms. Children on the way to school rub their eyes in an attempt to get rid of the painful grit.

Dry season dust and water shortages deprive children of their right to sanitation. Eye infections rapidly become something much worse.

Over 120 blind children from nine to 15 years old call this school on the outskirts of town their home. Like in Adigrat, they come from all over the region to get help. Fortunately, for these children at least, there are dormitories when they arrive.

The inside of these dormitories are dark and silent. The children listen for the slightest sounds from outside to help them know what is going on. At the approach of Ato Egubay, they rise from their sitting positions and make for the door. They use their hands to search out their visitor; the familiar feel of their teacher's clothes reassuring them.

Egubay teaches Braille alongside regular education. All lessons are taught manually. The school has no learning aids or equipment such as Braille transcription machines, which are used for creating large amounts of text needed for school exercise books.

"I'm sorry to say that this school is not well equipped," says Egubay apologetically. "The government only gives us Birr 100 (US\$11) every month. There are only two libraries for the blind in Ethiopia, both in the capital Addis Ababa. We want to build one equipped with all the things needed to help the blind here, but that is impossible. At the moment there is also no health support or transport. If a student becomes sick, it becomes a serious problem. We were given some money to pay for a nurse, but it was not nearly enough."

Security has also become an issue. The pupils have been subjected to frequent attempts at sexual assault by outsiders trying to take advantage of their inability to see. A wall was half built around the buildings, but there was no money to complete it.

As with the deaf, stigma and suspicion surround the blind. Many children find their way onto the streets because their families are unable or unwilling to support them. “We are forced to prioritize,” says Egubay (who is himself blind) “those who live here are the most vulnerable and in the most danger. Blind children from families must wait their turn.

For the majority, training and education stop before high school as there is no space or funds to teach at higher levels.

Despite this, some young people do go on to be a success. Egubay believes that being blind encourages excellent memory skills. Children here frequently pass national high school examinations with good grades and some have even enrolled in Addis Ababa or Mekele universities. But there are many more blind children in the area who deserve the same chance.

Action by UNICEF:

If funding is secured, UNICEF will provide learning aids such as adapted computers and audio/visual equipment. Local education offices will also be given training to identify and refer children in need of help.

With enough funding, security at both schools will be upgraded, providing a safe and secure environment for staff and pupils.

To help reverse the negative attitudes common in many parts of Tigray and Ethiopia, UNICEF wants to establish new community dialogue centers. These forums will help disabled people and society come to terms with blindness and deafness and help reduce prejudice.

With greater awareness and technical support given to all schools within Tigray, as much as 200,000 disabled children have the chance of a better future.