

SAVING YOUNG MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN FROM A LIFE ON THE STREETS



ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia – When Bizunesh Tadesse was 18, she left her hometown in Gonder to be a nanny in the Addis household where her sister had found work as a maid. But the bright future she thought she had discovered took a dark turn when the owner of the house raped her, and she became pregnant with his child.

“His wife was out for a traditional funeral,” Bizunesh said. “He got me, and threw me on the bed. When my stomach got bigger and bigger, they kicked me out, and I ended up on the street.”

She lived for almost three years in the makeshift plastic sheeting shelters that litter Addis’ streets trying to eke out a living for herself and her baby girl, Tesfanesh Shemsu. It was during her darkest days, that she found out about the Godanaw Rehabilitation Integrated Project. “Friends on the street told me Godanaw takes care of the destitute and would help me and my baby,” Bizunesh said.

Godanaw set her up selling candy, cigarettes and other petty trade items, paid for her rent for three months and helped furnish her modest home with a bed and cooking utensils.

“My heart’s desire is to send her to school to pull me out of poverty,” Bizunesh said. “I don’t want her to end up like me.”

Mulatu Tafesse is Godanaw’s Programme Director and has been working with UNICEF to help young street mothers and their children get off the streets and away from the dangers of violence and exposure to HIV-AIDS. “Your heart bleeds for them,” Mulatu said. “We teach them that begging hands can work. ... It is really exciting to see them repairing their lives and living off of the streets with the work of their own hands.”

His programme has supported income generating activities for 1,560 street children, educational funding to 1,250 destitute students, medical support for another 1,356 and vocational skill training for 560 young women. Godanaw also provides HIV/AIDS awareness training and testing for the children and their mothers, many of whom became infected with the virus after being raped while homeless.

About 67 girls are currently working by day, leaving their babies at a daycare facility provided by Godanaw. They return at night to live in tidy, well-maintained dormitory shelters to sleep off the streets with their babies at night.



Kidest Abebe was only four months away from graduating from high school and her eventual dream of becoming a nurse when her stepfather raped her while her mother was out-of-town. The neighbours who took her in threw her out when her "stomach started bulging."

For months, she was forced to scrape by on the streets of Addis living in a plastic shelter. When she was nine months pregnant she was admitted to Godanaw and began hairdressing training to support herself and her baby, Bruk Abebe.

"I will care for him as best as I can. I will provide for him with my hairdressing," Kidest said. "I know that Godanaw is like a shepherd – they gather us together and take care of us. Had Godanaw not been around, I would have been a victim of all that threatens us on the streets."

The Ethiopian Government estimates that there are currently between 100,000-200,000 street children in the country nationally, with 50,000-60,000 children living on the streets of the capital.

Of those in Addis Ababa, at least 15,000 are working and living on the streets without care or support, and the others spend 12-14 hours earning a living on the streets and go home to their families, relatives or friends. The Government estimates that about 25 per cent of Addis' street children are girls who are subject to violence and many turn to prostitution as a coping mechanism. In addition, an increasing number of street children have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF is supporting projects like Godanaw as part of its Gender and Child Protection Programme to protect vulnerable young mothers and children from a life on the streets. More than 85 street children have been reunited with their families, 100 street children placed in foster care and 400-500 provided with access to temporary night shelters in Addis.

"Girls who work and live in the streets are faced with extremely harsh conditions including sexual abuse, rape, unwanted pregnancy and early motherhood," said Joanne Dunn, UNICEF Child Protection Officer. "UNICEF is committed to working with the Government to assist Ethiopia's street children, getting as many of them off the streets as possible and providing support to those that are still out there."

Around Ethiopia, UNICEF has provided formal education and school materials for over 3,000 street children and access tutors and non-formal education to another 3,000. Special ID cards have given free access to health care for over 7,500 street children and mothers, and more than 2,000 have received health, sanitation and HIV-awareness education. Safe motherhood initiatives have also been provided to hundreds of street mothers and children nationally.

To keep families together, more than 550 households have received small credit loans enabling the start up of small businesses. A wide variety of skills training has also been administered to over a thousand beneficiaries and dozens of apprenticeships arranged and funded.

The Child Protection unit is also promoting the importance of Birth Registration in the country, working with sister UN agency, the International Labour Organisation, on discouraging child labour and with the Ministry of Justice on juvenile justice issues.

But with limited resources, the Child Protection unit can only provide a minimum of the assistance that is needed to help the growing numbers of Ethiopia's street children. "UNICEF support is only a drop in the bucket of what is needed to cope with the exploding streetism in this country," Dunn said. "We are counting on a strong donor response to address the needs of those already on the streets and help UNICEF protect more children from ending up there."

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