

INTERVIEW WITH ZERIHUN MAMMO, FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE ETHIOPIAN TEENAGER'S FORUM, ON THE SUBJECT OF STREET CHILDREN

The Ethiopian Teenager's Forum is a youth-driven initiative following the principles of the Global Movement for Children dedicated to working for and with children and youth. The theme of the second session is on street children. The forum, supported by UNICEF, will come up with ten recommendations regarding street children, which will be forwarded to relevant Government, NGO, international organizations, the private sector and the media.



Question: Why did you choose the topic of "Street Children" for the second meeting of the Ethiopian Teenagers' Forum?

Answer: The idea to hold this forum on street children first came during a previous meeting held in preparation for the Special Session on Children in New York. Ethiopian Youth put the issue of street children first as the most critical issue facing Ethiopian children and youth. So we were taking that into consideration and also looking at the situation now, children who are living on the street are suffering a great deal. We have selected this issue, because we have seen their situation.

In fact we had initially thought to make street children the subject of our first forum, but because HIV is also a priority area attacking youth we decided to make that go first. But initially our idea was to do it on street children.

How have you been preparing for this second forum?

We have been for this particular forum on street children that will be held on 5 March preparing in a number of ways.

First, we prepared questionnaires, which we then distributed to students. This was done to give students the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about street children and to give them an opportunity to forward their suggestions.

Another thing that we have done, in collaboration with the NGO called Godanaw, which is an organization that assists street children, we have been able to see first

hand the situation, the issues and problems that street children are facing first hand. We have tried to see what kind of lives children who live on the street lead. We have been able to see and understand what kind of cruel, bitter situation and life conditions they are in.

What did you feel when you saw this?

The thing that I saw that really touched my heart was this young girl. She is 16-years-old. Ten years ago she came to Addis Ababa from Gondar. She started working in someone's home, and when she was 15-years-old the man who heads the household raped her. When she got pregnant he chased her out of the house and she started living on the street. She gave birth to his child. Three months after she had his child she was raped again. She is 16-years-old and when we saw her it was only four days since she had given birth, and she had a one year and two months old baby. I was very sad when I saw her.

How is the girl surviving?

The girl has been living on the street for one year and two months now. She used to make her living selling things on the street. Then she got pregnant. She had her second child in Zauditu Hospital. When she was released from hospital she discovered that her street dwellings had been destroyed and that she could no longer live on the street. She became desperate and when she had no other option she went to the organization called Godanaw. They are now trying hard to help her. But they are also having trouble with finding housing.

Previously you had mentioned that you have friends who live on the street. You also live alone. Have you ever thought that you yourself might become a street child?

When I lost my parents it really hit me. The first thought I had was that I would end up on the street. But the community around me supported me, and the *kebele* (district) allowed me to continue living in the room my mother had rented. Otherwise, my fate would also have been life on the street. So when I see street children I consider that I am one of them. And I really feel sad for them. I feel very close to them. In fact, you can say that they are my friends. When I walk on the street they greet me. Sometimes we sit down and talk.

How old were you when you lost your parents?

I was twelve-years-old when my mother passed away. I was five when I lost my father.

How do you make a living?

I work in a flower shop that prepares flower arrangements for coffins. I make paper flowers for the coffins.

How much do you earn in one month?

We do not get paid by the month. I earn a maximum of six birr (about 75 US cents) per day.

How much do you pay for rent?

Rent is cheap – 3.75 birr (about 50 US cents) a month. It is only one room, two by four meters.

What do you expect to get out of this Forum?

What we really want is first to change the way youth perceive the problem. Young people could have different views on street children. Our first objective is to change their negative views. Second, it is to show how children can find solutions to their own problems. Adults cannot speak for us. They see things from the outside. We see things from the inside.

The other thing is to give street children themselves a chance to speak – for them to get up in that venue and speak about the things that happen to them. It is to show NGOs and organizations that we young people can discuss among ourselves and that we can identify our problems and speak about them and suggest solutions.

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