

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

AFGHANISTAN

THE STORY OF MASOOMA, SOLD FOR THE SURVIVAL OF OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

Six-year-old Masooma (not her real name), a girl from a village of Argo District, in north-eastern Badakhshan Province, was sold to a rich man in the village. Her mother describes poverty as the main reason for selling the little girl, "I sold my daughter in lieu of AFN 10,000 (US\$ 200) to protect the lives of my other three children."

The case goes back to the first days of September 2008 when Masooma's desperate mother submitted an application for assistance to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), stating that her husband, convicted of murder, had been in prison for a year and that, due to high food prices, she had started working as a cleaner for wealthy families in her village for the survival of her children. In her application, she warned AIHRC that if she did not get support, she would sell one of her children to feed the rest of the family.

Her application was discussed at a monthly meeting of the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN), where senior representatives of government departments and non-governmental organizations debate child protection issues. CPAN members decided to assist her financially using the emergency funds provided by UNICEF. However, UNICEF's Child Protection Officer discouraged dependency on the organization in order to prevent the flow of similar cases. Based on experience from other provincial CPANs, he suggested to explore locally available resources and recommended to refer the case to relevant government departments, such as the Afghan Red Crescent Society and the Social and Welfare Department of the Governor's Office, as well as local business men, while closely monitoring the case. Unfortunately, during the follow-up it was found that the child had been sold on 7 September.

The recent development regarding Masooma's case was reported to Badakhshan's provincial CPAN. On 9 September, a member from AIHRC staff travelled to Argo District to share their concern with local government officials unaware of the incident. Together with representatives of the District's Governor, the team went to Masooma's village. Although most of the neighbours, including the victim's uncle, refused to be involved in the case, they finally accepted that the child had been sold to a rich person, who stated that he did it for charity.

The visiting team in consultation with local people decided to reunify the child with her mother and take written statement from the wealthy person that he had no claims over Masooma's family. "When the little girl was returned to her mother, she was crying and unable to express her feelings. She was weak and distressed," said an AIHRC staff member.

A few days later, on 12 September, CPAN members visited Masooma and her family to check out her condition and to hand over food, a recreational kit and some cash donated locally, as well as a family kit (cooking and hygiene utensils) and four double bed blankets supplied by UNICEF. Noticing that the little girl needed help, it was decided that she would receive psychological support from AIHRC.

Afghanistan is one of the least developed countries in the world with more than 60 per cent of its population living on less than US\$ 1 a day. Absence of social protection networks, limited or non-existent basic services, unemployment and continued drought have exacerbated the situation for at-risk families, including elderly and disabled people, as well as female-headed households.

The sale of children for the survival of other family members has recently emerged and is becoming an alarming phenomenon. Similar cases have been reported from other parts of the country. In almost all of them, the child victim was a female, which suggests dangerous gender discrimination.

Masooma and her family are happy now to be reunited thanks to the assistance mobilized locally, although she may have fewer chances to go to school and enjoy her childhood. More needs to be done to reply to the silent voices of hundreds of women and children who live in exclusion with no access to basic services.