

VOICES OF CHILDREN

Introduction

There are total 22.8 million out of school children in Pakistan out of the 51.33 million children.¹ All over the world there are millions of children whose survival is dependent on public spaces such as traffic signals, markets, bus station. These children are referred as street children as their source of livelihood is connected to the road. Children are very much prone to get involved in crime or become a victim of various form of abuses which include sexual abuse, child labor, exploitation, bullying etc.

There are multiple factors for children who are regular on the streets either working or living. Most of the children who work on the streets are financially supporting their families or sometimes they run away from home to live their lives on the streets as they feel they are neglected by family, they immediately run away from home to make their own money.

In 2019, SPARC research team conducted a number of individual and focus group discussion (FDGs) of children in Islamabad and Rawalpindi in order to document some voices of the children of Pakistan.

"I want to become an educated and successful man to end poverty and illiteracy in my community", says Ahmed.

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1418208>

The objectives of the individual interview and FDGs were:

- To focus on the voices of children living in the slum area of Pakistan
- To assess the basic rights to live, liberty, dignity, identity, food, shelter, safety, security, education, health, right to expression and justice.

For the SOPC report 2019, SPARC has selected few of the stories of children from Islamabad and Rawalpindi is as follow: ²

Amna

Amna is a 12 year old girl she lives in the slum area of Islamabad. She has 8 family members in her home including 6 siblings and she is the eldest among them. Being an eldest sister she takes really good care of her family from helping her mother in cooking to babysitting her younger brother and sister. Amna has never been to school before. She always wanted to become a teacher when SPARC opened life skills based education (LSBE) center in her community she said with an excitement that, "**It was like a dream come true for her**" where she could learn to read and write. She was one of the most punctual and dedicated student of SPARC'S Life Skill Based Education (LSBE) center which ended up in successfully mainstreaming her in school.

2. All children's names have been changed, to preserve their identity and dignity.

Initially Amna's parents were not in favor of girl's education after the age of 13, but after SPARC team conducted number of awareness sessions with the children and community members on child rights, child protection and positive disciplining, they observed a gradual change in their parent's behavior towards child.

Amna's father now regularly picks and drops her from school. Her father says, **"SPARC has given us eyes and a vision to think of a brighter future for our children"**.

In conclusion, Amna added, **"I believe in my dreams because my mother says, true dreams always comes true."** One day i will become a teacher and make my parents proud.

Fatima and Maryam

Fatima and Maryam are sisters. Fatima is a 11 years old girl and Maryam is 10 years old. Fatima and Maryam are often found on the street of Islamabad begging barefooted for money. Their father is a drug addict he begs for money on the street signal or takes money from his younger daughters to fulfill his needs for drugs. A social mobilizer of SPARC met with Fatima's father and took him for a screening test upon which he was diagnosed with HIV+. This news was shocking for his wife and later the whole family was taken for the screening test and fortunately the rest of the family's result turned out to be negative. Her father is now admitted in Government rehabilitation center of Islamabad. Fatima and Maryam are the only

source of earning bread and butter for the family. Their mother takes care of 3 younger children at home who are under 5 years old.

Fatima is a very sensible and confident girl. She added, when I used to stand on the signal to sell flowers or ask for money I saw some children in a group wearing neat and clean uniform, school bags were hanging on their shoulders. That day I wished how life would be, if I go to school. I laughed to myself and said: Not even a single one has ever been to school in my background how can I even imagine. Then later, in my community center school I was informed by my teacher that SPARC will be enrolling us in schools and provide uniform. Our birth registration was made and after few days I was in school.

Fatima concluded, I am blessed beyond measures that SPARC has enrolled me and my community fellows in school but not all children in our country and streets are always lucky. She added, I request Government of Pakistan to treat rich and poor children equally and provide them access to basic necessities of life such as health facilities and quality education in schools. Fatima and Maryam are now successfully enrolled in federal government school of Islamabad.

Mustafa

Mustafa is a 9 years old multitalented student. He loves acting and singing. In morning he goes to school after coming back from school he take rest and then go straight to work in the market to sell balloons. Mustafa has four siblings and the unity among them is their

strength. Initially when SPARC started their non-formal education center he was one of the least interested student but extra curriculum activities and creative teaching technique in class attracted him to become a regular student.

An update: He is currently enrolled in school. He works till 1 am midnight on the streets and his school requires him to wake up at 7am. He is just 8 years old and for him to bear this burden at such young age is cruelty.

Ibrahim

Ibrahim is 8 years old boy. He sells flower on signal. He is the only brother and has two sisters. He was a student of LSBE center and how he studying in class 2. For quite some time teacher saw sudden behavioral changes as he seemed mentally disturbed and she tried asking him as she was concerned about his changed attitude. Upon asking he shared in private that some elder boys tease him, tried to forcefully touch him and offered him money to do wrong things with them. He shared that he got scared and ran away immediately and he has changed his work location as well. Without delaying SPARC provided him psychological support, he expressed his concerns.

Children who work on the street are exposed to mental, physical, emotional and sexual abuse more frequently. It is the responsibility of parents and state to provide protected environment to children. Especially parents and teachers should be sensitise regarding the protection strategies of children.

However, there is a need for mental counseling of children in schools either its private or Government school. No child should ever feel discriminated and humiliated. It has become necessity to have at least one or two psychologist in every school.

Ayesha

Ayesha age 10 years old, she is a younger sister of Amna and they both wash car and sell balloons on the signal of Islamabad. Ayesha is a chubby and a bubbly kid yet little hyper and aggressive too. In early days of classes it was not easy for her to fit in with other kids. She used to hit children in class for no reason and leave the class without telling. When her teacher asked her to come back and apologize for her misbehavior to the kid she would stand still with a blank face and zipped mouth. After few minutes her teacher saw her sneak peeking in the class from a small corner of the hut. She had curiosity in her eyes, she wanted to change, learn and experience the fun in learning with her friends. She needed a mentor and an understanding environment to guide her about wrong doings and right doings with love.

With the passage of time her behavior started to change as she got busy in her class work and home work and didn't really had time for fighting and cursing.

SPARC's non-formal education center provides not only quality education but it also empowers children about their rights and teaches positive discipline.

Mina

Mina is a 12 year old girl. To earn her bread and butter for her home she washes car wind screen on the traffic signal. Initially she had a very non-serious and care free attitude. At the beginning of LSBE center classes she has serious behavioral issues, so the teacher of center opted the technique of making her the captain of class. When she became the captain of her class and child Right club the teacher saw a drastic change in her behavior e.g. she became responsible not only for herself but for her fellow students in class. She became a regular, punctual and an obedient student. Being a captain of class you have certain responsibilities for example spreading knowledge on Child Rights, child club and positive disciplining. However, she took deep interest and enjoyed her role thoroughly as a Captain which also improved her reading writing skills and she scored 2nd position in post-assessment test.

Ahmed

Ahmed is a 10 years old short heighted slim boy. He used to wakes up early in the morning to pick garbage with his father in their donkey cart and in evening he go for begging with his mother. He is one of the most intelligent, cooperative and possesses leadership quality. He enjoy wining whether its game competition or class test. Ahmed scored first position in post assessment test in his LSBE center. He was the first person to introduced team SPARC in his community. His hobby includes cycling, singing and dancing. The main behavioral issue with him was his bad language for example he used to abuse and curses a lot in the beginning. When his studies

improved his behavior also changed gradually. To utmost surprise now he has left begging and concentrating on going to school regularly. When his teacher asked, Ahmed have you stopped working? He said, Yes Teacher, **“if a child works he cannot focus on studies and i want to study and become an educated man in future.”**

Sumaira

Sumaira is a 14 years old girl and a student of LSBE center. She is a dropped out student as her parents migrated to Islamabad from Lahore when she was in grade 1, after that she never joined school again. Interest and passion for education never died, she is brilliant in calculation and her favorite subject is Math. Sumaira got her 1st position in her LSBE class and she scored 49.5 out of 50 marks.

Due to her age issue she was unable to mainstream in school but she is still learning in LSBE center, taking SPARC'S vocational training in community where she has learned how to stitch cloths and Tie-Dye dupatta's. She is doing really well and tailoring has become her only source of income.

Muhammad Hamza

Muhammad Hamza S/O Muhammad Jehanzeb belongs to Vehari and living in I-10/3 with his family. He is 8 years old and he is the youngest child of his family. His father and two brothers are masons, his mother Afia Bibi is a domestic worker. Muhammad Hamza was the first student of SPARC community base center. It was observed

that he was the most disobedient student of the center who remained busy in different naughty activities like abusing, bullying, start playing stones and involved other students, left the center without any permission and no personal hygiene. He created disturbance all the time in the classroom. It was observed that he needs some attention and care. SPARC teacher and social Mobilizers decided to give him extra attention and counseling. They encouraged and appreciated him on his each and every good action. A good change came up within one month, Muhammad Hamza started to come regularly in the center, stopped abusing his class fellows, he regularly asked questions whether he is neat and clean or not? He got first prize in cleanness competition. Hamza says "I want to join Pakistan Army in the future". Hamza's best friends Abdullah and Dilsheer said "we like Muhammad Hamza because now he wears neat and clean dress". Hamza's father shared **"my family has observed that there has come change in his behavior he asked his mother to wash his clothes regularly, he waits for center opening and tells us all the detail of the center. Now he wishes to go to a regular school"**.

Sadia

Sadia is a drop out student. She studied till class 3 and due to migration to another city she had to leave her school. Now she is 15 years old. Sadia got married when she was just 13 years old, after few months her husband and mother in law started beating her. She got her first divorce within few months of her marriage. After completion of "Iddat Period" her parents forced her to do another

marriage, which is her second marriage. Her parents think a girl should be married when she reaches the age of puberty.

There are many cases like Sadia's in marginalized communities, where a girl under 15 years of age is considered eligible for marriage. The aftermaths of child marriage is very disturbing as they are more likely to have health related issues or they become subject to domestic violence.

According to UNICEF, it is reported that before the age of 18 years around 21% of girls in Pakistan are married and 3% before the age of 15.

Wajid

Wajid Khan belongs to Turkham, currently lives in a colony, works at vegetable market (sabzimandi) with his father. He leaves his bed early and goes to mosque for fajr prayers, takes his breakfast and moves to work at Mandi. He sells onions and potatoes in market.

Wajid drives cart at Mandi and this is very hard for his small hands and arms to carry heavy loads. He feels unhappy and discomfort during work at Mandi, but he has to continue his work to support his family. Wajid told that his father is a poor man and unable to support him for education. He has to pay house rent as well. Wajid had always a great desire to get education. He always shared his dreams with his friends. **“It feels wonderful when you fly with**

hopes and dreams. We all have the power to make little choices of our lives forever”, said Wajid.

One Bright morning Wajid's friends came to him and told him about CSC SPARC. He got admission in Non-formal Education and started his education. He was enrolled in level 1. During his course he was observed as a good child. He was hardworking and honest child. He enjoyed games and recreational trips with other kids.

Wajid was mainstreamed in government t boy’s school at Dhokehassu and facilitated with school funds, uniform and books. He feels proud to wear school uniform. He was happy for his new school and friends. SPARC team left him school with good expectations. Wajid Khan promised with team that he will not leave school in any case. During follow-ups of Non formal education (NFE) teacher met with Wajid's school teacher. She reported that he is a regular and punctual student, takes deep interest in education. She said Wajid stood first in class and got trophy.

Zara

Zara is a poor girl belongs to paktoon family. She was enrolled in NFE level 1. She is a bright child. Her parents are illiterate. Her father is a laborer and mother is a house wife. She was registered at CSC Rawalpindi in 2013. Zara is very hard working girl and she love studying. She has successfully completed her NFE session and was mainstreamed in government girl’s primary school in Mehar colony.

She was provided school uniform and other mainstreamed support by CSC.

Zara has a long affiliation with CSC staff. She often visits CSC and shares about her educational status. She brought her younger brother at CSC for admission. Her younger brother Sajid is currently registered in NFE level one. Her parents are happy with their children educational status because they were unable to give them safe and healthy educational environment. They frequently attended parents meetings with NFE teacher at CSC and take guidelines for their children, Zara is also very happy for her studies. She told that she is the only child of her family who is getting education. She told that Knowledge brings a positive change in someone's life. She really feels the difference and feels more confident. Girl's education is compulsory to change the society. An educated girl can be helpful for herself as well as for her family.

An educated girl can fulfill her needs and dreams. She is happy that she has passed primary exams and successfully completed his five years journey of knowledge. She will pursue her hope for more. Zara believes that **“A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination and instill a love of learning”**.

Observation

It is observed that, Pakistan is ranked the second largest country in the world where the children are out of school. There are more than 22.8 million children that are currently out of school. In Pakistan between the age brackets of (5- 16 years) which signifies 44% of population under this age group children are just not attending the school.³

In 2018 a report by Sahil shows, in Pakistan every day there are more than 10 children who are under the age 18 years is sexually abused. There were total 3832 cases reported in 2018 from all across Pakistan, 55% girls and 45% boys who were the victim of various forms of child abuse such as child sexual abuse, forced marriage, abduction, sodomy and gang rape.⁴

Street Children are often arrested by Police at signals and markets of city. Sometimes they are taken straight to jail or Eidhi centers on a basis to be found begging, pick pocketing, involvement in drug taking or dealing.

The poor, innocent, young and vulnerable, children are abused and exploited physically, sexually, emotional and psychologically on the streets.

³ <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/education>

⁴ Sahil annual report "Cruel Number 2018", Launched March 2019.

Some other survey have been conducted which have proved that 80 to 90 percent of the street children are victims of sodomy, sexual and physical abuse, not only by elders but older children within their own gangs. The police are unable to provide protection to the children on the street.

The street children are at the high risk of health problems such as Hepatitis, HIV, Chronic Skin disease and kidney infections. Among the street children, 54 percent left their home at the age of 10 to 12 years, around 45 percent living on street are enrolled in crimes and 49 are at the risk of HIV and AIDS.⁵

According to a report, around 45% of children in Pakistan are malnourished, which is almost half of our population. This ultimately results in underdeveloped growth of the brain and physical weakness.⁶

Since 1990, after signing the CRC, Pakistan has not been able to establish a national commission on child rights. In September 2017, parliament passed a law which permitted the establishment of a 'National Commission on the Rights of Child' but no actual steps have been taken in this regard to date.⁷

⁵ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/372733/the-children-of-the-streets/>

⁶“Govt urged to implement UN recommendations on child rights” Dawn, April 12, 2019.

⁷ Aziz, Mehnaz “The rights of the Pakistani child”,The news, February 28, 2019.

Pakistan is ranked 5th position in the category of world's most populous country, with 208 million people overall and per year the growth rate is estimated to be around 2.4%, which means if the population keeps rising there will be more un-favorable and adverse effects in our economy and it will affect the education system, health, environment and standard of living of every citizen.⁸

⁸ <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/04/29/family-planning-vital-for-poverty-reduction-report/>

Recommendation

- 1) Propagation of article 25-A which states that every child whose age is between ages of 5 to age 16 must be in schools and it's the responsibility of the state to ensure it.
- 2) There should be a coordinated policy for child rights in Pakistan which should also guarantee to monitor that the existing laws are being implemented.
- 3) Educate marginalized communities about the importance of birth registration as it provides a legal proof of one's existence. Also it is equally important to educate the communities the consequences they may face due to non-registration.
- 4) Government should strictly take the charge to eradicate child marriage and promote education and vocational training for the young girls who are already in child marriage.
- 5) The legislation of juvenile justice system should be taken as a serious matter of concern though it must be updated, reviewed and revised.
- 6) No one is above the rule of law, so the perpetrator will get stringent punishments and penalties if any of the child rights are violated. Every child deserves to live in a safe environment, where his/her dignity is protected.

- 7) Ensuring that law enforcement agencies are well aware of the recent developments in law making and also adhere accordingly.
- 8) Eradicating child labor at all sites and ensure child labor law is implemented accordingly
- 9) Birth control/family planning is a necessary topic which needs to be spread in our society among men and women; they should have the information and awareness regarding the use of contraception. Family planning is also related to decrease in poverty.⁹
- 10) Pakistan is ranked 5th position in the category of world's most populous country, with 208 million people overall and per year the growth rate is estimated around 2.4%. Which means if the population will keep rising there will be more unfavorable effects in our economy and it will affect the education, health, environment, standard of lives every citizen.
- 11) Ensure to prevent that there is no unwanted pregnancies, early marriages it can contribute to a society where poverty is reduced.

⁹ <https://pakistan.unfpa.org/en/topics/family-planning-9>

- 12) End physical and humiliating punishment, Teacher training should be compulsory in order to train them regarding the child protection. Students leave school as they get scared that they will be beaten up by teacher.

- 13) Build linkage between Bait-ul-maal department and government schools so they can approach needy people who are suffering from poverty and are unable to meet basic needs of life. This can lead towards reduction in child labor and students will be able to focus on their schooling

- 14) Government and NGOs should collaborate in projects to focus on livelihoods and build more institutes for vocational and technical training centers for both women and men. Livelihoods is fundamental pillar to enable a family and society in ensuring their basic rights

- 15) According to Kids Rights Foundation, Pakistan in the global child rights index is considered at 151st position of 181 countries. The government of Pakistan and policy makers should take some serious steps for the wellbeing of children of Pakistan.¹⁰

¹⁰ See article by prominent Parliamentarian and Educationist, Ms. Mehnaz Akber Aziz: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/571473-child-rights-in-pakistan> Child rights in Pakistan (The News November 20, 2019)

- 16) The four pillars of UNCRC i.e. survival and development; non-discrimination; child participation and the right to be heard; and the best interests of the child should be turned into action for every child living in this country.
- 17) It is a duty of Government to guarantee the rights of children are protected and they are being treated equally, fairly and they have the access to basic necessities like education, food and shelter.
- 18) The Government of Pakistan should provide sufficient resources to improve the development of all children.
- 19) There should be more awareness raising campaigns and trainings on child protection with the children as well as with their parents.
- 20) Government of Pakistan should ensure the implementation of law against corporal punishment in all provinces of Pakistan. It is a right of every child to be protected from all forms of abuses and violence's such as physical, sexual, maltreatment, exploitation, mental and negligence.
- 21) State must take strict action related to the violation of corporal punishment in school or outside. There must be effective law against corporal punishment in all provinces.

- 22) Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) should be included in curriculum in all provinces i.e. Punjab, KP, Balochistan and Sindh and teachers should be trained in order to train students.
- 23) The Laws against corporal punishment and child Domestic violence still needs to be enforced.
- 24) Need to focus on children health screening programs
- 25) Focus on Recruiting, Training and supporting teachers.
- 26) Expand access to high quality early child hood education.

Conclusion

It is the responsibility of parents, government, state and service providers to be vigilant when it comes to monitoring the rights of the children. We must indulge advocate, Lobby and campaign for the strengthening and implementation of the law to reach out children who are suffering from any form of abuse.

Ensure the identification of children and families and linking them with the safety nets available in all over country. There should be mass level of awareness to general community, government, Allied agencies, NGOs and different networks regarding the rights and procedures to ensure them.

We need to have friendly-school system where students don't fret over going due to anger issues of teacher. Mostly students leave or run away from school as they fear to be beaten by their teacher in front of their class fellows/friends. It is a serious act of humiliation which mentally disturbs them.

Government should take serious notice on the issue of child protection and it should also focus on the implementation of the rights of the children and the nation action plan as their main concern. The current Government should also allocate budget and resources for the better future of children.

Although we have many laws but implementation is weak, laws should be enforced successfully. Parents, Schools teacher, Juvenile Justice lawyers and Doctors should be sensitized regarding children rights and how it can be protected.

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