Preventing child exploitation on the streets in the Philippines

More than 40% of the Philippine population live below the poverty level, so it is not surprising that children are often forced by circumstances to help their family eke out a living or fend for themselves on the streets of Manila. Most of these children’s parents migrated from rural areas in the hope of finding better job opportunities in the city, but have been confined to a life of abject poverty by lack of education.

Street children, a term coined in the 1980s, are children who have been forced to work or live on the streets. Their presence is an indication of rapid urbanisation, environmental degradation, inequitable distribution of wealth and income, and the breakdown of traditional family and community values and structures. In the Philippines, around 30 000 street children live in and around Manila, 70% of whom are boys aged 7–16 years.

75% of the 200 000 street children in the Philippines and in many Asian countries return home daily to their families after working or begging on the streets, and many manage to go to school for half the day. They work mostly as child vendors, scavengers, beggars, helpers, labourers, and watch-your-car boys. Around 25% actually live on the streets as a result of being abandoned or leaving home because of sexual or physical abuse. These children have dropped out of school and cannot maintain contact with their families. Some are prostituted or otherwise sexually exploited, and many are victims of substance abuse.

Since 1989, Childhope Asia Philippines has been one of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with street children, their families, and communities. Strategies include situation analysis, advocacy, and organisation of local city networks, human resource development, and direct service programmes.

In Childhope’s street-based outreach and protection programme, 22 full-time street educators work daily with children who live on the streets (panel). Street educators are young people, some former street children, who provide love and attention, protection, and referral for treatment and services such as psychosocial care and education. Educators also teach children to protect themselves against drug abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, sexually transmitted disease, HIV/AIDS, and physical injuries. Finally, they work on life skills and on planning life goals, to help children decide whether to enter a shelter or to identify an alternative caring situation to the streets.

Street educators refer and escort children to temporary shelters. In these centres, children are helped to regain their self-esteem with caring, healing, teaching, and acceptance shown through being treated with unconditional love and patience. Children also benefit from the discipline and developmental and creative opportunities offered in a centre and can participate in informal, formal, or vocational education. Social workers make every effort to help a child identify a family relative who could provide foster care. In many cases, however, children need to be prepared for independent, group, or individual living.

For working street children who live with their families, Childhope and its sister NGO, Families and Children for Empowerment and Development, run a community-based programme. Families are helped to identify alternative opportunities for livelihood and income, including educational support or scholarships for children to continue primary and secondary education and, if feasible, tertiary education.

Community organisers and social workers motivate and mobilise parents, children, and community leaders to develop programmes and activities for sustaining families, preventing child abuse, and stopping children working or living on the streets. Participants are trained as advocates for children’s rights and against all forms of child abuse. Parents are assisted through microsavings, microcredit, and production workshops.

Finally, through family and child counselling, as well as parent education and responsible parenthood sessions, social workers strive to help parents and children resolve family conflict, domestic violence, and the causes of child abuse and family breakdown.

The mental, emotional, and physical health of children who work and live on the streets of cities all over the world is a human right that has been taken for granted. It is of the highest urgency that health professionals in every city all over the world recognise this need. The alternatives are long and costly rehabilitation and recovery services for street children who have suffered physical, sexual, and drug abuse. These children are the future adults in every country in the world.

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Case study: Emilio

Emilio was only 10 years old when a Childhope street educator, Butch Nerja, first met him on the streets of Manila. Emilio was surviving by scavenging and reselling vegetables discarded by market vendors. He is the only surviving child of a father, who is in prison, and a mother, to whom he is very close, who occasionally suffers from depression.

Emilio is feisty, witty, and has strong leadership skills. At age 13 years, he was invited by Butch to attend training for junior health workers, a project supported by WHO. Although Emilio had finished only the first grade of primary education, he became a very active health worker, helping to refer other street children for medical assistance.

In 2000, aged 14 years, Emilio was referred to several shelters, but did not stay long because the shelters were too near the streets and areas where his friends lived. Butch referred him to Stairway Foundation, an NGO with a residential centre on the island of Mindoro. After several months, Emilio returned to Manila to visit his mother. He went back to scavenging and selling vegetables on Manila’s streets for 3 months, during which time he resumed his health work. After counselling and motivation from Butch, Emilio realised that he could not help his mother unless he received help himself, and decided to return to Stairway. Emilio now enjoys songwriting and performing, and, earlier in 2002, took part in a theatrical performance mounted by the children at Stairway. He has used Stairway’s tutorial services and has now gone back to school.