



## **On the Record: Global Movement for Children**

### **Issue 8: Sexual Exploitation**

#### **From the AP Editorial Desk**

#### **Street Children Use Humor to Steer Clear of Sexual Exploitation**

In an emptied storage shack on the grounds of a Catholic school in the Chandni Chowk area of Old Delhi, a group of boys cannot stop laughing. What's so funny? Their travails as street children, believe it or not.

The boys are all bal sabha ("children's parliament") members of Butterflies, an NGO working to help the thousands of children who migrate to Delhi and other major cities for work from impoverished and undeveloped states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam and Uttar Pradesh. Today, the boys have theater practice. They'll take their show on the road in a week to help raise awareness about street and working children in the Indian capital and almost certainly crack a few smiles along the way.

In each of the skits, the group's supervisor Sunil gives the boys a scenario and they make up the lines as they go. In the first skit, Sunil instructs one of the boys to pretend he's a street child hiding in a ditch and is calling for help. One by one the other boys come by in character to see what the boy needs. When a sadhu (Hindu wise man or priest) comes by, he asks the boy why he wants to leave his ditch only to enter a much bigger ditch (i.e., society). The child playing the sadhu says wryly, "Just stay in this ditch, son. I'll give you my blessings right here."



### **Where Danger Lurks: young people are prey to violence and sexual abuse in the streets of Old Delhi.**

When a journalist comes by, his only interest is what the boy thinks of tensions between India and Pakistan, to which the boy says, "I'll support whichever side gets me out of this ditch!" And all afternoon long, the slapstick humor rolls on in a seamless stream of wit meant to purge the pain and suffering of these children. At the end of the first skit, the boys sing a song about their plight. "You don't seem to care about us," they sing. "You call us bastards and even the police beat us." The performance is moving, powerful, entertaining and utterly overwhelming.

Sunil points to an older boy named Badal who is approximately 16 years old. He leaves every morning at 7 a.m. to go ragpicking and returns to the Butterflies contact point at approximately 10:30 a.m. for informal educational lessons. He then goes to buy lunch for five rupees in Old Delhi, a predominantly Muslim area where he gets a good meal of cow intestines, beef or lamb's neck, and a glass of juice. He has to spend whatever money he has left over because there is a great risk that it may be stolen by the end of the day.

In the evenings, Badal watches movies in temporary tents just past the Catholic school where the theater group is meeting. For two to three rupees, he checks out a Hindi film in these makeshift theaters. On occasion, he watches pornographic movies with adults who pay him for sex afterward. The other day, Sunil learned that Badal was forcibly sodomizing a younger boy. When he was confronted, Badal said he "saw them doing this in the movies and he wanted to try it out."

Sexual abuse among street children is as common as the commercial sexual exploitation of children by adults. Some NGOs teach these children, who are primarily boys, to masturbate instead. Butterflies uses comic books and theater to convey the message that no child should ever be sexually or physically violated.

Drug abuse is another big problem among street children. To help children kick the habit, Butterflies organizes sports excursions that involve a day of vigorously playing cricket or football. "This gets the toxic drugs out of their system while introducing them to an alternative means of working out their emotions," says Nagesh.

As the last skit winds down at the theater group, Sunil interrupts the children and directs them to tone down the levity and get a little more serious. They tackle the discrimination they face from other children who make fun of their unkempt looks. They also have plenty to say about the way in which shopkeepers unfairly blame them when money is missing. Afterwards, all the boys gather in a circle to talk about the lessons they've learned during their afternoon of drama. "These plays are fun, education and therapy all wrapped together," says Sunil. "This helps the children understand the issues they face much better than a lecture, which they would not listen to anyway. Theater is participatory and fun."

## Butterflies to the Rescue

Butterflies was founded in the eighties by Rita Panicker, a social worker who was then in Bombay. She first encountered street children on the train she took to work at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. She was so charmed by the feisty independence and smarts of these children, that she began organizing educational and recreational activities for them at her home on the weekends. When she and her husband moved to New Delhi, she vowed to stay true to her grassroots commitment to this mobile population of young people.



One year after UNICEF commissioned her help for a study of street children in 1987, Panicker formally launched Butterflies. Then and now, the focus of the group has been to work with street children on their own terms. So rather than bus them out of the neighborhoods they're used to, Butterflies keeps its programs community-based. At the organization's drop-in shelters near the railroad station or in Old Delhi, where street children are more likely to hang out, Butterflies provides informal education and healthcare but not free of cost.

"These children earn a little and we charge a little for our services. This teaches them responsibility," says Radha Nagesh, Public Relations Program Officer for Butterflies. "What we give these children is confidence. They have to live in a tough environment and if we operated on the principle of free handouts, they would never learn to make responsible and empowering choices. We're trying to prepare them to deal with life on their own, after all." Butterflies charges one rupee for a meal and puts that money into a bank account that is used for the child's education.

On average, says Nagesh, these children earn between 30-100 rupees a day, most of which the police will steal because they don't believe these children can legally make this much money. Butterflies, like many other NGOs, has set up sensitization and training workshops for police officers. In September of 2001, the group also established a bank for street children. Those who saved money for six months without withdrawing any funds will earn 50 percent interest on their investment and are eligible to loan money to start small businesses such as a tea stall or shoe shine stand.

In fact, two of the group's twenty street educators are themselves former street children. As street counselors, they patrol areas where street children hang out and try to establish relationships with them in an effort to help them step out of the cycle of abuse and exploitation. "It takes a while to get a child to trust me," says one, who was once a street child himself. "This is especially true with girls and young boys who think I'm trying to buy sex from them." Once a child joins a Butterflies program, he or she is given an identity card that often helps deflect abuse from the police or adults.



### **Building Bridges to the Police: Raaj Mangal Prasad, President of the Association for Development.**

Street educators use the UNICEF "Say Yes" brochures in their advocacy. They insist that it is never sufficient just to talk about rights, and that progress is only made through participation. Nevertheless, says Sunil, the Say Yes and GMC campaign add validity to their work and it makes school teachers and authorities pay special attention. That is useful. "It helps us market our cause more effectively," says Sunil. But the real drive is coming from the children of Butterflies.

### **Police Cooperation**

The Association for Development is working with the police of New Delhi to assist victims of violent crime, especially sex abuse and forced prostitution.

"Umeed," one of the community-based projects run by the Association, came into being because of the Association's close relationship with the police department. The center is located in Mangolpuri, one of the most dangerous slums in north-west Delhi. It is housed in a building that was originally intended for relocated slum dwellers. But the building had fallen into the hands of criminals with government connections.

Association President Raaj Mangal Prasad was able to leverage his influence with police officials and in a matter of months the building was handed to his organization, which turned it into a community center for local slum dwellers.

The relationship is paying off. The New Delhi police regularly bring victims of crime to the center, where they receive counseling, legal help, medical assistance and vocational training. In return, Umeed counselors try to help the police crack criminal sex trafficking networks. They have also, says Prasad, pursued a strategy of influencing the upper rungs of the police department about the special needs and concerns of street children, who are often victims of police brutality. The Association gives publicity to policemen who have achieved positive results for children by inviting them to make keynote speeches at events held by the Association. This boosts these officers' profile within the department and encourages more "good behavior."

Prasad says his organization has so far found it easy to work with the police force which has a very disciplined force, which is very disciplined and has a very effective hierarchy. Once the top brass have been convinced of protecting children's rights, orders flow down the ranks and change is set in motion.

Still, Prasad admits, the police have certainly colluded with organized criminal rings in exploiting children and that has to stop. He is also worried that the focus on child protection will also change as energy is diverted into the fight against terrorism. "Right now," says Prasad, "the political climate is not in favor of prioritizing children's rights. These days, all anyone is worried about is terrorism."

The administrative centre of the Association, called Pratidhi, sits within the western Delhi police complex in Shakarpur. Here Prasad hosts meetings of what he calls a "completely non-bureaucratized Delhi Child Rights Forum" in an effort to encourage an open and fluid dialogue between those on the frontlines of the struggle to protect children.

"The formal legal definition of labor does not fit the Indian paradigm," says Prasad. "It is impossible to take all children out of the formal and informal labor force. You have to work with them in their context. NGOs understand this because we work and live side by side with these people. International organizations do not."

Nonetheless, says Prasad, NGOs are not doing enough to keep children free from cycles of exploitation. He tells the story of a girl that had been rescued by Delhi police from a sex trafficking ring in 1994 and then rescued again in 2001. "Once a child has been rescued from sex trafficking rings, it's the responsibility of NGOs to rehabilitate them," says Prasad. "This will simply require greater cooperation between the activist community, police and state agencies and that's exactly what are our organization is trying to do."