

The Rohingya Children of Karachi

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“Oh Allah I seek Refuge from Being Unlettered, Undocumented and Vulnerable- please protect and enable me to reach my potential.”



Areeba is a Rohingya belonging to a migrant family from Myanmar. Her ancestors escaped from their land when it was Burma. They ran for their lives during the vicious recurrent cycles of purges against them as a minority group. Areeba was born in Karachi, near a vast wetland, by the sea and close to a huge garbage dumping ground; it was in this sprawl of Pakistan’s mega city where her family sought refuge.

Until age 11 she was unable to enroll in any school, not because there were not any schools nearby, but because what they had to offer was not what her family wanted and they remained fearful of her ‘undocumented’ status as a migrant. Instead, she was enrolled in a nearby madrassa to learn the Quran, something all Muslims must do, especially girls prior to being married off early, as per family customs. Her cousin, barely 20, is mother to six children and expecting a seventh.

Areeba’s story is captured in a book called “Mapping Migrations”, which is a co-creation by children of her neighbourhood, Bachon Say Tabdeli (Transforming through Children), Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) and the Children’s Literature Festival (CLF), a social

movement for learning and critical thinking. And taking part in this book *wastransformative*: within a year Areeba managed to leapfrog her years of neglect and silence about her identity and aspirations, and to escape child marriage, unlike her sad cousin. How did that happen?

Areeba, along with 100 other children, lives in the slushy lanes of Akbar Shah Goth by the Arabian Sea. She, as the others, was identified as un-enrolled but willing to be part of a 'learning community'. This area has almost 60,000 Bengali-Rohingyas living along with other migrant communities from within and outside Pakistan. In a rented first floor space next to a poorly functioning government primary school, these children were provided an accelerated learning program. ITA ran the drop-in-centre with the support of Karachi Youth Initiative (KYI).



The drop-in-centre was set up by ITA in response to a tip from researchers in the area investigating the extent of vulnerabilities and gendered violence in urban localities. Their research was feeding into a Vulnerabilities Capacity Index, covering assets, ability to secure national identity cards or naturalization status to enable access to economic opportunities, right to education and social protection.

Areeba's cousin Ayesha scored a whopping 77 on the index. This group had suggested early in their research that there were innumerable children of migrant communities in these fragile areas who are unlettered. Without support, they believed they would be

pushed into early child marriages and with limited life skills another generation would be lost to despair, violence and beyond.

The ITA teams visited these coastal areas of Korangi to assess the situation and soon realised that action had to be taken. The drop-in-centre is a multi-purpose space open all day long with 2-3 sessions held of 2-3 hours. Groups of children come in, wash up, look at their faces in a mirror, comb their hair and sit down to a 'chatting or gup shup table' to discuss their highlights of the previous day or the morning and then settle to routines of literacy and numeracy along with life skills, art activities and indoor sports. This routine continues for 3-6 months until they are able to enrol in a regular school, low cost private or government, if that is functional.

In Akbar Shah Goth, in Union Council Ibrahim Hyderi, Bin Qasim town, Karachi, the next door government primary school was identified for the drop-in-centre and, with KYI support, the space was made functional – with an understanding with the school principal that the students would join the school along with the teachers. The principal was only too happy to see his school put right with missing facilities: a functional toilet, reinforced roof, drinking water, blackboards, furniture, repairs and extra teachers. All 100 children were mainstreamed to the primary school – a much better place to be, with dignity restored. Parents also felt that this is a proper school for our children.

Areeba learnt a lot, swiftly moved to grade three, confidently reading sentences and a story or two, doing two digit subtraction sums but more importantly able to communicate with ease and confidence. Like her, the children of the local migrant communities had already encountered many enriching experiences; they were exposed to two sets of experimental creative experiences that placed where they had the agency for internal or external reflections through voices, videos, cameras and drawings in any medium. They were given space to speak without being silenced by an adult about what is right and wrong. They visited the Children's Literature Festival twice, showcasing their videos and having fun just like other children with their incredible facilitators who believed in them. Areeba and her friends now know well what they could become if rich learning continues.

Areeba is now in grade 5 but remains very anxious about her future. Sadly, the funding finished for the project and the government school, in spite of intensive support. There is little planning for migrants, their languages and conditions of existence, and schools like this one quickly become a precarious space when unattended by mediators.

Areeba does not want to become like her cousin with seven children; she has learnt to have a sense of pride about her mother tongue without hiding her identity; but she remains worried because her parents still do not have a National ID Card. The reality is that she is a Rohingya living on the margins like her ancestors in Myanmar – her persecution has not stopped, it has become different, but remains very real.



The Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013 has been passed in Sindh raising the age of the child from 16 to 18; the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2013 is also in place committed to providing education to all children aged 5-16. For Areeba, and many like her, these laws of the land or even obligatory international conventions on the Rights of the Child or the Refugee Convention seem ineffective. She is an undocumented second generation Rohingya migrant, born in this land, living by the sea and its shifting sands. Her compelling prayers continue daily to her maker, “Oh Allah I seek Refuge from Being Unlettered, Undocumented and Vulnerable – *please protect and enable me to reach my potential*”