[**Choosing the street**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1681250/choosing-the-street)

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The writer is founder of Cities for Children, a non-profit that focuses on street-connected children.

WHY would children, given an option, ever want to stay on the streets?

This question arose when speaking to staff from a reputable organisation in Peshawar, with decades of experience in outreach and rehabilitation for children who live or work on the streets. It takes special skills to engage with that subset of ‘street children’ — or the more nuanced term, ‘street-connected’ children — who have left home of their own accord and drift between urban spaces. Experienced personnel can tell you the answers are not straightforward.

The welfare approach, as codified in law in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act, 2010 (amended 2018), would offer to these children the safe shelter that seems at first glance to be the single most important element missing in their lives. The streets of Peshawar offer a range of serious protection risks including sexual exploitation and abuse, and exposure to alarmingly high incidence of substance misuse. The KP Child Protection and Welfare Commission established under the act has the explicit mandate to offer welfare services, including shelter, to children found begging, living or working on the street or “facing extreme poverty”.

Why, then, have the issues not been resolved?

Let’s talk to the children themselves.

One answer would be the lack of actual services. While the commission is tasked with establishing child protection units in every district, there have not been adequate resources allocated. The 12 protection units initially established with Unicef support could not be maintained upon donor exit, and the shrinking of civil society in Pakistan has meant that several facilities run by NGOs have also shut down.

The Peshawar High Court recently took notice of the rising numbers of children on the streets, and responded to several petitions regarding the implementation of the child protection act. One positive directive from the court has been to ask the Social Welfare Department to produce a detailed report about the issues faced by such children, as well as the state of current welfare facilities.

This is an opportunity to really explore the varied experiences of children; critically re-examine the systems of support available; review fractures in coordination between different departments; and to assess whether the welfare approach alone is enough. Those who argue for a holistic, rights-based approach say, it is not. Children with experience of the streets, especially those who have lived independently, have a strong sense of agency. Even if rounded up and taken through a system which places them in institutions with everything that they seemingly lack — shelter, food, opportunities to learn — they may resist or even try to run away.

Every city context is unique, but in Peshawar children with loose family connections, who leave home due to violence or neglect, may find strong systems of peer support. As a colleague from Dost Welfare Foundation shared, they may enjoy being able to choose what they eat, to earn an independent income, to spend it on going to the cinema. The streets, for some, are an unfathomable but very real choice.

This is not to say that they should be left to their devices in a world that would leave no chance for the kind of childhood every child deserves. Every child has the right to an education, the right to safety and shelter and all the elements of the welfare approach. It is just to say that, in order to be effective, it is important to take children and their lived reality on board.

This can influence the kinds of options that would be considered for investment. Residential institutions alone cannot reach every child and may not also be the right fit for every case. Ins­tead, the first step should be for the So­­cial Welfare Depar­tment to gather — as instructed by the court — enough information to determine an appropriate resp­onse, and set up the continuum of services children may need. This could include prevention of violence at the family level; connecting with poverty alleviation programmes; action against organised networks that exploit children; or the establishment of ‘one-stop’ drop-in facilities where they can access learning, hygiene, or referrals to other services including drug rehabilitation. The partnerships that the government is establishing with organisations offering vocational skills can be a particularly powerful way of giving children the tools to build a better future.

One revolutionary rights-based idea would be to start the research process by talking to the children themselves, to understand the nature and scale of services needed. Stakeholder consultation should complement efforts to gather useful, disaggregated data around how many children are out of school, how many are in hazardous labour, how many are physically on the streets and why. With a strong, informed response, there can be hope to design real alternatives for street-connected children.

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