UNNOTICED: Children of Kabul

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ACCIAC Report
Abstract
I traveled to Afghanistan to produce a short documentary for the purpose of raising the awareness of the plight of young Afghan children, particularly the war-orphaned. The documentary places emphasis on the specific factors that force these children onto the streets and into child labor. It follows the lives of four children who must work in order to survive. These four children are not an exception. There are over one million children forced by years of war and conflict to work throughout Afghanistan. As the breadwinners of their families, these children are not able to attend school, thus depriving a generation of Afghan children of an education.

Overview and Results
Unnoticed: The Children of Kabul documents this unfolding tragedy of a new generation of Afghan children growing up without an education and spending their childhood in poverty and labor. Their families devastated by the war, thousands of children are forced to work in the busy streets of Kabul, selling candy, shining shoes and begging to help their families. Others take jobs in mechanic shops or vend in the crowded and dangerous markets. This twenty-four minute documentary takes the audience into the lives of these children, sharing their stories with an international audience in hopes of focusing attention on the future of Afghanistan – its children.

Unnoticed: The Children of Kabul takes you into the life of Fayaz, Omid, Yasamin and Sanabar - four Afghan children who represent the future of this country at a critical juncture:

Fayaz:
Fayaz has been working with his brother in his uncle’s blacksmith shop since he was seven years old. He leaves his house at 6am without eating breakfast in order to make it to work on time to open the shop. His workday ends when the sun sets. When he leaves home for work, other kids his age leave to go to school. Fayaz used to go to school too, but since his father passed away, he and his three brothers have been forced to work long and harsh hours in order to help provide food for the family and pay for their sick mother’s hospital bills. Five years ago, his father came home sick from work. When his sickness worsened, seven-year-old Fayaz ran to get the doctor; however, the doctor didn’t come due to the fact that they didn’t have the money to pay for his services. Fayaz’s father died later that night. His dream now is to go to school to become a doctor so that he can help families who cannot afford to go to the doctor. For now, though, Fayaz will have to work long hours in order to survive.

Omid:
Omid washes cars in front of a restaurant beside the US Embassy in Kabul. He makes about 100 AFN per day, which is the equivalent of $2. He is the sole breadwinner of a family of seven. Omid has to wake up early in the morning to catch the bus to his workplace. Usually leaving the house hungry and tired, he knows that he doesn’t have any choice since he is the oldest male in the household. He said that if his father were alive, he would have been in school like other boys, but life has been unfair. The Taliban
killed his father seven years ago. Now fourteen and unable to attend school, Omid still dreams of becoming a doctor to help his sick mother and other poor people.

Yasamin:
Yasamin’s day begins at 7am, as she leaves her house to go from dumpster to dumpster scavenging through rubbish looking for firewood in the richest neighborhoods in the Afghan capital. Four years ago, her father was killed in a bomb explosion beside a hospital. Yasamin recalls going with her mother to identify her father’s dead body. Her mother became mentally ill, and now Yasamin and her eight-year-old brother are forced to work in the dangerous streets of Kabul in order to survive. She said that she feels depressed when she sees other kids going to school, wearing nice clothes, and going to the park with their fathers. She too wants to go to school in the morning and return home with her clean uniform and a backpack full of colorful books. However, now at the end of each day, she returns home with a heavy plastic bag on her back full of rubbish.

Sanabar:
Sanabar wakes up in the morning to help her mother cook the food that she will take to sell in the market. Her father helplessly watches Sanabar leave the house with a heavy tray full of “bulanis.” He was a tanker during the Russian Invasion of Afghanistan. A landmine blew up his tank and since then he has been paralyzed. Sanabar’s older brother works too, and her mother goes from house to house doing house choirs in order to make money for hospital bills. Sanabar makes about $1 per day, enough to keep her alive. She knows that a child her age should be in school getting an education rather than in the streets. Since she is poor, though, she does not have a choice. Sometimes, boys beat her and take her money or eat her food and run away without paying. She cannot do anything but watch hopelessly as these atrocities occur. Her ambition is to become a teacher in order to help educate Afghans to work toward building a better future for Afghanistan.

There are thousands of children with similar stories in Kabul who struggle every day to support their families. Each of these children, affected in different ways by the war, provide a snapshot of the country while hinting at a dangerous future. With the planned withdrawal deadline of the United States military in July 2011, the country will begin to evaluate the war and its impact on the people of Afghanistan. By focusing on children, especially those whose entire life has been lived under the shadow of the war, this film is uniquely positioned to begin a conversation on the legacy of American involvement in Afghanistan and its consequences for the country’s future.

By educating and informing audiences about what often goes unnoticed in the war effort, particularly the plight of the children struggling to survive, Unnoticed: The Children of Kabul will raise funds for them by presenting the documentary to audiences worldwide. Our goal is to enhance the lives of these children and empower them as individuals.

I am very passionate about using this film as a promotional and educational tool for American audiences to gain a better understanding about children in Afghanistan. Co-director of the documentary, Jon Bougher and I are in the post-production phase of the documentary and we are hoping to finish it by the end of this year. Once the film is
complete, I will make it available for screening on campus. I think it would be valuable to hold a public event on campus that includes the film along with a discussion on current conditions in Afghanistan. This film could also be useful within the classroom to educate students on the effects of war on children. Outside of Wake Forest University, we have had two interviews with CNN International regarding this documentary and the situations of child laborers in Kabul. CNN has indicated a strong interest in a possible television broadcast of the documentary on their international network. This would provide the film will an international audience. I also plan to connect with other foundations and organizations to make the film available for public education. In addition, I plan to submit the film to various film festivals across the country in hopes of raising greater awareness.

Links to the CNN interview: