

Forum

Violence and prison: aspects relating to gender and childhood

MARÍA ANGÉLICA SEPÚLVEDA
CENDIF
Universidad Metropolitana

We were privileged to have as a our first speaker Dr. Elio Gómez Grillo, a member of the National Assembly in Venezuela, to talk about the position of the new Venezuelan Constitution as regards the penal system. He set out seven principles included in the new text: professionalisation of staff, decentralisation, a more open prison regime, the possibility of finding alternatives to jail sentences, a support system after imprisonment, independence of the prison system and privatisation. Overall, he stressed the importance of greater links between community and prison if the national situation is to improve.

From other Latin American points of view, the Forum included representatives from Colombia (Dr. Sara Victoria Alvarado, CINDE - International Centre for Education and Human Development) and Brazil (Dr. Irene Rizzini, CESPI - The University of Santa Ursula Centre for Research on Childhood).

Dr. Alvarado presented the findings of a CINDE project concerned with educating children in the construction of peace, a project which would allow them to rediscover their voices, rights and responsibilities as citizens and contributors to the society in which they live. The project is currently in its second phase, during which 2,500 children, 120 teachers and 100 parents will be exploring the development of the Emotional, Creative and Ethical Potential in children.

Dr. Rizzini examined the social and economic issues currently impacting on children in Brazil, and the issues surrounding children and violence in the country. She was particularly concerned to demonstrate that children suffer from violence in many settings, in the family environment, in institutions and as a result of generalised poverty.

CENDIF (Centre for Childhood and Family Research, Universidad Metropolitana, Venezuela) presented the paper "Women in Prison: A Constructive Alternative". This outlined a small business project undertaken at the Institute

for Feminine Guidance, Los Teques, the largest female prison in the country. The project was the result of a previous investigation, "Meeting the needs of mothers and children in prison", which revealed that the majority of female inmates are young mothers, and that there was a demand for a holistic intervention programme to aid with both their and their childrens' needs.

Contributions from a wider perspective were offered by Dr. Per Miljeteig, Director of Childwatch International, and Dr. Margaret Malloch and Madeleine Heneghan from the Centre for Studies in Crime and Social Justice, UK. Dr. Miljeteig addressed the issue of how to support young people in taking an active role in their own lives so that they can avoid being subject to violence and exploitation by adults, and how this notion of children's participation can be integrated into mainstream policy planning. Dr. Margaret Malloch and Madeleine Heneghan examined the increasing use of illegal drugs in women's prisons in the UK, and initiatives being taken within the penal system and the community to combat the problem.

Main objectives

Violence and prison are two themes of immense current relevance in Venezuela, yet themes which require a greater amount and depth of discussion within the country. This is particularly true where women and children are concerned, as they are often marginalised in the wider debate. Even where they are the focus, the debate often takes an individualistic psychological perspective. This standpoint ignores much of the reality of Venezuela today, namely that the largest influence upon children is still the family, and that in more and more cases the family is a single mother. Hence the aim was to approach these themes from a systematic perspective, to draw on Venezuelan, Latin American and International expertise and provide a platform whereby a meaningful examination of the issues could take place.

Secondly, such a Forum provided the ideal opportunity to invite Dr. Per Miljeteig, Director of Childwatch International, to Latin America. CENDIF and Dr. Irene Rizzini (University of Santa Ursula Centre for Research on Childhood) are already affiliated to Childwatch and it was felt that more Latin American organisations could benefit from a stronger regional Childwatch network.

The audience

Over one hundred and sixty people attended the Forum, and came from a vast variety of institutions and backgrounds. We were honoured to have as a

guests the Ambassador of Israel and the Ambassador of Morocco, representatives from the Embassies of Honduras and Brazil, the European Union and the British Council. Also present were members of Red Social Venezolana, Directors and staff from Non-Governmental Organisations in Venezuela, including the Catia Communal Centre and the Association for Street Children, and from Universities in Venezuela, including professors, staff and students from the Universidad Metropolitana, as well as lawyers, psychologists, educators, journalists, students and co-ordinators and participants from projects run by CENDIF.

In addition to the Forum, this was seen as the ideal opportunity to take advantage of the presence of Dr. Per Miljeteig and various important Latin American organisations concerned with children to have a more informal meeting in order to initiate a process of setting up a Latin American network of Childwatch International.

Report of the informal meeting regarding a latin american network of childwatch international

Participants:

- Dr. Per Miljeteig, Director of Childwatch International
- Dr. Sara Victoria Alvarado, Director, CINDE, Colombia
- Dr. Irene Rizzini, CESPI, Brazil
- Dr. Deanna Albano, President, Association for Street Children, Venezuela
- Alex Amos, Teacher, Association for Street Children
- Dr. Inge de Colima, President, Catia Communal Centre, Venezuela
- Dr. Alida Cano, Director of the Faculty of Humanities and Education, Central University, Venezuela
- Dr. Maria Angélica Sepúlveda, Director, CENDIF, Venezuela
- Lic. Gloria López, Deputy Director, CENDIF
- Arry Fraser, CENDIF assistant
- Dr. Margaret Malloch and Madeleine Heneghan, Centre for Studies in Crime and Social Justice, UK
- Dr. Barry Burdon and Dr. Judith Burdon, School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Summary

Dr. Per Miljeteig launched the idea of a Latin American network under the umbrella of Childwatch International, a network of importance as the region is seen to have pressing problems in common which closer links between countries could help to alleviate. Childwatch usually facilitates such networks through a key institution in each country.

The discussion highlighted the fact that despite a common lack of resources, networking could have a value in itself and collaboration over the internet could play a vital part in such a network. The presence of Dr. Barry Burdon and Dr. Judith Burdon exemplified the fact that new networks can arise from meetings and conferences in the region and bring new benefits, and they expressed their interest in forming new links between Australia and Latin American institutions.

Two proposals were put forward. The first, to follow up the preliminary meeting with a conference and publication, the second, to find common points of interest between the organisations and launch a common project. As CINDE is the organisation with the longest experience of networking it was suggested that they put forward the first ideas as to this common project, and that other groups follow on with their contributions.

Finally, it was suggested to CENDIF by Dr. Miljeteig that they produce a report outlining the link that they have with the Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge. This link could serve as a model for networks between other institutions.

In addition, a further meeting took place between Dr. Miljeteig, Dr. Rizzini and students from the School of Education in the Universidad Metropolitana who are currently taking courses Community Education under the direction of Dr. Sepulveda of CENDIF.

Further information

For further information regarding any of the above please contact:

CENDIF (Centro de Investigaciones de la Infancia y la Familia) Universidad Metropolitana. Distribuidor Universidad. La Urbina, 1070 A Caracas.

Tel. / fax: (02) 241 6869

Email: msepulveda@unimet.edu.ve

Website: <http://www.unimet.edu.ve/investigacion/cendif>