

Wrecking a bird's nest: how poverty separates parents and children

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“My family has been on the streets for three years. Our last place flooded. Three children live with me. Two of my children died: one of pneumonia and one of malaria. I have given away two other daughters: Rita, who's nine, is working as a domestic servant, and my youngest I gave away for adoption. I was afraid of what might happen if they grew up on the streets. Young girls are dragged away just because they are poor. Police harass us for sleeping on the streets. They come in the early hours, pile us into a truck, and send us to prison camps. And in those camps, they split up the families. Parents are not put together with their children. They split us up — like wrecking a bird's nest. All we have is our family. I can't read or write a word. But I understand that much — that what they do to us is an injustice.”

- Anna, Southeast Asia

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred as “the Convention”) and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children state that it is in the best interests of children to be brought up in their own families, where they should be shown love, feel a sense of belonging, and have long-term relationships to prepare them for adulthood. “ Article 7 of the Convention says that the child shall have, “as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.” The Convention sees separating children from their families of origin as being the last step after everything that can be done has been done to support parents in their responsibilities. Yet too often the chaos and pressure of extreme poverty breaks families apart, robbing both parents and children of their dignity, the very dignity which forms the basis of the Convention.

Part of being born into chronic poverty is being subject to mistrust. Society assumes that very poor adults are unable to be loving and responsible parents, and that their children can only benefit by being removed from their family. Our experience shows, on the contrary, that children who have lost contact with their family of origin as a result of extreme poverty face a heightened risk of emotional insecurity, educational failure, abuse and violence.¹ Time and again, they say how irreplaceable their families are:

“Family is the most important thing. Without our family, we cannot live; we cannot grow up. But a family cannot live without friendship in the community. Friendship makes you happy, even if you don't have enough to eat. [...] Friendship makes it possible for us to hold hands and to look in the same direction. It destroys poverty.”

- Fatimata, Western Africa

Challenges faced by marginalised families

Just as children cannot be seen in isolation from their families, families cannot be seen in isolation from their communities. Yet too many families live on the margins of society without friendship or support. In Guatemala for instance, the children of families on the margins may end up in the streets, with some of them ending up in prostitution. Other children find themselves drawn to drugs to blunt the pangs of hunger and despair, but these children then find themselves the objects of gang violence. Meanwhile, other parents live in the fear of their children being kidnapped for adoption. This fear is so great that it can lead expectant mothers to forgo prenatal care. In rural Burkina Faso,

¹ *How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights*, ATD Fourth World, 2004.

when children are able to attend school, however briefly, they are taught that the future of the world lies in city offices. The underlying message, that these children can learn nothing of value from their families, who live outside of town, too often makes them leave home for the city, losing their roots and putting their health and well-being at risk when they have to fend for themselves.

Industrialised countries have public systems designed to protect families in crisis. Unfortunately, all too often, long-term poverty is interpreted by well-meaning social workers as a short-term crisis. The importance of children's emotional well-being is underestimated in relation to their material well-being. The distrust of parents in poverty results in funds being spent on foster care, rather than on supporting a child's family of origin. For instance, in the United States, families who lose their housing in a fire can usually gain emergency shelter. But the bad conditions in these shelters — ranging from rodents and cockroaches to violence and drug traffic — can lead parents to feel they have no choice but to place their children in foster care. In addition, many shelters do not allow fathers to stay with their children. In the United Kingdom, social workers are under enormous pressure to reduce any elements of risk, which leads to a disproportionate number of children from families living in poverty being removed by the authorities and put into the care system due to "neglect." When such children go on to become parents when they are adults that their own experience as children in the care system has not prepared them to be good parents, particularly in terms of forming an emotional bond with their child. This increases the likelihood of their children being removed from their families of origin, setting the stage for the cycle to continue over several generations.

Poverty is not the only factor which causes parents and children to be separated. The phenomena that affect children in difficult situations are complex and will not be resolved by one single measure. But poverty clearly places families at a high level of risk of separation, despite the unstinting resilience and courage that parents often show on behalf of their children. Poverty is a violation of human rights that touches all areas of human development, including health, education, and the right to self-determination.

*"The lack of basic security means the absence of one or more of the factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may vary in extent, its consequences can vary in gravity, and may to a greater or lesser extent be irreversible. The lack of basic security leads to chronic poverty when it simultaneously affects several aspects of life, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future."*²

The importance of family ties

This degree of insecurity too often leads to family crises that separate family members from one another. The separation tends to rob the now isolated members of the family of their support network, their self-esteem, and their courage to struggle against poverty. When people living in extreme poverty are consulted, they consistently emphasise the overriding fragility and importance of their family ties. Protecting these relationships also protects the most basic framework on which families and communities depend to survive and to thrive.

Ending the exploitation of children, which can be linked to the vulnerability suffered by people in poverty and which tends to separate families, deserves stronger international initiatives and

² Final UN Report on human rights and extreme poverty, submitted by the Special Rapporteur Leandro Despouy (E/CN.4/SUB.2/1996/13). This definition was first formulated by Joseph Wresinski and adopted in February 1987 by the Economic and Social Council of France. (*The Wresinski Report: Chronic Poverty and Lack of Basic Security*)

commitments. Protection from abuse and neglect is vital and must be vigorously defended. However the experience of ATD Fourth World and other NGOs shows that in too many cases, there is scant evidence that children benefit by being removed from their parents' care.

“A foster family cannot replace your mother and father. When my mum used to come to see me in the children’s home, we would have fun together, but in the evening it was hard to leave her. When you go through that, it hurts, you feel ashamed. Some people said that we were separated because I was getting in trouble all the time. This was also said to other children in foster care. We have to do everything possible so children can live with their parents. We love our parents.”

— Eric, Western Europe

While society makes an effort to support these children by sheltering them, Eric speaks of his shame of being apart from his mother. Other children say they have no point of reference without their parents. They are among the many children whose experience calls into question the support they have received. These children remind us that the family life they now lack is irreplaceable.

Looking at the whole picture

Some of the things children feel and think are hard for them to express. When Katia in the US was about eleven years old, she constantly got into fights with other children. It took time to understand her anger. Katia constantly saw her mother disrespected by others. Not only did other children make fun of Katia’s mother, but Katia’s teacher also criticised her when Katia arrived at school late. Her teacher did not know that Katia was arriving late because her mother had taken on an extra job early in the morning to help make ends meet. Katia needed to walk her younger sister to school and she could no longer be on time herself. Katia was hurt that just when her mother was doing more to help their family that her teacher was insisting how irresponsible her mother was.

Without giving a voice to all the members of a family in a context where each one can speak freely, we miss out on learning the whole story. The most reliable indicators in this area are qualitative, whether for measuring poverty, for determining when a child should be removed from parental care, or for determining what kind of support families need to stay together. As valuable as statistics are, they can be manipulated, fail to capture complexities, or too often completely leave out the experiences of those in the most abject situations of poverty. In-depth interviews carried out in the context of long-term relationships show that the lives of extremely poor families are weighted with chaos, crisis and incoherence. They also reveal people’s resilience and determination. These factors are not captured by statistics. Nor do statistics adequately show the best way forward. It is only by involving families living in poverty in an analysis of the obstacles they face, and in the development of policies and programmes, that effective approaches for keeping families together can be developed.

No one wants children to suffer the harshness of life in poverty. As long as extreme poverty persists, some parents will feel they have no choice but to entrust their children to others, some children will end up in the streets, and child welfare systems will distrust parents’ abilities to raise their children. But children themselves say time and again that they know something irreplaceable has been lost when they leave their families and communities. We owe it to all these children to find better solutions together. We must continue to invest in fighting poverty, and to support the unseen efforts made by parents in extreme poverty to care for their children in order to shape a better future for all families.