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Expert consultation on child-sensitive complaint, counseling and reporting mechanisms:

Violence against children living in extreme poverty

While there are many different sources of violence against children living in extreme poverty, these children's reactions vary when the violence is committed by people who are part of their own community or within institutions meant to protect everyone. This affects the kind of reporting mechanisms and counseling that would be most appropriate.

Violence against children in extreme poverty perpetrated within institutions

In the past, much has been written about the links between poverty as a risk factor for the worst forms of child labor, or violence at the hands of the police and the justice system. What is not always recognized is that children in extreme poverty are also at special risk of bullying and violence in schools and other institutions. In Latin America, one girl who must walk through mud to reach her school was punished by her teacher who stepped on the girl's feet while telling the class, "Let's show her that if she comes to school with dirty shoes, we'll make them even dirtier." In North America, a girl who was molested in school found no one there she could trust and ended up dropping out of school entirely. Access to health care can also suffer because of neglect. One parent explains, "In the local health clinic, most nurses and doctors don't speak our indigenous language and don't pay attention to us. In the city clinic, it's worse. People look down on the way we dress, and sometimes they think we smell bad and they don't want to take care of us."

Lack of self-esteem as an obstacle to complaints/reporting

Children in these situations, even though they may face no physical obstacles to reporting violence, often face a substantial obstacle in their lack of self-esteem. In addition to the damage done by violence to their self-esteem, children who have been born into extreme poverty tend to grow up feeling they don't deserve better treatment--and in many cases their parents believe the same thing. One parent said, "When my child has been hit on the head with a ruler and doesn't want to go to school any more, we don't know how to defend them. The teachers glare at us and call us peasants, and we're humiliated." Another parent said, "Other children hit my six-year-old daughter in school, but when I went to the teacher, he got angry and said it's just a game." "No one believes us about anything. Without even knowing the situation, people condemn us."

These parents and their children know that they tend not to be believed about anything and to be looked down on everywhere. Some say, "We parents can't afford school supplies, so our children are sent home, and they're afraid to go back to school where they're mistreated." In some cases the violence their children face echoes violence their parents grew up with. "When I was 7, there was no school in our village so I went to town to study, but the family I stayed with did not send me to school. I did their housework and they beat me all the time. So many people treated me badly that I want to work on my own, so I sell vegetables in the marketplace, but it's hard, the police don't allow me to sell there."

Complaint mechanisms need to be developed that take into account that these children and their parents are not used to being believed, and may no longer believe they are worthy of humane treatment. One way to do this would be for governments to provide support and training in violence reporting and counseling to grassroots NGOs that have developed trust with the children living in extreme poverty who are at the greatest risk of violence. Campaigns to stop violence in schools can highlight the need for special attention to be given to discrimination and bullying of children living in poverty. Teachers and health care personnel need training in counseling and supporting the victims, rather than being perpetrators themselves.

Fragility, lack of life choices and prejudice as obstacles to complaints/reporting

The same factors that put extremely poor children at risk of violence make it hard for them to report past violence. A child who is illiterate and may have learned no legal way of earning money may need to lie about his or her past in order to have any chance at starting over. For instance, one girl who was trafficked into forced prostitution for three years before she was able to escape managed to travel back to her own country where people did not know her past. She quickly married and had a daughter. Her husband, who earns his living by sorting refuse at a garbage dump, often beats her and she fears for her daughter if he were to find out her past. At the same time, she is tortured by not being able to prevent other girls from being trafficked as she was. We know her story only because traffickers tricked seven girls whose families also work on the garbage dump into accompanying them. Afterwards, this woman confided her past to a single person. Although she agreed that it could be shared here and in other venues where people are working to prevent violence against children, she fears that warning the girls around her would lead to her own past being suspected. The community worker in her village to whom she confided feels that girls are becoming increasingly vulnerable to traffickers both because the ruses are becoming more sophisticated and because the increasing availability of television even in very isolated districts shows girls that higher paying work exists in cities. Without appropriate preventative counseling, they are increasingly likely to believe someone who tells them they will become waitresses in a restaurant, or even to run away on their own in search of higher paying work.

In addition to increasing preventative counseling, governments should do more to de-stigmatize victims of trafficking and other forms of sexual abuse, so that they more readily register a complaint, and can become agents in sensitizing others to the real dangers they can encounter in seeking employment abroad, and how to avoid them. More programmes are needed also to support their efforts to start over so that those who have escaped can gain both the self-esteem and the economic self-sufficiency necessary to be able to counsel others and, as accepted members of their communities, contribute to efforts to monitor incidences of violence.

Violence against children in extreme poverty perpetrated by others living in poverty

Children living in extreme poverty are of course subject to the same types of violence within their families and communities as children from other socio-economic groups. However, the violence can take on other dimensions because of the particular stresses people and families living in extreme poverty face as a result of the constant insecurity in which they live.

One of our members in Haiti, Mr. Jacques Petidor, says about the cycle of violence within poor communities:

“Being stuck among your own class is a risk. You risk taking the easy road, the one that can spiral down many levels. You have lived violence and you make others pay with the same violence. When a child is alone, things go through his head, you don’t know who to turn to. Joining a gang can feel like being part of a group, but in fact you’re still alone, all the members of the group are living a stereotype, stuck in the same actions day after day. It’s not a choice, it’s something life forces on you when a youth, a child is this alone and can fall into the road that leads back to violence.”

Another father says:

“It’s humiliating not to be able to feed your family. It pains your heart, you want to do right by your children, by yourself, even to help a friend if you could afford to. You feel useless. Sometimes you feel better in the street, but when you go home the family problems pain you. You feel violence in yourself, and that’s how others feel violence in themselves too. Life can push you to hurt others in the same way others hurt you. If you can’t find a balance in yourself, if you can’t accept that life is what it is, then you do what you shouldn’t.”

Also in Haiti, Jacqueline Plaisir says, “Living hand to mouth means often having no food, and then the neighbors show solidarity. But when solidarity breaks down, you go hungry. And sometimes the suffering is too much, and your patience splinters into anger.”

Another father elsewhere in Central America sees his son being caught up in gang life remembers his own

youth when he was forced to join guerilla soldiers and says: “Hunger hurts. When you’re hungry and someone asks you to do something for money, you don’t know the trouble it will lead to and you say yes because of poverty. Drug traffickers recruit our children, and then we’re told it’s our children’s fault.” One mother sees her son given drugs. Another mother sees her son threatened if he doesn’t join a gang and says, “Our teens are easy prey because they grow up feeling afraid of themselves, they don’t believe in themselves, they don’t believe they can make it on their own. They’re easy prey to those who destroy their childhood.”

Youths who do join gangs, both in industrialized and in developing countries, often say that crime is the only way they can help feed their family.

Parents speak of the way their youths grow up being continually accused of violence even when they are innocent:

- “From the time my son was 7 or 8, his teachers accused him of everything bad that ever happened in school, just because he was the only Romani.”
- “The government says violence comes from poor districts and they call our area the red zone. That means no one will ever trust any of us. Stores won’t give us credit, banks won’t make loans to us, and our youths can never get opportunities in school or find honest work because of where we live.”

Obstacles to complaints/reporting

In addition to lack of self-esteem, victims of violence from within their own families and communities sometimes choose not to report violence because they are aware that the punishments will wreck other lives, not only that of the perpetrator, but of those who may depend on that person for their survival. In some places, prisons are so harsh that even a short sentence can mean risking the prisoner's life. Families we know are deeply concerned about this. Rape has life-long repercussions for its victims, but reporting a rape can amount to a death sentence for a young perpetrator without improving the life of the victim, and in some cases compounding her feeling of guilt. Victims of violence are also concerned that the children of a perpetrator will go hungry: “It would be on my conscience to condemn those who hurt me even if they really hurt me a lot. I don’t want their children to suffer. I don’t want them to die in prison. I want them to see that we are all one family.”

Children and families who have first-hand experience of what can be unintended but harsh consequences need to feel that complaint mechanisms are linked to a justice system that is humane, or that they could result in counseling for the victim and his or her family without pressuring them to accuse the perpetrator in court.

Looking for pathways to peace

The young people we know living in Rwanda who have been victims of many kinds of violence are looking not for complaint mechanisms but for paths toward forgiveness: “If we try to punish people, the violence in our society will only worsen. People living in extreme poverty teach us that peace must be built together, day by day, and that it is the only way forward.” Children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have found ways to convince their own parents to stop being violent toward others. The young people volunteering with them say, “We will rebuild our country with the strength and imagination of children.”

The challenge in these situations is therefore to find ways to offer services that go beyond individual counseling, and aim also at reconciliation within the community as a whole. What mechanisms can we find that will help communities in extreme poverty to lift themselves out of the despair that engenders violence? What approaches can be developed that go beyond the punishment of perpetrators, to recognizing them as often being also victims themselves, and so involve them – as far as possible – in bringing about greater justice for their victims as well as for themselves?

Victims of violence living in extreme poverty in many parts of the world carry within them a deep aspiration toward peace, and a unique knowledge about how we can find ways forward together despite everything. We need their voices and their contributions to help shape all our work to end violence.