

**Submission of the  
International Federation of Social Workers  
Non-governmental organisation in special consultative status at UN/ECOSOC  
for the  
Day of Discussion on the Committee on the Rights of the Child  
on “Children without parental care”  
16 September 2005**

The world over, with very few exceptions, every child wishes to live with and be brought up by his/her natural parents or by persons who took on such a parental role right from the start. However imperfect birth parents or their substitutes may be, children prefer to be with them in a home they can rightfully call their own, irrespective of the material and emotional conditions surrounding them.

The sense of belonging, of being loved and wanted is not always felt by a child of dysfunctional parents (or parent), but it is prevalent all the same in the majority of cases. Very few children wish to leave their parents even if circumstances warrant their removal. An often quoted lament of a girl whose father was jailed on account of his repeated sexual abuse of her: “I did not want to lose my father but only wanted the abuse to stop”, is well known. While in such cases the removal of the offending parent is the only way to protect the child, the lament illustrates the strength of children’s attachment to their parents, even to violent ones.

In this paper the International Federation of Social Workers will address only one aspect of the extensive and complex issue to be debated at the Day of Discussion, i.e. the prevention of the separation of children from their parents. This in no way signifies a lack of interest in the other equally important issues under consideration, including the need of establishing norms and guidelines for children deprived of parental care, a process in which the social work profession wishes to be included.

In the field of **social policy**, the profession often works as an advocate for a family-friendly legal framework as well as for measures to sustain parents in their child rearing role. In its outline for the discussion day, the CRC names some of these measures such as family assistance grants, child care facilities, training in parenting and community based services for children and their families. All of these exist in most countries and will have prevented many child placements.

If such and other measures are to work more efficiently, there needs to be **a greater cohesion among parents, professionals, welfare personnel and the community**. Parents can be helped best if they are respected and not ostracised, and if they feel that they are seen not only as performers of their parental role, but as people in their own right. While society’s main preoccupation will naturally concentrate on the safety and wellbeing of children, parents should be made to feel that they also count. Social workers know this, and they usually befriend parents while keeping a watchful eye on the children’s physical and emotional state.

**Poverty** or a perennial lack of means adds to parental stress. In so-called “rich” countries, child placements usually occur in society’s lowest income strata, and special assistance for such families is often needed. School and pre-school facilities are important vehicles, e.g. for

the integration of migrant families, especially if educators and teachers interact with, and befriend the whole family..

Social workers are much feared by poor families because they have the power to place their children in alternative care. This is justified in cases of ill treatment or abuse. However, children are also removed on account of their family's precarious living conditions that may be thought to impair the children's health. Would it not be preferable in such cases for local authorities to help families repair their abode, have electric light and running water installed, possibly to be paid for by said authorities over a period of time, rather than removing a child from his or her parents?

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia poor parents sometimes place their children in institutions to ensure that will be given proper meals three times a day as well as clothes and a good education. For parents this is a sacrifice though one that does not benefit their children. The problem persists despite the numerous deinstitutionalisation projects carried out in the region which concerned mainly children from large state institutions. Needed urgently are : an improvement of the economic situation, a less unequal income distribution, more small group and/or family type institutions and a well structured foster care system. Needed even more is a change in the mentality of populations and their governments.

In developing countries it is again poverty that is mainly at the root of evils such as the sale of children and child prostitution, although ignorance of parents also plays a part as indeed it does elsewhere in the world.

**Not all causes of children's removal from parental care can be eliminated, nor can it be said that all known preventive measures, state and private, can put a stop to the placement of children in alternative care. However, preventive work needs to go on. It will comprise a mix of elements ranging from family support and child care facilities to pre-school structures, parenting groups, counselling, leisure facilities for families and other measures.**

Social workers' aim has always been to establish long term links with fragile families while taking due care that such a relationship does not entail dependency. In the present context, however, contact with clients over a long time may no longer be possible on account of social workers' ever increasing workload. One way out of this dilemma for social work professionals might be to network with volunteers, neighbours, community groups, community based services and others in the hope that support will be available at all times.

In all their actions, social workers are fully aware that the work they perform will depend as much on their skills as on the way they engage with their clients. They will always try to work with the whole family, including the children, who will be consulted and listened to in accordance with their age and with general circumstances. In the end, social workers know from long experience that interventions can only be successful if clients feel that their dignity is upheld and that there is an undercurrent of solidarity in all exchanges.

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