

## **Providing a Protective Environment for Children with Incarcerated Parents: The Role of Civil Society**

Presentation at the launch of the e-course on Children of Incarcerated Parents  
Hosted by Plataforma NNAPES and the Inter-American Children's Institute  
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by Vivienne Chin  
Senior Associate, International Centre for Criminal Law Reform  
and Criminal Justice Policy, a Member of the Canadian Coalition for Children with  
Incarcerated Parents

Thank you very much for that introduction and for inviting me to the launch of this very important initiative. Congratulations to Plataforma NNAPES and the Inter-American Children's Institute for establishing an e-course on children of incarcerated parents (CIP). On behalf of the Canadian Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents, we really appreciate having an input into the process. In this regard, I would like to acknowledge the contribution from 2 of my colleagues from the Canadian Coalition, Nancy Russell (Canadian Friends Service Committee) and Louise Leonardi (Canadian Families and Corrections Network).

I would like to talk about the Role of Civil Society (a) because many of you I understand are from CSOs) and (b) because providing a protective environment for CIP cannot be done by governments alone. CSOs have a crucial role to play and I have identified 6 kinds of roles which may overlap in some ways. Of course, the influence and impact of CSOs varies from country to country and depends on their capacity to raise funds, impact the political, legal, social, and child protection systems, and to a large extent depends on the support of government and their willingness to work cooperatively with CSOs.

### **1. THE HOLISTIC NATURE OF THEIR WORK**

- In general, CSOs take a wrap-around and holistic approach to child protection, and take into account the best interests of the child and their families, and make the links between different aspects of their lives including safety/security, housing, health, education, play and recreation, the role of parents and other caring adults in the child's life.
- CSOs don't usually work in silos – they work more horizontally and they have a flatter leadership style, allowing more collaboration.
- CSOs can make referrals to each other to reduce gaps in the systemic infrastructure.
- CSOs are focused on identifying and helping CIP without stigmatizing, labelling or retraumatizing them – they take a more inclusive approach.

- CSOs tend to provide supports and services in response to the needs of CIP – much of their work is one on one with families – it's individualized because everyone is different - an emphasis on a client focused caring and helping model of intervention.
- CSOs often provide services that are lacking in the formal system – for example facilitating child visits to prisons, helping with custody issues, reintegration, parental support (example, CFCN and KIP Canada, both in the Canadian Coalition)
- Perhaps most importantly, CSOs like CFCN and KIP Canada work collaboratively and inclusively with those with lived experience so that the voices and opinions of CIP form the basis of decisions and actions; having those voices at the CSO and government tables is vital and necessary. It's not about what we think they need but about what they say they need.

## 2. AWARENESS RAISING AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

- The purpose of raising awareness and mobilizing community is to ensure that government and the public understand that the CIP is an important and growing issue that needs attention; and also to understand the situation from the point of view of CIP and families and to understand their needs.
- CSOs represent a whole range of diverse interests and issues - children's rights groups, women's groups, self-help groups, professional associations, and faith based groups. Diversity is a strength and informs their activities and programmes.
- Because CSOs have direct contact with CIP and their families, they are able to collect first hand feedback and data which can be used to inform government policy and decision makers as well as the public.
- Because they are issue focused and strategic, CSOs collaborate well, create coalitions and knowledge hubs, referral chains, social media posts, run information and awareness campaigns, develop relationships with the media, print posters and brochures to increase the community's understanding of the rights of CIP and how it can help which brings me to...

## 3. NETWORKING AND FUNDING

- Increasingly CSOs make connections with CSOs in other countries and conduct joint projects and exchange information on best practices. This allows for the development of shared standards and norms, of shared models of interventions, and comparative studies.
- Many international CSOs have established national chapters so they are able to function at the national level with governments. Such CSOs are well

established and have considerable expertise from experience of working in different countries, often doing the implementation work on behalf of inter-governmental organizations - examples of such CSOs are Plan International, World Vision, and Save the Children.

- Finally, and this point touches on what Ann was saying, CSO coalitions and collaborations can leverage and increase influence at the international level. In Canada, for example, the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children brought together all CSOs that had submitted alternative reports for the most recent UNCRC Review of Canada. As such, this became a formidable group that met with Ministries, the Canadian UN delegation, the UNCRC etc. It is a strategic way for smaller CSO's to magnify their voice, influence and to gain a seat at the table.

#### 4. ADVOCACY FOR CHANGE

- There are CSOs which focus on reforming the justice system. Some advocate for the abolition of prisons and others for the promotion of alternatives to incarceration; others work in courts to provide judges with information on the offender during sentencing so that the courts consider the impact of their decisions on the children (to fully consider the best interests of the child in making decisions about offenders with parental responsibilities during sentencing, incarceration, and parole).
- Other CSOs advocate for changes in prison visitation procedures, more flexibility for greater family contact, more support for mothers and fathers in parenting skills, and for social reintegration and family reunification.

#### 5. HOLDING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

- The role of CSOs in monitoring, evaluating and holding governments accountable for their decisions and actions is really important, as Mr. Giorgi mentioned. However, it's not always easy for CSOs to gain access to government information and data.
- Some CSOs, working closely with the media, hold governments accountable and pressure them to fulfil their responsibilities to comply with international obligations – this can also be seen when a State party reports on its implementation of the CRC, CSOs have a chance to comment on those reports and to challenge what the States have claimed to have done.
- Some CSOs have developed permanent consultative working mechanisms with government departments which ensures transparency, information sharing, as well as a process of policy development that reflects the views of civil society and the community. Often this can be done through a network or coalition.

- CSOs often push governments to collect and share data. There is a real lack of data on CIP. For example, we don't know how many CIPs there are in Canada. Access to fully disaggregated data can help to identify trends, clarify the extent of issues, and assist governments to demonstrate that they have met their obligations as duty bearers.
- Finally on this point, CSOs represent the voices of children and youth and are accountable to them. On the other hand, often staff in government agencies mostly report up the organizational hierarchy on strategic plan achievements, goals and financial matters. So the crucial role of CSOs is to hold governments accountable for their actions and decisions as they impact CIP.

## 6. KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY BUILDING

- CSOs have a vital role as centres of research and information. They are well placed to build the knowledge base on CIP because they work directly with CIP and their families. In a way the real experts are the CIP themselves because of their lived experience – their stories are rich and informative. Policies and laws must not rely only on the viewpoints of groups holding established authority. They must take into account the voices of experience.
- Professional associations also perform an important function e.g. social workers, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, physicians etc – we see many more articles and studies being done by these professionals on the impact of incarceration on children. As Mr Salles mentioned, more studies need to be done to develop targeted government action.
- Where there needs to be more work is with schools, teachers and educators in raising awareness of CIPs and making the school environment safer for CIPs, so that they are not stigmatized or made to feel excluded.
- More work also needs to be done in relation to law enforcement officers e.g. when it comes to arresting people in their homes where children are present. Police need to be aware of the traumatic impact of their decisions and actions on children.
- There is an important role for CSOs in providing specialized training for justice officials and other front line workers on how to improve the situation of CIP. I'm sure some of you might do that.
- Finally, there is also a vital role for CSOs to help prosecutors and judges understand the impact of incarceration on the children of offenders, and providing infrastructure and means to implement alternatives to imprisonment, through community supervision, restorative justice, traditional or alternative justice systems or established community dispute resolution mechanisms.

Thank you so much for listening.