

White paper on creating an international network of organisations and individuals working on issues related to children of prisoners globally

Brief Statement

Internationally there are many children who have a parent in prison. Connecting those who are working to help these children will be of great value in mitigating the harm that parental incarceration causes. Through such a network, groups and individuals focused on this issue will be able to share experiences, knowledge, research, and best practices and form a joint agenda on behalf of these often forgotten children.

About Children of Prisoners

Children of prisoners are usually ignored by the criminal justice system and are not typically recognized by social service systems as having particular needs. In both developing and developed countries, as collateral victims of incarceration children of prisoners face violations of their human rights and are left vulnerable to a wide range of risks and harm. The specific configuration of this risk and harm depends on the particular conditions that exist in a given country and the political, economic, and social system. In general, however, we can say that children of incarcerated parents experience increased risk of serious mental health problems, poverty and homelessness, dropping out of school, early pregnancy, and becoming entangled in the criminal justice system themselves.

Background: The Proposed Need for an International Network

On 30 September 2011, the UN Committee on the Rights of The Child devoted its Day of General Discussion (DGD) to the topic of children of incarcerated parents, with about 200 participants attending. At that time, some participants raised the need for an international network that would bring all actors together.

Francis Ssuubi, founder of Wells of Hope Uganda, was involved in the Day of General Discussion and then in the expert meeting on children of parents sentenced to death or executed convened by the Quaker UN Office (QUNO) in 2013. In early 2014, Ssuubi visited the United States and, among other activities, met with Texas After Violence Project founder Walter Long, who had also participated in the QUNO gathering. During their conversation, they referred to these individuals and organisations working on behalf of children of prisoners as “voices in the wilderness” because they are all doing good work but are not necessarily familiar with each other. These voices include practitioners, academic researchers, human rights activists, and policymakers. Ssuubi and Long saw a need to bring all these actors into regular conversation with one another to promote mutual learning, support, and efficacy. There are many examples of good practice from around the world. Most are simple and inexpensive changes which, if

adopted, could make a big difference to the lives of children of prisoners. What is needed is coordinated policy and practice.

Issues related to children of prisoners have received some attention from international human rights bodies, which have called for interventions that would help avoid or ameliorate the vulnerability and harm that children experience as a result of parental incarceration. These recommended interventions have been included in the Report and Recommendations of the Day of General Discussion on Children of Incarcerated Parents convened by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Human Rights Council resolution 19/37 on the rights of the child, the UN General Assembly Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (resolution A/RES/64/142), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (esp. Article 30), and the African Committee of Experts on Rights and Welfare of the Child General Comment No. 1 on Article 30. At this point, however, in most countries there is no national policy or practice regarding children of prisoners, and in all countries there is room for improvement.

Aims and Proposed Activities of the Network

The aim of the network will be to connect individuals and organisations currently working on issues related to children of prisoners, to offer these organizations support through the sharing of information and best practices, and to harness efforts to make things better for children of prisoners throughout the world.

Specifically, the network will:

- help to promote outcomes from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion on Children with Incarcerated Parents and subsequent recommendations from the Committee, as well as other useful developments in the UN;
- share information such as research, ideas, news, or any developments concerning families of prisoners, scholarships and grants, and upcoming events such as conferences;
- share examples of good practice in order to improve what is being done around the world to create interventions and safety nets for children of prisoners;
- influence and foster policy and legislation regarding children of prisoners at local, national, regional, and international levels;
- be a forum through which members can have a single voice when addressing issues relating to children of prisoners;
- offer support for its members when a need arises;
- share best practices consistent with international instruments, whilst also keeping the different cultures and political and social systems in perspective;
- promote research and studies on children of prisoners;
- collaborate and work with other networks at local, national, regional, and international levels. These could be organisations working for children of prisoners, human rights, or children in general.

Next Steps

The first meetings of those interested in discussing the creation of a network will take place on the sidelines of the annual Prisoners' Family Conference in Dallas, Texas, under the title "International Children of Prisoners Focus Group." These meetings will be held on the 6th and 7th May 2015, 7 - 9 pm. The first meeting will be used to discuss the creation of the network and the second meeting will serve as the network's official launch.

As of this writing the group's working name is Family of Prisoners' Voices International (FOPVOICES). The name may be changed to reflect the group's specific focus on children. This can be discussed at the initial meetings, as can the question of where the network should be headquartered in terms of a physical office or in terms of a virtual base. It is proposed that the US would be the most effective central base for this work because of the number children and families in the US affected by the issue of parental incarceration and the number of universities and other organizations already involved.

An initial website for the FOPVOICES network exists at <http://fopvoices.org>. A goal will be to develop the site further so that it can be a major tool for the work of the network. Ideally, a website will be able to promote the network, maintain a listing of organizations and individuals working for children of prisoners globally and of resources connected with the issue, let visitors to the site know where help is available locally, host webinars, chats, and blogs, connect to Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites, and allow network members to update their information on the site easily.