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Street children in Brazil¹

This essay is about the children who live on the streets of Brazil, the problems they face, and the attitudes of the Brazilian population. It intends to emphasize the specific problems faced by girls, such as sexual abuse, rape, AIDS, pregnancy, and the "lure" of prostitution and drug smuggling.

The end of the military regime in 1985 left Brazil with the phenomenal debt of US \$120 billion; and severe manifestations of neglect in health, education, and housing. A recent US government report revealed that in Brazil, 21 million people are living in poverty². Corruption infiltrates every level; brutality and immunity are trademarks of the police force. This has resulted in the prevalence of street-children, or *Meninos de rua*.

Street-children are inherently difficult to count (due to fear of reprisals and due to the fact that they move around frequently), so widely varying statistics have been produced. But the most frequently quoted is UNICEF's estimate of 7-8 million street-children of all types in the whole of Brazil, although this has been widely argued. The Brazilian Government acknowledges between 200,000 and 700,000 children, including both those who live on the street and those who spend the majority of their time on it. Not all street-children are completely abandoned. Most have contact with their families, often only on the streets during daytime to earn an extra income³.

Street children tend to be concentrated in affluent areas of Brazil, such as Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro. These areas afford the highest profits in terms of begging, stealing and prostitution, due to the large concentration of tourists. Big cities attract girls from the interior of Brazil. Forced from their families by poverty, they gravitate to cities to find work as maids, often aged 13 or even younger. Work is scarce, and the streets gradually turn from a temporary to a permanent measure. When a girl leaves home it frequently implies the complete severance of family ties; whereas boys are often working to support a family living in the nearby *favelas* (shantytowns)⁴. Unfortunately, very few studies have investigated gender issues, or even divided data by gender. However, Projecto Axé says 86% of street children in Salvador Bahia are boys⁵. It is also common for a girl to be running away from sexual abuse, often accompanied by feelings of shame whereas a common reason for

¹ This essay was selected for reading at the Third International Conference on Latin American Women, 10th April 2001, by my Lecturer of Latin American, Gender, Culture and Society, Academic Year 2000-2001, Dr. Marta Zabaleta.

² "Brazil is the most inequitable country in the world, where the income of the richest 1% is greater than that of the poorest 50%". Cited by Serviço Brasileiro de Justiça e Paz, LAB News March 2000 www.oneworld.org/sejup. LAB News, Spring 2000 page 1, *The Other 500 Years*.

³ Emma Porio, Leopoldo Moselina and Antony Swift, page 66 in *Urban Children in Distress*, by Cristina Szanton Blanc.

⁴ Rizzini, Wilk 1990, Fenelon et al 1992, cited in Emma Porio et al. *Urban Children in Distress* page 68.

⁵ Meninos que Vivem nas Ruas de Salvador Duncan Green, 1998 *Hidden lives*, page 78.

boys to leave to family home is physical abuse from a stepfather, or extreme poverty. However, push and pull factors combine uniquely in each case.

Once on the streets, life becomes extremely difficult. The children feel forced to beg or turn to crime. The result of this has been the emergence of death squads or *justicieros*; groups of police officers, security guards and shopkeepers who believe the streets must be cleared, and that shooting the children is the only option.

At its worst in the 1980's, (a 1989 report by Amnesty International estimated that one child a day was killed by death squads) violence against street children has diminished since Brazil has become increasingly aware that the eyes of the world are upon it.⁶ Human Rights Watch maintain that 75% were black, an indication of the racism in Brazil, if not from the *justicieros* then from the society which pushes a disproportionately high percentage of black children onto the streets⁷.

An impenetrable wall of silence exists, created by fear. Children become victims for speaking out, but the perpetrators of these crimes do not even have to hide their actions to any great degree⁸. Promising to rid the streets of children wins public support and votes, regardless of the method. Brazilian people are scared - partly due to propaganda in the media, although crime is certainly a problem.

On one occasion, 7 children gathered in a *favela* to sniff glue and share what they had managed to steal or scavenge that day. Four armed men burst in claiming to be police and accused them of stealing a pair of tennis shoes. They then tied them up, dragged them to a river bank, forced them to lie down and proceeded to execute them one by one with a shot to the back of the neck. One, a fourteen-year-old girl, survived when the bullet deflected off bone. She describes the ordeal: "They aimed at us one by one. I was the third and the last was the youngest, named Claudio. The four men argued over who was going to shoot the boy - they all wanted to do it"⁹.

Brasileiros love children, but many see these as simply vermin. After the famous murder in 1987 of Fernando da Silva Ramos, who starred in the film *Pixote*, posters were paraded in the street saying "The people are grateful to the police - *Pixote* was a crook"¹⁰.

"Esquerdinha", or Clidenor Ancelmo Brilhante, is one of the most infamous death squad members. Awarded the title of "Citizen of São Bernardo" for "cleaning-up" the streets, he was quoted in the *Folha de São Paulo* in March 1998 as saying "I

⁶ Procurador General da Republica recorded 5,644 executions of children and adolescents (aged between 5 and 17) between 1988 and 1991. Letter to President Cardoso 1995, from the International Child Resource Institute's Brazil project. Robert M. Levine, John J Crocitti, editors, "The Brazil Reader" 1999 page 431.

⁷ Final Justice, New York 1994 cited Duncan Green, *Hidden lives* 1998 page 101.

⁸ One death squad, Organização pena de morte, claims to have killed 100 ex-prisoners, with 8 children killed in the first 3 months alone. Cited in Gilberto Dimenstein *War on Children*. 1991 page 14.

⁹ Andy Butcher *Street Children* 1996 page 76.

¹⁰ *Pixote* was filmed when Fernando was 11 years old. It was about a group of children living on the streets. Although not a street-child the association led to him being shot at point blank range in São Paulo 27 Aug. 1987. See Caco Barcellos, "Rota 66 A História Da Polícia Que Mata" (São Paulo: Globo 1992) 238-41, in Robert M Levine's *Brazilian Megacies* 1997 page 72-73.

don't consider anyone who rapes women and kills in cold blood as human. As far as I am concerned, these are not people, they are lice, and I crush lice"¹¹.

The shockingly sadistic actions of the police are not as surprising when you consider the military background and organization of the police force. A history of violence and impunity has led to an armed and dangerous institution with the inclination to murder and torture.

One of the most alienating street habits is drug taking. Drugs not only stave off hunger, but also the memories or fears of police brutality, rejection, death squads, and particularly in the case of girls, rape and abuse. A fourteen year old girl in Recife says "I know the streets have nothing to give – only beatings. That's why I sniff glue. I steal, I get beaten up, I cut myself – but this has nothing to do with me."

The roles of the children in the sale and distribution of drugs are affected by gender.¹² It appears that boys are made to transport and sell drugs, whilst girls usually smuggle drugs (due to the belief that they look more innocent), sometimes internationally. If caught, it is the children who are punished, not the organized gangs that "employ" them.

The Children often commit crime in order to feed a drug habit, or in many cases just to survive. Duncan Green professes that many more children are killed by other children than by vigilantes. The majority of children are armed at all times. This is partly to threaten or fight, but certainly also for protection. Exploitation of children in crime is very common, where younger children are used to commit crimes by the older ones, police, and other adults because they are rarely prosecuted for criminal acts under the age of 18. A Recife study showed that only 3% of cases involving minors resulted in a conviction¹³. This is despite Justice Department statistics that showed 50,029 crimes were committed of a type often associated with children (muggings, break-ins etc) in one year¹⁴. Due to this, Liborni Siqueira of the police Children's Department in Rio hi-lighted that minors are now responsible for most of the robberies committed in his district. In fact, the impotence of the legal system in dealing with juveniles may be a contributing factor to the "extra-judicial" punishments dispensed by frustrated police officers, who feel that they cannot implement the law sufficiently due to restrictions in the legislation.

However, the argument that all street-children are criminals and therefore need to be "controlled" is obviously false. Irene Rizzini commented on a study into crimes committed on the streets against children in three Brazilian cities, that discovered details about 457 children who were murdered in a period of three months¹⁵ (MNMMR et al. 1991). Only 11 had police records, and a maximum of 13 had been

¹¹ Gilberto Dimenstein, *War on Children*, 1991 page 45.

¹² Robert M. Levine *Brazilian Legacies* 1997 page 68.

¹³ Hecht, in *Hidden Lives* Duncan Green 1998, page 100. See also Robert M. Levine's *Brazilian Legacies*, 1997 page 71.

¹⁴ Many more were probably not reported, 1989. Gilberto Dimenstein *War on Children* 1991 page 44.

¹⁵ MNMMR et al. 1991 In Irene Rizzini et al. *Urban Children in distress*, 1994.

suspected of drug trafficking. Most lived with their parents, and none was ever known to have possessed weapons¹⁶.

Children could be held for periods of time in one of the infamous FEBEMs or FUNABEMs, but these were closed by the Child and Adolescent Statute, passed in 1990. Deodato Rivera blamed these institutions for producing juvenile delinquents by placing innocent children with children who had murdered, etc. This combined with abusive treatment from guards left them brutalized by the experience and conditioned to be criminals¹⁷.

It often appears that some crimes are not committed out of necessity, but almost just "for fun". Existing in a world where they can never succeed as measured by the parameters of the dominant society, a "sub-culture" has developed of crime and violence. Here, children can earn self-respect and status among themselves; this "respect" is placed upon those who commit the worst or most risky crimes (the ultimate "badge" being murder). Entering this "game" is an enticing option to both boys and girls alike. As the peer group may be the only semblance of family known to them, acceptance is vital.

Interestingly, although girls do partake in crime and drug abusing, traditional gender roles are replicated on the street¹⁸. Often, there is a male leader, an external provider, and a charismatic personality who guides and protects his group through a combination of respect/fear. He often resembles a "father-figure", although he may use younger members to commit crimes, beg etc. Girls may often take on the role of internal provider, playing the role as mother to younger members of the group, and "wife" to one or more male street children, including preparing food and washing clothes. Despite the increased risk of sexual abuse associated with being female and living on the streets, it has been suggested that this may lend protection to the girls from other forms of violence and "extermination". This may be due to a "macho" view of the vulnerability of girls combined with the fact that some individuals consider their bodies "useful". They have something to offer in return for survival. However, increased physical vulnerability combines with the expectations of society to make the street an even more unsuitable place for young girls than it is for boys.¹⁹ Home, and other private areas, is seen as the only "acceptable" places for girls.

One form of crime and income production particular to girls is prostitution. An "option" often accepted by those on the street, many of whom have already been abused or raped²⁰. Sonia in Belo Horizonte was "initiated" into the gang when she first ran away by being raped by 12 older boys. "And again the next night"²¹. One of

¹⁶ Irene Rizzini et. al *Urban Children in Distress* Christina Szanton Blanc 1994 page 66. Also Gilberto Dimenstein's *War on Children* 1991 page 14.

¹⁷ Deodato Riviera after staying in a detention center in Brasília in 1987. Gilberto Dimenstein's *War on Children* 1991 page 40.

¹⁸ Irene Rizzini, contributed to *Urban Children in Distress* Cristina Szanton Blanc 1994 page 74.

¹⁹ Tobias Hecht *At Home in the Street* 1998.

²⁰ Ana Vasconcelos to Gilberto Dimenstein *War on Children* 1991 page 38.

²¹ Andy Butcher *Street Children* 1996 page 24.

the prostitutes at Passage House in Recife run by WOMANKIND was raped for the first time at just three years old"²².

It has been estimated that there are 50,000 underage prostitutes in Brazil (1990 study using data from the Federal Police), some as young as seven. In a country where abortion is banned and the Catholic Church frowns on the use of contraceptives, (which are prohibitively expensive), this is a very dangerous occupation. A WHO survey in 1989 found 9% of the street population to be HIV positive²³. 12 years later, this figure is likely to be much higher. Brazil is not a country particularly badly affected by the epidemic, but the nature of street life, (sometimes incorporating intravenous drug use as well as high-risk sex) means the street population is undoubtedly more affected than the general population²⁴.

The Pregnancies that result are dealt with using an anti-ulcer pharmaceutical to induce powerful uterine contractions causing the fetus to abort, or a sharp kick to the stomach (often administered forcibly by police officers). It is estimated that 1.2 million women have illegal abortions every year in Brazil alone²⁵. Many girls need hospitalization for severe infection or internal bleeding from these practices with an estimated 200,000 girls dying each year from malpractice²⁶. When abortion is not sought, pre-natal care is rarely received, and drug abuse frequently continues throughout the pregnancy. Never the less, a child may be born on the streets, increasing the numbers further, and with little chance of escape from this life.

Many factors contribute to the likelihood that these children will spend the rest of their short lives on the street or in state-run institutions. Firstly, the prejudice against a street-child is immense, throughout society from *favela* inhabitants to schoolteachers to policy-makers. Additionally, after several years on the streets, children are physically and emotionally scarred, under-nourished and under-educated. They may have been sexually abused, and have difficulty forming "normal" relationships. Many suffer mental problems from long-term solvent abuse. Additionally, most have to suffer racial discrimination, as the vast majority is preto (black) or mulato (mixed race). The significance of having black skin is often vastly under-estimated. An adult in Belém who has been a prostitute since she was 13 points out "I suffer from three kinds of discrimination – because I am poor, because I am a prostitute and because I am black – and being black is the worst one"²⁷. Without months or years of rehabilitation, these children are unemployable, and there not enough jobs to satisfy the demand.

In conclusion, poverty alone does not seem to be the main cause of this phenomenon, but disunity of the family appears as a common undercurrent in many

²² Gilberto Dimenstein *War on Children* 1991 page 38.

²³ WHO report 1989 in Robert M. Levine's *Brazilian Legacies* 1997.

²⁴ WHO report 1989b 2000 street children tested for HIV in São Paulo. Quoted in Robert M. Levine's *Brazilian Legacies* 1997.

²⁵ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. Sarah de Carvalho *The Street Children of Brazil*.1996 page 226. Also *Brazil Draft Country Situation Analysis* Recife 1995, in Duncan Green's *Hidden Lives* 1998 page 35.

²⁶ Sarah de Carvalho *The Street Children of Brazil* 1996 page 226.

²⁷ *Street Sisters* video Channel 4, 28.9.1993. Director/Producer: Anne Marie Sweeney.

cases. Children regularly hold their mothers in extremely high regard, but often at the same time labour a deep hatred at her abandonment of them, or a deep guilt at their abandonment of her. Many of the mothers in question suffered lives "even more tragic than those of their children on the street"²⁸. (Coming from such an environment, problems are inevitable. The situation of the alcoholic or absent father, and a mother who must work all day as well as do the household chores and look after a larger than average number of children, is a common one. This is yet another example of the subordinate and difficult lives of many women worldwide.

To solve or alleviate the problem of street children in Brazil, preventative measures must be taken whilst the child is still in the family unit. Provisions such as counseling, childcare, educational assistance and adult education in areas such as health care, family planning etc would all help families to cope²⁹. Education must be re-thought, attracting pupils via a relevant curriculum, rather than forcing them through legislation³⁰. Assistance provided to those already on the street should take a different role, to soothe the immediate problems without encouraging a dependency relationship, and to provide them with the skills necessary for them to change their own lives, and then maintain this change³¹. Ideally, the best outcome for a child would be reintroduction into the family, with support and monitoring aiding this. The FLASCO/UNICEF study 1991³² found that often children could not be reintegrated into the family after gang life. This leaves options like the night-shelter CAM and the assessment-center CETI, both in Goias, replacing the FEBEMs (juvenile detention centers); and private or church-funded projects such as the *Ministerio Criança Feliz* near Belo Horizonte. A new concept is also that of the street-educator and Communal Educational Workshops (OEC), and PRACATUM in Salvador, trying to work with those still on the street.

The legalization of abortion appears to be a sensible proposition, likely to reduce the number of births to mothers incapable or unwilling to look after a child, and resulting in less "back-street" abortions and the complications these entail. Wider availability of contraceptives with the necessary education and a more realistic outlook from the Catholic Church would lower birth rates overall, help prevent STDs and reduce the need for abortion. Brazil does not have a population problem in terms of numbers; Britain has four times as many people per square kilometer, but rather one of distribution. If the city populations continue to grow at present rates, social problems will continue to breed. Family planning availability plus the want

²⁸ Wilson Mora in FLASCO/UNICEF study *Brazil: The Fight for Childhood in the City*. Anthony Swift 1991 page 34.

²⁹ There are 31 school age children in Brazil but 4 million have never been to school. A very small number go on to secondary education, with many having to work to support their families. Gilberto Dimenstein, *War on Children* 1991.

³⁰ Illiteracy in a country so rich in resources should not be an issue; it must be a deliberate choice to redirect public money, a decision made by the government and the rich. Christovam Buarque in Gilberto Dimenstein *War on Children* 1991 Page 9-10.

³¹ Antony Swift *Brazil; The Fight for Childhood in the City*. 1991 page 24.

³² Wilson Mora in Antony Swift's FLASCO/UNICEF Study, *Brazil: The Fight for Childhood in the City* Page 33.

and knowledge to use it, coupled with assistance to rural areas with the aim of stemming rural-urban migration, would significantly start to solve the problem at the root.

Another often over-looked vital requisite is the participation of the children themselves in the planning stages. They are the best judges of what amendments and provisions would most improve their lives. The first national meeting of street children was in 1986, when approximately 450 street children assembled with the Congress in Brasilia. They raised issues such as education, policing, healthcare and employment in a very diplomatic way. This was very successful in hi-lighting the issues effecting them and educating the wider population, laying the groundwork for future progress. Two similar meetings have occurred in more recent years. Only when all of these proposals are met, and the interests of the child are placed above money and political status, will this unacceptable faucet of life in Brazil (as in other areas of Latin America) be eradicated.