



Strengthening the Rights of Children and Women in Bolivia

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ABSTRACT Nancy Salinas Ardaya and Claudia Schachinger show how the SOS social centres are successfully strengthening both women's and children's rights among very poor communities in Bolivia.

KEYWORDS education; employment; empowerment; food security; health

Women and children in Bolivian society

Bolivia is among the poorest countries in Latin America.¹ Only 46.6 percent of the population has access to proper health services (Ministerio de Salud y Previsión Social, 2000). Around 40 percent of under fives suffer from malnutrition (UNICEF, 1998) and the mortality rate amongst the same age group is 83 out of 1000 (UNICEF, 2000), most caused by preventable diseases. Insufficient resources and the disparity between modern and traditional medicine further this situation despite free access to health services.

Primary education is obligatory, but real access is limited. Around 85 percent of the children enter the primary cycle, but just 60 percent finish it (Presidencia de la República, 1998). The children staying at home often do domestic tasks or work outside the home in order to compensate for low family incomes, particularly when parents are unemployed.² Many families are torn apart in the search for work, often separated for long periods of time, sometimes for ever. Child abuse is also rampant (DCI, 1997: 189).³ In this context, children do not perceive their families as places of shelter and growth, rather the opposite.

Despite modern laws women remain in their traditional role as caregivers, charged with education, health care and overall protection of children. Often they have to make extra efforts to compensate for lacking services or support from the government and a husband in bringing up their children. Bolivian

culture supports this male-gender bias and there is no educative corrective process. This 'machismo' and female inferiority is perpetuated and passed on to the next generation – children are accustomed to these gender roles and recreate them later on. The society is also very adult-centred, children and their needs are almost invisible, and issues of children's rights and protection are given little attention.

The aims and activities of the SOS Social Centres

SOS Children's Villages provide children with no family to care for them a new home. The SOS Social Centres complement this work within local communities, in order to prevent the abandonment of children and as an instrument in fighting poverty and exclusion. The SOS Social Centres in Bolivia began in 1985. Currently five centres are operating in Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Tarija, Oruro and Sucre; a new one is being planned in Potosí. They are located in poorer neighbourhoods⁴ of the cities where immigrants from rural areas⁵ first settle, often under difficult living conditions.⁶

The objectives of their work focus on three major lines:

- to promote the integral development of the child in terms of protection, health and schooling; social and family integration and cultural identity;
- to promote women's capacities through education and training, individual and collective empowerment and an improvement of economic and professional perspectives;
- to organize and ensure participation of the local community in resolving common problems and increasing attention to the well being, rights and needs of children.

The SOS Social Centres' work is mainly directed towards families⁷ with children between six months and nine years, living in extreme poverty. Day care centres and kindergartens provide educational care and support for children while their parents are at work. They receive a balanced meal covering their main nutrition needs and regular health care. Educational programmes aim at

capacity development (Montessori method) and support the schooling of children.

Women's programmes⁸ are offered according to their needs, centring on reading, writing or general education, daily life (nutrition, hygiene, medical or child care), vocational training, culture or empowerment. They receive advice and support in their dealings with labour offices, in employment schemes, and assistance with establishing micro-enterprises, as well as certificates for the courses they have completed.

Families benefit from legal advice and counselling. 'Family Committees' assemble a group of 8–15 families in the local community which makes a common analysis of their needs and problems in an organized and participatory way, aiming to find solutions together. Every Family Committee elects its own representatives. They organize community activities and run the 'Hogares Comunitarios'⁹ (Community Homes) which are established within the communities as extensions of the SOS Social Centres. They serve as day care centres. Two elected women are educators for the children and receive regular training and a salary (Yanagita, 1998).

Towards independence, not social aid

Every community has the capacity to overcome misery; social assistance or any type of aid creating dependency is not what the SOS Social Centres are about. All activities are directed towards the independence of their beneficiaries. In an average period of three years, they normally succeed in maintaining the changes they have achieved on their own. The centres help to resolve the tension between family life and professional obligations without taking the responsibility away from the parents. On the contrary, they support parents to better assume their responsibilities, respecting the dignity of the person and the rights of women and children.

The families participate in common activities and support the work of the centres. Most of the services charge a minimum fee. This has proved to increase the sense of ownership; the women and their families feel more responsible for their own learning success. It also contributes to self-esteem. As one woman expressed, 'we are poor, and the

poor always need to ask favours. But today going to the SOS Social Centres, we hardly have to ask for favours any more' (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 35).

The parent-child relation: children as educators

The children clearly benefit from the programmes: 80 percent of them succeed much better than average in the first years of basic education.¹⁰ They appear independent and self-assured, relate easily to others and respect environmental and social issues. The families recognize the importance of good schooling and 97 percent keep their children in school. Regular health checks, low price preventive and curative paediatric services, medicine and free immunization services improve their health conditions.¹¹

The children also transmit what they have learnt at the SOS Social Centres to their family. Many parents mention that their children are now teaching them about balanced cooking, hygiene, and behaviour. Apart from improving household standards, this has shown a positive impact on the relation between children and parents. They value the children's contribution. Women and children often experience having common objectives in how to improve their quality of life and assist each other. 'Our children are the ones who educate us now', says one woman, 'they especially tell us not to beat them any more' (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 39). Women indicate changes in their education style: 'Before I was always shouting at them. Today I never say no without talking to them first' (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 59). The relations are less tense, benefiting from the improved conditions. Women are proud of their successful children. They are also calmer since the children are in good care when they are working instead of being on the streets. Many women admit that they felt their children were mistreated by both circumstances and their own behaviour.

A stronger mother, a stronger woman

Mothers spend more time playing with their children, a sign of affection and attention. Here it is a

challenge to learn to express more emotions since in Bolivian society this is viewed as unusual and mothers fear their children would lose respect for them. In the SOS Social Centres they also learn to express and talk about feelings. This is not just an asset for the relationship with their children but also supports expressing what they want and feel in other relationships.

For women in general it is more difficult to sustain the changes. They are still faced with discrimination and their husbands are not always very supportive. Many men neglect their family duties or drink excessively. It is more difficult to raise their commitment to the SOS Social Centres. Even the relation between male educators in the centres and female beneficiaries sometimes appear authoritarian or paternalistic, as is common in Bolivian society.

Nevertheless, the 'silence of women and word of men in the Bolivian homes' (UNDP, 2000: 143) has turned in these families. Women feel more aware of themselves, and their participation in decision-making increases. 'Today I am no longer frightened to talk to people and I defend, claim and value my rights', says one woman (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 60). Some say that men respect them more and have started to help with the children and in the house. Also, in a few cases where relationships could not be improved, the participation in the SOS Social Centres has given women the courage to separate from husbands constantly mistreating them.

Self-esteem is one key for women to reach real participation in their lives. Their participation in the community increases significantly the longer the families attend the programmes of the SOS Social Centres. Women with similar problems give each other mutual emotional and educational support. Still, women engage more in the Family Committees, mother clubs and neighbourhood activities than in the organization of community events and they often claim little leisure time for themselves.¹²

A job: participation, recognition, autonomy

Having a job is a crucial element for the women. A recent evaluation study of the Bolivian Social 101

Centres shows that 50 women succeeded in re-entering the labour market. Others keep jobs more permanently, feel better qualified, improve their participation, negotiate their working conditions. In Tarija, women working as vendors have started to concentrate and qualify in areas of better income. Some have taken small loans from banks as 'Pro-Mujer' or 'Banco Sol' to start micro-enterprises or invest in the construction of their houses. In Cochabamba, where most women are cleaning ladies or waitresses, vocational training courses have led to increased job opportunities. 'When I went to look for a job with my certificate from the course, I got a stable and satisfying job in an office' (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 54).

Improved conditions and social skills also lead to considerable changes for less educated women. Their better qualifications, increased recognition and professional success empower them. Their autonomy as breadwinners makes them proud. 'My salary is for the food and the costs of the day-care. My husband's salary goes to pay back the credit for the house', reports one beneficiary (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 57). Shared responsibility improves the relationship between couples and the children also benefit. Asked for improvements in the SOS Social Centres, women wished for increased support in establishing micro-enterprises and cooperatives, more training offers, and

extended services to older children, single mothers and young women wishing to study.

Where women's rights are violated, this reflects directly on the children's rights and vice versa. When a woman gets an appropriate education and a job, her enhanced capacities, potentials, autonomy and self-esteem increase as well her abilities as caretaker. The mother-child relationship and the quality of the child's life gain enormously. As the woman's quality of life improves and she consciously assumes her own life, she will also feel capable of reconciling both roles as mother and woman, defending the rights of both women and children.

The SOS Social Centres' work cannot perform miracles and there is still a long way to go before all members of society are involved. But the vicious circle of women passing on their negative experiences might be broken. As a mother states: 'I do not want my children to be like me who never went to school. I want my history of suffering to end here and my children to have a different life to mine' (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 47). The women and children served by the SOS Social Centres in Bolivia show that their rights are not realized at the cost of the rights of others but, on the contrary, that in strengthening them they will contribute to each other's well-being.

Notes

1 The average per-capita income is \$US970; an estimated 62.6 percent of the population is living in conditions of poverty (INE Bolivia, 1999/2000).

2 According to a Bolivian household survey, around 14 percent of 10-14-year-olds work.

3 An investigation by DCI has shown that physical child abuse was as high as 42 percent among poor children. The main abusers were their own parents, followed by their employers.

4 Most of these areas do not have

basic services such as sewage water or tarred roads. Some quarters still lack electricity and potable water.

5 Seventy percent of the beneficiaries of the SOS Social Centres are migrants. The women work as vendors, domestics or workers; men as masons, drivers, workers and craftsmen.

6 Eighty-five percent of the families live in a single room, 55 percent share their bathroom with other families and 14 percent do not have toilets. 70 percent of the population is Aymara or Quechua origin, and

a lack of Spanish language skills also has a considerable negative impact on their incomes.

7 A total of 5311 children, 2189 mothers and 1850 families have so far benefited from the work of the SOS Social Centres in Bolivia (Salinas Ardaya, 2000: 31).

8 Female beneficiaries are married in 74.5 percent of the cases, around 25 percent are separated, widowed or single mothers. More than 30 percent are illiterate or have not completed basic education, another 25 percent have completed basic education, with

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just 15 percent to intermediate level. Still, this exceeds Bolivian data indicating an average female education of four years of schooling.

- 9 'Hogar' means literally 'fireplace' or 'hearth', the traditional central space of a house. It also signifies 'family/home life'. Some community homes are run in collaboration with the state programme PAN, a national programme for children under the age of six, where PAN sponsors additional expenses of the beneficiaries such as furniture or repairs.
- 10 Major reasons for failure at school were found to be lack of space, health, language problems or delayed development, all factors the SOS Social Centres try to prevent.
- 11 Many of the children suffered

from infections, respiratory diseases or diarrhoea.

- 12 Eighty-eight percent of the women in the SOS Social Centres work around 10 hours a day – the time left for their household and the centres' activities is little.

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Women and girls gather to bathe, wash clothes and fetch water at the community water tank, supplied with UNICEF assistance, in Ciudadela Guillermo Ungo, El Salvador – a settlement of displaced families, many of whom are former guerrillas from the Guazapa region. UNICEF supports programmes in primary health care, aimed at reducing high infant, child and maternal mortality rates, and in water and sanitation.