

**Extracts from the book “*Por dentro*” (On the inside) about the “Art and Awareness for women in prison with children” in Ezeiza prison’s Unit 31 (2005-2008) and in Jujuy prison’s Unit 22 (2008-2009) Argentina, carried out by Tierraviva civil association (NGO) and directed by teacher/artist Rasjid Alejandro Cesar.**

**Art and awareness-raising workshops on mother-child relationships in prison  
Presentation**

This work aims to contribute to the improvement of the difficult situation of children living in prison with their mothers.

The central axis of the text turns around the experience that Tierraviva has developed over the past few years with mothers and children in a prison situation, and specifically about the project which functioned between April 2005 and December 2008 in Ezeiza federal prison’s Unit 31: “Art and awareness-raising workshop on mother-child bonds in prison.”

The purpose of this text is to outline the empirical evidence produced in the implementation of the project in which around 100 convicted women took part, and with whom we tackled the complex task of promoting healthy and loving childcare practices within the prison in order to give children quality human care which would allow them to develop adequately, trying in this way to mitigate as much as possible the negative impact produced by the fact of having to grow up deprived of their freedom.

This account is a reconstruction of that group process (with the mothers and children in U31) in order to understand the problem better, to observe the successes and failures of the project, analyse the possibilities for improvement and suggest strategies for implementation in the future.

It makes possible an analysis of the experience - necessary in order to understand the situation and the tough conditions in which these children grow up, as well as the enormous problem that this represents for society as a whole (the negative impact of this reality will be visible in several years time); finally it states the urgent necessity for the state to look at this problem and to implement, together with civil society and the institutions involved, the preventative policies necessary to offer real and effective assistance to all the children growing up in prison with their mothers.

Finally, based on our own experience and on other scientific evidence, we suggest strategies and actions orientated towards women in conflict with the law, who are also mothers and/or the principal carers of children, at the moment of their arrest and/or trial.

The main ones are:

1. Avoiding as far as possible the imprisonment of children. Also avoiding the imprisonment of women who are mothers and the principle carers of children under 5 years old.

2. Applying alternative sentences to imprisonment or, as a last resort, home imprisonment, to mothers of small children. Offering them support via educational, cultural and preventative programmes at home or in the community.
3. Implementing a preventative psychosocial programme in the sphere of the community, as a stable and permanent medium to long-term policy, which aims at the re-composition of the social fabric, strengthening human capacity to provide quality care to children in the very places they are growing up. Supporting mothers in this way as a society so that the responsibility of childcare does not fall only on them, especially in situations of risk and psychosocial vulnerability.

In this way we would avoid locking up children as well as breaking family ties (the separation of the mother from the other children in her care and of the youngest from the rest of the family), in order to avoid a disintegration of the family unit.

In addition, as there are cases in which women cannot access alternative community programmes or home imprisonment (foreign women for example), it is recommended to

4. Guarantee them adequate assistance in prison through awareness-raising and early years play facilitation workshops for child development. And to renovate prisons in an adequate way where there is no alternative to housing small children.

## **1.2 The workshop**

The “Art and awareness-raising workshop on mother-child bonds in prison” (known as “bonds” in the prison), began in April 2005 with the purpose of aiding mothers with children under 4 who lived in Unit 31 of Ezeiza.

The main objective of the workshop was to “support the physical, emotional and cognitive development of children in prison, sensitizing mothers to positive care skills and practices adapted to the children’s developmental needs.” A complementary objective was to “support a positive production of subjectivity in the women in order to allow them to project their skills and strengths in the view of their future reintegration into society.”

## **1.4 The beginning**

Shortly after the beginning of the workshop, the women started to talk to us about the internal disciplinary procedures and we began to understand the “prison language” and the kind of life they lived inside.

## **1.5 What kind of women did we meet in the Unit 31? Prison seems to mainly punish poor people.**

100 women participated in the Unit 31 experience over 4 years. According to information given to us by the women themselves, almost 80% of the participants were from low social classes with low educational levels and conflictive personal and family situations surrounded by problems of under-employment, family disintegration, domestic violence, large families in

precarious living conditions, drug-addiction etc. Most of these women had other children outside prison who were being cared for by a family member, and in several cases, their fathers were also in prison. For example, one early participant was a mother of 8 children, in prison with her baby and her older daughter (her accomplice), who was also a mother who had her small child with her. That is to say that this child lived in prison with her grandmother, her mother and her uncle (also under 4 years old).

Most of the women have children from different fathers and in general they do not have a good relationship with them, if they have any. There were also cases of women with children from different fathers whose children were separated and/or living with their respective fathers.

Therefore we needed to find out what they were capable of in the way of helping the development and protection of their children. We are aware that the recovery of their positive care skills not only guarantees a higher quality of child development but also strengthens their self-confidence, generating better expectations for the future which in turn decreases the chances of re-offending.

Besides not knowing and not being interested in their legal cases, as we gained the trust of the group, the women themselves began to tell us the reasons they were in prison (several of them were re-offenders). The vast majority were in prison for drug-dealing offences (mostly for small-scale dealing and being “mules”) and/or simple theft. Many were detained although not yet tried, and in a couple of cases were released after two years of prison having been found innocent.

This means that the vast majority were poor women from the urban area of Buenos Aires and/or foreigners detained on trying to enter the country with drugs. So 80% were from a low social class and had not enjoyed the equal opportunities that would have allowed them and their families to develop in an acceptable way. This implies a kind of punishment for being poor.

Once trust was established, the women told us about their daily lives.

**Living conditions:** The space known as the “mothers’ floor” in Unit 31 is made up of at least 15 communal blocks, each one able to house 11 women with their children. Each inmate has a child with her, but in some exceptional cases we have had pregnant participants with one child or even two. The inmates have individual cells. The kitchen, dining room, bathroom, the laundry space with sinks and the internal patio (open till 6pm) are all communal areas. The individual cell measures approx 3x3 metres and contains the inmate’s bed, the child’s cot and a small space to circulate. Each cell has a window giving on to the internal patio and a wardrobe. Besides the individual cells there is a punishment cell which, as it can’t be used as such due to the presence of children, is used as a store room. Besides the mothers’ floor there is another floor housing the arrivals block where recently arrived inmates live.

**Court attendance:** when the women have an audience with the judge about their case, they are transferred to the tribunals. The transfer is organised according to the availability of vehicles and its duration depends on the amount of inmates that need to be picked up from each prison. Normally they begin very early (4am) and last almost all day.

The following is a text written by Liz M. about attending court seen through the eyes of her son (literary exercise on empathy):

*"I'm only two and a half, but I know how prison life is; a little while ago the guard said to mama that she will be out soon as she has to go to court. I've been several times, so I know what it's like. Mama covers me up as much as she can - we're going to spend a long time in the "cage" until the van which will take us to see the judge arrives.*

*6am: the day just began and I'm already tired, I've already spent two hours in this cold and damp cell. At last the van's arrived, says mama; she takes me in her arms and we get in the van. All the prisoners in chains look at me and say "what a lovely baby, how are you?", while the cigarette smoke chokes me because there is no air.*

*7.30am: we've arrived at court and a guard paints mama's nails. Then they shut us in a really small cell, a lot of us, mama says 15; but even so she lays down a blanket so I can rest.*

*10am: they call mama – at last the judge will see me, she says. They make us go up to the office, but the secretary says we have to come back another day as the judge is busy.*

*11am: mama is really annoyed, she swears so much my head hurts. I've been crying for hours and mama shouts at me. I want to explain that I want to go back to the "cell" as she calls it. It's my home and I want to go back. The guard hears me crying, knocks on the door and asks "what's going on with the child?" ... after a while she brings me a yoghurt and mama says thank you.*

*5pm: I wake up startled. Everyone in the cell is shouting to the police to send the van, they want to go back to the prison. On the other side they are shouting too, I don't understand anything, I'm scared and start to shout. Mama hugs me and says "don't cry, everything's OK", but even so I'm scared to death and cling on to mama.*

*8pm: at last they've calmed down and the guard comes and says "the van's arrived, you're leaving!" The way back is worse than the way there because everyone is tired and without hope.*

*Reader, I know you have seen the prison transfer vans and maybe you have said to yourself "there goes the ruin of society!" But let me tell you that the future of Argentina also goes there, with an uncertain fate, as no authority exists to protect me mentally or physically.*

## **Conclusions**

As a conclusion, and from today's perspective (August 2011) - going over the experience - I need to share reflections and certainties that have arisen from the feelings of the imprisoned women themselves in their daily exploration of more human alternatives for the raising of their children and from their singular histories and their capacity to resist adversity.

First let me point out that we have discovered that the confinement of small children, especially in prisons, has a negative impact on them, not only because of their direct exposure to a closed, arbitrary and incomprehensible system, but also because of the implication of separating children from a family environment, which in many cases is shared not only with the mother but also with other brothers and sisters, the father, grandparents, aunts and uncles, godparents and other significant people for them (neighbours, friends etc.) who are linked to the family and social environment and with whom they can interact.

Despite the negative effects the prison environment has on children, we should point out that it was possible to mitigate this to some extent via a conscious and intense focus on strengthening the state of mind and self-esteem of the women, who began to constitute a united network of sensitive and attentive carers within the prison, adapting and modifying routines and habits of cohabitation in the block and concentrating on how to satisfy the needs of their children.

I mention this especially because, in the event that other prison authorities still consider the possibility of locking up small children (as is the case in the new model prison in Paso Molino, Uruguay), our experience shows that there are many strategies which can be used in order to improve and make more humane the children's living conditions and to spare them unnecessary trauma and suffering. They are actions which require a minimum of material resources and mainly just effective use and capacity-building of existing human resources.

In Argentina home imprisonment has been chosen as a way to get children out of prison, and this is obviously better than imprisonment, but despite this the fundamental problem seems to persist; that is to say that this measure is not going to reduce the level of psychosocial vulnerability these women live with before arriving in prison. Therefore if the measure is not accompanied by support via home-based or community programmes (psychosocial care, cultural, health, educational and work programmes) – which women have recently begun to have access to in prison – and if they are not guaranteed this process of production and active integration in society, the fundamental problem is not resolved at all.

Reality showed us that prison primarily punishes poor people, seeing as most of the women who worked with us were from vulnerable situations, with economic problems as well as family conflicts and absent fathers (of their children). Most were “mules” and had begun drug dealing as an alternative way of subsisting due to their economic problems aggravated by the fact that in most cases the children were their sole responsibility with no support from others. Thus we see the importance of applying a real strategy “before prison” through preventive programmes of awareness-raising and support to women and children in high-risk situations,

joining prevention with programmes to stimulate productive human development like micro-enterprises, cooperatives, microcredit, kitchen gardens, farms etc.

A programme which not only gives them work and a positive productive role they can exercise with dignity, but also membership of a social network in which they can share responsibilities and commitments, and exercise their rights. We believe that this strategy of social inclusion could be promoted by the state to benefit women with children in conflict with the law.

Considering then the relationships observed between vulnerability, emotional deprivation and the later development of antisocial behaviour, it seems obvious to us that if we, as a society, don't make an effort to prevent and promote the end of this negative cycle of exclusion, we will help the growth of juvenile delinquency. To go further than this, as long as poor and vulnerable women are punished in this way, instead of correcting the situation and including them in the social system, we will be sowing "insecurity" in the future by damaging the emotional and psychosocial well-being of the children in their care.

Turning things around will not be achieved by widening the margins of repression by lowering the age of accountability to 16 years old. Things can only be turned around by widening the margins of inclusion and the promotion of development, taking care of children and young people right now, putting a stop to the violation of their rights and helping them in situations of risk so that they can develop in a healthy way with equal opportunities, able to acquire tools which allow them to participate fully in the life of society.

Participation in educational, cultural, artistic and productive programmes is one of these equalising tools and what we should use to change correctional treatment which should attack the causes which mean that people go to prison in the first place (lack of work, education, culture, integration, opportunities etc.) and promote positive habits of integration and participation by offering real tools for carrying out a positive role in the community. The most equalising element is culture, the knowledge and know-how of each person.

Thus we believe that home imprisonment should be accompanied by these support programmes for women, promoting early-years development through the capacity-building of networks of stable community carers for children, starting with convicted women; not leaving things there but expanding the creation of these networks of stable carers in order to support women so they can carry out other activities of their choice. The same social network will promote child development in the medium and long term seeing as we will be increasing the collective capacities for satisfying the developmental needs of children.

Rasjid Alejandro CESAR