Strengthening the Rights of Children and Women in Bolivia

Women and children in Bolivian society

Bolivia is among the poorest countries in Latin America. 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. 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). 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 neighbourhoods of the cities where immigrants from rural areas first settle, often under difficult living conditions.

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 families 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 programmes 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’ (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