

Shared empathy, a powerful weapon against child exploitation



Nov 24, 2008

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During the first [European Roma Summit](#), organized in September 2008 in Brussels by the EU Commission, I was approached by a few concerned Roma representatives to write an article (available [here](#) in French) about the psycho-sociological mechanisms and consequences inherent to the transgenerational transmission of violence against children(1), specifically with regard to the exploitation, involving or not trafficking, of Roma children, particularly vulnerable to these predatory practices including from within their own community.

From our informal discussions, I learned that, notwithstanding an unexpected, apparently politically driven backlash from all sides (including, oddly enough, certain NGOs) to keep such matters strictly "off the agenda", a small but determined number of forward looking Roma leaders(2) have nonetheless been courageously transgressing prevailing pseudo-humanistic taboos tending to trivialize or even deny the "touchy" issue of Roma exploiting Roma children, involving or not organized crime. Today they are actively appealing to all concerned citizens – Roma and non Roma, NGOs, Member States, etc. - to adopt together an uncompromising and non discriminatory child rights centred approach to deal effectively with this worsening problem.

Their rationale for the urgent implementation of such a public, unequivocal and unified stand against all forms of ill-treatment and exploitation of Roma children, whatever the circumstances, is twofold, and refreshingly coherent, i.e. a) how can we be demanding, and rightly so, the immediate implementation of full human rights for our community if we permit ourselves, "in the meantime", to go on denying these very rights to our own youth?, and b) consequently, how can we expect the next generation of Roma kids to be able to grow up to be normal responsible citizens, empowered actors for authentic Roma social inclusion, if we continue to curtail their individual potential for human development by failing to protect them, as children, against being used and abused as commercial commodities in all forms of exploitative activities(3), including child prostitution and pornography, begging, traffic of organs, domestic servitude, forced labour, forced marriage, illegal adoption, illicit activities such as drug dealing, pick pocketing, etc.?

Perhaps empathy, that innate faculty of individuals of our species to be able to consciously project ourselves in to the "shoes" of our fellow beings, could be seen in this context as a very powerful weapon enabling us to enhance our natural ability to correctly perceive the unacceptable, and therefore to stand together against all forms of injustice, especially regarding the plight of exploited children.

To develop, however, **a shared sense of empathy**, essential for a sustainable social perception of our survival as a species of "human" beings, each individual must first receive the adequate protection, care, kindness and overall positive emotional stability and affection essential to the satisfaction of his or her basic needs. This is not necessarily linked to the

financial or social status of the care-givers but rather to their acquired capacity to have been able to develop - or not - such primary empathy towards themselves and to be able to pass this on to their kids.

In a nutshell, to evolve into a responsible caring adult, a child must be initially perceived and treated as *a person*(4), thus entitled to be unconditionally respected and protected as such on the sole basis of his or her inherent human dignity(5), before being able to acquire empathy for others and, if need be, feel naturally inclined to come to their assistance.

On the other hand, a child who has been deprived of adequate respect and protection, who's been repeatedly subjected to physical and mental abuse, humiliated, exploited, been made to feel that he or she has no intrinsic (human) value other than that of a disposable object to be used for the sole benefit of others(6), will not be able to spontaneously develop his or her potential for self empathy and positive self esteem. Moreover, if these children continue to survive without ever experiencing authentic human kindness from concerned adults who actively intervene in their favour, they will be constantly compelled to give vent to the cruelty they have unconsciously integrated throughout their childhood, turning their unappeasable suffering and rage against other innocent more vulnerable victims, preferentially children, if not against themselves (depression, substance abuse), thus perpetuating the said individual and social cycles of (auto) destructive violence and abuse.

Given the aggravating factor of today's all-for-profit global economy on the ever-growing spread of violence against children, notably with regard to child exploitation and trafficking, the far-reaching "European Parliament Resolution of 16 January 2008: [Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child](#)" comes as a most welcome wake-up call. Indeed, among its many essential dispositions, the Parliament, notably(7) "(...) *calls on the Member States to implement serious measures to ban all different forms of exploitation of children including exploitation for prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery or servitude, use of children associated with begging, illegal activities, sport and related activities, illicit adoption, forced marriage or any other forms of exploitation;*".

Hopefully, for the sake of our shared humanity and future – namely "our children" -, all stakeholders could today draw new resolve – and strengthened empathy - from this important text and join ranks in supporting the Roma activists' campaign - "Stop exploitation of children" – rightly aimed at ending current implicit trivialization and condoning of these unacceptable practices and their socially toxic knock-on effects, as well as kick-starting effective non-discriminatory **prioritized protection of all children** and the urgent implementation of their fundamental rights as well as those of their families.

As Nelson Mandela (whom we paraphrase here) once put it: "Children are the rock on which will be built the future of Humanity; Citizens of tomorrow, for the better or for the worse."

It would indeed be a very foolhardy - or suicidal - society that would choose to deliberately ignore such wise words.

Footnotes:

- 1 - Cf. the remarkable research on the subject by Alice Miller (Switzerland).
- 2 - Among others, Nicolae Gheorghe, Romanian sociologist, former senior advisor on Roma and Sinti affaires to the OSCE, Hvzi Cazim, president of the Belgian based "Comité pour l'Union du Peuple Rhom", Valeriu Nicolae, secretary general of the European Roma Grassroots Organization (ERGO), Livia Jaroka, Hungarian MEP, etc.
- 3 - Cf. the important update of the United Nations Children's Fund : Guidelines on the Protection of Child Victims of Trafficking, September 2006, available at http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/0610-Unicef_Victims_Guidelines_en.pdf.
- 4 - T.B. Brazelton (USA).
- 5 - i.e. the cornerstone of all fundamental human and child rights
- 6 - Cf. the explicative notes of "exploitation" of the 1999 World Health Organization (WHO) Definition of child maltreatment, Document WHO/HSC/PVI/99.1, Report on the consultation on child abuse prevention, Geneva, March 29-31, 1999, WHO, Social Change and Mental Health, Violence and Injury Prevention, pp. 13-17.
- 7 - Ibid., P6_TA (2008)0012 – (2007/2093(INI)), paragraphe 89.

This article represents the author point of view.

Lorne Walters: *Lorne Walters is a Brussels based independent researcher and consultant on child health and child rights issues. He has been actively involved with the elaboration of the above-mentioned EU Parliament resolution of 16 January 2008, notably concerning the need for Member States to ban in law all forms of exploitation of children. Similarly, he is the author of a proposal to explicitly ban the "use" of children associated with begging, which, mutatis mutandis, could serve as a model for much needed harmonization and clarification of present EU Member States' domestic legislation on this particular issue. Since 2005 he has been the coordinator for a citizen's appeal promoting such legal clarification and the reinforcing of a preventive child rights centred approach with regard to the identification and referral of presumed victims of exploitation, involving or not trafficking, the text of which can be found on the website: www.stop-mendicite-enfance.org. He is also currently active as an independent advisor to European Roma NGO's and individuals working on child protection issues.*