

The realities of marginalization: the life paths of children and youth living on the streets of Rio de Janeiro

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The visual presence of young people hustling and living on the streets of Rio de Janeiro conceals complicated life histories. This paper based on extensive interviews with over 60 children shows how going to and being on the street is a process marked by many ruptures and losses, constant instability, lack of care from family and local social services, indifference and constant danger. The authors conclude by arguing the importance of providing practical support to the communities of origin and the families of these youngsters as well as the need for additional action by state and other social actors to reduce the incidence of marginalization.

This paper is based on the life stories told by children and adolescents found on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Their trajectories are connected to the current historical moment of globalisation, which as the geographer Milton Santos puts it, is: “a moment of rapid transformations, of transitions and of a spatial-political reorganization of the world”. These are the so called *meninos e meninas de rua*, *street kids*, *niños de la calle*, *enfants de la rue*... - common terms for a phenomenon that has become painfully visible in Latin America since the 1980s. The trajectories that we present and discuss here represent the lives of millions of children and adolescents in the world. Are their life trajectories inevitable? This question will guide our analysis.

The group upon which we focus in this paper is part of a larger contingent of people who migrate, are dislocated or exiled from their places of origin – one of the most notable characteristics of the current times. They are living examples of the contradictions of our times, between the emerging discourse of rights and the real aggravated situation of socio-economic inequality. The rights of children and adolescents to live with their families and communities is defended (and guaranteed by law), yet they are not given the minimum conditions for a dignified existence and to remain in their homes. In fact, the opposite is evident in their statements; their lives are marked from the beginning by continuous adversities, forcing them towards situations of danger, abuse and hardship that make up the background of their

trajectories. Though they live on the street with a hunger for life, their stories are marked by death, disasters, losses, hunger and a lack of options and support.

The life trajectories of young people presented here are based on an action-research project initiated by the Swiss organization *Terre des hommes*, who sought out CIESPI to coordinate the research. We set off from the idea of producing material that was completely based on the voice of children and adolescents, involving institutions and social educators in a participative process of developing and executing the research. This research was based on a concern with the lives of these youngsters and tried to capture in their words and way of expressing themselves how they saw their predicament and the paths they had taken. The research emerged with the intention of informing actions, it came about through a process of the creation of a network of organizations in Rio de Janeiro who were to work in concert with the population of children and adolescents in a street situation, the *Rede Rio Criança* [Child Network Rio]. This research was the first part of a process that is attempting to improve the way in which NGOs and government agencies, that are part of this network, work with these youngsters based on a better understanding of their trajectories, their organization on the street, their aspirations and the ways in which they make sense of their situation. The hope is that through this first step, of research and consolidation of the network, ways of working can be found that better meet the needs and expectations of these youngsters and which are more successful in providing them with attractive alternatives to the street.

There are broader political, social and economic issues that determine the excluding factors that affect the lives of these children and adolescents and of their families. However, this kind of statement implies that there is nothing that can be done to change the situation in the shorter and medium term. We do not believe this, basing ourselves on the experience related by children and adolescents. Despite their constant exposure to frustrations and disappointments, they are still hopeful and show awareness and lucidity when reflecting on their lives.

Examining the literature produced over the last two decades on children who live on the street, we can see how it has shifted its focus and concern as new concepts and research methodologies, cultural and political trends, prompt new questions and lines of enquiry to emerge (Butler and Rizzini 2001; Rizzini, Butler et al (2003).). More recently this literature has been concerned with the identity and subjective world of children and adolescents who live on the street. Taking place within broader societal concerns with participation and inclusion, this shift in emphasis has demonstrated an increasing concern to hear the voices of those who

have been historically excluded.

The impetus to try to understand children and adolescents as agents in the construction of their identities through their interaction with the world they live in, is indebted to the reappraisal of childhood as a cultural-historical construct credited to the work of Philippe Ariés *Centuries of Childhood* (1963). Those who have followed Ariés' footsteps have drawn attention to the ways in which "childhood" has over the last few hundred years been transformed, particularly through middle class Euro-North American culture, into a space that is increasingly controlled by adults who attempt to shield youngsters from adult society at large (Jenks: 1990, James & Prout: 1992).

For Tobias Hecht, a North American who researched youngsters living on the street in Recife and Olinda in the Northeast of Brazil, two kinds of childhoods result from these cultural-historical developments, divided according to the socio-economic conditions of the family in question. In one of these 'childhoods', children are "nurtured", that is, kept away from the world of work and taken care of economically by his/her parents. In the other form of childhood, children are seen as "nurturing", that is, they are expected to help their mothers with household chores and bring home an income (Hecht: 1995). It is common in a city as diverse and unequal as Rio to see this contrast vividly everyday. Whereas children from poorer families can often be seen selling flowers, sweets and other goods on the streets, their wealthier counterparts shielded behind gated communities and condominiums, are expected to do even less than children their own age in Europe or the US, with maids doing many simple tasks for them such as tidying their clothes or their rooms.

This shift from a nurturing to a nurtured conception of childhood has profound implications as regards the agency, or rather lack of it, attributed to children. As Harry Hendrick writes the modern, or in Hecht's sense the 'nurtured' conception of childhood, removed children from the world of work, sexuality and politics, and designated the classroom as the major focus of their lives. Speaking about this movement in nineteenth century Britain, Hendrick writes:

"Children were no longer allowed to earn money or to decide how to spend their time; they were forced into dependency on adults and obliged to study or play. Cute, contented and dependent, but without autonomy in important decisions concerning their

lives, children ‘should be seen and not heard” (Hendrick: 1990, p.3).

Countering this conception of children as individuals “to be seen but not heard”, the present research situates itself within the emerging paradigm in the social sciences that regards children as knowing not necessarily less than adults, but as Wulff writes, as individuals who know “something else that has to do with their particular situation and surrounding” (Wulff: 1995, p.11).

We do this by trying to listen to the children and adolescents on the street and attempt to understand in what way they are agents in the construction of their identities, and how they orient themselves in the world of the street. “Street children” are particularly significant within these wider debates regarding the category of childhood and the child as agent because, as Hecht and many authors on the subject have come to believe, of the way in which they have become an obsession “because of the extent to which they diverge from readily accepted models of childhood” (Hecht: 1995, p.217).

The history of the construction of the research

There were some challenges in carrying out the present research. We sought to increase our understanding of children and adolescents who dwelt, worked and/or slept on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. With this goal, the research team opted to develop an action-research in which a participatory methodology would integrate a group of actors with diverse experiences and professional qualifications.

The proposal was that the process of the research should become a place and opportunity for exchange between the various members of the *Rede Rio Criança*. We felt that the participation of street educators, youth workers that specialize in working with young people on the street, would help our field research and at the same time would be an opportunity for learning and exchange between them as well.

The methodology employed here departs from the premise that the experience and opinion of children and adolescents about particular topics must be taken in consideration in order to contribute to an effective change of paradigm in terms of understanding their life conditions and the kind of support that is offered them.

In this sense, we felt that the research would be one of the elements that contributed to

the making of decisions about actions to be implemented in the projects. In general we can say that participative methodologies provide tools that allow action and interaction, creativity and for feelings of belonging to a certain group or to society to arise. It also allows for the possibility of increased motivation and enthusiasm of people involved, contributing to the expression of their potentialities. Participation incorporates affective elements, making the group more secure and confident in assuring its own continuity. To participate is to take an active part in the process and decisions to be implemented.

An important assumption which informed the construction of the research was the change in paradigm indicated by Rizzini, Barker and Cassaniga (1998, 2000) shifting the focus from the child seen as a *risk* to perceiving her/him as an *opportunity*:

"The social policies and programmes designed for impoverished youngsters normally prioritise their problems, deficiencies and, frequently, reach children and adolescents when these are already in a situation that is difficult to reverse. A change of mentality is required which instead sees the competencies and potentials – of the child/adolescent, of the family and the community" (Rizzini, Barker and Cassaniga: 2000, p.10).

Fieldwork: observations and reflections

The places where the interviews took place were chosen based on the points of greatest concentration of children in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro. In order to go deeper into the life histories of the children we chose to carry out a second interview with five children who were staying at a shelter. The criteria for choosing these youngsters were based on their willingness to share their experiences with us and on the fact that their stories contained common themes also described by many other children.

We carried out in total 60 interviews, as anticipated. However, in some interviews more than one child spoke. In this way, we have interviews with 67 individuals, 48 boys and 19 girls. Forty-five of these interviews were carried out on the street and 15 of them in shelters. The larger than expected number of interviews on the street occurred because of children's desire to speak to us even when we had already conducted an interview with another individual in that locality. We found it important to listen to whoever wanted to talk. For a smaller number of youngsters, we carried out a series of life-history interviews, allowing us to get

deeper into their trajectories to and through the street. Two of these trajectories are presented here in order for us to get a sense of the various issues and experiences that come to affect a child's journey to the world of the street.

These brief life-stories also illustrate the trajectories of many others, stories marked by ruptures and a constant search for a place in the world.

As mentioned in the introduction the reason for addressing in detail the life trajectories of children who are living or who have lived on the street is that we can learn a lot from them. In particular, as we hope to outline, we can see the many points in their journeys where support from family members, the community, the state and other organizations could have made a real difference. These are the points of fracture that Sandra and Raí, the two adolescents whose stories we now present, so clearly articulate our conversations with them. Sandra and Raí were born like any other children full of the will to live and grow. For them to develop normally they needed an environment, even if simple or poor, where affection, food, health and security needed to be present. But they did not have these in their lives rather they recount a series of episodes marked by loss, adversity and violence. What moves us here is the fact that Sandra and Raí need not have gone through what they did. They could have had alternative life-trajectories, like many others who at this moment seek the street for protection or for the illusion that this will meet the dreams they harbour. Let us turn to the paths they took in Rio de Janeiro.

Raí's story, 15 years old

"Ah, my life was... was bad". This is how Raí sums up. His trajectory is one that is full of loss. The first occurs when he was two years old. His mother and father fought a lot. He says that during one of these fights, after being beaten up again, his mother ran away from home. She abandons her children (Raí, his four year old sister and his seven year old brother) at "some woman's" house, as he remembers it. Raí recalls that his mother had tried to run away from her partner many times before. Her departure provokes an immense sadness in Raí, as can be seen by his words:

"My dad beat her up, and it was me and my sister who got the blame. She abandoned me. Left me at the home of some woman and did not return. I know where she is, but I

don't have contact with her. I hate her. Nothing will change what I feel for my mum. All I want is that she lives her life on one side and me on the other."

Raí says that he and his siblings were beaten up a lot in the house where they were left. His older brother managed to escape. He and his sister tried to escape. They sought an aunt on their father's side who then took them back to the house. They tried again to runaway. This second time this aunt took them to an orphanage. "It was the orphanage who raised me" - says Raí. This aunt then returned when he was ten years old. He did not want to leave the orphanage where he appeared to be happy. He recalls how there were many trips there - to waterfalls, the beach. He cried a lot and asked to stay but to no avail and was taken to his maternal grandmother's house. His sister returned to live with his mother where she is to this day - "only because she has nowhere to go" asserts Raí. These days he stays in touch with his sister by phone.

Raí could not adapt to his grandparent's house. He felt confined. He says he was forced to go to church, to school, and could hardly go out to play. Even though he liked his grandmother he stayed there for just over a month. These days he goes to visit her, but only on weekends, "to spend the afternoon", as he says.

During this time he lived with his grandparents Raí's father, who had been in prison for the past seven years, is released from jail and comes to see him:

"He came at night and I was already asleep. My grandma woke me up to say my dad was there. I could not believe it was my dad because I hardly knew him. So then my grandma explained that he had been in jail. In my head my dad was already dead. So it was like this that I got to know him."

It was December and they spent Christmas together. This happiness, however, was short lived. Shortly before New Year Raí's dad was murdered by the police during a shoot-out between the police and local drug dealers. For Raí this was the worst thing that has happened in his life as his father was for him the most important person in the world.

When he was alive, Raí's father took him to meet his friends who were part of the drug trafficking gangs. Afterwards Raí also joined the gang. "I already knew how it was because I

saw many people doing it, so I learnt. It was just a matter of selling the drugs on the hill [the shanty town] and passing on the money to the boss. I earned \$100 a week, more or less.” He sold marijuana and cocaine, keeping half the money for him and giving the other half to the drug boss. Whilst in the gang he walked around armed and engaged in shoot-outs with the police. He was wounded once by a bullet in his thigh when he was eleven.

Raí’s older brother also worked for the drug gangs, and does so to this day. This was his brother’s path after having ran away from the house where his mother left him. He lives with his wife in a house that Raí claims was bought by their father. Raí lived with them for a while but did not get on with his brother’s wife.

In any case, today Raí is banished from his community on account of a debt incurred with the local drug gang. He owes them about \$500 and can only return once he has the money.

Raí relates how this debt came about, how he was caught by the police with a bag of marijuana and a gun. The judge gave him a sentence of a year and three months inside an internment institution. “That was the worse prison I went through” - Raí claims. “Jail” is how he (and many others) refers to the government’s ‘socio-educational’ institutions for children and adolescents. Once his sentence was over Raí goes to the street to try to get the money for the drug gang – which he owes to this day. From this point on his life entails a constant circulation between the street and institutions that care for children and adolescents. He even sought out a judge to claim his right to being accepted in a shelter that did not want to accept him: “Shelters were made to accept minors”, he says. Raí returns to shelters every time the street becomes unbearable: “When we are going through bad times on the street, when we can’t stay anymore, I go”.

Raí discovers that the street is not as he imagined it. “On the street we suffer a lot, life is a lot worse” he says. Instead of going round well-dressed, of getting things easily, as he thought, he experiences hunger and violence from the police and other boys, as well as other kinds of abuse and discrimination: “Some people walked by and swore at us, told us to get a job. How?! If even for those with schooling it is hard to find work!”

Raí claims to have had six years of primary education through all the institutions that he circulated, but he has difficulty writing simple phrases. He concludes then, that what is left for him is to just steal despite the consequences. Raí has been in ‘jail’ nine times. On the whole

he claims to have spent three of his fifteen years in 'jail'. With the money that he got from stealing, he bought glue, which he learnt to use on the street, and marijuana, which he began to use whilst still living in his community. He says that he uses drugs to forget the things that have already happened to him, to forget the death of his father who he liked very much and whom he constantly remembers.

He also does not forget the violent episodes perpetrated by the police. He says that he is in the shelter at present because he received a death threat from the police. This threat was given as a result of him throwing stones at the police in response to them confiscating his glue. In this episode, Raí was told by the police that they would kill him if they caught him on the street again.

A year previously Raí had been 'caught' with other boys by the municipal guards. After being beaten up they were left by a hospital. The following day the boys sought out a judge and as a consequence photographs were taken of them and the story made it to the newspapers. Raí's greatest fear is to be murdered at night by the police in his sleep. He is also afraid of drug gangs invading the shelters.

Raí's institutional life is extensive. He recalled thirteen places including shelters, homes, socio-educational institutions and day-centres through which he passed. The precise chronological sequence of these passages is impossible to ascertain with precision and the order of these episodes is also unclear. Each memory is filled with emotion, he is always running away. Underpinning the memories is a feeling of a lack of care and affection, of not being listened to. He asks for people to talk to him. He remembers lovingly two educators who treated him with affection. One of them he regards as a mother, even though they are not in touch any more. It seems that the few ties which he managed to build through his life – the two educators, his sister, grandmother all of whom he speaks lovingly – are not enough for him to break this constant process of escape. All the while Raí says that he does not like to stay in one place for too long. Things become boring and he needs to get away. This difficulty in adapting wherever he maybe leaves the impression that Raí is always out of place in the world.

Raí says that he asks God for the courage to change his life. He says that he does not have the courage to get a job, to ask for employment. The only time he worked (outside the drug gangs), he managed to stay with it for four or five months. "I used the photocopy machine, took the cases" – he summarises – at the General District Attorney's office. He liked

the work.

“Raising a family” also appears important for Raí. His fondest memory is of a photograph, which his aunt mounted in a frame, in which he stands next to his mother and father as a little boy.

About his future he is not sure of much. He wants to be a parachutist, but he remembers the many ‘prisons’ he had been into, and fears not being able to join the military. Then he says he wants to be a football player. He ends up admitting that it all depends, in the end, on him: “The only one who can help me is me. Only I can really change my life”.

Sandra’s story

Sandra, a 15 year-old girl who had lived on the streets for many years, was interviewed a number of times in a shelter for girls where she was living, a spacious two-storey house in the lower-middle class suburb. With some five or six large bedrooms with five beds in each, this shelter is home for some twenty five girls aged between six and sixteen, not all of whom had lived on the street, but who had a family situation that ensured them a place there. The house also has a TV lounge, a classroom for extra school-tuition, a craft-room and a chapel. The girls kept the house tidy themselves, each being responsible for a particular task. Sandra was 14 years-old when first interviewed; she had a real ease about the way she retold her tale volunteering the story of her experiences on the street spontaneously, eloquently and without inhibition, including her involvement in robberies and with drugs.

Sandra’s parents come from the impoverished north of Brazil, she has 5 sisters and a brother. Her house was in one of Rio’s many peripheral *favelas*. At home her father frequently beat her and her mother and she speaks of her mother suffering constant ‘humiliation’ at the hand of her father. She speaks of how her mother had no one to release her rage on and so turned on her children, regretting it afterwards saying ‘it’s because of that rascal’. Sandra left home when she was 11, as she puts the image of her leaving home – “like a bird in a cage, when the door opens the bird flies away”. Hers, however, was a gradual flight; Sandra begins frequenting the streets when she was 9 years old, selling sweets in Copacabana, an affluent beachside district in Rio where most tourists flock. The first time she went there her older brother (two years older than her) took her because he already stayed on the street, shoe shinning and mugging. Sandra also knew other children who stayed on the street when she

lived at home, boys who would go into her community to buy drugs. From the age of 10 Sandra stops selling sweets and gets more involved with the boys and girls who stayed out on the street. It was through her contact with these youngsters that she decided to leave home. From this time on she returns home only sporadically staying away for a week or longer. In these occasions she brought home some money, which her mother would tear up saying it was 'dirty money'. Sandra would then cello-tape together the notes so she could spend the money herself.

Sandra had only recently arrived at the shelter when first interviewed, and fresh off the street she still had her hair shaved, though she commented that she was letting it grow and was becoming 'more feminine'. She wore small shorts, a tight shirt, lipstick and make up. But on the street Sandra shaved her hair, used baggy clothes and in general tried to hide her femininity. She said this was in order to look like a boy when she was mugging someone, so she could intimidate more. But as she and other girls also mentioned, appearing like a boy is a very important protection strategy on the street, in particular from the police and from adults who might want to sexually abuse them. This strategy is observed only in girls who do not have a steady boyfriend who himself acts as the protector. So to walk around with shaved hair, baseball hat, baggy clothes and with all the slang and mannerisms of other boys on the street is to blend in, and partake of the advantages of being male on the street. Sandra says that when the police catch a girl in the middle of a crew of boys they go and slap them and call them names. Sandra and others on the street maintained that the police were the most dangerous thing on the street. The police, many have reported, will often demand money, particularly if the youngsters have been caught breaking the law. Sandra herself was in trouble with the police on many occasions, sometimes she was hit by the police and then let go, but in other occasions she was sent to Rio's youth correctional facilities, the first and second time when she was twelve and the third time when she was thirteen where she spent almost a whole year and turned 14 'in prison'.

The money earned on the street by begging or robbing was spent on clothes, food or drugs. Sandra experimented with all drugs on the street; marijuana, cocaine, glue and 'thinner' (quite literally thinner – a kind of ethanol-based paint stripper which has surged in popularity on Rio's streets, overtaking the more traditional and expensive glue). Sandra also retells that she and her friends would at times go on shopping sprees inside Rio *Zona Sul's* most

prestigious shopping centers. She remembers the day when she and her friends walked into such a shopping center “all dirty, and left there full of new clothes, new sandals and shoes without having had a bath and everybody would be staring”. I asked her how long her clothes lasted. “Lasted! They didn’t, one week and then they’d be in the bin, we didn’t wash them, it was hard to wash, we washed our knickers, there in this big tap... because there is this saying; ‘money that comes easy, goes easy’, right, so money came easy, and I wanted to blow it, I didn’t care.”

On the street Sandra slept on Copacabana beach beneath the coconut trees, or next to the buildings underneath the marquees when it rained. At times if the weather was particularly bad, or else they had money, her and her friends would go to a cheap hotel near central railway station, where they could also wash their clothes. Speaking of the friends she hung out with on the street, she says they were like a family, and they stuck up for each other. She reminisces about her time on the street: “There was a part of it on the street that was very lively, we played, had little play fights, fooled around, played just like children. But there were other times that I think the atmosphere was a bit heavy, I mean, things got a bit heated, we had to tone down a bit, we saw that there’d be a fight, and if there was a fight, then there is no separating, you leave one killing the other.”

When asked what she feels when she remembers her days on the street some 6 months after our first interview she replies; ‘sadness and anguish’, as she tries to give birth to a new identity, a new sense of self:

“... I have been in this house for 9 months now, 9 months away from everything, away from drugs, from everything. You came here you saw a bit of me, because when I arrived, you got to know a bit of the old Sandra still coming from the rhythm of the street, now I’ve changed a lot, now I’m here, I love myself now. Before I didn’t care about anything, if you messed with me, I just came out hitting, didn’t care about anything, now I sort everything with dialogue, by talking...”

Sandra says that ‘willpower’ is the crucial ingredient for changing one’s life, something that not only Sandra but also others who made the successful transition away from the street recounted. Willpower is related to a new-found sense of agency, a taking responsibility for

one's actions. As Sandra put it: "When I lived on the street I spoke like this; 'I was born only to suffer, to live like this', but I saw that it wasn't that at all which was happening, that everything was different, we suffer because we want to, right, that's it, that's all."

This transition, however, was not easy. During our first conversation, a few weeks after she had arrived, Sandra spoke of how she would have '*ataque dos nervos*' or nervous attack because of strong cravings for drugs, since all of these, including cigarettes, were banned in the house something that prompted her to run away from the house for a couple of days to indulge. Then, she also mentioned that the biggest problem in the house was the lack of activities. Indeed, another girl I interviewed, and no doubt others, ran away from the house because of having nothing to do and not being allowed out, a privilege that is only gradually earned. Initially Sandra said she did sometimes miss the hanging out on the street, but she never the less seemed determined to stick to her resolutions for changing her life.

If these 9 months inside the girl's shelter reflect a significant change in Sandra's perception of herself, equally significant in this process has been other people's perception of her. Asked what she thought other people thought of her and her friends on the street, Sandra replies, impersonating them: "Look there a bunch of street children, a bunch of wasters with no future, you know what their future will be, in a ditch with a bullet in the head, they thought like this..."

Asked how people saw her now, she said:

"I'd say that I have, more love from my mother, the love, the respect of my family, the respect of many people, inside here I have the respect of everybody from the day I arrived, but even more so now, right. Because before I was here I was Joe nobody, you have that Joe nobody who is nobody right. Not today though, now I have changed, I have the love of my sisters, the love of my mother, I always had the love of my mother but not how it is today..."

The perception of others, or of one's effect on and relationship to others is then also of crucial importance in the process of transformation of the self. Whereas the discrimination,

fear or disrespect of others contributes to youngsters' sense of self and to a sense of rebellion or inner-rage, Sandra here describes the effect of entering an environment that can be said to be completely opposite, one characterized by the care, love and respect of others. Sandra had been in other shelters before she arrived at this girl's shelter but she never stayed for long in these finding them a *bagunça*, a mess or a disorderly place. Before she arrived in this shelter she had been frequenting a day-centre belonging to the same NGO in the centre of Rio for a year and spoke lovingly of its educators, whom she thanks for being alive. On one of these educators Sandra showered much praise, for giving her advice, telling her things and making her think, reflect. She spoke of this process as promoting a change in her. At first she went to the day-centre, like many others youngsters do, *para zoar*, to fool around. Gradually, Sandra tells me, she started thinking about her life, about how she was also important, how she was beautiful, how she had '*muito para crescer*'- 'a lot to grow up', and had ambition and things to achieve. Through this reflection Sandra became determined to change her life. The first shelter she went to didn't work out but she says she really liked it here in this shelter; the place was tidier, things were more organized.

The opportunity for the reconstruction of a life-project is one thing that the various projects associated with Street Pedagogy do offer. Street Pedagogy is a shorthand way of referring to projects in Rio, both governmental and non-governmental, who have been influenced by the philosopher and pedagogue Paulo Freire's ideas concerning 'critical consciousness' and the transformative role of education in which the power relationship between student/teacher is re-evaluated. Part of the Freirean approach entails knowledge of the culture and the necessities of the student; it involves a listening and a joint formulation of the teaching. When this occurs the opportunities offered by projects are more likely to be taken up by youngsters. As Sandra related, being in the shelter has offered her other paths:

“When I arrived here I couldn't write my name, now I am going into second grade [second year of primary school] (...) Here I am in the football team, the netball team, I have extra school tuition, I make jewellery, I go to the psychologist every week and also what I like about this place is that doctors are not lacking, there is a health centre right next door.”

Sandra was looking forward to being able to work when she is legally old enough to do so and earn money to take her mother out of where she is living at the moment. She saw her mother every week and phoned her almost everyday. I asked her what she wanted for her future. “My future, I will have children, will marry, have a family, with my mum, with my children, my husband, my grandchildren, which I will have one day; how about that, I am already thinking of grandchildren!” The last I heard of Sandra, on a more recent visit to Rio, was that she had moved back with her mother, was still at school and had started working.

What can the life-trajectories of Sandra and Raí teach us?

We chose to present Sandra and Raí’s stories because they are emblematic of the stories of many other children and adolescents who take to the streets. Their stories reveal a multiplicity of links and trajectories, normally confused and fragmented and filled with episodes of violence and abuse that cause the rupture of affective ties. Our goal in this paper is to link research with possible suggestions in terms of policy and practice.

Sandra and Raí are part of a large population of children and adolescents in Brazil who experience extreme poverty. Of the country’s total population 170 million, 57% of those aged between 0 and 17 years of age live in families with a per capita income of less than half the minimum wage ¹ (IBGE 2000). Over half of the Brazilian families have at least one member under 14. Approximately 40% of these families are below poverty level (IBGE, 2004).

National and international research on Brazil has revealed that State spending does not necessarily benefit the poorest families. Rather, research points out that poverty results from modes of production that generate exclusion and inequality – and that the costs of services are high because of the inefficient bureaucracy that operates them (the Interamerican Development Bank 1988). However, the movement for guaranteeing the rights of children and adolescents throughout the 1980s and 1990s promoted an understanding of the situation of young people living on the street as manifestation of an excluding socio-economic order. Many today recognize that these children and adolescents are on the street because of an unequal society.

¹ Which at present stands at around \$100 a month.

For their development Sandra and Raí required an environment, even if marked by poverty, which provided them with basic resources such as food, affection, health, shelter and security. But, as we saw, they were denied many of these and they related events in their lives marked by adversity and violence. Based on their stories we see that going to the street was not the 'worse' experience that they had. Rather, leaving home and going to the street appears as a strategy of seeking protection when faced with the difficulty of remaining at home or in the community, spaces lacking in support necessary for their wholesome development (Rizzini, Barker, Cassaniga, 2000).

The need that many children and young people have of distancing themselves from home and the significance of going to the street are important themes to reflect on, as are the efforts that young people make in going beyond life on the streets.

Going to the street

Leaving home to the street is more than an escape; it is also a challenge and an attempt at self-affirmation. It is important to note that this attitude of defiance, though not present in all cases, is heightened when there is a rupture with the family, as opposed to cases when the child is raised on the street. The aspiration for 'freedom', whether real or an illusion, and the ideal of autonomy and unrestricted movement through urban space is an issue spoken of by many on the street. The movement of circulation from home to the street is often a gradual process amongst children and adolescents whose parents and carers are, on the whole, workers subject to the contingencies of precarious employment and lack of social assistance or welfare. They are parents who, generally, have very little support in raising their children. Frequently, these adults also had to abandon studying in their childhood in order to work. Growing up in an environment of adversity, they learnt to take care of themselves alone. Most of them do not expect anything from the government and do not trust the social services that they rely on. Despite many being angry at their situation, the most common attitude is one of powerlessness. Even if they know their rights, they do not find the channels through which to enforce or demand these.

What we understood is that initially going to the street meets young people's aspiration for freedom and for material resources, but in time the situations of danger, violence and discrimination overshadow these gains. The very ideal of liberty, many soon find out, is an illusion as the city is not a free space that is open to circulation; rather it is highly restrictive with

a number of barriers.

For many children and adolescents from the popular classes, the space of the street has a number of meanings; as a space of work, of hope, offering the opportunity for survival, a space of escape from domestic violence, and in which to assert a resistance to social *apartheid*, that pushes them to ghettos and *favelas*. For adolescents, staying on the streets is especially complicated as they are seen with less tolerance by society, associating them with urban criminality.

Sandra and Rai's stories lead us to reflect on the great distance that exists between theory and practice in Brazil. The country prides itself in advanced human rights laws and yet a number of obstacles stand before their implementation. This is the case with the Statute of the Child and Adolescent. According to this law every child has a right to remain with their families and communities, yet what actually happens is that many do not even have their basic rights assured (the right to life, for instance). This is not just a question of poverty but one of income distribution, since the country is amongst the world's ten largest economies yet has a number of social and economic indicators that rank along the world's poorest countries. The problem has deep roots in the social-political history of the country where the great majority of the population has remained in the margins of society.

Concluding: lessons that could help many

The life stories of these adolescents reveal a number of elements that are common to many children that find themselves in situations of great vulnerability and who need support for a wholesome development. In many occasions, as we have seen, this support is enacted by the family or by people who are connected to the parents. This occurs on a regular basis initially, especially during unforeseen circumstances such as episodes of separation and abandonment, illness, imprisonment or death of one or both parents. It is at these particular times of crisis that people mobilize to help the family, when we find the best opportunity to intervene with measures that offer effective support and protection for the child. However, what we observed in many cases is that though relatives and close acquaintances initially assume responsibility for the child or children, because they themselves live in similar economic circumstances, they cannot look after them.

In the life-stories we were told we saw that people, and possibly community organizations close to the children, did not have the material and psychological support necessary to care for one more child. Who should have responsibility in this process? Who should provide this support? Wouldn't it be more sensitive, efficient (and less costly for the State), to enter this process as soon as a problem is perceived and when many people are mobilized to act? The answer is clear, though we know that answers are never that simple. Our argument is that it should have been possible to intervene when children were still small, having the support of adults around her/him, instead of waiting for a crisis to worsen and that people 'give up' on the children.

Take Raí's case for instance. Though our analysis is based on what he narrated to us, and so we would still need more information for a fuller picture, many issues of his trajectory were also evident in the trajectories of other children and as such warrant some hypothesis. According to his narrative, there were a series of failures and omissions that could have been avoided. In truth, there appeared a number of opportunities that were missed for ensuring him a life without so much suffering. Starting from the story about his mother. We know nothing of her past, her life or her relationship with her partner who treated her badly. Though we do know that she needed help. She lived with a violent man who was involved with the drug dealing gangs. According to Raí, the children were not spared violent scenes. How many women today live exactly in this situation? There are some examples of support, such as the 'police stations for women' that have emerged in Brazil recently. However, this appears not to be enough especially when there is a lack of other interventions in other aspects of the lives of women who remain in the same condition of suffering from violence and who do not find in their environment sources of support.

We saw that Raí despite being surrounded by many relatives ends up in an 'orphanage'. How did this happen? Faced with what came to follow in his life, Raí considers the years he lived in the orphanage to have been "the happiest" in his life. Assuming that "a friend of my mother's" cited by him, as well as his aunts and grandmother, were part of Raí's life and that of his siblings, why did they not receive support to take care of them? What was the cost to the State to keep these children placed in orphanages as if they were orphan.

Through reflecting on Raí and Sandra's trajectories, we conclude that beyond the

structural problems of poverty that directly affect the lives of children who are born in similar conditions, there are a series of distortions in the system for the protection of children that is designed to guarantee their rights that need to be remedied. These are problems caused by a lack of effective planning in the area of policies and practices guided towards this population that is in need of support, and a lack of clarity in the attribution of roles between the various agencies and professionals involved. There is a need to re-examine the roles and responsibilities of institutions as well as professionals involved in the system of care and support for families and their children, preventing that children who are born in poverty face the same kinds of hardships that Raí and Sandra encountered.

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