

SYNOPSIS :

« CHILDREN BEHIND BARS »

by
Lizzie SADIN

An eight year journey, over eleven different countries, to understand the differences...

- 1999 / 2001: Russia
- 2001 / 2003: Brazil
- 2002 / 2003: Cambodia
- 2003 / 2004: France
- 2003 / 2004: Colombia
- 2004: Switzerland
- 2002 / 2004: Israel
- 2002 / 2004: Palestine and Gaza
- 2004 / 2005: India
- 2000 / 2006: Madagascar
- 2005 / 2007: USA (Texas, Arizona and California)
Prisons and boot camps

CHILDREN BEHIND BARS ...

More than a million children around the world are in custody without access to lawyers, often in countries where there are no juvenile courts, no judges specializing in juvenile affairs, where minors are held in flagrant violation of international treaties on human rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates that no child should be deprived of freedom in any unlawful or arbitrary way, and that detention “shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time;” the Convention also has a clause stating that any “child deprived of liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, and in a manner which takes into account the needs of persons of his or her age.”

The way a nation treats its prisoners can be a good indicator of the quality of its democracy; in other words a society can be judged on the way it treats its children. And yet there are a number of countries with re-education camps, prisons, detention centres, custodial establishments, penitentiary camps and penal colonies for children which invariably keep the young detainees in repressive, humiliating and inhumane conditions.

It is standard practice for minors to be held together with adult detainees, having to deal with violence, abuse, physical punishment, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, rackets and gangs. They have no access to education; family visits are rare or non-existent; overcrowded prisons, promiscuity, malnutrition, poor hygiene and lack of medical care are all common occurrences. These children are imprisoned, often forgotten, for many long years in order to be excluded and punished for their actions. And what about the children held in custody awaiting trial who are often held for much longer than their eventual sentence? What about these harsh sentences, not only for serious offences, but also for petty crimes such as stealing bread, a rooster or rice from a paddy, simply because the children were hungry?

The vast majority of the children ending up in prison camps come from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groups. They do not break the law out of choice but are victims, victims of poverty and lack of opportunity. Prison only worsens their situation, it would be far more sensible to offer them an alternative sentence to help them fit back into mainstream society. Prison sentences which intend to rehabilitate the offenders can be justified, but such initiatives are extremely rare.

How can these children be educated if the only influential model they have is prison? Is it a form of education or of obedience and constraint found in the military-style American boot camps where tough discipline prevails? In France there have been calls to abolish the 1945 law which prioritises educational measures over convictions under criminal law which are reserved for exceptional circumstances. An absence of dignity gives rise to hatred and rebellion; similarly, often the failure to bring these young people back into mainstream society leads to them falling back into their old ways.

I wanted to use my position as a photographer to present the juvenile legal system in eleven countries with very different geopolitical situations: in peace and in war, under the rule of democratic or authoritarian regimes. From one continent to another, we are inevitably struck by similarities: the same jails, the same isolated cells, the same distress and the same determination of prison guards to quash any form of resistance from the young detainees. The preconceptions I started out with did not last. In Colombia, where there is perpetual civil war as well as gang violence and drug dealers, proposals have been developed for a prison alternative. In Israel I was granted access to top security enclosed detention centres. In the United States, the reality of the juvenile justice system fell far short of our image of the world's foremost democracy. In Madagascar, poverty is the reason for the dire conditions in detention centres. Overall, taking into account the educational and financial resources available to different countries, democracies do not do any better than others.

To say that I encountered enormous difficulties in getting the authorisations needed for the 8 year project would be an understatement. It took me 18 months to get through all the red tape to be allowed 90 minutes in each of the three prisons I visited in Russia; in the United States this took me three years. All in all, I asked about forty different countries; the ten I visited allowed me into around sixty detention centres where I met thousands of young detainees. Some of the conversations had there will stay with me forever. I was moved by Sergei, Sacha, Dimitri, Pablo, Armando, Pascal, Alain, Matpala, Rivitchet, Khaled, Ali, Ron, David, Swasan, Evariste, Philibert, Sabrynn, Mike, and so many more.

I wanted to expose the insides of these detention centres along with the thoughts and opinions of their inmates to the outside world. I wanted to give these young people back their dignity, to break the silence surrounding them and, most importantly, to put an end to their isolation.

It is a story designed to bring them out of the shadows.

Lizzie SADIN