

Girls in a Playground Called Prison

By Zeldá DT Soriano

*They are little girls, mostly poor, who ran afoul of the law.
What is the government doing to help them?*

Louisa is the eldest of four children born to her mother's first marriage. She was orphaned by her father at age six and after a year, her mother remarried.

Louisa reached grade six until financial difficulties forced a stop to her schooling. A previous interview revealed Louisa's miserable relations with her family. For not finding work and not contributing to the family income, she was always in conflict with her late father's brother who lived with them. Louisa preferred to stay with friends also disgusted with their own family relationships.

On 7 October 1997, Louisa was apprehended by policemen in their home and was turned over to the Navotas municipal jail for alleged kidnapping. Louisa's denial of the kidnapping charge against her is vehement. She does not know Michelle, the missing girl, she says, and never met her before. Her only mistake, she says, is she mistook Michelle for Leslie, a friend whom she shared shelter with in the Navotas fish port where she ran away from home.

Leslie has another friend, Arlyn, who was the contact of a certain Belen, the woman who allegedly kidnapped Michelle and asked for P5,000 (US\$90) as ransom.

Women in Action found her at the Marillac Hills, in Alabang, a few kilometres south of Manila. Marillac Hills is a facility for young women offenders, the sexually abused and exploited female minors. Louisa, in fact, had just returned to Marillac Hills after running away and then changing her mind and surrendering herself to officials of the social welfare and development agency.

Louisa is not the stereotyped violent girl in prison. But she is a strong candidate for one, with her family relationship in shambles and her preference for the company of young girls in similarly dysfunctional family relationships.

Increasing Numbers

Social workers have noted a rise in crimes committed by young people. These are classified as "youth offenders," a term used by social workers to differentiate them from

adult criminals. Records at the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) show it handled 10,094 youth offenders last year.

Youth offenders, by the government's definition, are those over nine years old and below 18 at the time they were charged in court. A primer on child welfare services describes youth offenders as "victims of circumstances beyond their control, hence they should be treated as individuals with problems who need help—and not as criminals."

In the last two years, more than 10,000 crimes ranging from robbery to murder and rape were attributed to minors aged 10 to 17. The rise in the number of Filipino girls and adolescents found to have violated the laws is alarming. There are more than 2,000 girl offenders now confined in various institutions and centres nationwide, more than double last year's figures.

The DSWD says the increasing number of youth in conflict with the law has been a serious concern since the late 1980s. From 1987 to 1989, the figure doubled from 3,814 cases to 6,778. "In my two decades, the number of youth offenders never went down...and their crimes are becoming more and more serious," says Nelita Culong, officer-in-charge of the DSWD-NCR youth offenders division.

Of the 10,094 youth currently in jail, 9,390 are male and 704 female. The regions with the highest number of youth offenders are the Central Visayas (1,574), followed by Southern Tagalog (1,222), Ilocos Region (1,103), and Central Luzon (1,059).

In Metro Manila, there are more than 400 youth offenders detained in various city and municipal jails for serious crimes against persons and property, according to the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology. Of these, in the first quarter of 2002, 38 were girls. In 2000, of the 47 girl detainees, two were formally sentenced by courts.

The number of youth offenders in Metro Manila is in a way surprising because one would expect that the megacity's squalor would be fertile breeding ground for youth offenders. In the absence of official studies, one can

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only infer that the government’s neglect of the countryside is making the children of poor peasants and farm workers discontented and violent.

Mostly poor

Most jailed girls and boys come from poor families, the DSWD says. A survey conducted by the Bureau of Child and Youth Welfare and the DSWD at Camp Sampaguita and the Correctional Institute for Women noted that “majority of the youth offenders resided in urban areas, specifically in Central Visayas and Southern Tagalog, where increased urbanisation resulted in a parallel increase in unemployment rate, homelessness, disorder and other social problems. Urbanization caused ‘the proliferation of slum and squatter areas...brought about by the influx of migrants from rural areas in search of better opportunities in the cities.’”

Other significant findings of the survey:

- Of 51 minors surveyed, 26 or 50.98 percent were in the elementary grades. Only nine or 17.65 percent completed elementary education and eight or 15.68 percent reached high school. Eight minors or 15.68 percent had no formal schooling.
- Most of them stopped schooling because of financial difficulties.

- The fathers of most offenders were farm workers. Some had no fathers; the father was either deceased or separated from the mother. Most of the mothers were unemployed. Few were engaged as service workers or farm workers.
- The families of most youth offenders were earning far below the subsistence level.
- Contrary to what was expected, the survey found no significant relationship between gang affiliation and criminality. Results show that 31 of the youth offenders or 60.78 percent were not affiliated with any gang before imprisonment.
- Of the 51 offenders, 18 or 35.29 percent had been drinking alcoholic beverages while 15 or 29.39 percent had used drugs in the form of cough syrup, marijuana, methamphetamine hydrochloride, or a combination of the three. One was a drug pusher.

Other Studies

In other parts of the globe, debates are raging over the same increase in young girls’ involvement in delinquency and crime.

According to Jeanne Weiler (“Girls and Violence,” ERIC Review, Teachers College, Columbia University, Spring 2000), though still fewer than boys, girl offenders have increased significantly in the U.S. in the past two decades. Data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicate a 64 percent increase in the arrest of girls for murder; 114 percent for robbery; 137 percent for aggravated assault; and 126 percent for other forms of assaults.

A study of the behaviour of 300 girls between the ages of 10 and 18 in Britain, on the other hand, found that girls often display the same violent tendencies as teenage boys. Dr. Anne Jasper, who co-authored the study, is concerned not only about the findings, but more so because society, including the courts, refuses to acknowledge such findings. Dr. Jasper says: “The problem with not acknowledging that these girls are violent is that they then are not managed in a way that makes it as safe as possible for those caring for them.”

Social Dimension

The reason for the increased violent and anti-social tendencies of young girls is not conclusive, says Weiler, as there have been few in-depth studies exploring girls’ “pathways to violence.” Among the perceived causes, however, are: physical and sexual victimisation, negative attitudes toward school, lack of academic success, perceived lack of opportunities, a great deal of social activity, low self-esteem, and traditional beliefs about women’s roles.

Young girls who are often also victims of physical and sexual abuse, according to Weiler, react in such a way that they become violent to others, often also young girls. In attempting to cope with the violence and silence, young girls learned that power and control in the family resided in physical force. "The message that survival means dominating the weaker members of the group guided them in their relationships outside the home as well," writes Weiler.

On the other hand, the traditional belief that women should be passive and non-violent has profound influence on young women's relationships with their romantic partners. Meda Chesney-Lind, a known criminologist from the University of Hawaii, believes such socialisation of young girls locks them to abusive relationships, "raising their risk of involvement in delinquent and violent acts."

Sensitivity to Culture and Gender

To serve young women effectively, violence intervention programmes must develop culturally sensitive and gender-specific approaches. "They must take into account that girls' problems are often gender-related, that is, related to sexual abuse, male violence, their role in the family, occupational inequality, or early motherhood," Weiler says.

Weiler argues for separate intervention programmes for aggressive, violent men and boys because male violence and aggression against young women are often factors in female delinquency and violence. This would minimise the risk of female victimisation and, in turn, reduce the risk of girls' participation in violence, she noted.

In the Philippines, the same opinion is shared by Joyce Caragay, a social worker and professor at the University of the Philippines' College of Social Work. "Youthful crime offenders are probably on the rise because in most cases of family violence—violence in terms of battering and abuse—the victims are mostly women and girls who are perceived to be weaker," she said.

Caragay participated in a research (Breaking the Silence, UNICEF, University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies Foundation, 1997), for which she pored over 1,000 cases of family violence. The study found that almost all victims (98 percent) of intra-family or domestic violence in the Philippines were women and young girls. It also found that more than half of cases that victimised young girls involved the sexual and physical abuse of the victims.

Ineffective Efforts

Several advocacy groups and psychologists doubt the effectiveness of government's rehabilitative efforts and are

critical of the country's juvenile justice system, which only intensifies the factors that bind children to misery and crime. Calling such rehabilitative efforts "a cosmetic palliative," Salinlahi Foundation, a nongovernment organisation (NGO), hold that government's economic programmes and policies only serve to aggravate poverty and "further weaken the foundation of the Filipino family."

The local programme of the Australia-based Albert Schweitzer Familienwerk Association calls government rehabilitative efforts "ineffective." For Agnes Cabauatan, poverty breeds juvenile delinquents. "To bring them to a centre, feed them, or educate them for a month to a year, then discharge them back to the condition of poverty is a vicious cycle of crime and poverty."

Bayan Muna Party list Representative Liza Maza stresses the need for government to first address poverty, which for her is the root cause of juvenile delinquency. Government's social services, she says, should make sure that the Filipino family's basic needs are met. She also cited media responsibility in helping develop upright and responsible boys and girls.

Child psychologists and other medical professionals from the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) also deplore the short-term solutions used by the government in handling this social problem. The long-lasting solution, says Dr. Mariella Castillo, a paediatrician at PGH, is to empower the Filipino family by improving the economic conditions and socio-political activities of the family and the community.

Senator Robert Barbers advocates for the exact opposite and has authored Senate Bill 892, which seeks to lower the age limit of convicts who can be meted the death penalty. The best solution, he says, is an iron hand as this approach can serve as a powerful deterrent to crime, "especially drug-related crimes."

The bill has drawn vehement objections from children's rights activists who dismiss this as an "ignorant" appraisal of juvenile delinquency. The Barbers bill is still another sign of the moribund response of the justice system in the Philippines to the plight of young girls which, it should be reiterated, is a gender-related issue and a social problem.)

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