Profile
Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro: giving a voice to children

In early 2003, the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked the Brazilian human rights expert Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro to lead a study into the violence perpetrated against the world’s children. During the next 3 years, he worked to expose the scope of violence against children and its impact on their lives. Pinheiro’s report made unhappy reading. Violence against children was widespread, he found: about 53 000 children died in 2002 as a result of homicide, while 150 million girls and 73 million boys under the age of 18 years experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence. In 2004, 218 million children were involved in child labour, of whom 126 million worked in hazardous conditions.

But these figures do not tell the full story, as Pinheiro told the UN General Assembly in 2006. Although the world’s media focuses attention on brutal crimes, such as sexual abuse and human trafficking, other more insidious forms of violence take place every day in homes and schools. “Much violence against children, whether in the family, schools, alternative care and justice institutions, the workplace or the community is implicitly socially condoned or legally sanctioned,” he told the international community.

In an interview with The Lancet, Pinheiro describes these everyday places as the “invisible sanctuaries” of violence against children, and argues that they challenge the fundamental principles of democracy. “There is a basic contradiction in the world today”, he says. “A contradiction between the advancement of democracy all over the world and the continuation of the authoritarian treatment of children. There are millions of children suffering this authoritarianism. It’s a kind of power-struggle. Governments, families, and caregivers feel threatened if the child has a voice.”

Bringing together the report allowed Pinheiro a direct channel to the voices of the world’s children. Their message came through loud and clear. “All over the world, from Europe to Palestine, they can’t bear parents beating them. It was a sort of chorus—children complaining about teachers, about parents, about caregivers. For me this was very dramatic.” Although the report’s scope stretched far beyond the realm of corporal punishment, Pinheiro says he found himself becoming “militant” about banning all corporal punishment. “I think this is the basic message of the report”, he says. “This the children understood very well.”

Pinheiro’s own childhood in Rio de Janeiro, in the 1940s and 1950s, was happily free from violence. “I think that I had a very protected childhood”, he says. “My grandmother was the oldest of her sisters and I remember having many great-aunts around me. Looking back, I think this helped me to have a lot of self-assurance. It was a very important foundation for my evolution.” Pinheiro adds that “I think most of the people of my generation have been smacked, but I on the contrary have a sensation of protection and I think that this has helped me to do more things than my social class would give conditions for me to do.”

Pinheiro’s family had him earmarked for a diplomatic career, so his grandmother paid for private tuition in English and French from an early age. Later, he earned a law degree but was then unwilling to work with the military dictatorship that had been established in Brazil in 1964. Instead, he left for Paris, France, where he earned a doctorate and was profoundly changed by the student protests in May, 1968. “I think my real turning point was coming to France.”

Returning to Brazil, he began what has proven to be a long and fruitful international academic career, focusing on topics including social history and police violence. In the mid-1990s, Pinheiro was rapporteur of the Brazilian National Human Rights Plan, and began working with the United Nations—among other things as a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi and, later, in Burma (Myanmar). He also served as Secretary of State for Human Rights in Brazil from 2001 to 2002.

“Looking back, I think that most of the phases of my career were unexpected”, he says. “I never planned to do what I have done. I think that all these phases were possible because I have a sense of self-sufficiency. Not a single one of these involvements was very dramatic—they just came.”

Taking on the role of Independent Expert for the United Nations Secretary General’s Study on Violence Against Children in 2003, Pinheiro was surprised at the positive attitude of countries. “I was able to work very closely with the Arab League and the Conference of Islamic countries in a very positive basis, and countries like Thailand or China. Even countries that are very enthusiastic about corporal punishment, they supported the report as a whole.”

Now 64-year-old Pinheiro is still working to further the rights of children, as one of the seven commissioners of the Organization of American States’s Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. His academic work in political science, at Brown University, Providence, RI, USA, also continues. Meanwhile, he hopes the UN report on violence against children may have an impact. “Of course the law is not a magic wand, but even if law isn’t immediately implemented, the report is a framework for implementation by civil society. Without a framework, the struggle to combat violence against children will be much more difficult.”

Stephen Pincock
stephen.pincock@journalist.co.uk