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I am the administrator of the Norwegian language forum Redd Barna Våre which I started in early 2006. The posters on the forum take a critical view of the methods used by the Child Protective Services (CPS) in Norway, the theories used by them to justify these methods, and of the legal framework which gives the social services wide ranging powers. Members of the forum come from different backgrounds, but they have all had negative experiences from their contact with the CPS. Some have had their children forcibly taken away from them by the state and placed with foster families or in institutions, while others have been made to accept against their will humiliating intrusions into their private lives by the CPS or by psychologists working for the CPS. Several posters on the forum are afraid to disclose their identities because they fear that their participation in the forum will later be used against them by the CPS. On the forum we regularly receive pleas for help from parents who fear for the safety of their children. There are also cases of families who have fled the country for the safety of other countries with a more humane Child Protection system.

The authorities have made several attempts to close our forum. There is no doubt that employees of the CPS read the posts on the forum, since a police complaint has been made against me by the social services in my district. Not so long ago the Bergen City Council (Kommune) took action against a poster resident in Denmark by filing a complaint against our forum to the Danish Data Inspectorate (Datatilsynet), which fortunately refused to pursue the complaint.

I have no doubt that the existence of the forum such as ours is within the scope of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to freedom of expression. Moreover, the Norwegian Data Inspectorate ruled in 2004 that another web site which published lists of CPS workers and psychologists working for the social services, was not in violation of Norwegian Law. The administrators of that web site warned against the CPS workers and psychologists named in the list, following numerous complaints they had received from distraught parents.

Despite emphasizing that the reason for our criticism of the social services is to ensure that the social services actually achieve their stated objective, which is to help families and children in difficult circumstances, our discussions on the forum are instead seen by the authorities as a threat to the working of the social services – an attitude on the part of the authorities which may in itself be considered to reveal that all is not right with the present practice within social work. Several representatives of the present government have expressed their discomfiture at the existence of a forum which boldly calls into question the aims and methods of the Child Protective Services. We are repeatedly warned that government is considering measures which will make our activity illegal.

The posters on the forum are however united in their belief that in genuine cases where families and children may find themselves in difficult circumstances, the social services ought to concentrate the efforts and resources into assisting these families and children, rather than threatening the well being of families with coercive and humiliating measures which have on some occasions even lead to tragic deaths. I also have good reason to believe the numerous reports of interventions by the social services for far more frivolous reasons.

I am writing to you because I would like Amnesty International to investigate the working of the Child Protective Services (CPS) in Norway. I fear that far too many children are being removed from their families on flimsy grounds. Some of these children are being forced to grow up in badly supervised institutions, where they often become alcohol and drug abusers, while others are forced to live with foster families who are not related to the child's biological parents. These children grow up with little or no contact with the parents. The CPS even turns down requests by grandparents and other relatives who wish to remain in touch with these children

Not so long ago the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child (CRC) expressed concern at the large numbers of children being removed from their families in Norway. The document in which the CRC highlighted this problem is available online:

[http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/1a35ad6034bde2a4c1257018002e091e?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/1a35ad6034bde2a4c1257018002e091e?Opendocument)

In particular, I wish to call your attention to points 23 and 24 under the subheading "Children deprived of their family environment" in the above mentioned document. The UN body clearly recommends that the Norwegian state should give priority to protecting the natural family environment. Not only have these recommendations been completely ignored by the Norwegian government, changes have been recently made to the existing legislation which regulates the functioning of the CPS, which now make it even more difficult for a child to be returned to its parents, after the child has been placed in an institution or with a foster family. The revised law came into force on 1 January 2007.

In addition, the revised law now makes it impossible for grandparents and other family members to maintain ties with a child placed in care. Exception to this rule is made only in cases where both parents are dead, or have been stripped of their legal rights to see their child. The revised law clearly aims to sever all ties between the child and its biological family.

The CPS removes children from their families for a number of reasons. In some cases, domestic violence or child abuse are the alleged reasons. In other cases, the financial situation of the parents or parent, along with a combination of lack of progress at school, is considered to be sufficient reason for children to be permanently removed from their families.

The CPS possesses sweeping powers which allow social workers to remove children under emergency protection orders, as is the case in the United Kingdom. When the CPS brings a case before the County Social Welfare Board (equivalent to UK Family Court), statistics show that the authorities win in almost 90% of the cases. The County Social Welfare Board holds, without exception, in camera hearings, allegedly to protect the interests of the child.

However, many legal experts have raised concerns about the impartiality of the County Social Welfare Board's decisions, which in large measure rely on the undocumented testimonies of social workers, and more importantly, on the expert opinions of psychologists with close links to the CPS. Many parents find that their side of the story is not heard.

Another fundamental aspect of this issue is the CPS' problematic use of research material and data. Social workers tend to place far too much emphasis on the home environment at a time when research in psychology stresses the importance of the environment outside the child's home. Social workers' training makes them predisposed to see the home environment as the cause of children's problems at school or in the community. The CPS operates with a list of "risk factors", all of which pertain to the child's home environment. Removing a child from its family is not in itself considered by the CPS to be a risk to the child's future development. The CPS conveniently ignores the adverse effects of removing children from their families, which have been highlighted in many different studies.

I do realize that measures taken to protect children will be considered intrusive by all parents, and these measures will vary from state to state. However, I do not believe that such measures can be arbitrary: depriving a child of its family for a bad reason is a serious breach of the rights of the child, as much as it is a breach of the rights of the family. I do not believe that it is necessary to suspend the legal rights of families and children in order to safeguard the interests of children. That, in my opinion, is what is happening in Norway today.

There are also documented cases of child abuse at institutions run by the state, but the Norwegian government has not so far shown any sign of wanting to review the child care system which allows this to happen.

I would like Amnesty International to take a closer look at the issue which I have attempted to describe above. There are a number of published articles and reports from the media to support the claims I have made, but these are in Norwegian. If required, I will make these available to you.

I do hope you will not be misled by the good reputation that my country enjoys in the world. Abuses of human rights take place when power is in the hands of the wrong people, and when the legal rights of the victims are suspended. Even with the best of intentions, this can very easily happen in a democracy like ours.

Yours sincerely

Arild Holta