

Belgian Collective of Families of Murdered Children **(www.cfea.be)**

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I'd like to thank the European Forum for Restorative Justice to have invited the Belgian Collective of Families of Murdered Children (which I will call *the Collective*). I have the honour to speak in their name today.

I'll start with a brief presentation of the collective, its history, and explain to you why it's important to give them a voice and a place.

Then I'll present a few propositions made by the collective to answer the needs of the victims.

I'll end my speech with a short conclusion.

The collective was founded by families that had in common a murdered child.

For these families, it's not a matter of cultivating hatred and vengeance. Their aim is to witness the ongoing presence of their child in their heart. Losing a child is a tragedy, and it impacts the present and the future of the whole family.

This is why this collective has decided to mobilize themselves to raise awareness of the society to the irreparable consequences of these acts.

In the worthy memory of their child, they want to give a meaning to their pain.

Therefore:

- They invest energy to fight against any form of violence
- They help and support other parents going through the same tragedy
- They also try to preserve the future of the all the other children

They try to reach this triple objective by useful actions for the community.

They promote the creation of an efficient and effective « Right of Victims ».

The first official meeting took place during spring of 2007, with Jean Pierre Malmendier, a well-known figure in Belgium in the fight for the right of the victims.

In April 2010, the collective wrote a note to the political world, but this one was never sent because the Belgian government fell at that same time.

Finally, this letter was sent to all the members of Parliament, to all the party presidents, and to all Belgian ministers in March 2013.

This letter had less than 30% of answers. Moreover, some of the answers were standard letters.

In parallel to the support and help of mourning parents, the collective also does an important work to sensibilise and educate all the people involved.

Since beginning of 2016, the collective has been invited a couple of times to the Federal Justice Commission in order to explain their point of view on a law proposal on the enforcement of penalty.

As you may not know, this law gives very partial rights to the victims.

One more time, the collective says that if it were to be consulted about this law, it was obvious that it seems useless because nothing changes. They feel like they are not listened to and are not recognised.

NEEDS

This brings me to the second part of my speech concerning the needs of the victims and the proposals of the commission in order to face these needs.

One of the biggest needs of the victims is to be recognised. The fact that the collective has to explain over and over again what they are going through and what they ask for gives them the awkward feeling to disturb.

The inequality of treatment between the offender and the victims is a good example that shows that this special need was not taken into account.

- free lawyer for the offender (whereas the victim has to pay for it)
- psychological treatment
- free charges of trial for the offender
- the offender has the right, during trial, to sit near his barrister, whereas the victim has to manage to find a place on his own.
- we hear about reinsertion of the offenders, but never of the one of victims

The collective do not fight for a suppression of these rights for the offender, but to be able to benefit of the same rights.

This claim concerns more the political field, but the services of Victim Support do have a true role to play by supporting this fight.

The second need is the help and support to the victims.

One of the mothers of the collective, Françoise Van Holsbeeck, has told me incredible things according to the support she didn't get.

Her son Joe was stabbed to death by two young people for a MP3 player in the middle of the Central Station in Brussels. (This is just a few blocs away from here, and this was just 11 years ago (12 April 2006).

She was called to identify her son at the hospital. She had to go there alone with her husband. No intimacy was granted during the hospital time, the door had to stay open and two policemen were standing in the doorway.

After that, they were left alone to find the strength to go back home.

Obviously, driving was dangerous and almost impossible for these broken-hearted parents. But they didn't have another solution...

This example, as many others, show the importance to create a « stress-team » that could help and support these families at the very start of the drama.

That same mother told me that she did get some help propositions and information in the first weeks after the death of Joe. Meanwhile, she wasn't able to accept that help because she was still in a state of shock. After that, asking for help was too difficult for her. She emphasises the importance of re-contacting automatically the victims to help them. The right time for help is when the victim needs it, and not especially when the procedure proposes it.

Another demand of the parents is to have access to a type of « coach » who would be a single person contact that could assist and help them in criminal procedures, compensations or any other paper work...

A third need of the victims is the respect and the diplomacy of the different practitioners.

Joe's mother explained that the day after the murder, the police came at their home to start the investigation. They asked her a lot of questions such as:

- Have you had a fight with your son?
- Did he take drugs?
- Was he taking part in any gang activity?

She said she understood the need of these questions for the investigation, but she was very chocked by HOW these questions were asked.

The collective claims a better training, or at least a better psychological training of the people surrounding the victims in the early phases after a tragedy.

I could also talk to you about the needs of compensation, but I think it's a well-known revindication.

The last need I would like to talk about today resumes maybe all the previous needs. It is the need of reintegration-reparation.

Talking about Restorative Justice is a good start to understand this need.

After such an event, the families go through a period of social-break. Loss of thrust in the human being, but also in the institution which is supposed to guarantee security and avoid such facts to happen.

This leads to inward-looking attitudes with the family.

The feeling not to belong to the human community anymore.

You can understand how this leads to a permanent risk of social dropout:

- losing your job / be fired
- divorce
- physical or psychological illness

It is precisely to answer that kind of need that this kind of collective was born.

Obviously, this often is not enough to answer the needs of reintegration-reparation. And this is where the Victim Support association can play a big role. The question is how can be the most efficient?

This brings me to my conclusion that the victims, the civil society is too often the forgotten actor in the rebuilding of the social link. This statement leads us to a possible change of paradigm: working not only in a vertical way FOR the victim, but also work in a horizontal way WITH the victim...

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On behalf of the CFEA