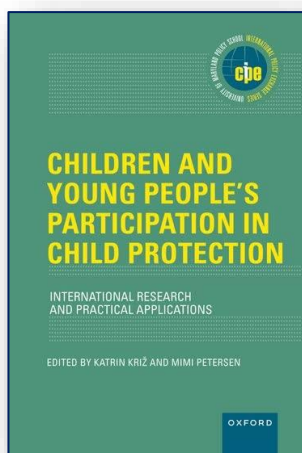




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Chapter 5

Children Claiming the Right to Live Without Violence in Nicaragua

Harry Shier

Introduction

All children have the inalienable right to live without violence, and this chapter is about how children themselves can organize to claim and defend this right. Drawing on case studies from Nicaragua in Central America, the chapter aims to show how, when children are informed and empowered as rights holders and recognized as active citizens, transformations occur throughout communities, leading to a safer, less violent society. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to enter a crucial caveat. Keeping children safe from violence and harm is essentially an adult responsibility. We adults must assume the role of duty bearers in relation to the child’s right to live without violence and the obligations that go with it. Most of the work to be done in ensuring child protection is done by and with adults throughout the world, and it is often challenging work.

Having made this point, we can return to our focus in this chapter, namely the children’s role. The chapter is structured in three parts. Following this introduction, the first part introduces and unpacks the concept of “a rights-based approach to keeping children safe,” drawing on specific rights established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989). The second part presents 10 examples of how children and adolescents have taken practical action to defend their right to live without violence, all drawn from my own experience supporting child workers on the coffee plantations of northern Nicaragua between 2001 and 2012. In the third part, I reflect on these experiences to share some of the lessons I learned along the way.

A Rights-Based Approach to Keeping Children Safe

In general terms, the United Nations describes a human-rights-based approach (HRBA) as a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyze inequalities at the heart of development problems and redress

discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006, p. 15).

Let us rewrite this with a focus on keeping children safe:

A rights-based approach to keeping children safe is a conceptual framework for keeping children safe from harm. It is based on the international human rights standards set out in the UNCRC. It is operationally directed to promoting and protecting every child's right to live without violence. It seeks to analyze inequalities that place some children at greater risk of violence and abuse and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that perpetuate such risks.

A distinctive feature of the rights-based approach is that it recognizes all children as *rights holders* and identifies adults as *duty bearers* at different levels. The implementation of a rights-based approach, therefore, involves building the capacity of children, as rights holders, to claim their rights. It also involves building the capacity of duty bearers to fulfill their obligations (as well as calling those same duty bearers to account when they fail to do so and providing support and solidarity to children whose rights have been violated).

For children to claim their rights, and for duty bearers to respect and protect them, there must be a shared understanding of what those rights are, and here the first point of reference is the UNCRC, an international treaty binding on all the world's governments except for the United States. (The United States is the only United Nations member state that has not ratified the convention.) At the heart of a rights-based approach to keeping children safe lies Article 19 of the convention:

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19.1

States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

But rights do not stand alone, so we must also take account of:

Article 28.2: School discipline to be administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity;

Article 34: Protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse;

Article 35: Prevention of abduction, sale, or traffic in children;

Article 36: Protection against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to the child's welfare;

Article 37: Protection from torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Together these constitute the child's fundamental "right to live without violence." "Violence" can be defined in many ways. For the purpose of this chapter, "the right to live without violence" can be understood as shorthand for the realization of the specific rights mentioned above.

A rights-based approach also needs to take on board the four underpinning principles of the convention:

- Enjoyment of all rights without discrimination of any kind (Article 2);
- The child's best interests to be a primary consideration in all decisions (Article 3);

- The right to life and development (Article 6);
- The child's right to speak out and be heard on all matters that affect them (Article 12; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, pp. 3–4).

It further needs to be recognized that Article 12 is accompanied by Article 13 (the right to information and ideas), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience, and religion), and Article 15 (freedom of association and peaceful assembly). Together these are the core of what is commonly known as the child's "participation rights." When protection rights are coupled with participation rights, it is clear that children have the right to live without violence and the right to know, defend, demand, promote, and protect—in other words, to *claim*—that right.

I emphasized above that a rights-based approach involves building capacities both in children to claim their rights and in duty bearers to fulfill their obligations. Both aspects are essential to the rights-based approach, and the importance of up-skilling and motivating duty bearers cannot be overestimated. However, with our focus on "children's participation in child protection," I want to look more closely at how we can support the empowerment of children as rights holders to claim and defend their right to live without violence. Note that in this chapter, "empowerment" is not used in a hazy, ill-defined way but is a clearly defined concept with practical application; see Shier (2019a) for a complete account of this concept and further discussion of "empowerment" toward the end of this chapter.

In more traditional conceptions of child protection, adults in positions of power generally did not seek, did not hear, and therefore did not consider the child's views (Shemmings, 2000; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Indeed, it was seen as in a child's interests not to be heard, due to a common belief that

too much responsibility and too much participation can be harmful to children. They need to be protected from participating in difficult decision-making or from feeling pressure to express their views on painful or controversial matters. (Lurie, 2003, n.p.)

This means a great deal of violence toward children, including sexual and physical abuse, went unnoticed and unreported. Children who did have the courage to speak out were ignored, disbelieved, or accused of fantasizing (Aronson Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Greeson et al., 2016). Increasingly these days, rights-based approaches require that children's views *are* sought, which means creating spaces where voices can be expressed and heard and adapting systems so that the views expressed can be taken into account in decision-making (Keeping Children Safe, 2011; Moore, 2017).

In child protection, this commonly happens at the micro level; that is, the individual child's views are sought to get the best possible outcome for that particular child in the prevailing circumstances (Wolff et al., 2016). But it can also happen at the macro level: the voices of a group of children can be brought together so that the sum of their individual experiences can become a driver for change at higher levels in the services or systems in question (Ruiz Casares et al., 2017; Willow, 2009). However, the focus, at least in wealthier countries where people rely on a range of social and legal services, is still on the child as a *service user*. The aim is to improve outcomes for the child through the provision of adequate and appropriate services (Shier, 2010a). In many places, however, children's experiences are very different.

Children Claiming the Right to Live Without Violence in Nicaragua

For 11 years (2001–2012), I worked with the children's rights organization CESESMA in the coffee-growing zone in Nicaragua in Central America, where extreme poverty and dependence on coffee production lead to a high incidence of child labor and associated social problems. Though the

situation is improving, the Nicaraguan coffee industry still employs thousands of child workers who work long hours in difficult and dangerous conditions, receiving little or no payment for their efforts. Almost all drop out of school early, leading to a cycle of dependency, hunger, and destitution in these remote mountain communities (Shier, 2010b).

CESESMA was founded in 1994 by a group of local schoolteachers whose initial aim was to make the education offered in village schools more relevant to the lives of rural working children. During my time there, however, although CESESMA remained solidly Nicaraguan and firmly rooted in the local communities it served, its role and mission evolved as it embraced a child rights-based approach, focusing on supporting rural children and adolescents in promoting and defending their rights. Among the rights promoted and defended were the right to education, a healthy uncontaminated environment, dignity and respect at work, play and recreation, enjoying and sharing their own culture, and speaking out, organizing, and participating. For many children, however, the most important was the right to live without violence (CESESMA, 2012b).

As the organization evolved, my role in the team also evolved from an initial focus on training and capacity building to encompass a broad range of rights advocacy, facilitation, coordination, and research (which included accompanying and facilitating some of the processes described later in this chapter; Shier, 2007). For someone like me, who had previously worked in the United Kingdom, a major difference I encountered in Nicaragua was that the emphasis on the child as a "service user," which prevailed in the United Kingdom, would have meant little here since services for children were sparse and had to be fought for, rather than simply consumed (Shier, 2010a). To fully grasp CESESMA's way of working and find my place in it, I had to understand and embrace two related concepts that were new to me at the time: children as *active citizens* and *protagonismo infantil*.

"Citizenship" has been conceived and defined in many ways, but the active citizenship promoted by CESESMA was neither a legal status nor a geographical identity. It was instead a conscious decision on the part of young people themselves to assume responsibility in their community and take collective action to improve the conditions of life – of themselves and others – by promoting and defending their rights (Shier, 2010a, 2014). In Latin America, the need to stand up and defend one's rights in this way, rather than avail oneself of services provided by the state, has given rise to the theory and practice of *protagonismo infantil*. *Protagonismo* amplifies the idea of children as citizens, occurring when children themselves take a *leading* role in conceiving and carrying out actions to improve their lives (Shier, 2019b; Taft, 2017, 2019). Rooted in the history of movements of organized working children, *protagonismo* is not about individual children acting independently in defense of individual rights but rather collective action by organized, self-directed groups. *Protagonismo*, in turn, leads to empowerment of children and adolescents and, through them, to transformation in society. Almost all the literature on *protagonismo* is in Spanish, but Taft (2019) offers a detailed account in English, and Lavan (2012) explores *protagonismo* in an African context.

Here is a selection of projects and processes that I was privileged to support and accompany during my 11 years with CESESMA amid the Nicaraguan coffee plantations, where children and adolescents exercised their citizenship and exerted their *protagonismo* to defend the right to live without violence.

Youth Theater Against Violence in the Home

Youth theater groups supported by CESESMA devised, produced, and presented original plays that exposed issues of gender-based violence and economic exploitation that were seldom talked about in local communities. This proved effective in opening up discussion of these "taboo" issues and urging communities to address them. Young people's community theater was

also a powerful medium in campaigns and protests, where groups devised and performed original plays to support campaigns against child abuse, corporal punishment, and exploitation of child labor (Shier, 2010b, 2012, 2014, pp. 17–19).

Festivals Against Violence Towards Children

Starting in 2006, Save the Children organized an annual National Festival Against Violence Towards Children. Organized groups traveled from all over the country to share their stories and creative approaches to tackling the issue through theater, song, banners, posters, and other media. The 2010 festival, held in La Dalia in the coffee-growing zone, gave the children's theater group Los Colibrís the opportunity to perform their play *Blows to the Soul* about the issue of domestic violence (see above) before an audience of over 2,000 children and adults in the town's baseball stadium (Shier, 2012, 2014, pp. 17–19).

Child Consultants Investigating the Problem of Violence on the Coffee Plantation

In 2007, a team of 12 working children aged 10 to 16 from the Santa Martha Coffee Plantation became expert consultants to research violence in their lives on the plantation. They interviewed 59 children and adolescents living and working on the plantation, then analyzed their data to produce a report with extensive recommendations for change. They then traveled to the capital city to present their findings at a national conference on the theme of violence against children. They were able to put their recommendations directly to the government minister responsible for children and families and challenge her to tell the conference what her department intended to do about the issue. It is unknown what direct effect this had on government policy, but the Children and Families Department introduced new programs to protect vulnerable children shortly afterward. The following year, the children retold their experience in words and pictures for publication (Shier, 2015, p. 210; Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2009).

The Dragon of Violence

In 2008, children in Samulalí district created a Chinese-style carnival dragon that took to the streets in several marches and protests to awaken people to the reality of violence threatening women and children in rural communities and the need to face up to it without fear. When the National Festival Against Violence Towards Children came to La Dalia in 2010 (see above), the children decided that the Dragon of Violence should take to the streets again. However, the original dragon, whose head was made from cardboard boxes, was in bad shape and not up to another parade, so the children created a new dragon based on the original design, which led the festival parade (Shier, 2012, p. 7).

Young Women's Groups

Adolescent girls formed learning and action groups in their villages to spread the word about gender equality, women's rights, and sexual and reproductive health. These safe spaces for girls and young women effectively empowered girls and built assertiveness in the face of the "machismo" prevalent in local communities (Hernández Méndez & Quintanilla, 2016; Shier, 2010b). CESESMA also invited parents to parallel awareness-raising sessions. However, given the traditional attitudes to gender roles in these communities, it was inevitable that not all parents were happy about their daughters engaging in these activities. In these cases, members of the CESESMA team met individually with parents and usually won them over by convincing them of the long-term benefits to their daughters.

New Masculinities Program

Understanding that men too have to change their ways, CESESMA supported adolescent boys in forming action groups to spread the message that there are many ways to be a real man that do not involve violence toward women and girls (Shier, 2016, p. 81). These experiences were later consolidated in a facilitator's guide published by CESESMA (CESESMA, 2013). As an interesting aside, this guide recommends a shared viewing of the film *How to Train Your Dragon* as a way to help boys and young men explore how traditional gender roles, and parental expectations based on these, trap young men into stereotypical aggressive behavior and make life difficult for those who dare to step outside such prescribed roles (CESESMA, 2013, p. 20).

Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents

Based on the earlier model of children's consultancy (see example "Child Consultants Investigating the Problem of Violence on the Coffee Plantation" above), CESESMA developed a new approach called Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents (TRCA). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe the TRCA methodology, but it is explained in detail in Shier (2016, pp. 232–237). Using this methodology, children became researchers to investigate and report on issues that concerned them in their communities. A team from El Plomo investigated the concept of respect and how lack of respect leads to violence in families and communities. A team from Yasica Sur researched the violence that children and adolescents suffer in the home. Children in Samulalí examined the issue of parents who hit their children. And finally, a team from Yúcul decided to investigate the topic of alcohol and its relation to violence in the community. As well as producing research findings and recommendations, the four teams drew up action plans to publicize the results of their research and push for the implementation of their recommendations. They presented their reports first in their home villages and subsequently in municipal, and some cases national, forums. The four reports were compiled and published in book form by CESESMA, followed by an English translation, *Learn to Live Without Violence* (CESESMA, 2012b; Shier, 2015).

All four teams used their research to advocate for change, but the one that made the most impact was the team from Yúcul. They presented their findings to the government's newly formed Family Life and Security Commission, which decided to prioritize the alcohol problem for local action. Local government officials admitted they had been aware of the issue for years, but it was not until the children came forward with their research that they felt obliged to act. The local police also took action, confiscating illegal liquor and closing unlicensed cantinas. A popular national television channel then featured the young researchers on the evening news. Since then, the local authority has ensured that no new liquor licenses are granted in the Yúcul area (Shier, 2014, pp. 26–28).

Children Researching Children's Understanding of Sex and Sexuality

One of the most remarkable projects undertaken by child researchers was a survey to find out what their peers actually knew about sex and sexuality and what they felt they needed to know. This project occurred in the context of a wider project to develop a new learning initiative around sexual and reproductive rights in rural communities. It was important to decide how and when to involve children of different ages in learning about this topic. On the one hand, these are sometimes thought of as things children should not have to worry about, but on the other hand, ignorance of sex and sexuality can increase risks such as unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, or becoming a victim of sexual abuse or exploitation.

To ensure the issue was addressed in a well-informed and culturally sensitive way, four teams of child researchers interviewed other children in their villages on these topics. After analyzing their

data, they produced a report that was published by CESESMA (2012a). Armed with this understanding of what children already knew and what they wanted to know, the CESESMA team was able to develop the new initiative in a way that respected both children's rights and local sensibilities and reduced risks for everyone.

Developing Child Protection Guidelines from the Bottom Up

Before 2009, the issue of child protection was largely ignored in Nicaraguan schools. Still, with growing awareness, not to mention pressure from external funders like Save the Children, schools recognized the need to embrace the idea of safeguarding, which meant new policies and guidelines were needed. Instead of the usual top-down policy process, CESESMA supported local schools and their surrounding communities in developing child protection policies from the bottom up. Children worked in teams to identify the risks they were exposed to—both at school and while traveling to and from school—and propose changes in conditions, practices, attitudes, and abilities that would help safeguard them from these risks. The children's views were written up and published by CESESMA as *Safe and Quality Schools: As Viewed by Children and Adolescents* (CESESMA, 2009). Groups of parents and teachers carried out similar analyses. With this clear vision, smaller working groups involving students, parents, and teachers met to synthesize their findings and develop draft policy documents. Finally, there were joint meetings to review and adopt the policies. Children and adolescents also took a leading role in monitoring and evaluation (Shier et al., 2013, p. 196).

Weekly Radio Show “Children and Adolescents’ Voices Heard”

CESESMA also supported a children's radio team, who broadcast their show *Children and Adolescents’ Voices Heard* on La Dalia's local radio station every Sunday morning. Young reporters living in the surrounding villages sent in reports on local issues affecting children's rights. Along with these, the show included peer-to-peer messages about preventing, recognizing, and reporting violence, interspersed with music and lighter items (Shier, 2010b). Though there is no data available on the overall reach of the broadcasts, it is interesting to note that many school-teachers were regular listeners. They told CESESMA that it was the best way to keep abreast of what local children were concerned about.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

There are six key learnings I want to share after reviewing these examples of children taking action to keep themselves and others safe

No-one Empowers Anyone

Although the above examples can be seen as instances of children and adolescents “empowered,” and the work of CESESMA over many years has been praised for the delivery of this empowerment, an important lesson we have learned along the way is that adults cannot “empower” children; specifically, the adult facilitators who supported the processes described here did not “empower” the children and adolescents they worked with. Only children and adolescents can empower themselves.

This is because building capacity and creating enabling conditions for children's authentic participation are not in themselves sufficient to deliver empowerment. Empowerment also requires a transformative process whereby self-esteem, motivation, critical thinking, initiative, perseverance, and solidarity take shape within the person (Sharp, 2014; Shier, 2019a; and see also Freire, 2001, for a similar view).

Thus, true empowerment (as distinct from “enabling” or “capacity building,” which are often confused with empowerment) can only be achieved through a transformative process within the person. What adults *can* do, however, is develop and facilitate the kinds of processes that will lead young people toward such transformation. A lot of CESESMA’s experience has involved adults rising to this challenge, for example, by supporting, resourcing, and, where needed, facilitating the kinds of activities described in the previous section.

Not “Held Responsible” but Responsible Citizens

Children, especially young children, are *never* responsible for their own protection. It is axiomatic that protecting children from harm is *always* the responsibility of adults. Though it is generally considered a good thing for children to learn to recognize danger, avoid risk, look after themselves, and look out for others, no matter how tough and resilient children become, the responsibility for their protection can never be devolved to the children themselves and always remains with adults. To put it another way, when adults harm children, it is *never* acceptable to blame the victim. Adults must always be held accountable for their actions and omissions in relation to protecting children from violence.

This point must be clearly understood, as failure to understand it can lead to confusion and misunderstanding on the next point. To affirm that children are *never* responsible for the wrongdoing of adults, however, is not to imply that they must therefore be considered irresponsible. As the examples above demonstrate repeatedly, children can assume the role of active citizens and, as such, can unite to undertake appropriate actions that contribute to their own and others’ safety: raising awareness, identifying and mitigating risks, practicing assertiveness, denouncing abuse and exploitation, and, through it all, claiming and defending their right to live without violence. In other words, when it comes to the prevention of violence, children can never be *held responsible*, but they can freely choose to *assume responsibilities*, exercising *protagonismo* in ways that correspond to their positive role as active young citizens (Shier, 2018, pp. 774–775).

Cultural Change From Within

Some of the factors that allow the violation of children’s right to live without violence to persist in society are linked to belief systems embedded in tradition and culture, including, for example, conceiving of children as the property of their parents; denial of gender equality; denial of children as rights holders; belief that children (particularly girls) should be servile and obedient; belief that violence in the form of corporal punishment is a legitimate part of childrearing; belief that violence and abuse within a family must never be spoken of outside the family; belief that victims, particularly girls, are to blame for sexual violence against them, and worse, that they deserve to be punished for bringing shame on their family; and belief that certain abusive practices are not only sanctioned but demanded by religious or cultural tradition, female genital mutilation and child marriage being well-researched examples (Hale Reed, 2014; Khosla et al., 2017).

Changing cultural climates that permit such violence and abuse to prevail is one of the toughest challenges in child protection. Bringing about sustainable cultural change is difficult at the best of times, but it can be particularly challenging in the context of postcolonial societies (Girei, 2016). If people associate advocacy for change with the cultural values of the former colonial power (or a notion of “Western values” in general), it may be resisted as an imposition of neocolonial “cultural imperialism” (Wane et al., 2011). It is quite legitimate for the descendants of formerly colonized peoples to question the right of the foreigners who stole their land, enslaved their ancestors, and destroyed their way of life to now tell them that their culture is flawed and that they must adopt

the supposedly superior values and practices of their former colonizers (Hickling-Hudson, 2006; Olivier, 2019).

In such situations, there are none better placed than the child activists of Nicaragua to effect significant, sustainable cultural change. These young people are growing up *within* their own local and national culture, and proudly so; yet they see the need for change and the possibility of stimulating and inspiring change. The clearest examples of this are the youth theater groups chipping away at long-standing taboos, the girls' groups demanding gender equity, and the young men arguing for alternative masculinities in communities where such ideas had never previously been countenanced.

In this context, it is important to note that CESESMA, the organization that supported and accompanied them, is solidly Nicaraguan, staffed and run by local people for local people. During my time there, the team numbered around 30, consisting of 28 Nicaraguans, one Irishman (me), and one Swiss. The pressure for change that CESESMA supported was thus not an external force seeking to destroy or diminish local culture, but an alliance of those within the culture, seeking to build on, update, and improve what was already there (Kaime, 2005; Zwart, 2012).

The Power of Creativity and Imagination

Many of the actions undertaken by children and adolescents described above show a high level of creativity and imagination, for example, the Dragon of Violence, youth theater, and festivals against violence. Though prevention of violence and abuse is a deadly serious subject, these vibrant, imaginative actions caught the wider public's attention, communicated key messages, and galvanized responses in ways that somber speeches failed to do. Creative approaches can also get people to question old and outmoded habits of thought, leading to sustainable behavior change. A lesson for adult supporters and facilitators here is that "serious" and "important" are not necessarily synonyms for "tedious" and "boring."

The Power of Children as Researchers

As researchers, children can not only access knowledge about other children's lives that is hidden from adults but also can cast an alternative light on that knowledge from their own distinct perspective and deepen and extend adults' understanding of the issues being investigated (Kellett, 2010, p. 197). Examples of this mentioned above include children's understandings of sex and sexuality and children's experiences of violence on the coffee plantations.

Unfortunately, it is all too common for adults in power to be dubious about children's participation because of previous unsatisfactory experiences. Children are often asked what they want, which means adult decision makers end up with nothing more than a random, fanciful wish list. In contrast, however, when children speak out against violence and back up their recommendations with *robust research findings*, the situation is very different. Instead of telling the adults, "We want A, B, and C," the child researchers will say something like: "Based on our interviews with 150 local children aged 7 to 15 and analysis of the findings, here are our concrete proposals for the changes that are required." When this happens, it is harder for adults in power to ignore or disparage the children's message (CESESMA, 2012b; Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2009).

We Will Not Silence Children Who Want to Speak Out Against Violence (but We Will Not Put Their Lives at Risk Either)

It is a common occurrence, in both practice and research, for children to be silenced by adults in charge because they fear that they (the adults) will be held responsible for the consequences if the children are allowed to speak out. This silencing of children's voices often happens indirectly through selective exclusion from participation opportunities, which is then rationalized by

labeling certain children as “vulnerable” (Tobin, 2015). Once children have been labeled as vulnerable, it is easy for adults to appeal to notions of ethics to justify excluding them from involvement in a participation or research initiative. Skelton (2008, p. 23) shows how “ethical research practice can actually close down participation for children and young people” and how “institutional ethical guidelines can deny children’s and young people’s competence and ability to make decisions about their own lives.” The voices of the supposedly vulnerable children are thus effectively silenced and disappear from the scene.

CESESMA has always taken the view that where children want to speak out about an issue that is of concern to them, and there is a potential risk of adverse consequences, it is the duty of the responsible adults to find a safe alternative, managing the risks so that children can be protected from harm *without* having their voices silenced and their right to speak violated. In the examples above, the clearest instance of this was the research by the children of Yúcul on the relationship between alcohol and violence in their village (CESESMA, 2012b, pp. 37–46). When the children announced their chosen research topic, the CESESMA team had to think long and hard about the implications of letting children probe into such a contentious issue in a small community. Some felt the easiest solution was to say, “No, we will not let you pursue this; it is too risky.” However, taking that approach would have been to silence the children’s voices and deny them their right to speak out on an issue that concerned them.

Instead, the CESESMA team took on the challenge. We analyzed the risks and looked at the safeguards we would have to put in place: we talked with parents, teachers, and local community leaders, where we found universal support for the children’s initiative and got a commitment to keep an eye on things; we informed the local police; and we made sure someone from our team was always close at hand when the children were doing interviews (but not so close as to hamper conversations between peers). As with every team of child researchers, we discussed and agreed on safety rules. We always worked in pairs, ensuring peers, parents, and a CESESMA team member knew where they were and what they were doing; confirming the interviewee was willing to participate before asking any questions; and politely withdrawing if anyone appeared unhappy about continuing. When we heard that a national television company wanted to interview the children, we discussed options including anonymity or using pseudonyms. However, by then, the children were so proud of what they had achieved that they refused to conceal their identities.

As a practitioner on the ground experiencing these initiatives, the transformative benefits were easy to see. From a researcher’s perspective, however, there remains the challenge of demonstrating a causal link from children’s social action to concrete social change and finding indicators to evidence and measure this. We have plentiful evidence from the testimonies of children, parents, teachers, and local community leaders, but to shift this from the “anecdotal” realm to the “analytical,” we need more focused research. Following a rights-based approach as described above, it is clear that the children’s right to speak out and take action is not dependent on them proving the effectiveness of their actions. However, still, this is something we adults (especially social scientists) are keen to know about. It seems only appropriate, therefore, to make a call here for further research in this area.

As mentioned at the start, building children’s capacity to claim and defend their right to live without violence is just one aspect of a rights-based approach to keeping children safe. We must also direct our efforts to build the capacity of duty bearers to fulfill their obligations and call those same duty bearers to account when they fail in providing support and solidarity to children whose rights have been violated. What this chapter has set out to demonstrate, however, is that when children are informed and empowered as rights holders and recognized as active citizens, they can not only claim their right to live without violence but also, in doing so, contribute to transformation throughout society.

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Reflection Questions

- (1) The experiences described in this chapter come from a specific geographical and cultural setting, namely the remote rural villages and coffee plantations of northern Nicaragua. When we read about these experiences, what are the bigger, universal messages equally relevant in our work or study environment?
- (2) Given that the protection of children from harm is essentially an adult responsibility, in what circumstances, and under what conditions, is it appropriate for children to take on responsibilities in relation to keeping themselves and others safe (and for adults to encourage them to do so)?

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