Around Europe
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Women, Prisons and Health - assessing the situation in Europe

This was the title of the presentation given by Liz Scurfield at the recent conference on Women's Health in Prison organised by the World Health Organisation's Regional Office for Europe in Kyiv (Kiev), Ukraine from 12-15 November 2008.

The main goal of this year's conference was to review issues on women's health and health care in prisons and to develop recommendations for international collaboration in this field. The draft declaration (to be known as The Kyiv Declaration on Women's Health in Prison) was discussed at the conference and largely agreed with some small outstanding issues still to be resolved. The objectives of a Declaration on Women's Health in Prison are:

1. To raise awareness among the countries within the WHO European Region of the current situation regarding the health of and health care provided for women in European prisons;
2. To call for marked improvements in the current situation by the implementation of WHO recommendations for:
   - a general approach that creates a more acceptable and gender sensitive criminal justice system, with special attention to the rights of any women and children involved;
   - the amount and quality of health care to be provided within prisons, which should be at least broadly equivalent to the health care provided in the community; and
   - the establishment of satisfactory methods for ensuring continuity of care.*

The network discussion of the draft declaration involved thirty-six countries, twenty-five of whom were present at the conference. It was clear that all participants were united on what the main problems were. It was also encouraging to see that all our various research findings complemented each other and reinforced what each speaker had to say. I was particularly struck by the increasing importance many of us placed on looking at alternative sentences for women prisoners, the majority of whom are the primary or sole carers of their children.

Liz Scurfield and Nick McGeorge in front of St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv

QCEA's research is finding that in many cases, especially those concerning women, prison sentences do little to reduce the risks of re-offending. At the same time the social costs to prisoners (especially women), their families and society as a whole is disproportionately high. The same applies to pre-trial detention which affects significantly more women than men.

There is a need for an integrated approach to women's offending. Many women could be kept out of prison if the causes of their

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Drought and Economic Growth Take Their Toll in Syria

The Syrian Arab Republic is a country which receives a somewhat mixed reception in the global community. Located as it is between Lebanon and Iraq, it is difficult to find a hot issue in the Middle East region where Syria does not play a significant role.

Syria is also a country in the process of economic, political and environmental change. Economically, she continues to grow steadily - although major curtailing of fuel subsidies this year has contributed to high inflation. Politically, visits from major European figures - including Nicolas Sarkozy (President of France) and David Miliband (UK Foreign Secretary) - in addition to a renewal of ties with neighbouring Lebanon are strong signals that the country is seeking a more international future. Environmentally, significant sections of the population are suffering from failed crops, a lack of water and industrial and commercial waste.

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This year has seen the worst drought suffered by Syria in decades. More than forty per cent of the population live in rural areas and, according to a recent report released by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 150,000 farmers have lost their harvests - their livelihoods. This has a great impact on the wider rural societies. For each farmer that loses his harvest (and it usually is a 'he') an entire family will suffer. Where certain areas suffer in particular, anaemia, diarrhoea and malnutrition take hold, further weakening the chances of recuperating food to sell and to eat. Barley has been the worst-affected crop with an estimated failure rate of up to ninety per cent. This has directly forced herders and keepers of livestock out of production. The OCHA has made an appeal to international donors for more than 20 million dollars to help the worst affected.

Damascus in particular prides itself on the availability of drinking water. Throughout the city, water distributors along with attached metal cups are available for members of the public to drink. However, following the hot, dry summer, drinking water has become in short supply - particularly in rural areas away from the major cities: "the land and the wells are drying up," stated Akram, one local in the north-eastern region: "there isn't enough water any more". The disputed Golan Heights region is one of the most water rich areas in the country. However drinking water there has had to be carried in by trucks to deal with the shortages. If 2009 does not improve, people could be forced to relocate away from the most affected areas.

As the Syrian population continues to expand, currently at a rate of 3.6 per cent, more pressure is placed on the available resources. Over-fishing, over-hunting and over-grazing are all becoming increasingly commonplace. As the economy expands and consumption levels rise, demand for natural resources increases even more. The Syrian Environmental Protection Society, the first environmental non-governmental organisation in Syria, states the following as the top three environmental problems: 'Contamination, depletion and dissipation of water resources; poor air quality and air pollution; and deterioration of the urban environment'. The connection between economic growth, rising consumer demand and environmental degradation is slowly being realised.

Throughout the Middle East - including the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Syria - waste and environmental degradation are apparent. From piles of litter by the side of busy roads to noise pollution and gas-guzzling old buses, it can be difficult to ignore. However, Syria has a real opportunity to improve. The culture is not based on a high-level consumerism and the vast majority of trade is with neighbouring countries. Major environmental problems, such as crop failure, scarce drinking water supplies and commercial waste, already have a tangible impact on the population and action is beginning to take place. It is crucial for this region that urgent action is taken now to ensure that depletion and misuse of resources do not become sources of greater conflict.

Matt Loffman
- former QCEA Programme Assistant, now living in Damascus

Conference on Energy Security

Over 100 Friends from across Europe attended the biennial QCEA/QPSW conference which took place in Brussels over the first weekend of December. To tie in with the new Sustainable Energy Security project, the conference explored our complex relationship with energy through discussion workshops, a scenario planning exercise, songwriting sessions and a contemplative, experiential activity using clay. Topics covered included what can be done on a personal and Meeting level to reduce energy use, the ethical dilemmas of green living and consumer choices, and the divisive issue of nuclear power.

Joint QCEA representatives Liz Scurfield and Martina Weitsch's keynote speech called on Friends to challenge the culture of individualism which entrenches our dependence on an unsustainable energy system. Laurie Michaelis, an Oxford Friend who runs the Living Witness Project in the UK, delivered a powerful follow-up presentation on 'the triple crunch' - the convergence of climate change, oil supply problems and economic recession. He called on Friends to review their own environmental footprint and suggested that radical cuts in individual energy use will be necessary to mitigate climate change and allow for fairer distribution of the world's energy resources.

Photo: Wiglef Puerschel

The conference concluded with the following message:

A Message of Hope and a Call to Action

This conference calls upon Yearly Meetings across Europe and the world, and the wider Quaker Community, to develop well-thought through visions of ways of living that are:
- rooted in our testimonies;
- sustainable;
- supportive of community and well-being;
- close to the earth and supportive of its capacity for renewal;
- that we can act out ourselves, project to others and use to develop partnership with others.

If you would like to join the Sustainable Energy Security project email list to receive occasional updates, please email Neil Endicott at: nendicott@qcea.org

It's time for action - European Parliament Elections 2009

In June 2009, some 700+ Members of the European Parliament will be elected by the citizens of 27 Member States of the European Union. If you are 18 or over, a citizen of a European Union Member State and eligible to vote, that means you!

QCEA will be working on the European Parliament Elections; we have started by establishing a page for the elections on our website and by providing a briefing paper and some background information. Over the next few months, we will be adding to this: information, briefings and action points. Check out the page and keep checking:
http://www.quaker.org/qcea/epelections.htm

If you have contact with any of the candidates, tell us about it. We will publish information as we get it. If you would like to send us the manifestos of the parties standing for election, please send them to mweitsch@qcea.org

And don't miss your chance to vote!

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offending behaviour were addressed in the community before they commit the crimes which lead to their imprisonment, causes such as poverty, abuse and violence against them and/or their children; and drug and alcohol addiction which are often caused by one or the other or both of the first two.

QCEA and the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva, together with the Quaker representative at the United Nations Crime Commission in Vienna, Nick McGeorge, have now become acknowledged international experts in the field of women prisoners and their children. All of them made significant inputs to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's recently published handbook for prison managers and policymakers entitled 'Women and Imprisonment'.

QCEA's own work informed the European Parliamentary own initiative report (The particular situation of women in prison and the impact of the imprisonment of parents on social and family life P6_TA(2008)0102)which was passed in plenary on 13 March 2008.

Liz Scurfield also provided the background report on Women in Prison for the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Committee on Social, Health and Family Affairs. The report and its recommendations are scheduled to be presented at the next plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly in late January 2009.

Text: Liz Scurfield
Photo: Ellen Gartrell McGeorge

* WHO Europe, WHO Conference on Women's Health in Prison papers, EUR/08/5086974/5, p.7

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Quaker Council for European Affairs aisbl
Square Ambiorix 50, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium
Editeur responsable : Elizabeth Scurfield
N° entreprise 0420.346.728
www.quaker.org/qcea - info@qcea.org
Périodique mensuel. Bureau de dépôt : Bruxelles X

Belgique-België
P.P.-P.B.
Bruxelles X
BC 8843