

WEF-EU-plenary:

Being Open While Addressing Privacy and Security Concerns: The Importance of Continuing Communication & Dialogue

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Diana Skelton

### **Privacy, Communication, and Building a Sense of Belonging**

The concerns about privacy that are being brought to the fore today by cyber-espionage are new. But navigating a path between privacy and the communication that connects people to one another is an age-old question. This can be a particular challenge for people who live in deep poverty. In Madagascar, where I used to live, the most disadvantaged families are often homeless, which means they have no privacy whatsoever and live in full view of any passerby. In the United Kingdom, where I live now, families in poverty sometimes spend their lives under what can feel like constant surveillance by social workers—sometimes quite literally on camera 24-7, such as when mothers are being observed with their newborn babies for weeks on end. This lack of privacy can make people want to protect themselves by communicating as little as possible with others.

Another factor that hampers dialogue is that people in poverty can be stereotyped and stigmatized. In Europe, it's often the media that perpetuate a skewed view of people in poverty as "lazy cheaters" dependent on the welfare state. In Africa, there can also be very strong judgements. For instance, children who are living in the street may be suspected of acting immorally in order to survive. Not only do those stereotypes distort communication; children growing up in poverty sometimes internalize them to the point where they cannot imagine that anyone might ever want to hear what they have to say.

One of All Together in Dignity/ATD Fourth World's members, Mrs. Jean Stallings, is an African-American who describes her own feeling about being stigmatized this way:

"When my children were young, there was no recognition for single mothers as human beings. You were outcast because of the colour of your skin, and also as a single mother. We were stigmatized by case workers who would inspect our homes looking for a trace of a man, trying to prove we were lying about being single, and turning our homes upside-down in front of our children."

The first time that Jean was invited to participate in a community meeting, she says, "I hesitated. I was terrified to walk through the door into that meeting with my babies in their stroller. In your worst moments, what you need most is someone who will look into your eyes without disgust."

In our experience at ATD Fourth World, a crucial step toward ending stigmatization is giving people born into poverty from different countries and continents the chance to meet one another internationally and to think together. Even though bias and stereotypes exist in every country, specific stigmatization is often very local. In one country, bias may be most strongly linked to the difference between an indigenous population and a population with colonial ancestry; in another country, bias may be linked to religious beliefs, to skin colour, to level of education, or to the urban/rural divide. When people come together who have the common experience of poverty, but who also come from places where the stereotypes are different, it makes it possible for each of them to begin to see themselves differently. Someone who grew

up always seeing their parents and grandparents disrespected and looked down on may have come to believe that this is normal, and only what their family deserves. Getting to know others with similar experiences in different contexts makes it possible for them to begin believing in themselves—and then to pool their knowledge about how to strengthen solidarity, and how to build the dialogues that can strengthen diverse communities.

I want to quote Jean Stallings again. About the time when she was terrified to walk through the door of a meeting, she says:

“Other women reached out to me that day. Other women trained me. They planted a seed in my heart that began my journey to activism. Our goal was to let people know that we wanted to be treated with dignity. I found my own voice. And we cared for each other, even in hardship.”

In the years since that first experience, Jean has often been the one who reaches out to others in order to show them that she believes in them, and to invite them to speak out publicly. She says:

“People don’t feel like they have a voice in the community. They feel isolated. You see young people who you maybe would not want to pass in the streets because of their attire. They turn out to have a heart of gold. You tell them, ‘This is what we have done and you can come join us. You can learn to express your feelings without going to the streets, and without getting involved in crime. You can do something that is going to help you and your family and give you a sense of pride.’ I’ve seen that, and I’ve seen [that the young people who are distrusted] want the same thing as any other child.

“When you finally walk up to a microphone with policy-makers listening to you, ‘You put all those feelings of hurt and despair aside and to say, ‘I am somebody. I am somebody. You’ve come here to listen to me and I am going to tell you how I feel and what I need from you as a governing body.’ It is very important. It gives you a sense of dignity. It empowers the people who listen too, because they get to hear people in poverty at a different level. They are not complaining. They are saying, ‘I am living in poverty, but I am still here and I am still determined to give my family and myself a better life.’ Being able to stand up and say that is so important. And that’s how we make peace.”