

children: unseen victims of the death penalty

Why is this issue significant for abolition?

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) is committed to the abolition of the death penalty in all its forms. We believe that bringing light to the issue of the impact of the parental death penalty on children contributes to the broader abolitionist movement and can advocate for the eradication of the death penalty worldwide.

The issue of the impact on children of parents sentenced to death or executed is applicable to all countries, and at all stages of the process, from arrest through to post-execution—there are parents everywhere. Focusing on the experience of the children who are affected can help in turn to humanise those sentenced to death, by representing them as people who give and receive love—as human beings, and not only as the crimes they may have committed. People who have experienced a parental death sentence or execution are and can be powerful advocates for abolition, as they speak about the profound and unintended impact of the death penalty on their lives, despite them not being implicated in the actions of the person who was sentenced to death. It reminds us all that the death penalty does not exist in isolation, but that it is a State sanctioned violence that continues to be condoned in our communities, that has soundwaves that echo far beyond the execution room. We all have a responsibility to these children.

Seeking to make decision makers, including defence lawyers, sentencers and legislators, and also diplomats and State representatives, aware of relevant international legal standards, can decrease the number of people executed. Emphasising the duty to respect the best interests of the child in all decisions that affect them can mitigate the sentences of those who may otherwise be sentenced to death or executed, reducing the overall number of those who are executed.

Showing the impact on children of the parental death penalty can support arguments for moving from moratorium to abolition. The negative impact on children of this experience endures even in situations where there is a moratorium, as they may still not have access to their imprisoned parent, and they can be haunted by the concern that the moratorium could be lifted and their parent executed.

First and foremost, we focus on these children because their rights matter, and because we have a responsibility to ensure that they are seen, heard and listened to. Furthermore, pending abolition, it is crucial that these children, and the burden they endure as a result of State action, are not forgotten, and that their rights are upheld.

Further Resources

Stephanie Farior (2019), **Protection of the Rights of Children of Parents Sentenced to Death or Executed: An Expert Legal Analysis** (Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva). Available in English at: quno.org/resource/2019/2/protection-rights-children-parents-sentenced-death-or-executed-expert-legal-analysis

Children of parents sentenced to death or executed: Developments, Good Practices and Next Steps (2014) (Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva). Available in English at: quno.org/resource/2014/8/cpsde-developments-good-practices-and-next-steps

Rachel Brett and Oliver Robertson (2013), **Lightening the Load of the Parental Death Penalty on Children** (Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva). Available in English, French, Arabic, Farsi, Japanese and Spanish at: quno.org/resource/2013/6/lightening-load-parental-death-sentence-children

Children of Parents Sentenced to Death or Executed: How Are They Affected? How Can They Be Supported? (2013) (Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva). Available in all UN languages at: quno.org/resource/2013/9/cpsde-how-are-they-affected-how-can-they-be-supported

Briefing Tools for Practitioners—Children: unseen victims of the death penalty (2019) (Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva). Available in English and French at: quno.org/resource/2019/7/briefing-tools-unseen-victims

View the full archive of QUNO publications on this subject at:
quno.org/resources/Children-of-Prisoners

QUNO's Human Rights & Refugees programme raises up the concerns of marginalized groups, so they are better understood by international policy makers, which leads to stronger international standards. Frontline organizations can use these strengthened international standards as a tool to limit suffering, improve lives and challenge the root causes of injustice. Our work focuses on children of prisoners, children of parents sentenced to death or executed, conscientious objectors to military service, Indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees.

For more information and to share feedback, or to order hard copies, please contact:

Laurel Townhead
Representative, Human Rights & Refugees
ltownhead@quno.ch