

**Los Trabajadores de las Rosas**  
*Violence and poverty affecting street children in Xela*



Janny Kappert

Bachelorthesis Cultural Anthropology 2011



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## Acknowledgements

My time in Guatemala and in Xela especially is something that I will forever hold in my memories with a smile upon my face. During my stay in Xela have I met many people who were willing to let me into their lives, to tell me their stories and to share the feelings they experience. I had never thought before my research that people would let me in, into their houses, into their families and into their hearts. It is no wonder therefore that I had such a special time in Xela. Many times have I been confronted with my own fears and hesitations, holding me back in my ability to execute my research properly. The first time that I had to approach a complete stranger on the street. The first time I had an interview with someone in a language that felt alien at that time to me. The first time I really felt accepted by the children I spend so much time with. There were many firsts during my research and every time I overcame my fears and doubt and was able to grow. I didn't only spend my time in Guatemala for my anthropology study. I was there to enjoy the culture, the people, the food, the music and the dance. In a short period did I dive into Guatemalan culture, and tried to learn and experience as much as possible. Hanging out with friends I met in Xela, travelling through the country and seeing the most incredible sites. I still can clearly vision the beautiful mountains, the colourful *trajes* of the women and the market stalls full with the most amazing fruits and vegetables.

I have to thank many people for my wonderful stay in Guatemala. Without doubt first the children that would let me into their lives and share their stories about both the downsides and upsides of their lives. The afternoons we spend together on the street in the parks, while they worked. The mornings I spend with them in school in Las Rosas. Also the children from Casa Hogar who I believed had a really hard time thrusting outsiders. Even though it took me a long time to notice that these children became more at ease around me, did we share some wonderful moments. Every morning did I walk these kids to the buses in the park, and together we took the bus to Las Rosas. They introduced me to their world, the world of children who are without families and often have to deal with the many negative aspects of social exclusion.

Besides the children do I have to thank the organisations for their help and their trust to let me in and to be a part of their staff. In the beginning was I completely in the dark how I should make contact with (former) street children and due to my involvement in both Edelac and Casa Hogar was I able to do so.

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## Introduction

*'I don't want to live in just any place. I want to live in a house. I want to live with a family. A family that wants me and loves me and takes care of me, that is something I dream about'.*

(Quote Carlos)<sup>1</sup>

I sit with Carlos on a couch in a shelter for homeless children, Casa Hogar, where he has been for three years. He likes to be at the shelter, because he grew up with violence and fear in his own family. His father drank heavily and used to beat his mother, who also used to drink. When his father died Carlos went with his mother to a park. He was 7 years old at that time and his mother told him that she would come back soon. She never returned and Carlos was left behind. He had to survive on his own, trying to find food, water and shelter everyday. He describes how he used to hide out in back alley streets, afraid that someone would find him, would hurt him. After a year the police picked Carlos up from the streets and after taken care of him in a special project, did they dropped him of at a shelter for neglected and abandoned children.

Carlos' story is not uncommon in Xela, the second-biggest city in Guatemala. Children perform different kinds of tasks in the streets: they're shoe shiners, they watch cars, they wash cars, they collect garbage. They sell all kinds of products such as fruits, cigarettes, candy, dvd's and drinks. The kids have different backgrounds, but many are from the periphery of Xela or the little towns near Xela. Those kids are used to living in a rural setting and have to adjust enormously to the life in the city. Walking through the streets of Xela, on the markets, on the bus terminal and in the parks, I noticed all these street children and it made me wonder. Where are these kids from, what kinds of backgrounds do they have? Why do they have to work on the streets, are they alone or with family or friends? Do they life on the streets or do they have a place to stay during the night? What do these kids themselves think about the work they're doing and what kind of effect does the life on the street have for them, physically and psychologically?

Even though I meant to do my research on socially excluded adolescents, and not so much kids, was I fascinated by their lives and their resilience. Therefore I decided to change the topic of my research from socially excluded adolescents and the way music works as a coping mechanism for them, towards socially excluded kids and their work and life on the street as a way of coping. Especially kids who are working on the streets are vulnerable, because they are exposed to many negative elements. They encounter discrimination on the streets, name-calling and repression from

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carlos on 15/04/2011, in Xela.

both citizens and police. There are little people who take care or defend children, when they encounter discrimination or violence while working in the streets. Many children have an unstable home, where problems such as domestic violence, alcoholism, divorce or separation of the parents play a big role. Due to this unstable background are some kids unable to turn towards their parents for trust and support. Lack of support from the government makes children working or even living on the streets vulnerable, because they have nobody to turn towards when something bad happens, both in the public terrain as in the private sphere. This not only makes the children vulnerable, but also resilient. At a very young age are they able to take care of themselves, to avoid dangerous situations and handle dangerous situations when they occur.

While doing my research did I discover that a combination of urbanization, urban poverty, violence and social exclusion affects the area Las Rosas and the street children from this area enormously. I decided therefore to focus on the ways poverty and violence have an impact on street children, and how these children cope with the hardships of daily life. Therefore I formulated this research question: How do poverty and insecurity affect the life of street children in Las Rosas, Xela?

Narayan describes in his theory on social exclusion the different components and the processes that take place, while Bradley describes five elements that are part of the life of the excluded. Urbanization has a major impact on the socially excluded residents of Las Rosas, because due to this process unemployment rates are significant, therefore creating urban poverty (Savenije 2009). Marginalized street children from Las Rosas have however means to cope with hardships related to poverty and violence. Jones and Rogers (2009) describe the importance of social networks and groups related to socially excluded people.

While I conducted my research in Xela was I active in a shelter, named Casa Hogar, where kids who used to live on the streets or who are at risk of turning up on the streets can find help. The children were aged between 7 and 18 and had all kinds of different backgrounds. Some were orphans, some were left behind on the streets, some were dropped of by parents and some ran away from their homes. This very diverse group of former street children or children that were at risk of becoming street children made me realize how many aspects are present in their lives, making them socially excluded children. They're not all the typical Oliver Twist: living or working on the streets and therefore pitiful, a lost cause. Children who can only turn out bad: begging, stealing, raping or using other forms of excessive violence. During my research did I encounter both sides: the way they're toughened up by bad experiences due to family or a period of homelessness and abandonment. Some children were indeed very aggressive and weren't able to trust people. I can not foresee how their lives will turn out. But I saw also the other side, the potential in these kids. How

bright and creative they can be, while they were making their homework or playing with friends. And I saw the kids who dared to dream, to want bigger things in life. A family that cares for them, a house where they can feel secure, a study they want to complete, a profession to carry out when they're grown-ups. Spending time with these children in the shelter, in the school and on the streets made me realize how complex their lives look like. How many problems they come across during their young age, and the often impressive ways they deal with them.

My research was conducted in an urban area, a city called Quetzaltenango. I will refer to this city as Xela, because most people within this city call it the same. Xela the second-biggest city in Guatemala and is divided in different *zonas*. During my research I focussed primarily on *zona 5*, called Las Rosas, an area located at the periphery of Xela. I worked in Las Rosas on a school for street children and children who are at risk of ending up on the streets. Because of this notion were most children from Las Rosas or from poor families living in other areas who couldn't afford the education for their children themselves. Edelac, the school I worked at in Las Rosas, has a complete program to help children with their education, but also with health related issues, problems within the private sphere and psychological problems of the children. I worked in the centre of Xela in Casa Hogar, which is a shelter for kids who worked on the streets, or just as children at Edelac, are at risk of ending up on the streets. In Casa Hogar were mainly children from little towns outside Xela, only 2 of the children were from the area Las Rosas. I decided to focus on Las Rosas as a research area, because I found out during one of the first weeks that almost 80% of children working at the streets are from this area. Therefore it seemed important to me to find more out about the life in Las Rosas, the journey in the bus the children have to make everyday to the centre, the education they receive in their neighbourhood and the homes they come from.

During the nine weeks that I conducted research in Xela, I used different kinds of qualitative methods. The methods I used are: participant observation, interviews (informal/semi-formal), data collection, informal conversations and peer groups. I mainly had informal conversations with children working on the street in the centre of Xela, as well as with the children in Casa Hogar and Edelac. Interviews were conducted with professionals working in these institutions, such as teachers, caregivers and a psychologist. During my research have I approached several other institutions that work with children on the street. Several of my informal contacts, acquaintances or friends, were also actively involved in the lives of children working on the street in Xela. They gave soccer practice for the kids and worked on a school that just as Edelac was concerned with the education of the less privileged children.

I start my thesis with chapter 1 in which I will discuss the public domain of Xela and especially the research area, Las Rosas, related to concepts such as urbanization, urban poverty and

fear and insecurity on the street. Chapter 2 is aimed at the explanation and description of the domestic terrain, the houses street children in Las Rosas are brought up in. The importance of gender roles, health and food of the children and problems such as alcoholism and domestic violence are discussed in this chapter to create an image of the background of children and the reasons why they are forced to work on the street. Chapter 3 is focussed upon the different kinds of street children, related to their background, work and education. I have made a typology of the three most common groups of street children, the ones that are living permanently on the street and the ones that only work on the street and have a home to return to after work. In chapter 4 will I explain the importance of work, education, social networks and organizations such as Edelac and Casa Hogar for street children. These elements in the lives of street children can be used and seen as useful coping mechanisms, a concept that I will also explain in this chapter. Finally I will summarize the outcomes of my research in the conclusion and will I discuss the relevance of these outcomes.

## Chapter 1 - Social conditions of children in Las rosas

During my research have I found out that street children while working and sometimes also living on the street experience many problems in the public domain related to urban poverty and especially a sense of insecurity of people on the street. Part of social exclusion is the stereotyping and discriminating of the marginalized, in this case street children. There are multiple reasons why children end up on the street, sometimes very clear to recognize, others are more difficult to notice. Kids from the area Las Rosas all seemed to be affected heavily by the rapid urbanization of their neighbourhood, and the social exclusion and urban poverty that are partly a result of this.

### 1.1 Theoretical concepts ~ urbanization, social exclusion, urban poverty and violence

Social exclusion is a term that has a very broad meaning.

*'It refers to the norms and processes that prevent certain groups from equal and effective participation in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of societies. It is both an outcome and a process that renders similar outcomes more likely. Social exclusion thus involves at least four factors: the excluded, the institutions from which they are excluded, the agents whose actions result in the exclusion, and the process through which exclusion occurs. Social exclusion is a relational phenomenon, implicating those with power and affecting those without. To complicate the dynamic, power asymmetries are observed even within excluded groups.'* (Narayan 1999: 188)

This definition describes the ways people can be excluded in many different ways, and also the intern power struggles that are present in excluded groups. Members of socially excluded groups aren't marginalized in the same way, while often children, women and men experience this phenomenon in varying manners, also depending on aspects such as social strata, age and health.

Bradley's (1994) framework describes five main mechanisms of exclusion of increasing severity: geography, entry barriers, corruption, intimidation, and physical violence. Through area stigmatization can the community of a specific area be branded either as a criminal, or an accomplice to one. This stigmatization and discrimination leads to disrespect from outsiders and the police alike and contributes to the fact that stigmatized people cannot secure a job or learn a trade.

Unemployment and illiteracy therefore can be a direct outcome of the stigmatization of certain areas and it's inhabitants.

Youth can be affected by violence and social exclusion on different kinds of levels. How they deal with these negative aspects depend on the person and the situation. For many youth does social exclusion and violence have a negative impact on their personal and on their social identity:

*'Two threats in particular, emerge as affecting their sense of personal identity: the threat to physical integrity, and the threat of feeling worthless and lacking self esteem. Social identity is threatened by the humiliation of being poor and the limits of a society marked by inequality and obstructed social mobility, with the threat of disaffiliation and the concomitant lack of social relationships representing the culmination of vulnerability.'* (Jones & Rodger 2009)

Social exclusion, urban poverty and violence can be a direct or indirect outcome of a process called urbanization. Urbanization has affected many areas and people worldwide enormously in the last couple of years. People used to live mostly on the countryside, but the table has turned and nowadays do cities occupy the most inhabitants. This major shift from the countryside to the urban areas has had consequences for the population on many different levels. People decided to move to a city, because of better job opportunities, housing and education. People used these new living circumstances to escape from the poverty that was present in many rural areas. But as time went on, did the cities become overcrowded and the urban population experienced new forms of poverty. Slums became sites that were the biggest representation of urban poverty and are still till this day on inhabited by people who experience exclusion and violence. (Savenije 2009)

## **1.2 Las Rosas**

*The sun is shining and casts a bright light on the dirt roads of Las Rosas. It is 8 o'clock in the morning and the streets are filled with children that walk towards school. Some older children walk their small brothers and sisters to school. Some are on their own and others have company from their mother. The sky is filled with the sounds of children talking, singing, screaming and crying. The ones that are late rapidly hurry towards the school in order not to be late for classes. An hour later is the street the complete opposite. The noises have disappeared and silence has replaced them. A couple of women sit in front of their houses, talking with other women, playing with their younger children or doing household chores. Two other women are selling fruit and*

*vegetables at the side of the road. Platanos, mango's, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and oranges mixed with spices in little bags. There are few men on the street, the ones that are in Las Rosas during the daytime are elderly, physically enabled or are men that spend most of their time in the local bar. Even though it's early in the morning is one man already highly intoxicated. He's not able to walk a straight line on the main road and is yelling loudly.*

This is Las Rosas, zona 5 in Quetzaltenango. With a minibús takes it the inhabitants from Las Rosas 20 minutes to reach the centre of Xela. Buses stop regularly at the main road that runs from Xela to Los Encuentros, a town that is known for the many *camionettas* that stop there and a town where people can change buses. Many buses pass Las Rosas during the day, but only a few people know of the existence of the area. Black fumes from the buses and dust clouds from the roads are elements that every visitor and inhabitant of Las Rosas encounters when they stop there. Walking up a hill does the area 'Las Rosas' begin. The concrete road covered with sand, stones and rocks is the main road of the area and all the stores are connected to this road. This is also the road that runs up the hill to the school, Edelac. There is a wide variation in the size and maintenance conditions from the houses. Some houses seem to fall apart, made out of wood, hard board and plastic. Other houses are more luxurious made out of bricks, with roof tiles and well maintained gardens. The differences between the exterior and interior of the houses are enormous, but all of the houses are located in the same environment. The residents of the houses have to walk up the same dusty, rocky road. All the houses have a lot of empty land around them and the fields between the houses are covered with garbage, weed and little shacks with graffiti on them. On the side of the road is a public phone booth and dogs rumble through the garbage in the fields.

Las Rosas is in many different aspects a socially excluded area, while residents daily have to deal with a bad reputation of their neighbourhood, therefore experiencing discrimination and marginalization. A lack of government representation in and for the area Las Rosas is one of the reasons why the poor households aren't able to rise above poverty.

Social exclusion is useful in the explanation of the area Las Rosas and it's inhabitants. Residents of Las Rosas are excluded from different institutions, both on the political and social terrain, Many people in Las Rosas find it not important to vote, while they feel they're is not political party that adequately represents their interests. This is an important example of the relationship between the excluded of Las Rosas, the institutions that are beyond their control and the process that takes place due to the relationship between different actors.

### **1.3 Urbanization**

Las Rosas is an area that used to be countryside. The inhabitants of zona 5 of Xela were originally *campesinos*, farmers that grew crops and held cattle. The people in this area used to take care of their own food supplies. All kinds of different fruits and vegetables were harvested. The *campesinos* and their families used to eat from their crops and sell them on the markets as well. The original inhabitants of Las Rosas were indigenous people, Mayans. While they used to express their indigenous background with clothing and ceremonies, does poverty and urbanization change these aspects of their living conditions. The older women still wear their *trajes*, colourful clothing that express their indigenous background, the youth wears jeans and shirts. I talked to a lady about this change:

*'I'm worried that our children don't wear our traditional clothing any more. It seems that they don't care to much about it. But it's important. These cloths represent our history and our background. Without these clothes, our background may get lost along the way'.<sup>2</sup>*

Martha describes the worries of more elderly people in Las Rosas concerning the expression of their indigenous roots and the second or third generation. Some children and adolescents are influenced by the clothing and the lifestyle of *ladinos* and want to wear and act the same as them. Others may find it important, but don't have the money to buy and wear *trajes*. The production of *trajes* is time-consuming and they are therefore more expensive to buy than clothes that are made in factories. The weaving of the fabric is a specific procedure and the materials that have to be used are costly. Urbanization has changed the life of people in Las Rosas therefore in different ways. It has changed their income, work and the expressing of their indigenous heritage. It has generated new opportunities as well, because children from Las Rosas turn out to occupy other professions than their parents and grandparents. The ones that are able to complete their school and are educated have more opportunities for high-skill jobs in the centre of Xela.

#### **1.4 Family income and assets**

Las Rosas is an area that is well-known as a zona of Xela where many families live with little money to spend. Most families have an income around the 10-20Q (1-2E) a day were children and parents both have to be provided from. It's hard for households to generate money, while many

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Martha on 02/04/2011 in Las Rosas



people within Las Rosas are depending upon an informal job or a job that is very uncertain. Most women work in the household and take care of the children. They sometimes have the opportunity to work outside the house, for example as a maid in a hotel nearby or by selling fruits and vegetables on the street. It is difficult however for women to find work, because they are often under qualified for well-paid, steady jobs and are therefore depending on jobs within the informal sector. Work within the informal sector can have it's benefits, while the social network within Las Rosas sometimes provides women new working opportunities. Taking care of other children, cleaning houses or helping build a house are examples of the reciprocity that is present in the neighbourhood. In return receive the women goods, such as food, supplies, tools or they receive similar tasks such as helping out in the house or with the children.

Men in the households have the task of provider and therefore are the ones that earn the money. While the area like mentioned above used to be countryside were most men working as *campesinos*. The area has become an urban area however, and this has a major impact on the work and income of men. Nowadays some of the men go into town to work in stores or work in the construction building. Other men remain *campesinos* and leave the area for a period of time to work elsewhere. These men often have to deal with irregular income wages, while they work in the informal sector in Xela or are depending upon seasonal work in the countryside. There's also a group of men who are unable to find a job, some of them due to their age, others due to a physical inability. They remain unemployed and are therefore unable to provide for their family.

Many parents hope for their kids a better future with a good job and enough money to buy food and rent a house. It's difficult however, because the children in Las Rosas have to contribute to the household due to low incomes of the parents. Children in Las Rosas are used to help out their parents by working in the house or on the street in Xela.

## **1.5 Violence and insecurity**

*It is around 8 o'clock in the evening in Xela and it's pitch dark outside. In zona 1 is Central Parque a perfect spot for adolescents to hang out together. The park is surrounded by old historical buildings and the Mac Donalds and bars inside those buildings form the main attraction for the youth. Most of them don't have enough money to spend in bars, they can afford a hamburger or a coffee, but that's the limit. More money isn't within reach. Therefore are the parks perfect for free and especially care-free relaxation. Friends cheerfully hug each other and slap each other on the shoulders, girls walk proudly on the arm of their boyfriend or loud giggling groups of girl sit*

*together. It is clear that the girls and boys are there only for one thing, hugging and flirting. Boys whistle at pretty looking girls who walk by, while they are sitting on benches. Sometimes they shout something at the girl something like 'hot' or 'sexy'. The girls often pretend not to notice and walk undignified further, till they reach their girlfriends, look over their shoulder at the direction of the boys and start laughing. But there is another feeling to those meetings as well. Anticipation and the feeling that they shouldn't be at the park in the dark. Especially the girls know that they can get into trouble with their parents if they found out that the park is also visited by their daughters in the evening.*

Especially the older generation have a hard time trusting their children and grandchildren for making the right decisions. In Xela are many parents worried about the activities of their children. Hanging out on the street doesn't just mean hanging out on the street, but it means trouble. Elderly think that adolescents and children who spend time on the street are involved in criminal activities, or get into trouble in other ways. I talked during my research with many people about the fears they had related to violence and the role adolescents play in this. It seems that parents fear the fact that their children become involved in the criminal world, the world of the gangs, *maras*. *Maras* are active around Central America and in Guatemala as well. Guatemala city, the capital, is the site where they're most active, just as around the border with Mexico. In Xela are however also *maras* present.

These gangs especially hang around in the parks, the *cementario* and in the mountains surrounding Xela. Most of their activities in Xela seem to be related to bribing, robberies, sexual assaults and murder. *Maras* are able to operate and spread an environment of fear because of different factors. One of the most important reasons is a lack of credibility of the government due to the role of the army during the war that lasted from 1960 till 1996. During this war was the government the main perpetrator of the atrocities that happened to the Mayan people. Mayan villages were torched down, women were raped and people were killed, because the government believed the Mayan people to sympathize with the guerilla's. The struggle between the guerrillas and the Army become more intense in the course of the years, and residents in the countryside were the victim of the escalation of violence. A violence of fear was created by the Army to paralyze people into their houses, and to make sure they wouldn't participate in battle. Even though fear in the countryside was more profoundly felt due to direct contact with violence, were people in the cities also affected with these sentiments of fear. Almost everybody had a missing or murdered relative, friend or acquaintance. Due to this fact were people in the cities also affected with a struggle that was primarily held in the countryside. Nowadays is the war over, but it seems that an

atmosphere of fear is still present in Guatemala. Guatemalans have seen or heard what gruesome things people are capable of doing to each other and what the Guatemalan government was capable of doing to its own people. Due to this distrust among citizens is a vacuum of power created where people involved in criminal organization can take advantage from. Distrust towards other citizens and towards the government is therefore not uncommon. The media plays a big role in the coverage of stories about crime, corruption, *maras* and other negative elements in society, therefore maintaining and even feeding distrust among Guatemalan people. The fear is in many ways even incorporated in the newspapers and journalists.

During my research did I have a lot of contact with Samuel, a guy that works in a bar in Xela. One day he told me that he studied journalism and that he actually was a journalist. He wants to write and work for a newspaper, but thinks it's unsafe.

*'Many journalists who cover stories about government misuse, corruption, killings, abductions disappear at a certain moment. It is dangerous writing stories about the dark side of Guatemala, but if I'm going to work as a journalist I want to write about everything, the good and the bad. Without being afraid of repercussions'.<sup>3</sup>*

Large scale killings and abductions in the countryside during the war are problems of the past that have to be reckoned with by many people, but in the meantime is urban violence a problem of the present. Violence is mainly concentrated in the urban areas and the two biggest cities in Guatemala, Guatemala city and Xela, are sites of this phenomenon. Like mentioned before seems a culture of fear still be embedded in the hearts and minds of people in Xela:

Rumours and stories related to violence are produced and reproduced several times, making some stories bigger than life. While people get scared because of these rumours does it affect their lives in a very destructive manner. Everybody in Xela has his own theories about which places are safe and which are unsafe, on what time it is safe to go out and on what time it is unsafe and whose company can be trusted upon.

A teacher told me during my period in Xela that I should never use computers in an Internet café, because the wrong kind of people were hanging around there:

*'The internet bars are not a good place to go, because during the day it's full with children and adolescents that never go to school. They do have money however to spend in the internet bars, something that is only possible because they are involved in illegal activities. You can easily get*

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<sup>3</sup> Fragment of an informal conversation with Samuel on 16/03/2011

*robbed in such a facility, because only gang members and pickpockets have so much money to spend, and don't have to work or go to school during the day'.<sup>4</sup>*

Everybody seems to have his or her own ideas about the level of safeness in certain places, but most people mentioned that especially walking around in the dark is dangerous, just as walking around on markets or in parks, because you easily can get robbed in a crowd of people. In this environment of violence and distrust are socially excluded groups of people extra vulnerable, because they have a bad reputation and can't really depend on the help of the government organisations. Nowadays people within Las Rosas don't fear police or state officials, but treat and talk about them with contempt. They feel neglected, because they don't receive any aid from the government in the form of social work or protection. Whenever inhabitants of Las Rosas become victim of violence is there little they can do, while most police-officers aren't keen on going into the area. The area Las Rosas has a bad reputation, just as it's residents. There are never policemen or security men in the area, therefore has the community created it's own security. Graffiti or stamps with the text 'Vecinos contra la delincuencia' on buildings in the area indicate that neighbourhood patrols take care of the area and try to keep the area as safe as possible. The neighbourhood patrols are ambiguous, because they work outside the jurisdiction of the law and force their own laws upon the people. They are formed by the residents of the area, and mostly are a group of men. In other areas in Guatemala is the neighbourhood watch more organized and are they the real authority as it comes to keeping crimes rates low, rather than the authority from the Guatemalan law. Whenever theft, robberies, assault or even murder takes place, do the neighbourhood patrols blow a whistle, where upon they meet and deal with the perpetrator or perpetrators of the crime. Punishments take place in the social terrain and are meant to humiliate the perpetrator and to make an example out of his behaviour. Public beatings, taking away his possessions, stripping of the clothes in the street or even lynchings can be punishments performed by the neighbourhood patrols. This is however only the case in areas where there is no trust in the Guatemalan jurisdictional system and the representations of this system, the police. In Las Rosas is the neighbourhood patrol in control, but are there little incidents related to extreme violence. Once in a while I have seen men patrolling in the street, people talk however little about their presence and it's difficult to make up what their role in the area precisely is.

I talked to some men on the street about the neighbourhood patrols:

*'They are here to keep the streets safe and make sure not the wrong kind of people take over.*

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4 Fragment of an informal conversation with my Spanish teacher Gabriela on 20/02/2011

*There is little crime here in Las Rosas on the streets and we like to keep it that way. We don't want any youngsters hanging around, making it easy for maras to approach and manipulate them in becoming a gangmember'.<sup>5</sup>*

So far I discovered there have never been any incidents in the area such as lynchings or public beatings and are neighbourhood patrols mainly present to preserve the peace in the street. Most neighbourhood patrols not only mingle in the public sphere of an area, but also in the domestic terrain. Whenever it's clear that domestic violence is taking place in a household do the men of the patrol watch talk with the one responsible for the violence, or like mentioned before punish them. While domestic violence is a problem in the area Las Rosas, and the neighbourhood patrol doesn't seem to interfere with this, the patrol watch in Las Rosas has only authority on the street and therefore not in the households.

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5 Interview with a group of men in Las Rosas on 22/03/2011

## **Chapter 2 - The families and homes of street children**

Some of the street children have never or only experienced a home for a limited amount of time. Others are however still bound to their family and home, while they only work on the street and live in the area Las Rosas. Problems related to poverty and violence are therefore not only experienced in the public terrain as mentioned in chapter 1, but also in the domestic sphere. Domestic issues that play an important role in the lives of street children from Las Rosas are related to gender roles, health, domestic violence and alcoholism.

### **2.1 Theoretical concepts ~ Domestic issues**

Molnar, Rath, and Klein (1990) found that children living on the street were at risk for developmental difficulties far greater than those of the average child. According to Maslow (1968, 1970), children are not likely to grow and move forward until their basic needs have been satisfied. If a child is hungry, no other interest exist but obtaining food. (D'Abreau & Mullis 2001)

The income level plays an important role in the lifestyle of a family. Kephart (1972) remarks that the family income level is a major measurement of the quality of life of a family. It determines the quality and quantity of education a child in a given family may receive. The researcher observed that poor families often live in overcrowded unsanitary houses, and the parents may be so busy trying to feed and clothe their children that they give inadequate attention to behaviour moulding. The hierarchy of needs of Maslow (1954) reveals that people only strive to meet higher needs, when elementary ones have been satisfied. These basic needs of survival are the strongest human needs that, if not met, result in deficiency. Starving persons will take great risk to get food. This situation is likely to push neglected children and those from poor homes to seek “comfort” in the street, especially if these basic needs appear to receive immediate satisfaction there. (Matchinda 1999)

### **2.2 Family structures**

*'Family is in many ways the cornerstone of society. In Guatemala are families with many children very important. Children are a safety net for parents while they know that due to the fact*

*that they have children, these will take care of them when they're older.*<sup>6</sup>

All children are part from a family, however this family may play a part in their lives is depending upon many aspects. Some of the street children I met during my research in Xela were not in contact with their family any more. They come from broken homes, where domestic issues have contributed to the separation of home and child. Others come from nurturing families and fortunately have loving relatives to take care of them.

Families and homes are very important in the process of becoming a street child. It is often the domestic sphere that contributes to children ending up in the street, whether they live on the street permanently or only work there. In Xela are families in general big, whereas most of them are composed of 4 till 5 children. In Guatemala is having many children a sign of fortune as well a pure logical decision. Children can provide for their parents when they're older and children are able to pass on the family name and cultural customs that are important for people. As mentioned before is Las Rosas originally an area where only *campesinos* and indigenous people, Mayans, lived. Due to rapid changes in the area towards an urban area has also the family composition changed.

Different elements have contributed to the fact that there are many female headed households in Las Rosas nowadays. Domestic issues related to unemployment, alcoholism and violence give a heavy strain on relationships between couples. In Las Rosas and Xela in general are men often absent in the upbringing of their children. Many men leave their wife behind with children and start a new life elsewhere, sometimes starting a different family. Sometimes couples get officially divorced and are therefore separated. Due to the influence of the Catholic Church and sometimes the condemnation of divorce by a social network or the community is divorce a phenomenon that is still frowned upon. During my research have I met women who were ashamed to talk about their domestic situation, the separation or divorce with their husbands, because they feel it's not respectful to live alone.

Many children I met in Las Rosas or in other zonas in Xela were brought up in a single-parent household, namely a female headed household. It is a rare case that only the father takes care of the children, but females taking care of children on their own is fairly common. Female headed households have a major impact on the children, because children have to take over some of the responsibilities in the house.

## **2.3 Health and nutrition**

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6 Interview with the head master of Cass Hogar, on 28/03/2011

*'I was really sick last year, but my parents didn't have enough money to send me to the doctor. I couldn't concentrate in school, because I had terrible headaches. Usually I sell tamalitas made by my mother in the street in the afternoon, but it was impossible to do so. My parents understood, but I guess they were a little bit sad as well. My little brother had to go work instead, but he's only 8 years and my mother doesn't like him working on the streets. Now it's better. I don't have headaches any more and I can work.'*<sup>7</sup>

The fact that many families have to provide for themselves with only 10 till 20Q a day means that it's often very difficult to make sure all children in the household receive the right amount of nutrition. Most children I met in Las Rosas used to go to school or work on the street without any breakfast, the first food they eat during the days is either at school or on the street and not in their homes. In Edelac, the school in Las Rosas, receive the children in their first break a cup of lemonade or *atole*, which is a liquid made out of corn. Besides that the children get *pan*, a small bread to eat. This is for almost 60% of the children the first meal they eat. Nutrition of the children is often unbalanced, whereas the main components of their nutrition are *freijoles*, tortillas, bread and sometimes a little bit of chicken or eggs. Meat is expensive however, and it's something that is not eaten everyday. The lack of vitamins in the diet of children can be traced back to a certain indifference towards vegetables and fruits. Even though fruits and vegetables are rather cheap while purchased on the markets are most Guatemalan not fond to eat much of them. In the supermarkets where people with more money to spend do their groceries, rather than on the markets, is the fruits- and vegetables section very small. Many Guatemalan people who I met during my time in Xela and can be placed in a middle-class or even upper-class economic position had a very unhealthy diet. MacDonalds food, ice cream, milkshakes and cereals with high amounts of sugar are items that many of them consumed daily. The result is that obesity rates are rising in Guatemala among the people who have money to spend.

It seems that information related to health and the right nutrition is limited, and people, if they have the resources to buy more food, are unaware of the importance of a balanced diet. In Las Rosas do most families have little choice related to food, because everyday is a struggle to earn money and buy food. The food in the shops and the food that is sometimes sold at the side of the main road is certainly cheaper in comparison with the food in the centre of Xela.

There are negative results related to the health of children due to the lack of vitamins and dairy in their nutrition, both mentally and physically. Concentration problems are most noticed in the schools, where teachers daily observe the way children have trouble making their homework

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Fernando on 27/03/2011, in Xela



and staying focussed. I talked to a teacher about this phenomenon:

*'There are several reasons why children in this school have trouble focussing on their school work. They often have domestic problems which causes them to be distracted from their tasks. An unhealthy lifestyle is also a reason why children mentally can't keep up in school. They don't get enough sleep and the lack of right food, sometimes resulting in malnutrition, have a negative impact on their performances in school.'*<sup>8</sup>

Like mentioned above is not only the amount and composition of nutrition a problem related to the growth and progress of children. While children have to juggle between their responsibilities in school, house or on the street are they busy till late in the evening and are sometimes tired due to a lack of sleep. Because there's sometimes not enough money or supervision of parents for the children are there also problems with hygiene. Some of the children don't wash themselves properly, resulting in lice and rashes. Tooth aches and cavities in the teeth are common among children in Las Rosas, whereas some children don't even have a toothbrush at home and toothpaste is rather expensive.

While I was working in Edelac, was the school visited by students who were in training to become a dentist. They set up all their equipment and examined every student in the school for free. This was arranged by the headmistress of Edelac, while it's often to expensive for parents to bring their children to the dentist. All the kids received a toothbrush, toothpaste and fluor.

The reason why it's so expensive to go to a doctor or dentist is because there isn't a social health care system that helps people with little money, making it difficult for people within Las Rosas with health issues to go the doctor. It is often expensive to receive treatment and pay for medicine, reason why most of them don't go the doctor at all or seek alternative methods. In Guatemala is it a common phenomenon that people buy creams and lotions from vendors, these are supposed to cure any possible disease ranging from a rash to cancer.

Children who not only work on the street, like most children in Las Rosas, but also sleep and life on the street have the same problems related to health and nutrition. Their problems are most of the time more severely, while they have no adults to provide for them, to take them to the doctor when they're sick or to give them food when they're hungry. Street children completely have to take care of themselves, and find alternative ways to obtain food. They use a social network from other vendors and street children, do chores in return for food or sometimes steal to feed themselves. During my research have I witnessed many times street children that shared food and street children

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8 Interview with a teacher of Edelac on 11/04/2011

that got food from the vendors in the markets. Thankfully for these children can they regularly depend upon the generosity of other people and receive some tortilla's, *freijoles*, fruit, or bread. It is without say that also this group of street children have trouble maintaining a healthy, balanced diet, so they keep up a resistance against diseases.

## 2.4 Gender

*'I don't trust the boys here in Xela. So many girls get pregnant and they all walk away. They have no responsibility and it's always the girl and her parents that end up with the problems. And what about the girl then? She's not able to complete her school and has to take care of her child and the household. At the meantime she's still a child herself, around 16 years old. That's why I check up on my daughter regularly, because she has to finish her school. That's important.'*<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent that during the period I did research in Las Rosas I noticed some significant differences between the role of women and the role of men. While I talked to many women in the area Las Rosas, did I receive an image the women had about their own problems, responsibilities, limitations and liberties. Especially the men seemed to occupy a special place of the worries the women had in the area Las Rosas.

Several women shared their frustrations concerning their husbands or men in general with me on the playground of the school, in front of the shops or outside their houses. Those frustrations were often associated with a lack of responsibility, unemployment, machismo, the use of violence or alcoholism. Above mentioned fragment is an illustration of the fear mothers have regarding the treatment of their daughters by men. Teen pregnancy is a phenomenon that occurs often in the area Las Rosas and in Xela in general. Most men in Xela and in particular Las Rosas have children, it is not uncommon that they also have children that they've never seen, or only see once in a while. There are different reasons why teen pregnancy rates are high in Xela and why men often are not involved in the lives of their children. It is highly uncommon to talk to teenagers about sex, such as the use of protection, the chance of getting soa's or the chance of getting pregnant. This lack of information contributes to the fact that not many adolescents talk openly about sex, but simply have sex, without looking out for the dangers or negative consequences of it. When they talk about sex however, I found that they often joked and boosted about it. Both girls and boys in Las Rosas didn't mind talking about sex, but were just in the dark concerning the more serious aspects of it. The girls were more interested in the implications of getting pregnant, but seemed to joke a lot

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Gloria on 06/03/2011 in Las Rosas

about it too. Especially the guys seemed to find it easy to talk about sex in a group, but more boosting than serious talking.

*'She's a real mango, I mean, she's really fine. She ignores me, but I know she will come around eventually. I would love to kiss her and more stuff, you know what I mean...? Maybe one day. Her mother checks up on her every time, and she isn't allowed to go out. That is a shame'<sup>10</sup>.*

Girls are often raised more protective than the men in their family. When I talked about the reasons why the girls in Las Rosas had to go home directly after school hours did the girls mention several things. One of the reasons was that they had to do their chores in the household and help take care of their brothers and sisters. They also had to do their homework, or help sisters and brothers with school work. Other reasons included the fact that the girls have to behave honourable, and the fact that parents don't trust boys around their daughters. The sphere in the area seems at times a bit conservative and strict. Parents rarely talk with their kids about differences between girls and boys, their development and how to deal with all this.

Especially boys in Las Rosas are even at a very young age preoccupied with sex, expressed in whistling or shouting at girls, sometimes even with grabbing. Teachers on the school EDELAC in Las Rosas held several factors accountable for the early interest of boys in sex. While parents expect their girls to come home afterwards school, they don't expect the same of their sons. Boys have in general more liberty to hang out on the street, because they have less obligations in the household concerning chores. They have other obligations, such as working in the street: selling fruit, drinks, cigarettes, candy etc. Therefore boys have a legitimate reason to hang out on the street, where they are exposed on an early age to peer pressure from other boys working in the streets. Sex is considered a fun topic to talk and boost about, and especially in groups of street children hanging out on the street without supervision from parents or elderly. Not only the freedom and peer pressure that is part of the life of the street boys during their childhood is a reason for the early interest of boys in sex. Many men in Guatemala, also in Las Rosas, behave in a *machismo* way. They like to look at the ladies, flirt, and live according to a patriarchal standard. I heard during my research hear many stories from women about men in the area, who are misbehaving themselves. These men behave rudely towards women: They act dominant, talk down on the women and sometimes even use violence, both physically as mentally, to put a woman in her place.

*'The boys in this area need to learn how to behave properly towards ladies. Here at the*

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10 Interview with Lius on 03/04/2011 in Xela

*school we don't like the boys whistling at girls or hearing them talk degrading about them. If we notice this kind of behaviour the boys will receive a warning or a punishment. It is hard though, because most of the boys get the wrong example in their households or on the street. They copy the behaviour from their fathers, uncles and other men and consider it normal.'*<sup>11</sup>

## **2.5 Domestic issues: Violence & alcoholism**

Domestic violence disrupts the life of children and their families in a violent manner. During one of the first days of my work in the school in Las Rosas, Edelac, was I surprised that a class of children were playing in regular school hours on the playground. I asked the teacher what was the reason behind this and she explained that many children in her class had a hard time at home. Due to violence in the home did many children have trouble concentrating and the teacher decided therefore to talk about abuse, what abuse means and what it does to people. The children talked in the group about some personal experiences and logically were unable to focus on their homework afterwards. The children could play around for an hour or so and discuss in the course of the day more domestic issues with their classmates and the teacher. I asked the teacher if I could sit in the classroom while the children told their stories and was granted permission. While I listened to the stories of these children was I completely shocked and in awe with them at the same time. The courage it must have taken these kids to share their most private, sad and sometimes embarrassing stories. Some kids told about violence that was used against their mother and they expressed the sadness they felt when they saw how she got yelled at, threatened or even beaten. Others were themselves the victim of either verbal, sexual or physical abuse. Sexual abuse seemed a no-go-area to discuss, which is very understandable due to the group setting and the high amount of secrecy that most of the time surrounds sexual abuse. The teacher told me afterwards that sexual abuse certainly takes place in the households, because they sometimes can tell by the behaviour of children that they experience this. This can be either the total aversion related to physical contact and sexually loaded comments or the opposite, a rather obsessive kind of sexual behaviour. Verbal and physical abuse are forms of domestic violence that is more easily discussed, if you can put it like this. Physical abuse is very hard to disguise for a longer period, and can be noticed by other children, friends, neighbours or teachers. During the afternoon in which the children talked about their domestic issues in the classroom, was there suddenly a girl that confessed that her mother hits her regularly. She broke down in tears and described that she was afraid to do or say the wrong

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the headmistress of Edelac on 29/03/2011 in Las Rosas

things, because she would be hit. In this case the mother would take a spoon and spank her child, sometimes on the buttocks and sometimes on the back, arms or legs. Other children were rather quiet during this confession but seemed moved by the story. Some girls started to sob and cry a little bit, the boys' eyes remained dry. After the girl finished her stories started other children their stories. All of them contained the level of fear, sadness, shame and sometimes anger they felt during witnessing or experiencing violence. I was surprised by the ability of the children to remain rather cool during their conversation and discussed this later on with the teacher.

*'It's a shame, but many of the kids that experience domestic violence deal with the bad things that happen to them, by shutting themselves off from other people and their emotions. As a teacher I hope that children feel at ease enough to tell about problems that are going on their lives, but most of them feel to embarrassed or isolated to share their stories.'*<sup>12</sup>

Until the group conversation of the kids in Edelac was a rather unaware of the major impact and the amount of domestic violence that takes place in the houses in Las Rosas. In many ways were my eyes opened, due to the children's stories and conversations with teachers, and afterwards did I notice more children who were potential victims of domestic violence. Because of the shame and restraint of many children to talk about their domestic problems was it hard to find out more about the scale and nature of domestic violence. I could however see the physical injuries in the form of bruises. I also noticed some of the results of domestic violence in the behaviour of the children. Children who were completely introvert and wouldn't allow physical contact. Their reactions ranged from flinching to aggressive behaviour. Also children that were almost all the time preoccupied with sex, both in their manner and in their language.

Several factors are likely to influence domestic violence, such as unemployment, machismo and alcoholism. Multiple professionals from Edelac and Casa Hogar have indicated that especially the combination of alcoholism and unemployment causes heavy strains in the households. Tensions build up easily in such an environment, and parents who have an alcohol problem use their misjudge sometimes and react to or punish children or spouses disproportionately.

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12 Interview with teacher of Edelac on 09/04/2011 in Las Rosas

## Chapter 3 – The neglected, the orphans and the loved ones

The relationship children have with their families is very important, because family can provide children with a safety net, care and a social network. When this falters and parents can't hold up to these expectations, consciously or unconsciously, children are left alone. In the case of street children does this mean that they have to create their own social network and have to take care of themselves. On what scale depends on the domestic backgrounds, the work and the education of them.

### 3.1 Theoretical concepts ~ Street children

The problem of street children has become increasingly apparent in countries throughout the world, especially in large cities. Whereas some street children maintain contact with their families and are in street settings to make money to contribute to their households, others are full-time residents of the streets and neighbourhood shelters, having little or no contact with their families. (D'Abreu & Mullis 2001)

### 3.2 Typologie: 3 different kinds of street children related to domestic backgrounds

*'I don't blame my mother. I know there's no other way. My father died and my mother has to raise us on our own. That means that it's logical that I work as well. I mean, she can't take care of my 3 brothers and sister in the house and also go to the market to work. That's too much. Because I'm the oldest I have to work as well.'*<sup>13</sup>

The motivations and reasons children have or obtain to work or live on the street can be explained by the social background of the street children. Not all street children sleep under a bridge, got beaten when they were younger, are uneducated or are hungry 24/7. Some of the children I worked with during my research experienced some of these hardships, but some of them never. When I use the term street children do I refer to children that sleep and/or work on the street on a regular basis and in such a way that it affects other aspects of their lives negatively such as education, nutrition, health, care and/or recreation.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Manuel on 13/03/2011 in Xela

During my research period did I meet many children while working or living on the street and did I recognize certain similarities and differences. The group of street children that work on the street, but also live permanently on the street is significant smaller than the group of children that only work on street, but sleep in the house of their parents or family. The domestic backgrounds from the children that live permanently on the street are almost always difficult. Therefore I want to describe the first category of street children in Xela.

Related to the domestic background of street children is the first group of children the one that experienced the most problems in the domestic sphere. Abandonment by parents or a parent is the most common reason why children end up on the street. Like mentioned before in chapter 2 is domestic violence often related to unemployment and alcoholism of caregivers of children. In Casa Hogar lived children who encountered these hardships and who were left behind on the street.

Mario is one of the children who have had to deal with life on the street. One day his father brought him in the car from a village nearby Xela to Parque Central in Xela. He left him behind and Mario was forced to take care of himself. His father spend all his money in the *cantina* on beer and other alcohol beverages and wasn't able to provide for his family any more. Mario's mother never has been around and Mario doesn't know if she's still living somewhere, or if she passed away. Till the age of 10 was he forced to work on the street and was he severely beaten by his father. On the age of 10 got he dropped of in the centre of Xela and started a new period in his life. He worked as a shoe shiner on the market and was able to provide for himself due to this. During the day didn't he mind living and working on the street, but he always felt scared sleeping on the street. After a while did he meet other street children and they started to work and sleep together, therefore making things a little less difficult.

The second group of street children that full time live and work on the street are the ones without any relatives. They are orphans and have no direct family to take care of them. After their parents passed away are some able to find a place in the orphanage, but while there's little place in these institutions are especially the older ones left behind. Brothers and sisters get separated, because some of them are institutionalized and some have to find shelter elsewhere. This means that this group of children is forced to live on the street. This group of children haven't experienced many domestic problems in general and reminisce many times about the time that their parents were still alive. The transition for this group of children is very difficult, because life with their parents in a home was naturally way more appealing. In comparison with the first group of children that experienced violence and insecurity in the household is the impact of street life on them very different. Kids and adolescents that experienced domestic violence often have psychological issues due to their past. They have trouble trusting people, are often very introvert and have 'toughened'

up in their interaction with other people. Even though this is of course sad, is it for street children a way of dealing with the hardships on the street and can caution mean the difference between surviving or perishing. The second group of children that end up on the street, because they don't have any family left to take care of them often come from a protected and safe environment. The transition from a warm home towards the street is huge and because some of these kids are unaware of the dangers they can encounter are they in a way more vulnerable for people with the wrong intentions.

The third and last group is the group of street children that work on the street, but also have a home to return to. Main reason why these children work on the street is due to a lack of financial resources of the parents, therefore these kids have to contribute to the household as well. As mentioned before in chapter 2 are many kids from Las Rosas working in the centre of Xela due to this. Related to the domestic backgrounds of the children of Las Rosas are most of the children who sell food in the markets or engage in other activities to earn money brought up in a female headed household. Families in these households have the least amount of resources due to the absence of a full time provider, namely the father. Especially the eldest children have to work in the street, making it possible for the youngest to go to school.

The first and second group of street children live full time on the street and have ended up on the street due to social problems, such as abandonment by parents or the death of parents. The third and last group of children only work in the street, but have a roof above their heads during the night Main reason why children who only work, but not permanently live on the street are active on the street is due to financial problems. This typology is meant to indicate the differences and similarities between street children, but isn't rigid. Children from Las Rosas that I met during my research while working on the street were often able to return to their home in the evening, but also this group of children often had to deal with social problems such as domestic violence, separation of their parents or addictions. The first and second group of children have become street children due to social problems, but the financial situation of their families and themselves also have of course a major impact on the reason why they have to live entirely on the street. The division of street children in these three groups is to point out some of the main reasons why children become members on the street, may it be full time or part time, related to domestic backgrounds.

### **3.3 Education**

Applying the typology that I have described earlier will the education of street children be discussed. The first two groups who live permanently on the street are often in no position to go to



school. Depending on the life history of the children have some of them been to class before, some of them have never seen a school from the inside. *Primera* is the name for the ground school in Guatemala and children from the age of 4 till 12 go to this school averagely speaking. The groups of street children that are least common in Xela are the first and second group of children that both work and life on the street. Most of these children have been to school on a very young age, but had to drop-out due to problems in the household, their work on the street or a combination of both. Children who are recorded by a institution or a shelter fortunately have the change to return to school and receive the education that is fitting to their level. This means that in several schools in Xela former street children are put in a class with much younger classmates, so that these children can keep up with the level that is doable for them. While living on the street is there no change for children to go to school.

The third and last group of children I have mentioned are the ones that work on the street, but have in some way a home. During the research period in Xela have I met many children that worked in the afternoon and sometimes in the evening as well. Before they started their workday on the street, had they already been to school in the morning. The children that only work on the street are the ones that go to school rather often, and are able to follow their classes. Even though they are in a better position compared to the children that never go to school, is the regularity of their goings very fragile. While I worked in Edelac, a school meant for former street children, current street children and children at risk of becoming one, have I noticed many children that went to school on an irregular basis. Especially illness in the family was one of the reasons why children were held at home to help out in the household or to absorb the financial setback. I met parents who were concerned with the education of their children and thought that it was important that they at least completed the *primera*. I met also parents who felt that school was a kind of luxury their children couldn't afford. These children are kept from school to help with domestic duties, such as taking care of their little brothers and sisters and clean the house, or because they can work in this way more hours on the street. There are plenty of children in Las Rosas that complete the *primera*, but almost none of these children continue their education afterwards by going to the *secunderia*.

Related to the education of street children can multiple conclusions be drawn. Children or adolescents that life full-time on street often have been to school once, but became drop-outs. Children that only work on the street go to school in the morning, but are kept at home or at street on a very regular basis, thereby impairing the ability of the children to perform adequately in the classroom. The inability to make their homework or keep up with classes, due to a frequent absence are reasons why many street children have to redo their year. Therefore are these street children often older then their classmates, who go on a daily base to school

### 3.4 Work

*'It's sometimes hard to watch other kids on the streets. Some of them are able to buy snacks and they wear nice clothes. I always wear second hand clothes and when I was younger I used to walk with shoes that were too small. If I had more money, I would buy snacks everyday and nice shoes. Yes, I would do that..'<sup>14</sup>*

Work on the street is the element that unifies all the street children of Xela. Even though there are some children and adolescents that don't work, have I noticed that this part in Xela is rather insignificant. Persons that never work, but do live on the street are often adolescents and are involved in criminal activities, are often addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. This group uses begging or stealing as a way to survive life on the street. There's a tendency to think that all children living or working on the street act out criminal behaviour, due to their involvement in *maras* or due to addictions.

I have found that this image of street children is not the reality in Xela, while most children work to generate money, food and shelter. Some of the children I met from Las Rosas used their money to buy cigarettes and the adolescents used to buy an occasional alcohol beverage, but this never was part of serious addictive tendencies towards drugs and alcohol.

The street children I met during my stay in Xela in general worked many hours on the street. Several professions that are generally conducted by children are shoe shiners and vendors. Kids sell many different items on the street such as candy, drinks, food, cigarettes and matches. Some of them carry a tray with all these products, while walking around or standing in the park. They are often working for an official employer, but never on an formal notice. It is hard to find out who sends these kids on the street, while they are the ones that most of the time live permanently on the street and are therefore not ordered by their parents or family to work on the street. The sight of children working on the street is very normal and all of the Guatemalan people find it highly normal to see these kids. They're part of daily street life. Even though it's perfectly normal to see children sell items in the parks and on the market in Xela, are they officially not allowed to work. The people who send children with trays full of items to sell on the street are therefore carrying out illegal activities. Most of the children I worked with during my research were living in Las Rosas and sold food made by their mother. Carrying baskets with home-made dishes and snacks, such as *tamalitas*, were they generating money. Pirated dvd's and cd's were also sold on a large scale by these kids.

Besides selling items on the street, are children on the street actively involved in the

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14 Fragment of an informal conversation with David on 18/03/2011 in Las Rosas

washing and taking care of cars and as mentioned before, the shoe-shine business. The parks in Xela are even at 7 o'clock in the morning full of people, and every respectable businessman seems to let his shoes get polished by one of these children.

## 4. Life on the street: Liberation or suppression?

Violence and poverty are elements that influence the lives of street children in a very destructive manner. Both physical and psychological problems can be results of domestic violence, marginalization, neglect, malnutrition or discrimination. I have discussed in the previous chapters how both violence and poverty are manifested in the public as well as in the private sphere of street children. Important is to look at the ways street life affects children. What mechanisms or institutions help children cope with the difficulties they encounter on their very young age?

### 4.1 Theoretical concepts ~ Coping mechanisms, resilience and agency

I have discussed the work activities of street children in the previous chapter, but what kind of impact does working on the street have for children? In this paragraph will I discuss the ability of street children to deal with social exclusion and additional disadvantages, such as discrimination or intimidation due to the work they do on the street.

Sztompta (1993) argues that part of agency is the way people deal with their everyday reality and are able to create different circumstances, making a social change:

*'In it's place they propose the image of social change as the structuralization and restructuralization of the arena on which people perform actions in response to the problems and challenges they face. Social change is incremental; it emerges from their social games, negotiations, bargaining, conflicts and co-operation' (Sztompta 1993)*

Different coping mechanisms can be used by marginalized youth to deal with these 'threats' to their personal and social identity. Coping mechanisms that are relevant for my research are related to the social of the lives of youth. Creating a sense of solidarity in a group or even a group identity is one of the ways youth cope with daily exclusion and violence.

*'It is not that solidarity is a basic building block for coordinated social organization. This is a truism. What focusing on street kids demonstrates for youth gangs and social groups in general is that solidarity requires certain features to be present for intricate social systems to form.'* (Jones &

Rodger 2009: 153)

Being part of a group of people can empower marginalized youth and can contribute to the formation of (self)respect and dignity that is attacked by negative responses from society outside of 'the group'.

## 4.2 Work

*'Working on the streets is difficult. I'm often tired, and sometimes I feel I don't have any energy left to do stuff. But I like the fact that I have my own money and can buy things. I envy kids that get all kinds of things from their parents, but I'm independent. I take care of myself.'*

Work helps in many aspects create the agency Sztompta (1993) talks about. The hardships children encounter on the street are often difficult to deal with, but due their ability to have a task and to be useful, is the self-esteem of these children raised. They're able to actively work at their social status and are at the meantime also able to change their position. Street children and children from Las Rosas often are discriminated due to their backgrounds or their lifestyle. The stereotype of the non-working street kid who survives by acting out illegal activities and the consumption of addictive substances is just as in many other places present in Xela. Especially the working class and the older generation seem to be worried or even frightened by the number and presence of street children in Xela.

*'It's sad that kids have to life like this (on the street), but I'm worried as well. These children hang around all they, and everybody knows that most of them are up to no good. Most of them are hungry and sometimes it's no wonder that they use stealing or robbing as a means to get by. Still, this is criminal behaviour and street children are the ones who make the street more dangerous'.<sup>15</sup>*

Through the use of work, both for themselves and for other people, have street children the ability to show their resilience to deal with their difficult lifestyle in a positive constructive manner. Seeing children work on the streets, does for many inhabitants in Xela feel like a comfort, because it implies that they are doing honest work, rather than being part of a criminal organisation, such as *maras*. This helps breaks down the stereotypes and the related marginalization and discrimination of

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15 Fragment of informal conversation of Isabela on 03/03/2011 in Xela

street children. Due to work can street children occupy a useful position in society and are they able to counter the notion that the street is a dangerous place to be at, because of the supposedly illegal and violent behaviour of street children.

### **4.3 Social network on the street**

Street children are often left alone without the help of a stable social network of family or relatives, and sometimes even without a social network of fellow classmates and friends from school. This means that they have to deal with isolation and loneliness, aspects that make life on the street very difficult to cope with. Fortunately have I met during my time in Xela many street children that construct alternative social networks on their own. This is made possible due to the presence of other street children and people working and living on the street. Because these children, adolescents and adults have a common bond, namely life on the street, is there a tendency to help each other out. Social networks from street children are formed by making friends and acquaintances on the street, and seem in general very loyal towards each other.

In one of the first weeks in Xela I noticed a group of shoe shine boys that regularly met in Parque Central. The boys were not the same age, while the youngest said to be 7 and the oldest to be 16. Even though the differences in age and therefore the phase in their lives are very different, had they no trouble hanging out together and making fun. The boys acted as brothers, messing with one another and playing soccer for a while. They made funny comments about the other boys in the group and all of them seemed to be at ease in this group setting. The youngest was helped by the older children during soccer, but also during work.

After the kids played together in the park would they all go their separate ways to work. Each of them had their own area to prevent the fact there are parks that are overcrowded with shoe shiners and competition would be so brutal that it would disadvantage the boys' chance to earn money. While talking with the boys did I found out that the boys always used to make appointments about who should work at which place. The youngest boy of 7 years was often given a place where there was also one more of the group present, this to make it a little bit easier for him and to protect him. This protection is sometimes very needed on the street.

*'We need to help Marcus, because he's the baby in the group. It's difficult working on the street. Sometimes we get thrown or intimidated out of the parks by other vendors or even the police. To make sure he's all right, one of us always goes with him. We do have to be a little bit selfish ones*

*in a while however, because we all need the money. But as long as we don't play dirty tricks do we understand this.*<sup>16</sup>

Like mentioned several times earlier are mostly boys works on the street in Xela. One of their main ways to relax and to have a break from work is by playing soccer. Soccer is very important in the lives of the street children, and they often practice a lot. If someone is really good at playing soccer does he receive respect from the other kids due to his skills. Children want the best players on their team, so they have a fair change of winning. Groups of children meet in the afternoon, but mostly in the evenings to throw soccer matches on the street or abandoned grass fields. Social networks of street children are sometimes created because the kids and adolescents play together, other times is already social network strengthened by playing and hanging out together.

#### **4. 3 Organisations: Edelac & Casa Hogar**

Institutions such as Edelac and Casa Hogar are able to help (former) street children better cope with problems and difficulties they experience both in the public and the domestic terrain. Children with behavioural disorders are very common in Las Rosas due to a constant pressure from parents or family members to work many hours on the street, sometimes under challenging circumstances. Illnesses, stress related to domestic violence, discrimination, malnutrition, all are aspects of the lives of street children. The psychological consequences of these living conditions are very noticeable among the children in Las Rosas. These psychological problems are an inability to trust people, shock-like reactions in rather normal situations, problems with concentrating, nervousness, fear and sometimes aggressive behaviour. Professionals working at Edelac and Casa Hogar know how to recognize symptoms indicating domestic violence or an unhealthy lifestyle. Both at the school and in the shelter are psychologists present to talk with the kids, and try to help them out with their inner struggles. Physical problems due to a lack of sleep or food, are also dealt with by these institutions. The kids in the school daily receive in the first break bread and sometimes fruit, so they receive some food in the morning. This is very important, because many children don't eat breakfast and therefore have trouble concentrating on their school work. The children in the shelter, Casa Hogar, receive balanced meals with enough protein, vitamins, dairy and

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16 Fragment of an information conversation with Fernando on 11/04/2011 in Xela

cereals.

Edelac is a school that has been in Las Rosas for around 20 years. One woman started to teach 5 children in a little shack with limited resources. The interest in the school from inhabitants of Las Rosas grew and so did the school. Nowadays is Edelac the biggest school in the area with 12 teachers, a psychologist and many mothers that are willing to pitch in whenever they need to. The student number has also risen significantly till 68 students. Edelac just as any other school takes care of the education of children, but also focusses on other aspects of the lives of the children in Las Rosas, such as health, nutrition and domestic issues. Regular visits to the households of the children and conversations with the parents are meant to monitor the home situation of children. This is not always easy, because families with domestic issues are not at all thrilled to be visited by teachers from the school. Edelac is looked upon as an authority in the area and if problems within the household are severely disrupting the health of children, physically or psychologically, are they in the position to place children outside their home. This is however not the aim of the organisation, while most teachers rather try to resolve issues and let children in their own environment, rather than putting them in a completely new environment such as a shelter or an orphanage. Social work is almost non-existent in Xela and the shelters are non-stop full. This means that there's sometimes not even the ability to place children in another home or institution.

Casa Hogar is a shelter for former street children or children that are at risk of ending up at the street, located in the centre of Xela. Most of the children living in the shelter are born and raised in villages near Xela. These children are brought to or put in the shelter because they are orphans or because their parents aren't in the position to take care of them financially. Of the 18 children that live in the shelter were only 2 from Las Rosas and were 4 children placed in the shelter due to domestic violence or alcoholism of the parents. The rest of the children were placed or brought there due to the financial problems of their families.



## Conclusion

Poverty and violence affects the lives of street children in many ways. Processes of urbanization, social exclusion, urban poverty and violence are interrelated and create often difficult living conditions in the lives of street children from Las Rosas.

Violence is present in Xela in varying ways. A significant level of fear of violence is present on the street, mainly due to the existence of *maras*, in Xela. Fear among people is expressed in the amount of stories related to violence, such as robberies, extortion, sexual harassment and murder. It seems that especially the older generation has a problem with distrust against the younger generations, fearing that children and adolescents are involved in criminal activities. At the worst escalating with the involvement of these kids and adolescents in *maras*. Socially excluded groups of people from Las Rosas, and especially the children that work on the street in Xela have to deal with these feelings of fear and distrust daily. Due to a bad reputation of the area where they are brought up in and a tendency to think that street children are involved in criminal activities do street children often have to deal with discrimination and intimidation.

Violence affects the lives of street children tremendously, because they lack the safety parents and peers can give them. Intimidation on the street and sometimes even physical violence are elements that happen on a regular basis. The notion that street children themselves execute violence like mentioned above is the most of the times reason for this intimidation. On the notion of 'cleaning the streets' and 'making the street a safer place' do people make their lives sometimes very hard, making it impossible to execute their work. Street children not only have to deal with violence and intimidation on the street, but also in the domestic spheres. Domestic violence is a phenomenon that is very common in Las Rosas and affects the lives of children both physically and mentally. Violence in the households can be related to several domestic issues, such as a tension between the older and younger generation, urban poverty, unemployment and gender roles.

Urbanization has created many changes in the area, changing the infrastructure, the ways of dressing and living of Mayans and most importantly the economic position of people. While inhabitants of Las Rosas used to cultivate their own food, therefore maintaining a self-supplying community, are they nowadays depending on a more formal labour market and the purchasing of food and drinks in the shops. Men used to work as *campesinos* on the field, but are now working in the city. They often work in between the formal and the informal sector in different kinds of stores. It is hard however to find jobs and many men have trouble supporting and taking care of their families financially. The ones that are unemployed have trouble with the lack of support they can

give their families, undermining their authority and role as the providers in the household. This results in problems related to alcoholism, divorces, men who abandon their families or as mentioned above domestic violence. Female headed households are therefore very common in Las Rosas and the older kids have to take care of the younger ones, either by helping earn money on the streets or by working in the informal sector. The biggest differences in the work and the tasks that children have are between the girls and the boys, while the boys often have to work in the public terrain, the street. The girls on the other hand have to help out in the household and are often applied the task of taking care of their younger brothers and sisters. Girls are raised in a more protective way and are more restricted to the house due to the fear of parents that their daughters gets pregnant on a early age, the traditional role model of the women in the household and the idea that girls who work on the streets are 'loose' and easily affected by elements in society such as alcohol, drugs and sex.

Many children from Las Rosas have to work due to the low financial support their parents can give them, thereby forcing them to work on the streets. Kids from the age of 8 have to work on the streets as vendors of candy, drinks, food, dvd's or other items. Sometimes even younger children have to take care of their family by providing to the household by washing cars, doing chores for people in the neighbourhood or by working on the minibuses as collectors of money. There are many negative affects about the work that children have to do on the street. While they are outside the protective environment of their neighbourhood and the house are they more easily affected by violence on the street. Some of the kids get robbed or threatened while selling their items and the children who have experienced this have had to deal with a lot of fear. Especially psychological problems can be created due to a lack of safety at home as well as on the street during working hours. These psychological problems are an inability to trust people, shock-like reactions in rather normal situations, problems with concentrating, nervousness, fear and sometimes aggressive behaviour. Among the boys seems aggressive behaviour worse then among the girls, this also because it is socially more acceptable for boys to shout or fight then it is for girls. Besides experiencing violence or fear for violence are also health problems a major issue related to children working on the streets. Children working on the streets have to make long days, and often have a lack of sleep. A combination of a heavy workload, lack of hygiene and malnutrition, often the case in the families of the children, creates a low resistance and children easily get sick. Even while children are sick, do they most of the time still have to work in the cold or in the rain for long hours. The ability to go to the doctor is limited, while it is expensive and not a lot of parents can afford taking their children to a doctor. The last major problem I noticed during my research in Las Rosas was that the kids due to working on the street are incapable of receiving their education. Some of

the children go in the morning to school, some go on an irregular base to school and others never go to school. The children that go to school in on irregular base or the ones that never go miss out on their education and the chance to enter a high-skill job later on in their lives. The ones that go to school in the morning are the children that have the best options, but because many of them have trouble concentrating due to a lack of sleep, malnutrition or psychological problems created by violent encounters, are they often unable to productively follow their classes.

During my research I discovered something else as well however. Working in the streets doesn't only create problems for the children, but also gives them tools to become independent, and create a better self-esteem. The children from Las Rosas that worked on the streets were able to build a social network on the street of friends, other street children, and other street vendors. The growth of their social network provides the children with an alternative safety net, the safety they sometimes don't receive at home. Street children work many hours but are often capable of messing around with friends as well, and in the evenings play many boys from Las Rosas soccer together. This kind of recreation forms a sufficient distraction from the problems in their lives. Financial gain is another aspect of the street life that makes the children more resilient. Many of them don't hand over all their earnings to their parents, and are therefore able to buy items that kids who stay at home can't buy. The children in general buy snacks, food, toys and sometimes cigarettes and alcohol from their money. The money empowers them in a way and makes them more independent from their family, sometimes helping them better cope with the hardships they encounter at home or on the street.

Summarizing the most important outcomes of my research have I found interesting answer to the question, how does poverty and violence affects the lives of street children in Las Rosas? Even though street children are said to be perpetrators of criminal or violent behaviour are they in Xela mostly victims of this phenomenon, both in the public and in the domestic terrain. Violence used against children are manifested in physical and psychological manners, intimidation being the most important one in the public terrain. The social exclusion that many children from Las Rosas experience is partly present due to the urbanization process that took place in the area. Unemployment rates are sky high in the area and domestic issues such as violence and alcoholism are a direct or indirect outcome of financial problems. Urban poverty therefore affects the lives of street children tremendously, affecting different elements such as their health, education and work. Kids are often forced due to their domestic background and the process of social exclusion to work on the streets, making it difficult for them to continue their education. Both psychological and physical problems are a result of this. Work and life on the street does however also have it's benefits, while kids are able to create agency and are able to construct a social network of other

street children and vendors working on the street. Especially for kids with trouble within their home is the making of a additional social network very important, boosting their self-respect and sense of security.

This research has been important to create more insight into the domestic backgrounds of street children and the problems they face in the public domain. In Xela are stereotypes concerning street children who are involved in *maras* and other criminal activities present in the minds of many people. The outcomes of this research have shown how these stereotypes are often not true, but highly affect the lives of street children in a negative way. Hopefully more people will look deeper into the lives and minds of street children, to counter the discrimination that they experience so often.

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### Appendix 1: Resumen

Muchas investigaciones sobre Centro-América describen la presencia de la violencia urbana y la inseguridad. Los niños de la calle son muchas veces llamados la razón por la cual las calles son escenarios de la violencia. Durante mi investigación he encontrado conclusiones diferentes. En Xela los niños de la calle a veces no utilizan la violencia, pero que eran víctimas de la violencia. La violencia doméstica y discriminación afectan gravemente a los niños. Hay muchas consecuencias por la salud de los niños, tanto mental como físicamente. No solamente la violencia afecta la vida de los niños socialmente excluidos negativamente. También la pobreza afecta enormemente a los niños de una manera destructiva. La pobreza urbana es en la zona de Las Rosas resultado de los procesos de urbanización. El desempleo y la analfabetía reducen las posibilidades de los niños para conseguir un trabajo o para ir a la escuela. Trabajar en la calle. Trabajar en la calle no tiene inconvenientes sólo. Los niños de la calle son capaces de mejorar su reputación, porque ellos demuestran que no están involucrados en actividades delictivas. También son los niños capaces para crear una red social de niños de la calle y otras personas que viven en la calle. Esto es estimulante para su autoestima y sentido de la seguridad.

## **Appendix 2: List of Spanish words**

atole – Guatemalan drink, made out of corn

barrio – neighborhood

camionetta – bus

campesino – farmer

cementario – burial place

contra – against

delicuencia - crime

freijoles – type of brown beans, often mashed and served with breakfast.

indigena – indigenous

juntos – together

machismo – dominant male behaviour

mango- Guatemalan slang meaning 'sexy lady'

maras – gangs in Central-America

pan – bread

parque - park

platanos – type of bananas

primera – ground school

secundaria – second school

traje – traditional, clothing piece worn by indigenous women

vecino - neighbour

zona - area

### **Appendix 3: Reflection**

‘How do I reach those kids’

During my stay in Xela have I thought and laughed about this sentence a lot. This phrase is mentioned in an episode of South Park in which Kenny very dramatically tries to teach children and repeatedly tries to ‘reach them’. Even though I used to smile while thinking about this sentence, it was a funny episode of South Park, did it become a serious part of my research I had to reckon with. Due to the often difficult backgrounds of street children and the tough circumstances they have to deal with in their daily life was it not at all easy to reach them. Toughened up by bad encounters with people treated they me with caution, I couldn’t blame them while listening to their stories once they decided to share these with me. I felt privileged that children I only knew for three months were able to open up and that with some of them even a special relationship of trust started. I remember the time in Xela as a time of constant reflection and constant thinking about ways to approach the kids, both practically and emotionally. Sometimes I woke up in the middle of the night and wrote notes about places where I could meet up with them, what kinds of subjects I wanted to talk to them about and the most difficult part, how to formulate my questions. Should I use a direct approach and ask immediately the questions that I wanted so desperately to ask to find out more about their encounters with violence and poverty? Or should I just let them ease into me, observe and hope that they would take me into confidence on their own time and pace? Till this day I’m still not sure if I used the right ways or if I asked the right questions. I do however was able to connect with some of the kids and adolescents and during the course of my investigation became the impact that poverty and violence had on them more and more clear.

I’m still impressed with the resilience and positive ways of dealing with hardships of the children I talked with. I felt sad for the children that weren’t able to do so and could only hope that somebody one day can give them a sense of security or love that they so clearly miss out on. Because of the involvement in their lives was I left with other questions as well. How far and in which ways should I mingle in their lives? I knew all along that I only had 3 months to spend time with them, afterwards returning to home. I decided therefore to participate in their lives, but also remain a little bit distant. The last day of my research on the school, in the shelter and on the street was very difficult. Once again did someone walk out on them, at least that was the thought I couldn’t help stop repeating in my head. I know that this isn’t realistic, that these kids have moved on and that they thankfully have their own lives to continue in Xela. Even though they are in Xela and I’m back in the Netherlands will I remember the faces, the smiles, the crazy encounters, the tears and the stories, because these children have left an undeniable mark in my heart.



