

**ICC 13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Utqiagvik, July 17, 2018.**  
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### **State of the Family.**

Asasakka ICC-mi ataatsimeersuaqataasut tamarmik,

It is with great regret that I cannot participate in the General Assembly meeting in person. In fact, my reasoning relates to exactly that topic I should speak about – family. On this very day, I am reuniting with my daughter whom I have not seen for an entire year. I would like to start by giving many thanks to ICC for the honour of being able to give this speech and share my experience with all of you.

We all know that family has always been a vital element for our survival, our culture and our identity. And it continues to be, even though family life has been greatly challenged in many ways by, for example, new requirements that come with a new way of life, as well as by foreign structures and laws which are not adapted to our Inuit family structures. Today I will focus on the families who have difficulty taking care of their children; they need help. Secondly, I will speak about how we are trying to solve these problems in a way which is better adapted to our own family structures and culture.

Greenland became party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993. The convention ensures that all children's rights are upheld, in particular the basic rights to food and healthcare, as well as the right to development, education, protection, help and equal participation.

As Children's Spokesperson in Greenland, my work is founded upon legislation whose primary goal is to ensure that the convention is adhered to. In the past three years, I have travelled to 34 different places in Greenland, which equates to an area that spans approximately 3.666 kilometers / 2.278 miles. In each of these places I have talked with children and families who, every single day, live in limbo between the old family culture and the demands of the new family structure of the modern world. I have been able to meet and listen to the strongest children and adults who battle with some of the hardest things a human can endure. Ironically, these families are not the ones who scream for help the loudest. On the contrary, they fight their personal battles in silence. One of the common threads amongst these families is that they rarely, or never, get asked how they are doing. Their viewpoints and perspectives are never taken into account when the political debate turns to them and how to solve their problems.

I want to first talk about the challenges that families with children face, seen both from my monitoring of the convention and in general. Afterward, I will compare this to what the children and families say themselves.

Some of the biggest challenges I see children endure are: lack of protection (which allows for physical and psychological violence, neglect, violation and being taken advantage of sexually), substance dependence and addiction, security, standard of living, parental responsibility and lack of helpful resources. These children's messages are often extremely emotionally charged. For example, some have come directly to me and asked to be removed from their homes. Others have said they will commit suicide if they do not get help soon. And still others, who have been relocated several hundred kilometers from home, wish to be closer to their families.

The families of these afflicted children are often pointed at by society for having problems with alcohol, hash, gambling, poverty, social problems, low education and social dysfunction. These problems are often debated in society, but usually not by one who has a window into these peoples' lives and certainly not from those who live with these problems themselves. Recently a politician said, "They have to pull themselves together." To me, this just shows that we are not taking the people themselves into consideration – the families and their children altogether. It also shows that the norm is to put these families into a box created by a system that does not consider how our family units and familial culture are constructed.

Most of the families I have spoken with do want to improve their lives and actually do completely recognise that they neglect their children. Many of them live in shame about the situation yet feel powerless and thus, turn to self-medication. Many of them also have their own unresolved issues related to their similar upbringings, having also been neglected or sexually abused as a child. But that does not describe all of them. Most families do want access to resources to be able to move on and to raise their children, but they often feel that they are isolated living in towns and settlements far from the administrative center. They rarely see authorities come to their town or settlement and thus, they lack a place to go to seek psychological help and advice. One huge wish that all the families I have talked to have in common is to be listened to and to be understood. Our traditional family structure and norms, where a family consists of more than one mother and more than one father, still lives on today. That is just part of our culture. The family often consists of many relations who all have, more or less, a close relationship to the children in the family. We help each other as much as we can. The way we have learned to be a family informs our entire way of being, and this also goes for how we solve problems. Of course, modern times have changed our way of living to some extent; for example, most people no longer live all together as one large family. However, there are many who still follow the culture of being a large family in some ways, so our concept of family cannot always be compared precisely to the western concept of family. Many in

Greenland still help each other raise each other's children. For example, a child might not live together with its parents but rather with its grandparents, or a child can also be a gift to another family. Still other children grow up primarily in the care of others if their own parents cannot raise them for some reason. Today, there is no one right way to be a family in Greenland.

Most of the children I meet through my work do not live with both a mother and father, either for one of the aforementioned reasons or because they grow up in single-parent homes. Single parents who do not live in the same place as the rest of the family also face a big struggle. They have no family to lean on for support and they receive no in-kind benefits from family like free childcare or help around the house.

Traditionally, Inuit families have protected their children in a strong and loving way. Through the generations, entire small societies and families have provided for the healthy upbringing of the community's children, and the core element was that they did it together. A healthy child comes from a healthy family. Even though families these days do not live in the same communal style as before, we still see that the family unit and network is essential for leading a healthy life.

Today there are many requirements put on families. From the moment one steps outside their home, they enter a world with different norms and countless requirements. Inside the home, we still live with many of the traditional family norms, but at work, in the community, in school, in the daycare and through the greater legislative framework in general, there is a requirement for people to follow the modern world, where focus is on the individual and not on the family. In that way, families must carry two different lifestyles, each with its own mode of decorum, every single day.

We must also remember that no two families are alike. Some have adopted more European norms while others live according to totally different norms. In the modern world, if growth is based on the individual, one assumes then that people can talk with each other, express their feelings and seek individual help dependent on one's own needs. But many families cannot take that approach as it can bring shame to them if they seek external help. For many generations, it was seen as a strength that one could survive by helping each other and taking care of problems oneself. These days, the constant battle of often contradictory requirements puts an immense stress on the families which are already challenged to begin with. And should these families need help, help is given in a method based on the individual and European norms, rather than based on the family and the norms Inuit are used to. By the same token, it is no longer that easy for the entire family to band together and help out if someone is having a problem. Families are often dependent upon the system to help. But, if the system itself is not adapted to familial norms and culture, and if the families can no longer solve their problems in a traditional way, how can we find a suitable way to reinvigorate the strong family that takes care of its children?

To revitalise the concept of the strong family, I think we need to rethink our entire approach to problem-solving and giving help. We need to disrupt the current method and think opposite. In other words, we should make the entire family, as well as family culture and family norms, the starting point, instead of continuing forward with a system that actually disregards the family. Just as one cannot catch a seal with a fish hook and blame the seal for not being able to be caught, nor can we blame families for not being able to 'pull themselves together' when the resources to do so are not appropriately adapted for them.

To create synergy between the family culture, legislation and action, involvement is a must. The families themselves are the ones who know their lives best, and even those who are in the worst of the worst situations have an idea about how to improve their lives. Instead of coming with solutions from above and from outside, like we are used to, we must do something different. These families have the right to be involved in the process and feel an ownership over their own path toward a better life.

Try for just a moment to imagine that you get asked how you will prefer to improve your life. Now try to imagine someone else comes and tells you that you must change your life and your habits in a way that you do not feel you can maintain in the long run, especially because it makes you lose your identity. How would you feel? Do you feel motivated to make a change? On the contrary, if you imagine that the person knows you, involves you in the transition process, and envisions the goal together with you, as well as how to reach that goal, how does that feel instead?

It does not need to be complicated to adapt our system to the family culture. Children have more than just individual rights. They also have rights to their culture and to a collective rights system. Children are a part of their families, so the families that function well and prosper end up raising children that are also well-functioning and happy.

The first step in the process of adapting our system to the family culture is involving families themselves as well as their communities. Over the last three years, MIO has tested a new involvement method in which we start with the local culture, its taboos and its communication methods, and we adapt our work to them. By using this method, we have succeeded at hearing children's and families' own words. We have drilled down to the very core of taboos and forbidden topics, and we have collected their suggestions and recommendations accordingly. Our principle is to work on an even playing field with the people we meet. This equality approach is a fantastic place to start.

Qujanaq. Thank you.