

# Fighting two vicious circles

Australian social educators are struggling on two fronts in their outreach work with the country's indigenous population. They must help the individual break his or her social heritage and at the same time fight the apartheid-racism inherent in the system

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It is only 40 years since the indigenous population of Australia was classified as humans – that is as citizens with human rights. Before that they came under the 'Flora and Fauna Act,' explains Social Educator Rebecca Lewis, 29, with a straight face.

It is not her fault that the British colony first and later the Australian state treated the country's indigenous people – the Aborigines – as inarticulate beings who could be exterminated, forcibly removed or forbidden access.

But as an outreach social worker it is her responsibility to make up for the wrongs of the past – each day of her working life.

In a country that only in 2008 apologised for its quasi-apartheid past, her youth is an asset. Her past is not at stake –but her future is.

"The official apology from the new Labour government is only the first step. There is an entire political and administrative culture that must be broken down through openness and dialogue," she says.

As a re-entry social educator, employed by an NGO, in the prison service, Rebecca Lewis regularly sees the consequences of the institutionalised racism both in the system and in the human destinies she tries to redirect. The numbers speak for themselves.

"We are two social workers working with the re-entry of women prisoners in New South Wales. There are 9,000 women in the prisons. The aborigines constitute 30% of the inmates, but only 1.9% of the population," she says.

Rebecca Lewis' co-workers are government

For the past two years, Rebecca Lewis, 29, has worked with re-entry of women inmates for the private Community Restorative Centre, [www.crcnsw.org.au](http://www.crcnsw.org.au). In her previous job, she helped people with acquired brain damage back to a normal life.



employees, but many of them feel that it is not their job to worry about how the inmates are re-socialised.

“Many of them are burnt out and only see the worst in people,” she says.

In a way she understands them. The colleagues in the prisons only see the repeaters who return to the prison, she explains, while her colleagues in the social services face new cases with child abuse basically every day.

“But we must break the circle. We must meet the aborigines as people who have a choice. We must ask them personally what they want. We must work with their history and their own networks of elders’ councils. And we can offer them education and meaningful work,” she says.

In Rebecca Lewis’ job, narratives and personal action plans are the most important professional tools. The female inmates sign up voluntarily for the re-entry programme and, in this sense, have to do the work themselves.

The action plans help to get the future sorted out. The clients usually have some idea about what they want to do, so the challenge of the social educator is to concretise these ideas and make the clients reflect and go through scenarios

This spring, Australia’s indigenous population received an apology from the country’s new Labour government. It heralds an enormous social effort for a population group with major problems. Many people, including the aborigines on the picture, were forcibly removed from their parents and grew up in militaristic boarding schools as part of a racist assimilation policy.

for what they are going to do once they are offered narcotics again.

The narrative is to help them sort out their past - a precondition for breaking the vicious circle. They can all tell stories about betrayal in their family and culture and about a generation of parents who were forcibly removed without distinction and sent to cruel boarding schools because the white said it was for the best.

It was an aspect of the same attitude when the previous, conservative government a few years ago tried to reduce alcoholism by banning alcohol in certain areas and deploying the army to enforce the ban.

“It was like the old days: We know what is best for you! But we need to send social workers instead of soldiers.”