

# Norway's hidden scandal

20-25 minutes

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**The UN rates Norway one of the best countries for a child to grow up in. And yet too many children, according to a large number of Norwegian experts, are taken into care without good reason. The conviction of a top psychiatrist in the child protection system for downloading child abuse images is now raising further serious questions.**

It was a winter's day, some years ago, when two child welfare specialists – a female psychologist and a male psychiatrist – knocked on the door of a small modern wooden house on the edge of the Norwegian capital, Oslo.

A lively little girl opened the door and greeted the strangers warmly.

But the girl's mother, Cecilie – who understood the purpose of their visit – was much less pleased to see them.

"I was very scared. I didn't want them in my house in the first place," she says, remembering that day.

"I was really nervous that they will find something wrong. I know this is how the Child Protection Services take away children."

The experts had been appointed to write a report for a family court hearing which would decide the little girl's future.

Their visit followed years of concern by the Child Protection Service that Cecilie - a single mother - wasn't looking after her daughter properly, and had rejected offers of help.

That day, she was right to be nervous.

The experts were highly critical of what they observed at her home.

They wrote in their report that "there was no natural flow to the interaction" between mother and daughter.

They said Cecilie struggled to keep the house in order. And they commented on other details that Cecilie believes they misinterpreted.

"Everything is twisted in a negative way," she says.

"This was not so long after Christmas, and in the local store I had found some gingerbread which they were selling really cheap, for one Norwegian krone. So I bought it just for fun, so that my daughter and I could make some gingerbread men together as an activity.

"But apparently they thought my financial situation was very bad, because I had bought it after Christmas... How can you say a person is poor just because they buy cheap gingerbread?"

"When I saw the report, I was so devastated. It was just all this negativity - negative, negative, negative. There was nothing positive at all."

The experts' report – based on information from many health and childcare professionals as well as their own observations – concluded that the little girl's "development would be limited" if she remained with her mother.

The report said: "This is because the mother does not recognise her daughter's basic needs and does not perceive the mental harm she may have suffered" while in her mother's care.

Since then, Cecilie – a lean, anxious-looking, blonde woman now in her 50s - has only seen her daughter seven times.

"I have not been able to follow her development," she says. "I just lost my daughter's childhood. I don't expect really to see her until she's an adult."

The recommendation to put the girl into long-term foster care was approved at Oslo District Court. The report's co-authors attended as witnesses.



Fast forward to April this year, and one of those two experts – the male psychiatrist - reappeared in the same courthouse.

This time, though, he wasn't in the witness stand.

He was in the dock.

He was sentenced to 22 months in jail - after admitting he had downloaded nearly 200,000 images, and more than 12,000 videos, showing the sexual abuse or sexualisation of children.

The court heard that some appeared to show infants being raped.

Norwegian police were initially tipped off that the man was downloading illegal child abuse images in 2015.

But it wasn't until early 2017 – a year and a half later – that they investigated and then arrested him.

He confessed that he had been viewing such material for 20 years.

The expert hasn't been named in the Norwegian media – to protect the privacy of his own children.

But until his arrest he played a key role at various levels in Norway's child protection system - as an expert witness in individual cases such as Cecilie's, and more recently as a member of the prestigious Child Expert Commission, which evaluates all independent protection reports.

His conviction puts the spotlight back on a system which has been heavily criticised by some parents – and by leading Norwegian professionals in the childcare field – for being too quick to put children into care, splitting families unnecessarily.

The disgraced psychiatrist has had his professional licence revoked, meaning he cannot work in the same field again.

But parents who've lost custody of children in cases he was involved in believe all his previous decisions should be reviewed.

"What he was saying isn't valid, because of what he has done. His judgement cannot be trusted," Cecilie says.

If he had told the judge (in earlier cases, when he was an expert witness) that he had been downloading child pornography for years, of course he would never have been appointed as an expert."



The local child protection agency which handled Cecilie's case points out that he was only one of two specialists who wrote the report, that their recommendation was approved by a court, and that their observations were only part of the justification for putting her daughter into care.

But Cecilie and other parents say his crime shows he was unable to empathise with children.

The presiding judge in the case, Nini Ring, commented in her judgement that he appeared not to understand the suffering involved in the material he enjoyed viewing.

She said: "The accused has taken exception to the most serious material, which he claims not to have downloaded consciously. The Court finds, however, that the accused to a certain extent trivialises his own actions."

The judge continued: "The defendant appears remorseful, but reflection seems to have come only after he was caught out. In court he has explained that he considered he was not harming children, since he did not take part in the production (of the images)... The Court finds it serious for somebody with his special expertise on children to express that only now has it struck him that he has subjected these children to grave violation.

"The Court furthermore sees it as serious that a professional who is supposed to be the 'protector' of children and young people has placed his own satisfaction and desires first in this manner."

Among many other child protection cases the disgraced expert was involved in is one in the south of Norway, where a large family has now been split up for nearly five years.

Inez - a warm, round-faced woman - is the mother of eight children.

Four are grown-up. The younger four were suddenly taken away by the Child Protection Service, or Barnevernet, in September 2013. She was arrested and put into a police holding cell.

"It was so strange to find myself in a cell and I just remember being so scared," Inez says, trying hard not to cry as she recalls that day.

"The walls were coming closer and closer and it was becoming so difficult to breathe. It was like the air was becoming less and less... I never ever thought that I would be accused of something illegal.

"At one point I was thinking if I was mad, if I had in my madness been doing things I wasn't supposed to do, had I harmed my family without really knowing it?"

There had been an allegation that Inez had used physical force on her children, which is outlawed in Norway.

She says she was obliged to act to protect one child from another, who refused to stop biting his sibling.

"I gave him the smack in order for him to let go of his sibling. It wasn't right of me to give a smack like that. But I was just saying that there was a sibling in pain."

A criminal court acquitted Inez of the charges against her in 2016.



Inez doesn't criticise the authorities for following up the initial allegation of violence. But she says they didn't then listen properly to what the children were saying.

"The problem was that every question was a leading question," says Inez's lawyer, Victoria Holmen.

"And when you analyse the reports of what the children actually said, if you count up how many times they said 'My mother was violent against me,' it's zero.

“An example is that they were not satisfied with the answer that the youngest daughter gave them when they asked: ‘Has your mother been violent to you?’ She said: ‘No, never. She never hit me.’ But they followed by saying, ‘How many times did your mother hit you?’ And that was when they went totally wrong.

“They had already formed their opinion of what this case was about. And then they questioned the children so that they would have the answer that would match their opinions.”

The child protection office that handled Inez’s case has been unavailable to comment on this. But the same point – that investigators put words into the children’s mouths – was made by the Appeal Court when it acquitted Inez.

Soon after that verdict, two of Inez’s children were returned.

But the youngest two are still in foster care more than two years later. This is despite an independent psychological report that praised Inez’s parenting skills and recommended that the family be reunited.

It said: “The experts find it impossible to believe that so carefree, positive and undisruptive children can come from the home described in the accounts that form the basis of the child protection and police actions.”

That report was disregarded, however, after it was sharply criticised by the supervisory body, the Child Expert Commission.

The Commission said the report was “explicitly biased” in the parents’ favour.

One of the two Commission members who made that comment was the now-disgraced psychiatrist who was also involved in Cecilie’s case.

The positive report he and his colleague rubbished was co-authored by two very eminent psychologists – one of them Reidar Hjermann, a former Children’s Ombudsman, the independent official responsible for safeguarding children’s interests throughout the country.

When I meet Hjermann, he tells me this accusation of bias made him very angry.

But I discover he doesn’t know that the expert who made the accusation has been convicted – because he hasn’t been publicly named.

When I tell him, he’s shocked. “When bad things like this happen, it’s important to look at what kind of responsibilities a person has had - and see if his way of misbehaving has been having an influence on the important job he or she has had.”

But there is no sign that the Norwegian authorities are planning any general review of cases the convicted expert was involved in – or that they believe his disgrace has any wider implications for the system.

The Child Expert Commission told me they have looked into the reports he did for them – only part of his work – and could find no evidence that he had shown too little, or too much, empathy with children in his judgments.

But the Board of Health Supervision, the body which has now withdrawn his licence, said it was not planning to investigate his professional practice. It says there is no information that the convicted expert had committed any crimes in his work, or any medical malpractice.

Other agencies – local and national – that employed him have said the same.

But for Inez, those reactions are just proof of the lack of accountability in a system that needs thorough reform.

She says she’s now been assured by Child Protection that they now regard her as a “good enough” parent, and that her two youngest children will soon be returned to her.

But losing them for five years has been a devastating experience for her and her husband, Knut.

Initially, she was only allowed to see them four times a year. And each parent could speak to each child on the phone for just 15 minutes once a month.



“The house was so quiet,” she says. “And you know how parents usually want the kids to be a bit quiet? It was so strange to be on the other side: I just want lots of noise, bickering.”

She blames the negative comments co-authored by the disgraced psychiatrist for keeping her family divided until now – and, like Cecilie, she also says his past judgements should be reviewed.

“It’s like constructing a building which has a major flaw in their foundation. Do you let the building stand with a big flaw, knowing that at any moment it will collapse? Or do you try to rebuild it and make it correct?”

“And in cases like this, they should do it, because the outcome is a tragedy when the decision is to separate children and parents.”



The criticisms of the Norwegian Child Protection Service date back some years. Two years ago I reported on [the case of Ruth and Marius Bodnariu](#), evangelical Christians who were accused in 2015 of breaking the law by smacking their children. Their five children – including a small baby – were put into emergency care, prompting demonstrations by sympathisers around the world.

The children were eventually returned to their parents – but the family then decided to leave Norway. They now live in Marius’s home country, Romania.

In the same year, 2015, more than 140 professionals in the childcare field – lawyers, psychologists and social workers, wrote a National Notice of Concern to the government. They said that “a long list of children – the actual number is not known by anyone – are exposed to serious failures of understanding and infringements of their rights.”

They added that “when expert witnesses submit their reports and give evidence in court, we often see that the observational basis upon which they report is very weak.”

That open letter has now been signed by a further 120 specialists. Meanwhile, a family involved in a custody battle with the state has won a rare legal victory, gaining the right to have its case heard later this year at the highest level of the European Court of Human Rights.

And, increasing the international pressure still more on Norway, several families from the country have sought refuge in Poland to avoid the threat of care orders by the child protection service.

They believe Poland places more emphasis on keeping families together.

Among those now in Poland is Leen, the 14-year-old daughter of Palestinian parents who were given asylum in Norway.

Her father, Talab, a journalist, had served five years in jail in Syria, much of it in solitary confinement, for criticising the regime there.

Talab and his older daughter, Hiba, are still in Norway, while his wife and Leen are in Poland where they are now seeking asylum for a second time.

Hiba, who works as a nurse, explains what happened to her younger sister: “One day she went to school and she didn’t come back. And my family, my parents and brother were looking for hours as her phone was turned off, going everywhere, looking like crazy on the street and we couldn’t find her.

“Then, hours later, we had two child protection officers at the door and they said Leen is with them. They asked for her belongings, because she was taken under an emergency care order. She had told the school nurse that she had been physically abused at home.”

Leen was taken first to a foster home, then to another care institution, then to a hospital. Eventually – a year after she was first put into care – she ran away. She met up with her mother, who took her to Poland, where they have lived for the past year.

Speaking from Poland, she says the original allegation of abuse was made by another child at her school, where she was being bullied. Then at her foster home, she became depressed and started self-harming. She was treated with anti-psychotic drugs – and then other medication for the side-effects, which she says made her increasingly physically ill.

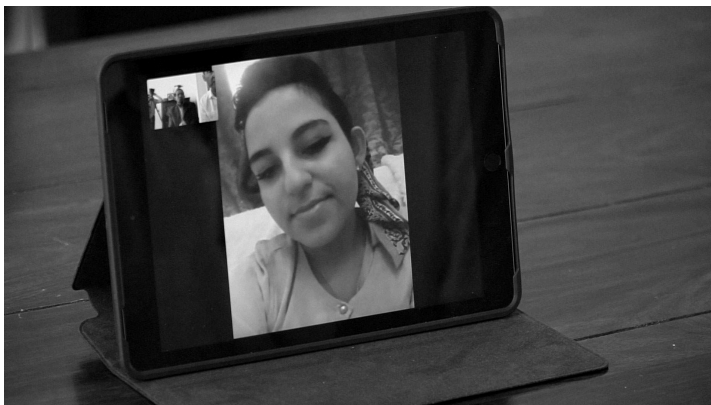
But medical certificates issued following tests in Poland do not confirm all the diagnoses made in Norway. Doctors there say she is physically fit and suffering only from stress caused by her experiences over the past two years.

“When we came to Norway, we thought that this was where we would live in peace and we would forget all the traumatic and sad events,” Hiba says, referring to the family’s escape from Syria. “But we have all lived this trauma again.”

“I didn’t see the growing-up of my older children when I was imprisoned in Syria,” Talab says. “So when Leen was born here in Norway, it was a God-given present for us. How could we have mistreated her? It is a very silly joke to hear this from the Child Protection Service.

“They behave above regulations, and you can’t win any case against them in the courts, even if you bring witnesses with you. It is as in Syria – the verdict is written beforehand.

It is unbelievable in Norway, something very strange in a welfare state – a Scandinavian state.”



The family says Leen was never physically punished – and they believe the allegation of violence was taken particularly seriously because they were immigrants to Norway.

“If you’re from the Middle East you’re automatically deemed to be abusive and backward,” Hiba says.

The Child Protection office dealing with the case said it could not comment in detail. But it said it did not agree with the family’s version of events, and it denied treating children from immigrant families more strictly than others.

One journalist has calculated, however, that children with a foreign mother are four times more likely than other children in Norway to be forcibly taken from their families.

Reidar Hjermann, the former Children’s Ombudsman, says no-one should be judged to be violent without evidence. But he also says: “When a family comes to Norway with a mother and father who have themselves been brought up

with violence, then I think we should assume that we need to go to help this family to understand that where they come from, physical punishment is rather common, but in Norway it is absolutely forbidden.”

He believes “the Norwegian system should do something about its reputation” by improving professional competence in a system that he thinks is currently too decentralised.

And he adds: “One of the absolutely overarching strategies is to help children in families. To remove a child from a family is something you try not to do at all.”

Katrin Koch, the head of the Child Expert Commission which the disgraced psychiatrist was a member of, says one reason for the disproportionately high number of immigrant families affected by care orders might be that Norway is “quite a conformist country in many ways.”

She says: “It might be that the child protection services are not aware enough that there are many ways of raising children.

“Another point would be that Norway is a rich country – and the richer you are, the less consideration you have to give to survival issues, and the more consideration you can give to an optimisation of how children are to be raised.”

Child welfare guidelines in Norway, as in some other countries, specify that parenting does not have to be “good” - only “good enough.”

But Katrin Koch says: “Maybe the level for ‘good enough’ in Norway is different from other countries.”

The Ministry of Children says it’s bringing in legal changes that will strengthen children’s and family rights. It’s reviewing some care orders – though there’s no suggestion that’s linked to the conviction of the expert psychiatrist.

Like other agencies in the child protection system, the Ministry won’t comment at all on his case at all.

But Inez – who’s now become a campaigner for family rights – regards the silence over the convicted psychiatrist as a cover-up.

She and other parents who’ve lost children are also surprised by a family court decision that the disgraced expert can keep custody of his own young children.

“I’m at a loss for words, for the outrage,” she says, “knowing other parents who have had lesser allegations and have lost children.”

Thore Langfeldt, a psychologist who works with sex offenders, and who gave testimony as an independent expert in the case of the convicted psychiatrist, regards that reaction as “moral outrage”.

He says there is no evidence to suggest that people who download child pornography are more likely than anyone else to commit other offences against children.

“Sometimes moral panic takes over and empirical psychological data vanish on us,” he says.

But Inez, who has been active in her community as a local politician and lay judge, says the case has changed the way she views her own country.

“Before 2013 I considered Norway as the best country in the world. And in many aspects it still is a good country. But if the system is closed and there is no transparency, then it is so much easier to sweep things under the carpet when things go wrong,” she says.

“There has to be a willingness to fix things, because it ensures that people can trust the system.”